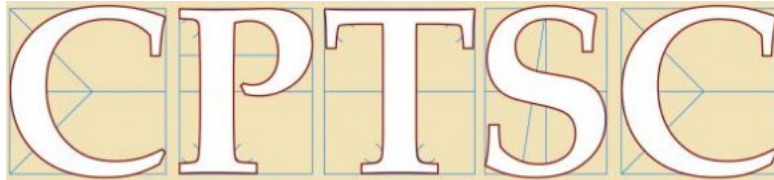


Programmatic Perspectives

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Editors' Introduction to Issue 17.1

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Welcome to Issue 17.1 of *Programmatic Perspectives*! In this issue, we present five Research Articles, one Program Showcase, two Curriculum Showcases, one Commentary, and three Book Reviews. We believe you will find all of these scholarly efforts relevant and helpful.

Research Articles

Kathryn Yankura Swacha, in “Intersectional Internship Experiences Across TPC Programs: Barriers, Supports, and Programmatic Change,” examines how students from diverse intersectional backgrounds experience TPC internships, identifying key barriers and supports that shape those experiences. Her findings highlight the influence of cultural narratives, mentorship, institutional integration, and material conditions, offering concrete recommendations to strengthen internship support structures across TPC programs.

In “What Do We Mean By ‘AI Literacy’?” Katlyne Davis and colleagues analyze institutional AI frameworks alongside educator reflections to reveal “tensions between efficiency-driven integration and critical approaches to generative AI literacy.” They advocate for a “slow pedagogy” model that emphasizes “deliberate, justice-centered engagement” with AI in educational contexts.

Dorcas A. Anabire, Jamal-Jared Alexander, and Rebecca Walton in “Prospective Students' Insights: Identifying Barriers to Graduate School” investigate the barriers that prospective students, particularly students from marginalized groups, face when considering TPC graduate programs. Drawing on focus groups at Historically Black Colleges and

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Universities (HBCUs), they offer actionable recommendations to improve recruitment and support, even within the constraints of anti-DEI policy environments.

In “A Field-Wide Examination of Assignments in the Service Course in Technical and Professional Communication,” Katherine Mavridou-Hernandez and colleagues analyze 90 syllabi to identify the most common assignments in TPC service courses across US institutions. Their findings reveal alignment with workplace genres while also calling for clearer terminology, improved assignment design, and more intentional structuring of coursework.

Stacey Pigg and Douglas Walls, in “The Capstone Journey: Touchpoints and Temporalities in a Redesigned Master’s Capstone Process,” explore how students’ experiences of academic time shape their engagement with capstone courses in a master’s-level TPC program. Through analysis and redesign, they propose a model that distributes reflective and integrative learning across multiple structured interactions, emphasizing the role of institutional temporalities in shaping student learning.

Showcases

Adrienne Lamberti, in the Program Showcase “From Editing and Writing to Editing/Writing: Reframing a Professional and Technical Communication Program through Critical Archival Studies,” extends a framework of critical archival studies used in a course project to “inspire my administrative decision-making for the larger professional and technical writing program.” Focusing on reflection, peer workshopping, editor/writer authority, and interrogations of technology, Lamberti presents a heuristic for program administrators to consider.

This issue also presents two Curriculum Showcases that provide detailed descriptions and rationales for generative artificial intelligence pedagogy in the classroom. In “Leveraging AI for Data-Informed Resume Writing: A Pedagogical Approach,” Timothy Ponce addresses the ongoing need to revise resume-writing assignments to reflect changing industry preferences for “AI-enabled applicant tracking systems.” The article not only provides scaffolding exercises for using AI to distinguish applicants’ skills and experiences with job descriptions but also extends AI literacy to a much-needed undergraduate assignment. Yeqing Kong, in “From Incident to Insight: Understanding AI Model Lifecycle Management Through Case Analysis,” presents a four-step activity that begins with short background readings, and then moves to student groups to investigate industry harms detailed in the AI Incident Database. In groups, students choose one incident to analyze and then present their work during a group presentation. Kong concludes with an autoethnographic

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reflection on the process including limitations that instructors should consider if they choose to include this assignment in a course.

Commentary

Teena Carnegie, Sean Williams, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, and Tharon Howard have spent considerable time revising and refining the external program review process for CPTSC. Their Commentary, “Moving Program Reviews into the Future: Strategically Positioning Technical and Professional Communication,” begins with a history of CPTSC program review efforts and provides “updated review guidelines, reviewer recruitment processes, fee structures, and support materials.” We encourage all administrators and coordinators to take advantage of this service that can be an important part of programmatic assessment and accreditation processes.

Book Reviews

The book reviews in this issue include a two-volume collection edited by Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin, and Carl Whithaus, *Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment*, reviewed by Jordan Dagenais. The collections cover technical and political contexts as well as emerging theoretical and pedagogical processes with regard to assessment. Andrew Ridgeway reviews Sydney I. Dobrin’s primer on AI, *AI and Writing*; presented as a short textbook for an undergraduate course on writing with AI, this work presents a comprehensive overview for students, faculty, and program administrators who are looking for a straightforward description of the impact and possibilities of utilizing AI on writing. Finally, Jessica Remcheck reviews *Technical Communication for Environmental Action*, a collection of essays from scholars across the field of TPC on how the field can and perhaps even has an imperative to address the climate crisis and local environmental crises through research, teaching, and engagement.

Intersectional Internship Experiences Across TPC Programs: Barriers, Supports, and Programmatic Change

Kathryn Yankura Swacha

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Abstract In this article, the author reports on interviews conducted with students from various intersectional positionalities and institutions regarding their experiences in TPC internship programs. The work contributes to scholarship on internships in higher education and TPC by focusing on barriers and supports that interns encountered throughout their internship experiences. Findings show that interns' experiences were affected by various factors, which include dominant cultural narratives surrounding internships, the liminal positionality that interns are often expected to occupy, the type of mentorship interns receive from faculty members, how well support for interns is integrated into their host site communities, and the material barriers/supports that interns face. Based on these findings, this study offers concrete recommendations for bolstering support structures in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) internship programs for all students.

Keywords Internships, experiential learning, inequities, field experience, positionalities, mentorship

The US is in a transition period in the world of work. While our field has been expanding how we define professionalism (Bennett, 2024; Downs, et al., 2024; Racelis, 2024; Randazzo, 2024), sociocultural and political forces are narrowing what being a professional means and who “counts” as a professional, with the closure of workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, tightening of work visas, and use of generative AI (Visser & Terblanche, 2025).

Amidst this shifting landscape, technical and professional communication (TPC) programs continue to provide students with rhetorical training and adaptable workplace communication skills. Internships are a common component of our programs due to their well-established benefits for student learning. Fifty percent of undergraduate TPC programs require students to complete an internship (Katz, 2015; Melonçon & Henschel, 2013).

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Despite the established benefits of internships, entrenched inequities persist within internship programs. Internships across higher education are not as accessible for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students or for women (Lake, 2021; NACE, 2021; Najmabadi, 2017).

As a field, we need to better understand our students' experiences in our internship programs so that we can address embedded barriers and design programs to be inclusive and supportive for all students. Toward these ends, this qualitative research project asked:

- What inequities/barriers do students experience in TPC internship programs?
- What programmatic factors best support students to succeed in TPC internships?

Through analysis of eight interviews with diverse participants at various institutions, this article identifies interconnected areas tied to programmatic support and/or barriers. Discussion of these categories extends current scholarship by offering empirical insight into how students experience internships within TPC programs and leads to concrete recommendations for bolstering student support structures.

Literature Review: Internships Across Higher Education and in TPC

What is an “Internship”?

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines an internship as “a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional workplace setting” (NACE, 2023, para. 1). At the heart of this definition is experiential learning, which is widely acknowledged in TPC for helping students acquire key skills (e.g., Dubinsky, 2002; Sapp & Crabtree, 2002). What this definition looks like in practice can differ widely, however, pending factors like where an intern is placed, when an internship takes place, and how the “classroom” paired with the internship experience is structured (i.e., as a traditional, asynchronous, or hybrid course). I use the term “internship experience” throughout this piece to refer to a larger process of how participants found their internship(s), how they felt supported (or not) throughout those internship(s), and, if relevant, how they have reflected on and leveraged their internship(s) afterwards.

Internship Benefits

The benefits of internships are well documented in both TPC and higher education scholarship. Higher education research has identified internships as “high-impact

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practices” that contribute to improved student retention and graduation. Other benefits include increased knowledge of career options, greater career readiness, higher professional confidence, improved professional skills, and larger professional networks (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Gault et al., 2010; Kuh, 2008). Research has shown that interns are more successful when they develop so-called “soft skills,” like self-regulation, self-awareness and self-direction, which are increasingly crucial in today’s changing workplace (Downs et al., 2024; Visser & Terblanche, 2025).

TPC-specific scholarship has shown that internships can increase students’ job opportunities and help students to improve key TPC skills like audience/genre awareness (e.g., Bloch, 2011; Bouelle, 2012, 2014; Crabtree & Zhang, 2009; Katz, 2015; Munger, 2006). TPC research on internships is typically couched within the field’s scholarly traditions on experiential learning, situated knowledge acquisition, and transfer of learning, such as Chris M. Anson and L. Lee Forsberg’s landmark piece (1990) on writing interns’ transitional stages in nonacademic settings, and Anne Beaufort’s longitudinal work (2007) on knowledge transfer from universities to workplaces. More recently, Kristin Pickering has offered compelling case studies of how interns construct their professional identities (2018a, 2018b).

Programmatic research on TPC internships includes ideas for adjusting programs during crises like COVID-19 (Sides, 2021), facilitating international internships (Ding, 2020), and including community stakeholders (St.Amant, 2003). Other work has focused on the legality of unpaid internships (Durack, 2013), the (un)availability of paid internships (Bay, 2006), online internship courses (Bay, 2017; Bay, Fillenwarth, & Masters-Wheeler, 2021), and the role of mentors both at the university and the internship site (Kramer-Simpson, 2018a, 2018b).

Inequities Within Internships

Emerging higher education research has shown that inequities persist across internship programs. Barriers to internship participation disproportionately affect BIPOC students—for example, financial barriers can prevent them from pursuing unpaid internships and/or a lack of social support can inhibit them from finding internships. These barriers particularly affect Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), where they often do not receive adequate mentorship (Lake, 2021). BIPOC students are thus significantly underrepresented in internships, especially in paid internships (Collins, 2020; Jones, Win, & Vera, 2021). Women are also underrepresented in paid internships (NACE, 2021). Such underrepresentation can create a snowball effect, as people with paid internships are

more likely to land higher-paying jobs post-graduation (NACE, 2023). Inequities in TPC internships are currently underexplored.

This article builds on the current literature by adding rich qualitative data and analysis specifically on (a) diverse students' experiences across different types of internship programs, (b) barriers and supports that interns encountered, and (c) how interns' intersectional positionalities affected their experiences.

Methods

To gather this data, I interviewed both graduate and undergraduate students who had participated in internships sponsored by a TPC program across the US.¹ My goal was to understand better how internship programs shape diverse students' internship experiences and what barriers/supports interns encountered throughout those experiences.

Participants were recruited via an email that was sent to TPC program heads and internship coordinators across the country. In order to participate in the study, participants must have completed, or be currently in, at least one internship during college that was part of a TPC program.²

Because I was interested in participants' intersectional positionalities related to their internships, I asked participants to complete a short demographic survey before their interviews. The survey asked their racial identity, gender identity, family income level, where they completed their internship(s), where they attended college, and their parents' educational background. Interested participants then completed a semi-structured interview with me over Zoom (refer to Appendix A for interview questions). Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, and all participants received a \$50 gift card for their participation.

After the interviews were conducted, I edited the automatically generated Zoom transcripts for accuracy. I then took a grounded theory approach to analyze the data, by

¹ This study was reviewed, approved, and judged exempt from further review by my institution's IRB board (IRB 2022-07-09).

² By "part of," I mean that participants received TPC credit for their internship, took a course paired with their internship in a TPC program, and/or found their internship via the direct mentorship of a TPC faculty member. Participants had all completed their internships between 2019–2022, so the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected participants' internship experiences; interestingly, none of the participants directly mentioned the pandemic in relation to their internships.

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reviewing the transcripts several times to generate codes related to the research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Because I was specifically interested in how internship programs shape students' experiences, I first coded for instances where participants mentioned factors tied to programmatic or institutional structures, such as degree requirements, interactions with internship program coordinators, and courses tied to their internships. I also coded for instances when aspects of participants' positionalities affected their experiences; these instances were almost always interwoven. Thus, while I narrowed to five main themes, I will draw attention in the findings section to these themes' interwoven nuances so as to account for complexities in participants' experiences.

The five emergent coding themes included: The Hard-Working Intern Narrative, Liminal Positionalities, Faculty Mentors, Networked Communities of Support, and Material Barriers/Supports.

Participants

This study interviewed eight participants, which is an ample sample size for such qualitative work because it allows for rich description and analysis of each participant's experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Participants attended college and/or completed internships across the northeastern, southeastern, midwestern, and western US. Participants are a racial mix of Black, Asian, and white individuals, who all reported coming from either low- or middle-income families. Several participants were the first in their family to go to college. All but two participants were TPC or English majors or minors. They all conducted internship work typical to TPC, such as content creation, editing, informational design, and multimodal writing (Melonçon & Henschel, 2013).

I include a fuller description of each participant below, in order to highlight specificities of their positionalities and experiences:³

Ali is a cis man from Pakistan. After receiving his undergraduate degree in Foreign Service from a prestigious, private US university's Middle Eastern campus, Ali earned an MA in Museum Practice from a university in the UK. At the time of his interview, he was an MA in English student at a university in New England. He reported coming from a middle-income family and one of his parents having a four-year degree. At the time of his interview, he had recently completed a paid, remote marketing communications internship at a start-up

³ All participant, organization, and location names are pseudonyms. Participants were given the option to select their own pseudonym. Pronouns were self-reported by participants.

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company in California, where he worked in search engine optimization (SEO), content creation, social media research, and email marketing. Ali found his internship by applying to many large companies, with minimal support from his institution.

Ashanti is a Black, cis woman. She reported being a first-generation college student from a middle-income family. She was originally a business major, but after enjoying a few professional writing (PW) courses, she changed her major to PW with a business minor. Ashanti attended a liberal arts college in the Southeastern US, where she completed an internship with ABC Technologies, a company that creates software for non-profits. As part of her internship, she helped to create multimedia software tutorials, edit content, and track data. A PW faculty member directly helped her to find this internship. Ashanti had graduated two years before her interview. Immediately after graduation, she worked as a document control specialist for a sports medicine company. At the time of her interview, she was working as a digital accounts manager for a news agency.

Dana is a white, cis woman. She reported being a first-generation college student from a middle-income family. She began college at a small school in the Southeast as a psychology major with a creative writing minor. She switched to an English major after working on a volunteer basis with her campus's literary magazine and taking a few creative writing courses. For her internship, she worked as that same magazine's co-editor, a paid position that was funded via a grant awarded to her faculty mentor. Dana was in the middle of this internship at the time of her interview.

Jade is a Black, cis woman. At the time of her interview, she was working in higher education as an international student counselor. She began college at a large urban university, where she had been majoring in biology. After one year, she transferred to a small college in the Southeast, where she majored in TPC. She is a self-reported first-generation college student from a middle-income family. At her small college, she completed two internships—the first with a local media outlet, and the second as part of a study abroad trip to Ecuador with a tropical ecology class. For her second internship, she worked with another English student to document the ecology students' field work. Jade found both of her internships through direct support from faculty.

Justin is a white, cis man. He reported being the first in his family to go to college and coming from a low-income family. At the time of his interview, he was in his second year of a two-year MA in English program at a land-grant university in the northeastern US. He was in his fifth month interning as a podcast producer with the public policy center on his campus. Justin's faculty mentor directly approached him with this internship opportunity, which had been coordinated between his faculty mentor and the policy center director.

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Several months after his interview, Justin reported back that he had landed a full-time job at the policy center.

Maggie is a Black, cis woman. At the time of her interview, she was in a graduate program for psychology at a mid-size public university in a mid-Atlantic state. As an undergraduate at a liberal arts college, she had taken on a TPC minor at the advice of her psychology advisor. While she had initially wanted to pursue an English minor as a “fun” complement to her major, her advisor recommended that she minor in TPC instead for its more “practical” application. She reported coming from a low-income family with one parent having a graduate degree. Maggie had an undergraduate internship with her college’s Career Development Center, where she mainly created content.

Maryam is a cis woman from Iran. She did not report a family income level or parents’ educational background. At the time of her interview, she was in her final year of an MA in English degree at a large university, where she was focusing on creative writing. She also has an undergraduate degree in geology and an MA in Cinema from an Iranian university. She had a remote, paid internship the summer before her interview with a large SEO company in Chicago. As part of that internship, she wrote blog articles about SEO for the company’s website. Maryam found her internship by applying to large companies, with limited support from her institution.

Quinn is a white, transgender man. They reported being the first in their family to go to college and coming from a low-income family. At the time of their interview, Quinn was a history and education double major at the same small college in the Southeast as Dana. Quinn intended to become a high school history teacher. For their internship, they were the co-editor, alongside Dana, of their campus literary magazine. (Dana’s and Quinn’s interviews happened separately). Quinn noted that, even though they were not an English or TPC major, they valued writing, found their internship to be “fun,” and felt that their internship would help them to mentor their future history students with writing.

Basic information about these participants’ demographics can be found in Table 1 below for ease of reference.

Table 1: Participants' demographic and internship information

Name	Identity	1st-gen	Interned at	Major/Program
Ali	Cis man from Pakistan	No	SEO start-up	MA in English
Ashanti	Black, cis woman	Yes	Software company	PW with a Business minor
Dana	White, cis woman	Yes	Campus literary magazine	English
Jade	Black, cis woman	Yes	-Local media outlet -Study abroad trip to Ecuador	TPC
Justin	White, cis man	Yes	Public policy center	MA in English
Maggie	Black, cis woman	No	Career development center	Psychology with TPC minor
Maryam	Cis woman from Iran	Unknown	Large SEO company	MA in Creative Writing
Quinn	White, transgender man	Yes	Campus literary magazine	History and Education

Findings

Five themes emerged with regard to how programmatic structures, participants' intersectional identities, and other contextual factors shaped participants' internship experiences:

- 1) **The Hard-Working Intern Narrative:** A cultural narrative suggesting that interns must work harder than other workers to succeed.
- 2) **Liminal Positionalities:** An "in-between" positionality in which interns feel somewhat part of their internship sites and somewhat not.
- 3) **Faculty Mentors:** The particular faculty members at participants' institutions, who helped them to find and succeed at their internships.
- 4) **Communities of Support:** Support for interns that was tied to their workplaces' or institutions' larger communities.
- 5) **Material Barriers/Supports:** The ways in which participants were supported to balance their internships with material necessities such as paying their bills, completing their degrees, and putting food on their tables.

The following sections report on each theme in turn, with particular attention to interwoven nuances of participants' experiences.

The Hard-Working Intern Narrative

All of the participants reported feeling strongly that they should complete an internship at some point in their college careers. Echoed in this pressure was the cultural narrative that interns should work extra hard.

For Maryam, an international student, this narrative was couched in her perception that domestic students were starting out more experienced than her:

I think many students here [in the US] do internships when they are in high school or stuff like that. That was something that I found out when I was applying for internships. And that was something that I really regretted, because I wasn't here to do an internship when I was in high school or after that... Probably you have to work harder here [in the US]. They expect more things from you here.

Reflecting the Hard-Working Intern Narrative's pervasiveness, Maryam expressed repeated regret later in her interview that she was somehow "behind" domestic students:

One thing that I regretted was that I don't probably seem as experienced as many, I don't know, Americans. Probably many Americans had the fortune to work as a fiction writer, for example, earlier, but I didn't get that chance, so they have more experience, and they can find, I don't know, more professional-level, higher-level internships. But as an international person I might not be able to do something like that, because I somehow started later.

Maryam acknowledges that, on the one hand, internship opportunities are beyond an individual's control: "Americans had the *fortune* to work" (my emphasis). On the other hand, through her repeated use of phrases like "I regretted," she implies that she somehow put *herself* behind by not coming to the US or pursuing internships earlier.⁴ Implicit in this belief is the Hard-Working Intern Narrative that interns must create their own opportunities and work hard to distinguish themselves from other interns.

Ali echoed Maryam's sense that international students have to work harder not only to obtain an internship, but also to prove themselves once there. After explaining that he applied to 100 companies for an internship and only received a few interviews, Ali shared his feeling that international students:

⁴ We can assume that not being in the US for high school was not solely up to Maryam, and research shows that only 2% of US high school students complete internships (ASA, 2020).

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need to just be thankful that you got it [an internship], and you want to bend over backwards to accommodate the employer rather than standing your own ground, and whether it's, you know, asking for an hourly wage, or if it's just, you know, time off. You kind of have to double, triple things because you're like, "Oh, it's not my country. I'm not from here. Like, they're giving me this opportunity." So I feel like in terms of power dynamics, I feel like there's a big, big imbalance over there, and I feel like companies probably know that, and they know how much they can push you to get work out of you.

In addition to echoing the Hard-Working Intern Narrative ("you want to bend over backwards to accommodate the employer,") Ali identifies the problematic power structure that this narrative both emerges from and adds to: "[companies] know how much they can push you to get work out of you."

Jade, a domestic student, similarly invoked the Hard-Working Intern Narrative, when she described how she made decisions that positioned her for more opportunities. She explained, for example, her decision to transfer from a PWI in a large city to a smaller college, which was less expensive:

[My prior institution] is predominantly white, and even though my high school was about fifty-fifty, it was still kind of a culture shock to me, and I did not expect that feeling, didn't expect it at all. Um, I had a group of friends because I'd got to go with a multicultural program over the summer. And so I got to, like, create a group of friends who are students of color, who actually ended up getting me through the year, which was fantastic, but it was still very different, and [that institution] was expensive...I'm the first in my family to go to a four-year university. Like, I couldn't handle the cost of living there, so I transferred. I wonder what would have happened if I would have stayed all four years. I would have been a lot more in debt.

Jade acknowledged that she was working within a context where structural, social, and cultural barriers persist for first-generation and Black students like herself. Within that context, she felt that her hard work and outgoing personality created opportunities:

I'm also a person who really enjoys making connections, and, like, always seeks those out. So I feel like sometimes that makes a little bit less barriers for me, which is a good thing. But I know that everyone's not that way. So if things are, if things are explicit...if, like, opportunities aren't asked or told to people, then that creates barriers, you know. I feel like I've always had to, like, push for these things to

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happen rather than just happening, or just being available, or opportunities just being explicitly out there.

Jade's comments reflect the Hard-Working Intern Narrative in that she feels that her work "making connections" and "push[ing] for these things to happen," resulted in "a little bit less barriers" for her personally. At the same time, she recognizes that more institutional or programmatic support is necessary to make opportunities transparent for all students: "If like opportunities, aren't asked or told to people, then that creates barriers."

Ashanti expressed a similar sentiment in describing how her perseverance led to internship opportunities:

I did have friends who kind of struggled more than I did, and I think it was because I would go into anyone's office, and I will ask questions. I'll sit outside the door and wait. Um, so, and I feel like a lot of people may not be that social. And so I would encourage them, especially in this field [TPC], when it's not well-known to make a good relationship with your professors, because chances are they have much more resources than you can get on your own. So definitely talk to them. Speak up!

Like Jade, Ashanti recognizes that support is necessary to bolster interns' hard work: "Chances are [professors] have much more resources than you can get on your own." Yet, she also evokes the Hard-Working Intern Narrative in placing responsibility on students to seek out such support: "Speak up!"

As the next theme will highlight, such support is not always present, or can be difficult to find, as interns tend to occupy a liminal space both "inside" and "outside" of their host organizations.

Liminal Positionalities

Participants expressed challenges associated with occupying a liminal positionality as an intern—that is, someone who is expected to contribute to their host organization, but who is not a fully integrated employee.

Several participants expressed how they navigated this liminal positionality with other intersectional aspects of their identities. Quinn described how their identity as a transgender man shaped how they performed their "intern" positionality at the literary magazine:

Just existing as a trans person in this internship makes, makes me nervous and makes me a little bit more hesitant to go and talk to classes and people about [the

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literary magazine], because I'm worried about, like, how they perceive me, but also worried about, like, pushing the journal on to people...[I deal with that by] kind of just like ignoring it, and like just presenting myself as [Quinn], and, like, presenting as I am the managing editor for [the literary magazine], and, like, surely if people are confused, they're just gonna, like, stay confused, but kind of trying to put that part of my identity aside and just be like, "Okay. I am here for [the magazine], and I should only be worried about the [magazine] stuff." But sometimes I leave or, right before, I get, like, real nervous, real anxious. And I'm like, "Hmm. Are they seeing like, how? How are they perceiving me?" ... But it is really demeaning sometimes when you have people on your own editing staff, or people that are, like, trying to talk about your event. And you just get mis-gendered randomly, and it's like it's not even a second thought. They're not doing it maliciously, but it's still a thing that happens, and I was like, "all of the work I've put into this."

Quinn's comments indicate that they feel cultural pressure to live up to the Hard-Working Intern Narrative by asserting a competent ethos: "I am the managing editor." In order to do so, however, they feel that they must put other aspects of their identity aside: "I should only be worried about the [magazine] stuff." Quinn highlights the liminality positionality that doing so places them in: "I'm worried about, like, how they perceive me, *but also* worried about, like, pushing the journal on to people" (my emphasis). Their frustrated reaction to being misgendered by colleagues shows the emotional toll of performing to a sort of "disembodied, hardworking professional" ideal, while also negotiating positionalities perceived to be at odds, such as "transman" and "editorial intern."

Sometimes participants' liminal positionalities as interns directly affected the level of support they received at their internship sites. When asked whether she experienced any barriers throughout her Career Center internship, Maggie replied:

I don't feel like there was any barriers. The only thing I would say— It was a— I'm thankful, but I would say, the person who was in charge of the Career Center—he was sometimes involved [but not] one hundred percent involved. Um, Dr., the woman, um, she was the one who really helped me. ... He was in charge of the—he was the director. So that's the only real barrier. It could be because of time. ... Dr. [Kirk] [her faculty mentor] was the one who was helping me all the time. I mean we would have meetings every once in a while. But, I just knew that maybe if I had any problem I could go to Dr. [Kirk].

Maggie ultimately concludes that her supervisor's lack of mentorship was a "real barrier." She is careful to couch her critique in the Hard-Working Intern Narrative, however, by first

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mentioning that there were not any barriers, then expressing gratitude for the experience, and finally excusing her supervisor: “It could be because of time.” The number of “false start” sentences (e.g., “It was a.”) and “ums” in this passage was uncharacteristic of Maggie’s more confident tone throughout the rest of her interview; her hesitation here suggests an unsurety in how to describe her supervisor’s shortcomings. The Hard-Working Intern Narrative promotes the idea that interns should navigate unsupportive workplaces without complaint and with gratitude. Cultural pressure to conform to this narrative can thus leave interns feeling that they have little language to name inequities, as could be the case with Maggie’s hesitation here.

The liminal positionality that interns occupy reinforces this idea. As an intern, Maggie occupied a precarious positionality in which she was expected to contribute to her host organization yet was not provided the mentorship necessary to do so. She thus defaulted to asking her professor for help, perhaps because she felt more comfortable with that person and/or because she had come to expect a higher level of support in academic spaces.

Gendered dynamics are also at work in Maggie’s account. When I asked her how Dr. Kirk became her default mentor, Maggie replied:

She just kind of fell into it because she was a part of the Career Development Center, so...she ended up just kind of falling into it. But I think she wouldn’t mind it either, because, you know, she was still a part of it.

Maggie’s comments highlight the often-invisible labor of mentorship, which is culturally coded as feminized “care” work. In this case, Maggie’s female professor was taking on additional work to provide needed support for Maggie, while Maggie’s male supervisor had the named recognition as her official “supervisor.” Dr. Kirk thus also occupied a somewhat liminal positionality by effectively performing as both Maggie’s faculty *and* site supervisor.

Jade similarly had to navigate a liminal intern positionality within gendered and racialized dynamics at her first internship with the local media outlet:

The person who I reported to just didn’t seem interested or invested in anything else I wanted to do, like, would just kind of like, be very nonchalant and kind of like shut down my ideas for things to [do]. If I wanted to write certain articles, it wasn’t like, “Go for it and try and present it to me and see what happens.” It was very much like, “No, this is what we do. Don’t give us any more ideas.” And so that person like made it a very, not a good experience.

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Jade's comments indicate that she and her supervisor were operating from different assumptions about the positionality an intern should occupy. Jade assumed that she should have the opportunity to suggest fresh ideas and take initiative, while her supervisor wanted her to fall in line with "what we do."

When Jade noted that her supervisor was a white male, I asked her if she felt that gendered or racialized dynamics shaped their interactions, to which she responded:

It's just that supervisor was such a huge barrier, and honestly, it's hard. It's hard for me to tie things to race because I have no idea, honestly, like I don't remember very many people of color at that newspaper...especially not writers...but it's just, it's hard for me to make that connection, you know, because there wasn't anything— It wasn't anything explicit. It's just— And he might have been like that with all interns and [it was] his personality. But it was just awful. Yeah, Yeah, it's hard to say, but it wasn't encouraging.

Like Maggie, Jade hesitated to blame her supervisor and described turning to her female faculty mentor for support:

Yeah, it was actually that same professor, Dr. [Hall], that I would go to for support, and she would make suggestions and things like that, so that helped me like finish the experience. But I think when I, like, kind of gave her feedback on how I felt, I think that started the conversation of like, "Oh, well, do you want to do something else."

On the one hand, we could read Jade's faculty mentor as being more supportive than her supervisor, as in Maggie's situation above. On the other hand, in an echo of the Hard-Working Intern Narrative, her faculty mentor connects Jade's declining interest in journalism to a failing on her part: "Oh well do you want to do something else," rather than interrogating the problematic workplace context that led Jade to that conclusion. Recall from the previous section that Jade attributed fewer barriers to her experiences because of her willingness to work hard. And yet, this part of her story shows that individual hard work is not always rewarded in the ways that the Hard-Working Intern Narrative would lead us to believe, partly due to the liminal positionalities and structural inequities that some interns must navigate.

As Maggie's and Jade's stories show in this section, faculty mentors can play a significant role in influencing how students navigate such complexities.

Faculty Mentors

Most of the participants reported having strong faculty mentors, who helped them at various stages of their internship experiences, such as brainstorming opportunities and providing ongoing support. Ashanti recounted:

I really didn't have any ideas of where I wanted to intern, because I wasn't sure...like I knew from my classes that these two subjects, business and professional writing, I knew that they went together, but I didn't know if there were a lot of employers that kind of saw the value of it; or if they would see me on paper and understand that my degree did relate to the type of work. But Dr. [Smith] put me into contact with, um, ABC Technologies out in [small city], and they had taken, um, some students from [my college]. And so that was how I got my internship. I wasn't really sure how to get one on my own, or what companies would be, um, interested in my degree combination. Um, so a lot of that was thanks to Dr. [Smith].

Ashanti's account shows that faculty mentors can particularly help with the creative thinking required not just to figure out what to do with a certain degree, but also with a certain degree combination. Offering such creative thinking as a form of support requires careful listening to each student's particular interests, contexts, and needs. Jade noted about her English faculty mentor, who was influential in helping her to acquire her second internship with the international ecology project:

[My English professor] knew my interest in like writing and science. She actually posted this to Dr. [Jones], who is the science professor who is teaching the tropical ecology class...I like dropped National Geographic or something at some point, and she just ran with the idea...It was very helpful to have, like, a faculty ally like [my English professor].

This form of tailored faculty support typically required participants to become involved in their department's larger community. Ashanti noted:

So I had been hanging around the English department and gotten pretty connected with the English professors, and I guess I was doing really well with Dr. [Smith], and so that kind of turned into a lot of encouragement for me to change my career path. She was very helpful in kind of securing a position for me, because I really just had no idea how to get one or where to start.

A high level of departmental involvement partly reflects the Hard-Working Intern Narrative—participants who were already working hard to make connections with faculty

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mentors were more likely to acquire their help in finding internships. Dana, for example, discussed changing her major to creative writing and then taking a specific class taught by the faculty advisor for the literary magazine where she later interned:

[My creative writing professor] was talking about it [the internship], and she invited me to [literary magazine meetings] a couple of times, and I was like, “No, I’m really not interested. Um, it’s not really something I like. I have a lot of my plate right now.” And so I went to one of the campus events run by [the literary magazine]. I interview, and she handed me an application, and she was like, “Hey, applications are already done. But I’ve read your fiction work. I want you to be my fiction editor.” And so I was like, “Okay, if she’s this adamant, I’ll do it.”

Dana’s experience shows that faculty support is not neutral. Even though other students had already applied for the editor position, Dana’s professor hand-picked her for that role, based on her prior assessment of her work.

In contrast, Quinn discussed feeling like they were not as well supported by the same faculty mentors who advise the literary magazine, because they were not an English major:

[The English faculty members] don’t have the same kind of repertoire [with me]. They don’t know me like they might know some of the other people. So there’s that barrier that I’m just like unknown. But I’m always there just doing things...I [work through it] by putting as much effort into everything that I can, and trying to be as organized as possible, just to like, prove that I am doing things, and I do know how to, like, do the more technical side of what people might consider this internship would need.

Both the Hard-Working Intern Narrative and liminal positionalities are at work here, in that Quinn felt that they had to work harder to “prove” themselves to their faculty mentors, because they were both “outside” of the English department as a non-major and “inside” of it via their internship. These participants’ experiences demonstrate that faculty and other types of support are closely tied to the contexts in which they are given.

Communities of Support

The participants who reported feeling the most comfortable and confident in their internships were those who were more fully integrated within their host organizations’ communities. In discussing how he adapted to working on the policy center podcast, Justin recounted:

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I think I felt pretty assimilated from the start, and I think part of it was that the podcast was sort of this new thing that we [the podcast team] were brainstorming together. Um, I think if it was like already a formed podcast, and then I was kind of the new hire in that way, I think I would have felt a little, you know, like there would have been more, um, not hesitation, but I would have felt, I guess, more like an outsider to start. But I felt like, since you're sort of starting from the beginning with it—there only being two episodes previously—I think that I sort of felt assimilated right away because I was, you know, we were all doing it sort of at the same time.

Justin worked on a podcast team, which included the director of the policy center, Justin's English faculty mentor, the editor of the center's academic journal, and several of the center's staff researchers. As Justin suggests, he was part of this team from the start and thus felt less like a liminal "outsider" and more like an integrated member of the policy center. His quick integration into the policy center "community" directly impacted how he perceived his work there:

[We] like created this whole podcast, basically you know, working on it through the summer. So it felt a lot more involved because we were doing that. But at the same time, I think it was really beneficial to have that experience [of] sort of deciding on what articles we were going to use, and you know, making sort of decisions about the like, the podcast logo, for example, like all of those things that don't necessarily have to do with the writing itself, that were really good experiences to have, and especially working with the, like, a whole team of people doing different things and working on the same project. [It was] almost a hopeful experience.

As part of a team, Justin had the chance to experience how writing is threaded throughout coordinated work in organizations. Justin's work with "a whole team of people doing different things and working on the same project" helped him to see how his work impacted the larger project and organization in "almost a hopeful experience."

This community of support also affected the type of feedback Justin received. For example, when I asked him how he adapted to writing podcast scripts, Justin replied:

The more I did it, and the more I understood sort of what the policy center was looking for and who the audience would be...that made it sort of easier to sort of adjust to that mode of writing...and then, of course, the feedback routine of having it looked at by [my faculty mentor], and having it looked at by the team...that's been really helpful to have somebody else sort of look at the writing and say, "You know,

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this may be complicated for [the podcast host] to say, or this may be, this might get lost on the audience,” and having that kind of feedback was helpful, so kind of having that, like, culture of a team and then getting consistent feedback.

Because Justin’s hard work (“the more I did it”) was well supported by a team, it was a more generative experience for him, as opposed to other participants, who strived to reach the Hard-Working Intern ideal without support. Recall Jade’s story of going to her supervisor with ideas only to have those ideas rejected, and Jade deciding that journalism was not for her. “Consistent feedback” that was integrated within the “culture of a team” helped Justin feel less like a liminal outsider and more like a valued member of his host organization, who could take a “safe to fail” approach.

Justin is one of three participants who reported internship experiences where faculty mentors were directly involved in their host organizations. Dana recounted the networked support she felt at her campus literary magazine:

I’ve been very blessed to have my office right next to [Dr. Will, who runs the literary journal], so it’s very easy to just kinda like pop over, or I’ll send her a text or something. I have a huge amount of support, though, like I constantly have English professors that know about [the magazine] that come and are like, “Hey! If you need help with anything...” The people from campus activities boards have also been very, very nice to me. A lot of the professors. Um, if I have a question about like internship hours and stuff, I can always go to my supervisor, Dr. [Martin], but usually I just kind of stick with my advisor for [the literary magazine].

Dana traces a network of support here that is aided by her office being physically down the hall from the magazine’s supervisor. This office space enabled a kind of *kairotic*, just “pop over” and chat, form of sustained, immediate support. At the same time, this network also included the student who had worked in her editorial role previously, who provided a useful form on “internship memory”:

I think that like in terms of editing styles and such, we have like a set list of guidelines that we follow every year that my previous editor had sent to me. And she also made a huge Google Doc of like training and stuff like that. She’s like, “This is what you can do. This is what you can’t do.” But in terms of, like, actual guidelines and stuff, Dr. Will is very, very lenient with me, thank goodness, and she trusts my judgment on a lot of editorial stuff because of my skill with writing that I kind of came to her with. If I kinda call a shot she, she trusts that I’m right. And I really, really appreciate that, because it does make me feel like I have more footing.

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Having access to the prior intern's documented knowledge creates a continuity of professional practice that helps Dana to know, "what you can do" and "what you can't do" in the editorial role, which helps her to claim greater agency within it. Dana feels like she has "more footing," or agency, to make decisions and that her faculty supervisor "trusts" her, partly because she is situated within a network of sustained support where her skills are recognized and valued. As with Justin, Dana's positionality as an intern is thus markedly different than the liminal positionality experienced by interns who were less integrated into their workplaces.

Jade similarly described feeling much more supported in her second internship with the tropical ecology class, because she was part of a team:

That was very cool. I got to make a brochure for practice in Mako, and worked on like a manual with another English student, who is actually also a Black woman. And I don't know where she is now, but we got to work on that project together. It was three weeks in Ecuador over the summer. ... We were the first English students to do this. So this was kind of, like, creative for us. Um, so there wasn't really much guidance to give. ... I do wish that I had, like, done more planning on the front end to do more, like, more targeted observation while we were there to have like a better product.

Jade claims ownership over her work ("we were the first" and "I do wish") that frames the lack of "guidance" she received as less of a problem and more of a generative challenge. Her sense of agency stems partly from her peer community at this internship; she got to be "creative" with a colleague with whom she identified, both as "also a Black woman" and as the "first English students to do this." She also expressed agency in how she retrospectively analyzed her work: "I do wish that I had, like, done more planning."

These participants' experiences show that working on a team can provide interns with supported forms of agency to run with ideas and take ownership over projects. Such agency thus helps them to adopt a collaborative growth mindset, rather than a competitive "work hard to prove oneself" approach.

Material Barriers/Supports

All of the participants noted material factors such as getting paid (or not) for their internship and navigating their internships with other jobs as influential to their experiences. Justin noted about his internship search:

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I was looking for something paid because I don't get funded through being a TA in the summer because we don't teach in the summer. So that was definitely something I was looking for...I would rather do an internship in the field that I'm interested in than get a job that isn't necessarily in my interest in the summer. So I saw an internship as sort of an opportunity to be able to pay for things in the summer, and have sort of field experience at the same time.

Justin's comments highlight the benefits that an internship can have when it is both paid and in the student's desired field. Quinn similarly echoed the need to get paid for work that was important to them:

But most people [at the literary magazine], they have like part-time jobs just to make a little bit of money. Like some people who live on campus, and they make a little bit of money to like pay for groceries and stuff. But, like me, I have the internship, and I have my actual real-world job of cashiering. Um, but I make the money to pay for my gas and to squirrel away money for grad school. [But] having the internship, having the hours and the money aspect to it definitely makes it feel a lot more real and sharpened my focus to it. More versus last year, when I was doing very similar things.

Quinn had volunteered at the literary magazine before obtaining the paid internship position. Their comment partly reflects interns' liminal positionality by setting up a binary between their internship and their "real world job." By suggesting that they approach their work with more "focus" now that they are paid, Quinn also suggests the cultural, conceptual, and material value that labeling students' work as a "paid internship" can evoke.

Dana, who also started with the magazine as a volunteer, echoes both material and non-material value in having her work named an internship:

It's definitely gonna look way better on my resume. ... I've always taken my job with [the literary magazine] very seriously. So in terms of work ethic it hasn't really changed, but it's been very nice, having it labeled as an internship, because it definitely feels more like, self-fulfilling and having that office space has really, really helped me get my work done way better than before.

The material reality of having office space down the hall from her faculty mentors has supported Dana to get her "work done way better." Dana feels that having the intern label not only will look "way better on my resume," but is also "more self-fulfilling." Her

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comments show how material support is intertwined with affective support in that it puts more actual and perceived value on interns' work.

Just like social and affective support, financial support for participants varied depending on their institution and host organization type. Jade, for example, tied her paid internship opportunity to the small, liberal arts setting in which she connected with her professors:

I'm a huge proponent of small liberal arts colleges like [my college], because I got to get really close to my professors, and like we're still close to this day...I mean I'm pretty self-motivated too at the same time. But I would have never come up with that tropical ecology thing, and the fact that [my faculty mentor] allowed me to use some of her grant money to do it—I would have never been able to go if it hadn't been for that, because I wouldn't have been able to afford going abroad. It covered everything.

Not only did Jade's smaller college facilitate her relationships with faculty, but her professor got creative both in using her grant money to support Jade's internship and in creating an internship out of what was otherwise defined as a study abroad trip. Recall that Jade proactively integrated with the English department, which likely added to the extra level of support she received from its faculty.

Not all participants experienced this level of material support and community-based mentorship. In discussing his experience applying for internships with big companies as an international student, Ali explained:

Sponsorship was quite a big barrier. ...And one thing is really interesting in the applications: Almost every application has a...[are you] "eligible to work starting like as soon as possible without any hindrances" [question], and I feel like as soon as I press "No" over there that might signal something to the employer. Now I don't remember exactly if I pressed "No," because technically I knew I could get [university sponsorship] without an issue. But I feel like that would become an issue if someone does press "Yes," for instance. ... And then just juggling interviews, people asking, you know, if you're allowed to work and all is just, it's not the easiest process. And then, because you're an international student, people would, I would assume, prefer people from the US, who are citizens whose first language is English, especially in a field where you have to write.

As Ali pinpoints, the way that employment applications ask students about their visa status can present rhetorical roadblocks even for students who have clear paths to sponsorship. While international students face added layers of liminality and

discrimination that program directors and instructors cannot control, communities of support, for example in departments and international student offices, can help international students rhetorically navigate complex employment processes that have serious material consequences.

Discussion

This study adds to the understanding of how interns negotiate various positionalities throughout TPC internship experiences, which can help administrators create stronger programmatic support. Although this study's small sample size precludes generalizability, it provides rich qualitative insight into overlapping factors that can affect interns' experiences. Based on these findings, I couch my discussion in concrete, iterative actions that TPC programs can take toward building more supportive and inclusive internship programs.

Defining Internships Clearly, Capaciously, and Creatively

Several of the barriers discussed by this study's participants emerge from how internships are defined. Some participants conceptualized their internships more in the ways administrators and faculty might expect professionals to define early-career jobs—for example, Ali's sense that companies were primarily trying to get work out of him, and Maryam's feeling that she was not competitive enough for "professional-level" internships. These conceptualizations partly emerge from the Hard-Working Intern Narrative telling us that interns need to work harder to prove themselves. This view of internships is at odds with the higher education definition of internships as primarily a *learning* experience (NACE, 2023).

Although internships have been well documented as "high-impact practices" (Nunley et al., 2016; Ocampo et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2016; Wolfgram & Ahrens, 2022), this study illustrates that internships are not positive learning experiences for all students. It is difficult to embrace a growth mindset if one feels that they must come into an internship already highly skilled. Further, as we saw with Quinn's negotiation of their trans identity, feeling that one must adopt a "professional" ethos at the expense of other identities requires a significant amount of emotional labor, a finding supported by recent scholarship in TPC on professional identity negotiation (Racelis, 2024). These findings add additional layers to literature demonstrating that internships can vary widely in terms of student learning (O'Neill, 2010) and that the US economy's increased focus on internships can function more as a gatekeeping mechanism than a commitment to student growth (Wolfgram & Ahrens, 2022).

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Programmatically, our operational definitions of *internships* can contribute both to how liminal students feel within them and how they are supported in navigating their intern positionalities with other aspects of their identities. There has been some push in TPC to connect interns with more organizations off-campus and internationally so that they can experience new contexts (Ding, 2020). While there is certainly merit to such approaches, the participants who reported the most generative experiences in this study were those who worked with campus units, either directly on campus like Dana, Quinn, and Justin, or via a study-abroad course like Jade. Participants working on campus may have felt less liminal simply due to their familiarity with those spaces. However, these participants were also given greater agency to pursue projects within a network of support. In other words, regardless of where an internship takes place, a supportive context that embraces a growth mindset is necessary. Setting up such contexts is partly definitional work that departments, internship coordinators, and host sites should ideally do together.

Such growth-minded, team-based contexts can be fostered by defining internships creatively. For example, internships can be formed from student organizations when paired with dedicated faculty support, like in Dana's and Quinn's literary magazine experience; from service-learning courses (re)defined as internships, such as Jade's tropical ecology class; and from on-campus teams of students, faculty, and staff across campus units, like in Justin's policy center internship. Indeed, such non-traditional internships may particularly help students who face additional barriers to finding work with larger companies, such as the international students in this study. While there has been some research in TPC advocating for such approaches (St.Amant, 2003), additional research is needed to determine how non-traditional or on-campus internships affect diverse students' experiences.

These findings are supported by a deep history of literature on situated learning both in TPC and other fields showing how professionals learn by following stages of apprenticeship alongside more experienced practitioners within "communities of practice" (e.g., Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This study adds needed attention to how students negotiate other aspects of their intersectional identities while learning specifically as interns, negotiations that are heavily affected by mentorship.

Mentoring Interns via Distributed, Community-Based Networks

This research contributes to other TPC literature showing the importance of faculty and supervisor mentorship for interns (Kramer-Simpson, 2018a, 2018b). Some higher

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education research has found that interns, particularly from marginalized groups, benefit from mentorship in their communities and from peers as well (Lake, 2021). Scholarship in other fields has shown that a team-based approach to internships can be particularly impactful for underrepresented students (Murray et al., 2025).

This study adds that mentorship works best when it is integrated within larger networks of support, because such networks can (a) provide interns with more consistent and contextualized feedback; (b) help them to understand the larger impact of their work as part of ongoing projects; (c) contribute to interns feeling more integrated and less liminal; and (d) help interns to feel less of a perceived divide between their “academic” and “work” spaces. When other interns are part of these networks, as we saw with Dana’s and Quinn’s literary magazine experiences and Jade’s work in Ecuador, interns can feel more ownership over their work.

Negative sides to mentorship also emerged in this study’s findings. Mentorship can be a burden on mentors when they are not well supported, as we saw with Jade’s and Maggie’s default female mentors who shouldered extra mentoring responsibilities. Research has shown that in the absence of strong social support, women tend to pick up the slack of care work, which includes mentorship (Calarco, 2024). Programmatically, administrators need to ensure that faculty members who spend extra time working with interns are first recognized, and then fairly compensated and well supported by their departments and institutions.

Additionally, mentorship is not neutral. For example, Dana’s faculty mentor singled her out for the editorial internship, while Quinn received the same internship, but felt like an outsider as a non-English major. As faculty members, we have to be mindful of the strong role that we can play in shaping students’ lives. As we saw with Jade’s faculty mentor who suggested that she try a different career path based on one unsupportive supervisor, the power of suggestion—and the related power to define competencies—functions within gendered, raced, and classed structures that are not always equitable (Fine, 2025).

Rethinking mentorship as *networked* and *distributed* rather than as a duty designated to one individual can help both to spread out mentorship work and level out biases, while providing students with additional layers of support. For example, networks of mentorship can include other peer interns, former interns, departmental faculty, community members, and a variety of staff or volunteers at host organizations. Mapping mentorship networks is an activity that internship supervisors can do together with site coordinators to ensure that multiple mentorship layers are in place; this exercise can also be done

iteratively with students in internship courses to help them visualize who they can go to for support and what type of support works best for them (refer to Appendix B).

Supporting Interns Materially

This study joins other scholarship showing that material support is often a prerequisite for students to pursue internships. Students from marginalized groups face additional barriers to internship participation that are shaped by systems of power (Hora, Wolfgram, & Chen 2019; Wolfgram, Vivona, & Akram 2021). While large systems of power are difficult to change, individual programs and faculty members can get creative to find/create material support for students. For example, Dana's and Quinn's faculty mentor used grant money to turn the editor position into a paid internship with office space, and Jade's faculty mentor used grant money to support her tropical ecology internship. My department uses funds from an endowed chair to provide fellowships to students pursuing non-profit and/or social justice internships that would otherwise be unpaid (Swacha, 2022). While such funds will not be available in all departments, other material factors—as we saw with the office space provided for Dana and Quinn—can make a difference. Other examples include access to computers and printers, transportation, or even professional clothing.

Pooling resources across departments can be fruitful; for example, at my home institution, we cross-listed the TPC internship course I regularly teach with the internship course in our Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies program, which had been running as unsupervised, asynchronous course credits. This merge allowed both units to offer a synchronous internship course, while also making WGS students eligible for our departmental internship fellowship. Working with other campus units that might be better funded and in need of communication interns—such as the policy center in Justin's case—can also help to create funded internships. These ideas have the added benefit of placing TPC students in interdisciplinary contexts, which can help them to experience the multi-dimensional work necessary to solve complex problems (Swacha & Heim, 2023). Internship coordinators can create other material support structures, such as databases of paid internships, to help students find more paid internship opportunities.

Creating Programmatic Structures of Support

While administrators cannot control for all of the intertwined factors that affect interns' experiences, we can build multi-layered support structures into our programs. I summarize a few ideas for doing so here, based on this study's findings, as a starting point rather than a prescriptive list:

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- 1) Define ‘internships’ creatively, iteratively, and together with site supervisors and students, so that operating definitions create generative parameters for interns’ work.
- 2) Discuss cultural narratives of “professional,” “work,” and “intern” with both students and mentors to allow for critical thinking on how such narratives affect how interns are perceived, how they and others approach their work, and how other aspects of their identities shape their intern roles.
- 3) Provide students with growth-minded narratives that empower them to become a part of their internship communities and support one another, rather than fostering the individual, Hard-Working Intern narrative.
- 4) Support faculty mentors and internship coordinators to build well-supported programs, via course release time, dedicated committees, and/or faculty stipends. Advanced students can be involved in such work, for example via department-level internships that place them on planning committees, as TAs in internship courses, as content creators for internship marketing materials, and/or as peer mentors for other interns.
- 5) Create networks of mentorship, for example by
 - a. Selecting internship sites that take a team-based approach;
 - b. Forming cohorts of interns either in workplaces or in internship courses, where students can mentor one another;
 - c. Critically thinking about and reflecting on mentorship styles across different spaces—for example, via “mentorship maps.”
- 6) Get creative with funding internships via departmental or institutional funds, grants, and/or standing internships with well-funded campus units.
- 7) Develop course sequences that teach theories of situated learning for students to take before, during, and/or after their internships. Such courses can help students to think through how they can engage with the “community of practice” at their internship sites as a novice learning from experienced practitioners, rather than as a liminal worker seeking to prove themselves (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Understanding how people learn in context can help students to develop the professional agility necessary to navigate shifting workplace contexts well beyond their internships.

Conclusion

Building from this study, some areas for future research include: more research on how internships are defined and operationalized across TPC programs to determine correlations between types of internships and their impacts on student learning; further research on how interns are mentored across TPC internship programs; additional studies to understand how internship barriers affect students with specific positionalities and the

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types of support that can mitigate those barriers. This specific study can expand to include more participants at a greater range of institution types and geographic locations (rural, urban, etc.). As work landscapes rapidly change, it is imperative that program administrators iteratively research what makes internship programs most supportive for all students and shape our programs accordingly.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me about your internship—what organization are you interning/did you intern with? What are some of your main responsibilities or projects there? Who do you work with/report to?
- 2) Tell me a bit about your internship search process: How did you find this internship, and why did you decide to pursue it? What most inspired you to pursue an internship? What resources/people did you rely on to secure an internship? Did you encounter any challenges or barriers when seeking an internship?
- 3) Tell me a bit about your prior experience going into your internship:
 - a. Have you ever had an internship before?
 - b. What concerns did you have going into this internship?
 - c. What professional skills do you feel you had going into the internship, and which skills are you working to develop through the internship?
- 4) Can you talk generally about how you feel your internship is going/went?
 - a. What were you confident/not confident about going in? What goals/visions did you have for your internship?
 - b. How do you feel about those goals and confidence levels now? Are you reaching your goals? Why or why not? Has your confidence improved? Why or why not?
- 5) Can you talk about some of the challenges you have faced so far in your internship and how you have addressed them?
- 6) Can you talk about some of your successes so far in your internship? Why do you feel that you have been successful in these areas? What has fostered or supported your success? How would you define ‘success’ in your internship?
- 7) Are there any aspects of your identity that you feel have affected your internship experience?
- 8) Who/where have you gone to for support throughout your internship?
- 9) Which of these resources have been most helpful to you in your internship so far? Why?
- 10) Which resources have not been helpful? Why not?
- 11) Are there any additional types of resources or support that you think would be helpful for you to succeed in your internship?
- 12) What are your professional plans after this internship? Do you see this internship as preparing you in any way to pursue those plans? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Mentorship Maps

Site supervisors and faculty internship coordinators can use this heuristic iteratively both when setting up internship placements and throughout internships to ensure that a network of mentorship is consistently available for interns. Students can also do this activity both early on in their internship courses and throughout it. The goal is to help site supervisors, faculty, and students identify who interns can go to for support, what types of mentorship they can expect, and to think critically about what types of mentorship are most generative for each student. After discussing and/or writing reflectively about these questions, students can make visual ‘mentorship maps,’ which show who they can go to for support in various contexts, and where there might be overlap.

Defining Mentorship

How would you define “mentor”?

What characteristics make a “good” mentor?

Who have you gone to for mentorship in the past? What has been most useful to you about these mentorship relationships? What has not been useful? Who is the “ideal” mentor for you?

Mentorship at my Internship

Who is the main person(s) you can go to for support at your internship site? How can you contact them? How do you know that you can go to this person(s)? What type of support can you expect from them?

Who else can you go to for support at your internship site? How can you contact them? How do you know that you can go to this person(s)? What type of support can you expect from them?

Mentorship at my University

Who is the main person(s) you can go to for support at your university about your internship? How can you contact them? How do you know that you can go to this person(s)? What type of support can you expect from them?

Who else can you go to for support at your university about your internship? How do you contact them? How do you know that you can go to this person(s)? What type of support can you expect from them?

Mentorship in my Community

Who can you go to for support in your home community or your life off campus about your internship? How can you contact them? How do you know that you can go to this person(s)? What type of support can you expect from them?

Critical Thinking about Mentorship

Is there any overlap among mentors at your internship site, university, and in your community? How might this overlap be generative for you?

Are there any gaps among mentorship in these spaces? How might these gaps be generative, and how might they pose challenges?

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What Do We Mean By “AI Literacy”? Tensions in Current Institutional Guidelines and Recommendations for a Slow, Reflective Future

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Abstract This article examines how educators navigate tensions between efficiency-driven integration and critical approaches to generative AI literacy. Through thematic analysis of twelve institutional AI frameworks and collaborative autoethnographic reflections, we identify significant gaps between policy aspirations and pedagogical realities. While institutions converge around principles of human oversight and ethical consideration, educators face challenges including time constraints and tensions between preparing students for AI-integrated futures while maintaining critical perspectives. We propose a “slow pedagogy” approach that resists efficiency-driven integration in favor of deliberate, justice-centered engagement, offering a reflective heuristic for practitioners across educational contexts.

Keywords generative artificial intelligence, AI literacy, writing pedagogy, reflection, slow pedagogy

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) across educational and professional landscapes represents one of the most consequential technological disruptions in contemporary higher education. From ChatGPT's public debut in late 2022 to the proliferation of field-specific AI applications across industries, GenAI tools have fundamentally altered not only how knowledge work is performed, but how we conceptualize the very nature of intellectual labor, creativity, and expertise. Within writing studies, technical communication, and design contexts, this technological emergence has been particularly pronounced as the generative capabilities of AI intersect directly with core pedagogical practices and professional competencies. The speed of this transformation has left educators, administrators, and students grappling with fundamental questions about academic integrity, pedagogical relevance, and the evolving nature of disciplinary knowledge itself.

Yet this rapid technological emergence has precipitated what can only be described as a moment of profound pedagogical reckoning, one that reveals the urgent need for critically nuanced definitions of "AI literacy" within our disciplinary contexts (e.g., Liddle & Grant, 2024; Woo et al., 2023). The term "literacy" itself carries significant theoretical weight within writing studies and technical communication pedagogy, encompassing not merely technical competency, but critical awareness, rhetorical sophistication, and ethical engagement with tools and texts (Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, 1996). However, current institutional responses to GenAI often deploy AI literacy as an under-examined buzzword, conflating basic operational knowledge with the kind of critical, ethical, and theory-informed engagement that AI literacy demands. This conceptual imprecision is particularly troubling within our disciplines, where literacy has long been understood as a complex sociotechnical practice involving critical analysis, ethical reflection, and awareness of power dynamics embedded within communicative technologies and practices.

This imperative for critically examined AI literacy is particularly urgent within technical and professional communication (TPC) and writing programs, where students are explicitly preparing for careers that increasingly demand AI competency. Unlike general education contexts where AI literacy might be treated as ancillary to disciplinary content, TPC and writing programs must grapple with AI as both pedagogical concern and professional necessity. Our students will enter workplaces where AI-assisted writing is standard practice, yet they must also develop the critical capacities to evaluate, resist, and reshape AI applications that perpetuate bias, reproduce inequities, or diminish human agency. This dual mandate of preparing students to work with AI while cultivating critical resistance to its problematic applications positions TPC educators uniquely to develop nuanced

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approaches to AI literacy that neither uncritically embrace technological integration nor categorically refuse engagement. For writing program administrators (WPAs) and TPC program directors, this means developing frameworks that support faculty in navigating these tensions while maintaining pedagogical integrity and disciplinary values.

The empirical landscape surrounding AI literacy corroborates our call for more deliberative pedagogical approaches. Peter Cardon and others' (2023) comprehensive survey of 343 business communication instructors reveals a field in profound transition, where rapid technological adoption has outpaced thoughtful pedagogical integration, creating significant anxiety among educators who feel pressured to adapt without adequate support or theoretical grounding. Their findings illuminate precisely the pedagogical crisis we seek to address: While 80% of instructors believe AI-assisted writing will be useful in the workplace and widely adopted, 47% feel nervous or anxious about using it in their courses, and many resist change due to concerns about their ability to adapt or simply lack of time to develop new approaches.

As writing, communication, and design educators find ourselves navigating an increasingly complex landscape of institutional mandates, technological capabilities, and ethical imperatives, we witness a troubling pattern: The rush toward integration often outpaces the deliberative reflection that such consequential pedagogical shifts demand. This urgency to "keep pace" with technological advancement has generated a proliferation of AI literacy frameworks and institutional guidelines that, while well-intentioned, frequently prioritize operational efficiency over the nuanced ethical and social justice considerations that should undergird any meaningful pedagogical transformation.

Yet within this moment of institutional scrambling lies an opportunity for scholar-teachers to pause, reflect, and chart a more thoughtful course forward. Rather than adding our voices to the growing chorus of either wholesale celebration or categorical rejection of GenAI tools, we in this article position ourselves as a collective of educator-researchers committed to what we call a reflexive future, an approach that centers ethical responsibility, social justice, and genuine student advocacy in our pedagogical decision-making processes. Our collaborative inquiry emerges from a shared recognition that the current discourse around AI literacy often fails to adequately address the lived realities of students and educators working within complex institutional constraints, while simultaneously overlooking the broader social implications of uncritical technology adoption.

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As a research cluster (Building Digital Literacy, of the Digital Life Institute), our group's scholarly goals reflect a deliberate commitment to the concept of "slow pedagogy," a methodological and philosophical stance that advocates for an alternative understanding of learning that is intentional, contemplative, and embodied as a response to ceaseless productivity (Berg & Seeber, 2017; Holt, 2002; Leddy & Miller, 2024; Payne & Wattchow, 2009; Shahjahan, 2015). We draw from the principles of slow pedagogy to resist the breathless pace of technological adoption in favor of deliberate, reflective engagement that prioritizes ethical consideration and social justice principles (Tham, 2025). Our approach—extended from our collective understanding of digital literacy threshold concepts (Stambler et al., 2025) and our conception of digital life as enmeshed in infrastructural issues of equity and lived experience (Davis et al., 2022)—recognizes that meaningful AI literacy cannot be separated from broader questions of educational equity and the kinds of critical thinking capabilities we hope to foster in our students' everyday lives. We advocate for a socially responsible, justice-centered pedagogy that interrogates not merely how to integrate GenAI tools, but whether, when, and for whom such integration serves genuinely transformative educational purposes.

Our collaborative autoethnographic methodology reflects this commitment to slowed-down reflection, allowing us to examine our own positionalities as both researchers and practitioners while interrogating the institutional contexts that shape our pedagogical possibilities. The methodological significance of our collaborative autoethnographic approach becomes apparent when considered against existing research limitations. While quantitative surveys provide valuable baseline data about instructor perceptions, they cannot access the nuanced, lived experiences of educators grappling with AI integration within specific institutional contexts. Our collaborative methodology offers precisely what current research identifies as needed: sustained, reflective engagement with the complex realities of AI literacy development as it unfolds in practice, not merely as it is anticipated in theory.

This study presents a thematic analysis of existing AI literacy frameworks within pedagogies of writing, technical communication, and design, examining how current institutional approaches navigate, or fail to navigate, the fundamental tensions between efficiency-driven integration and critically engaged pedagogy. Through our collaborative autoethnographic lens, we analyze institutional policies and guidelines not merely as administrative documents, but as representatives of rhetorical frameworks that reveal deeper assumptions about learning, literacy, and the role of technology in educational spaces. Our analysis illuminates significant convergences and divergences in how AI

literacy is conceptualized and operationalized across our institutional contexts, revealing patterns that speak to broader questions about academic labor, student agency, and the social responsibilities of educational institutions. We offer instructors and program directors a “slow,” reflective approach to examining GenAI pedagogies and literacies that focuses on considering contextual nuances over dichotomies of refusal or acceptance.

Literature Review

While researchers have begun articulating new paradigms for human-AI collaboration in writing and establishing critical frameworks for understanding the ethical complexities of AI integration, institutional responses have often proceeded without adequate grounding in this scholarly foundation. This disconnect between theoretical development and policy implementation creates a compelling need for systematic analysis of how institutions are currently defining and operationalizing AI literacy. The following review examines three key areas of scholarship—theoretical frameworks for AI-assisted writing, ethical considerations in AI integration, and emerging pedagogical and institutional responses—to establish the foundation for our thematic analysis of institutional AI literacy frameworks and to demonstrate why such analysis is both warranted and needed.

Articulating the Writing Assistant Paradigm

Across our discipline and adjacent fields like education and linguistics, scholars are articulating what may be called the “writing assistant paradigm”: a socio-technical framework in which AI systems serve not merely as tools but as rhetorical collaborators that reshape authorial identity and composition processes (Amirjalili, Neysani, & Nikbakht, 2024; Fyfe, 2022; Hutson, 2025; Masters-Wheeler, 2024; Tang, 2021;). This demands new theoretical frameworks that account for collaborative entanglements between human and artificial intelligence. Responding to this need, scholars have begun developing taxonomies to capture the nuances of writing with AI assistants. For example, Heidi McKee and James E. Porter’s (2022) taxonomy of human-machine teaming roles—resource tool, assistant, writer, and executive decision-maker—exemplifies this theoretical development by emphasizing the rhetorical intelligence required to navigate these evolving configurations. Building on this foundation, scholars (Deets et al., 2024; Getto et al., 2025; Markauskaite et al., 2022) have examined the dynamics of genre-sensitive task allocation, emotional entanglements in human-AI partnerships, and the broader social conditions that shape AI-mediated writing. Stacey Pigg (2024), for instance, demonstrates an embodied practice framework for writing with AI to describe rhetorical moves that expert writers take to leverage AI functions in research writing. Additionally, Alan Knowles (2024)

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discusses rhetorical load-sharing with automation machines via machine-in-the-loop writing methods.

The psychological dimensions of this writing assistant paradigm prove particularly significant. Jerry W. Washington's (2023) critical literature review illuminates how GenAI affects writers' self-efficacy, potentially enhancing creativity while raising concerns about overreliance. This complexity extends through the work of Jing Gao (2024) on writer agency, identity, and affect. Simultaneously, Chenchen Liu et al. (2024) and Jinhee Kim et al. (2025) warn that personalized AI feedback systems may unintentionally mask authentic voice or promote normative conventions that inhibit genuine expression.

These transformations are reverberating across both academic and professional domains, revealing the broader implications of this paradigmatic shift. Hart-Davidson et al. (2024, 2025) situate AI-assisted writing within broader conversations about automation and justice, while Gallagher et al. (2025) provide complementary evidence by documenting how machine learning researchers experience communicative pressure amid AI hype cycles—demonstrating that these tensions affect practitioners across disciplines. Building on these contextual insights, empirical work (Albrecht-Crane et al., 2024; Jiang, 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024) provides crucial evidence of how human-AI writing partnerships evolve iteratively through interlocking negotiations between control and co-authorship. These transformations operate at an infrastructural level that demands critical examination, as scholars like David Gunkel (2023) and Collin Björk (2025) interrogate the epistemological and ethical consequences of extractive AI systems, raising fundamental questions about labor and intellectual ownership that become central to institutional policy considerations.

Specifically, the theoretical foundations underlying human-AI collaboration challenge presumed boundaries between human agency and machine performance. This presumption needs to be acknowledged if we wish to devise institutional frameworks that do not simply echo technological determinism but instead understand AI systems as social artifacts embedded with human values and cultural logics. Of note, Steve Woolgar's (1985) foundational call for a sociology of machines anticipated today's need to examine how sociotechnical systems like AI are co-constructed by and co-constructive of human behavior and institutional norms. Realizing this prescient vision, contemporary studies by Carlo Perrotta, Neil Selwyn, and Carrie Ewin (2024) and Andrea Guzman & Seth Lewis (2020) operationalize this sociotechnical understanding by considering AI not as autonomous actors but as artifacts imbued with human labor, intention, and sociocultural

coding. Virginia Eubanks's (2018) early critique of human labor erasure in AI systems calls for reinvestment in humanities education to retain critical capacity for interpreting and shaping AI-mediated communication.

Moving beyond utilitarian framings, Ann Hill Duin and Isabel Pedersen's (2021) "writing futures framework" situates human authorship within networked ecologies of tools and practices, while Ann Hill Duin and others (2022) theorize AI as a provocateur of pedagogical and epistemological change. Jennifer Higgs and Amy Stornaiuolo's (2024) investigation of how young people articulate ethical concerns through frameworks of care, authenticity, and creative agency reveals that ethical AI engagement involves attending to fundamental human needs rather than simply applying external moral frameworks. These theoretical insights illuminate how institutions might develop policies that honor both technological possibility and humanistic values, recognizing the ongoing negotiations of authorship, embodiment, and meaning-making that characterize human-AI relations.

Navigating Ethical Complexities

While the writing assistant paradigm establishes the theoretical framework for understanding human-AI collaboration, the implementation of this paradigm raises profound ethical questions that institutions must address through their policies and guidelines. The ethical discourse surrounding AI integration reveals tensions that extend far beyond classroom concerns to fundamental questions of agency, justice, and responsibility. These complexities challenge our most basic assumptions about authorship and accountability, demanding new frameworks that institutional policies must address.

Traditional academic integrity models prove inadequate when confronted with AI-assisted writing's fluidity. Scholars (Banville et al., 2024; Deptula et al., 2025; Wise et al., 2023) demonstrate how writing with AI destabilizes established expectations of originality, demanding institutional policies that move beyond detection and discipline toward transparency and shared responsibility. This shift represents not merely procedural adjustment but fundamental reconceptualization of intellectual labor. Marie Alina Yeo's (2023) exploration within TESOL contexts raises critical questions about "contract cheating," procedural fairness, and teachers' roles in cultivating ethical judgment, revealing how technological innovation intersects with educational inequities in ways that institutional policies must carefully navigate.

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The theoretical implications for authenticity represent equally challenging terrain for rhetoric (Majdik & Wynn, 2023; Ranade et al., 2025; Wang, 2024a; Wang, 2024b). Drawing from classical and humanistic frameworks, Andrianna Deptula et al. (2025) illuminate the tension between technical proficiency and rhetorical integrity, while Roberto Santiago de Rook (2024) calls for pedagogy that foregrounds agency within datafied ecologies. The implications of these authenticity and agency concerns extend beyond educational contexts into broader public discourse, where Seth C. Lewis et al. (2019) issue parallel warnings against technocentrism and algorithmic objectivity in journalism. Extending this critique to the political sphere, Jamie Littlefield's (2025) concept of "stochastic publics" reveals how AI's probabilistic logic often reinforces power asymmetries rather than democratizing participation.

For these reasons and more, critical attention to algorithmic bias becomes essential for institutional consideration. Antonio Byrd's (2023) critique of linguistic and ideological assumptions in large language model corpora reveals how these systems reproduce colonial and racial hierarchies, while Jennifer Sano-Franchini and Kaytely Carpenter's (2023) interface analysis illuminates how bias operates through design patterns that systematically disadvantage marginalized communities. The pedagogical responses emerging from these ethical complexities point toward the need for institutional policies that actively foreground justice and agency.

Responding Pedagogically and Institutionally

For the reasons scholars have outlined in our growing body of scholarship around AI writing technologies and writing instruction, educators are responding to GenAI with nuanced integration (and refusal) strategies (Malette, 2024; Noone & Baek, 2024; Reeves & Sylvia, 2024; Shultz Colby, 2025). Some of these responses engage students and other instructors' perspectives (e.g., Bedington et al., 2024; Black & Tomlinson, 2025; Kim & Kim, 2022; Kohnke et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023). By and large, these responses require institutions to develop new approaches that build AI literacy as a form of critical thinking, revise learning outcomes to include technological collaboration, and create classroom practices that emphasize thoughtful reflection and ethical decision-making (Bond et al., 2024; Hutson & Plate, 2023; Shalamova & Rice-Bailey, 2024).

Reflective thinking emerges as crucial for meaningful AI integration (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Thominet et al., 2024). Liu et al.'s (2023) reflective thinking promotion mechanism demonstrates how structured reflection improves writing performance while reducing

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cognitive load, resonating with Mohamed Awad AlAfnan and others' (2024) emphasis on soft skills development and Jason Tham's (2024) vision prioritizing ethical inquiry, creative exploration, and rhetorical adaptability. Experimental studies provide compelling evidence: Sibel Söğüt's (2024) research reveals enhanced student confidence when instructors scaffold AI use with explicit learning goals; Brandon Strubberg et al. (2023) observe the need for diversity in student participants when testing interactivity with AI applications; while Kristen M. Getchell et al. (2022) demonstrate how scenario-based learning helps students internalize professional standards through technological augmentation.

However, current institutional responses reveal regulatory framework inconsistency. Dylan Medina's (2025) comprehensive analysis highlights the critical disconnect between pedagogical possibilities and policy implementation, demonstrating how institutional frameworks often constrain innovative teaching practices. Hind Aljuaid's (2024) systematic review reveals striking policy diversity—from Stanford and University of California's acknowledgment policies to Middlebury College's classroom bans—reflecting fundamentally different assumptions about student agency and educational purpose that often hinder pedagogically effective innovations.

Curricular transformation demands disciplinary assumption interrogation alongside institutional adaptation (Tham et al., 2022). Stephen Carradini (2024) calls for curricula cultivating epistemic humility and deliberative thinking, aligning with Christine Masters-Wheeler and others (2023) and Jialei Jiang and Gustav Verhulsdonck's (2025) assessment frameworks emphasizing generative co-creation. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope's (2025) argument for reimagining literacy education through design-oriented approaches rather than legacy integrity notions suggests institutional resistance often stems from deficit models of student agency. The evolution toward multimodal approaches (Getchell et al., 2024; Jiang, 2024) requires policies supporting expanded pedagogical imagination, while Amy Stornaiuolo and others (2023) and Julianna Lopez Kershen and Brianne Johnson's (2025) "platformization" theory reveals how AI infrastructure simultaneously amplifies affordances and inequities.

Institutions increasingly recognize needs for adaptive governance models. Xieliang Chen and others (2022) and Dorcas A. Anabire and others (2024) document shifts toward sustained professional development and community building rather than policy enforcement alone, including updated codes of conduct, faculty training investments, and AI literacy programs. Justice and equity considerations prove central to both pedagogical

reconceptualization and policy development. Cardon et al.'s (2023) emphasis on AI literacy critically aware of algorithmic bias connects to institutional urgency around seemingly neutral policies that reproduce educational disadvantage. Hongqin Li and Lin Pan (2024) and Xiao Tan and others (2025) argue prohibitionist approaches may exacerbate inequities, particularly for multilingual students benefiting from AI-assisted language support, connecting to broader research calling for inclusive frameworks aligned with inclusive design principles (Ghimire, 2025).

Building on these governance insights, scholars have begun developing more comprehensive frameworks for institutional AI integration. Jürgen Rudolph and others' (2024) relational and reflexive governance approach situates AI within broader sociotechnical systems, complementing initiatives documented by the Digital Life Institute's *Adapting to AI Writing* report (Pedersen, 2023), which reveals the extensive coordination requirements for meaningful integration. Meanwhile, Aljuaid's (2024) integration of Technology Acceptance Model, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Community of Inquiry frameworks signals growing recognition that AI evaluation requires multiple analytical perspectives beyond academic integrity concerns. This multifaceted approach extends to workplace preparation, where Gustav Verhulsdonck and others' (2021) integrated approach to design thinking, content strategy, and AI reflects both industry needs and user-centered values.

Despite these promising theoretical and practical developments, the implementation reality reveals significant needs for systematic analysis of how institutions actually define and implement AI literacy through policies, guidelines, and other resources. To this end, our study addresses this gap by examining the artifacts that constitute institutional AI literacy frameworks and educators' lived experiences implementing these frameworks through collaborative autoethnographic analysis, investigating how educators navigate the tensions between institutional guidelines and ethically reflective pedagogy. In the next section, we describe our collaborative analysis process.

Methods: Studying Existing Institutional Guidelines

This study addresses three primary research questions that emerge from our review of current AI literacy discourse:

1. How do existing institutional AI literacy frameworks define and operationalize AI literacy within higher education contexts?

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2. What convergences and divergences exist across institutional approaches to AI literacy implementation, particularly regarding the balance between efficiency-driven integration and critically engaged pedagogy?
3. What tensions and unresolved questions characterize current AI pedagogical approaches, and how might these inform more socially just and reflective frameworks?

Our methodological approach combines collaborative autoethnography with thematic analysis, reflecting our commitment to what we refer to as a slow, reflexive response for AI—a deliberate, reflective stance that resists the rapid pace of technological adoption in favor of ethical consideration and social justice principles. This methodological choice aligns with our theoretical positioning that meaningful AI literacy cannot be separated from broader questions of educational equity and critical engagement.

Collaborative autoethnography serves as our primary methodological framework, allowing us to examine our own positionalities as both researchers and practitioners while interrogating the institutional contexts that shape our pedagogical possibilities (Chang et al., 2013). This approach enables sustained, reflective engagement with the complex realities of AI literacy development as it unfolds in practice, addressing what current research identifies as needed: nuanced understanding of educators' lived experiences with AI integration within specific institutional contexts. Our collaborative methodology offers precisely what quantitative surveys cannot access—the contextual, experiential knowledge that emerges from practitioner-researchers grappling with AI integration in real time.

We systematically collected and analyzed 12 institutional AI literacy frameworks (refer to Table 1). In the context of our study, we define a framework as an overarching structure or orientation of an institution's approach to AI; this structure can be gleaned from various institutional artifacts. The 20 artifacts we collected included higher education institutional policies, guidelines, resource lists, and statements from diverse institutional types and geographic locations. These artifacts were identified through purposive sampling, targeting institutions that had texts that were publicly available and specifically addressed AI literacy or pedagogical integration.

Our thematic analysis followed an inductive qualitative coding process informed by grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2006), allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Each framework underwent analysis by 2–3 team members independently, followed by collaborative discussion to achieve coding

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consensus. This multiple-coder approach enhances reliability while our collaborative discussion process ensures that diverse perspectives and institutional contexts inform our analysis.

The coding process involved three iterative phases: 1) initial open coding to identify preliminary themes, 2) focused coding to develop more substantial categories, and 3) theoretical coding to establish relationships between themes. Our collaborative autoethnographic approach meant that we simultaneously analyzed the artifacts in each framework while reflecting on our own institutional experiences and constraints, creating a dialogical relationship between data analysis and personal reflection.

From a qualitative research standpoint, our study establishes validity through several mechanisms. Credibility is enhanced through our multiple-coder approach and collaborative analysis process, ensuring that interpretations emerge from collective rather than individual perspective. Our collaborative autoethnographic methodology provides prolonged engagement with the phenomenon under study, as we are not distant observers but embedded practitioners. Transferability is supported through our detailed description of institutional contexts and analytical processes, allowing readers to assess the applicability of our findings to their own contexts. The diversity of our collaborative enhances the dependability of our findings by incorporating multiple perspectives and reducing individual bias. Our inductive analytical approach allows findings to emerge from data rather than confirming predetermined hypotheses.

Table 1. Existing artifacts from 12 universities and two international organizations.

Institution/Organization	Artifacts	Framework Notes
Central Michigan University	Generative AI Resources https://www.cmich.edu/offices-departments/curriculum-instructional-support/select-or-develop-materials-and-tools/artificial-intelligence-AI-resources	General institutional resource collection; teaching-focused guidance
Digital Education Council	AI Literacy Framework https://www.digitaleducationcouncil.com/post/digital-education-council-ai-literacy-framework	Independent educational organization framework; comprehensive

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		literacy model
James Madison University	Task Force on Artificial Intelligence https://www.jmu.edu/president/initiatives/ai-task-force/index.shtml	Task force-driven institutional approach; governance-focused development
Pennsylvania State University	Program in Writing and Rhetoric: https://www.pwr.psu.edu/pwr-ai-approach/ Penn State AI Guidelines: https://ai.psu.edu/guidelines/ AI, Pedagogy, an Academic Integrity: https://ai.psu.edu/ AI Literacy Unit: https://ai.psu.edu/ailiteracy/	Multi-departmental comprehensive approach; includes discipline-specific (writing & rhetoric) and institution-wide policies
Texas Tech University	AI Teaching Resources https://www.depts.ttu.edu/tlpdc/ai-resources/teaching-with-ai.php	Teaching and learning center resources; faculty development focus
UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)	AI Competency Framework for Teachers https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ai-competency-framework-teachers	International policy framework; teacher competency model for global implementation
University of Central Florida	Faculty Multimedia Center – Home for Artificial Intelligence https://cdl.ucf.edu/the-fmc-is-your-home-for-artificial-intelligence/	Faculty technology center approach; technology integration focus
University of Groningen	Basic Rules for the Use of AI in Teaching https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/organization/quality-	European institutional context; regulatory compliance

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	assurance/education/artificial-intelligence-ai/?lang=en	emphasis (GDPR)
University of Pittsburgh	<p>Teaching with generative AI (University Center for Teaching and Learning): https://teaching.pitt.edu/resources/teaching-with-generative-ai/</p> <p>AI and academic integrity (University Center for Teaching and Learning): https://teaching.pitt.edu/resources/encouraging-academic-integrity/</p> <p>Acceptable uses of generative AI (Pitt IT): https://www.technology.pitt.edu/acceptable-use-generative-artificial-intelligence-tools</p> <p>AI policy (Writing Center): https://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/ai-policy</p> <p>White paper on procuring public-sector AI (Pitt Cyber): https://www.cyber.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/AI/Procuring%20Public-Sector%20AI.pdf</p>	Multi-unit comprehensive approach; includes IT policy, teaching center guidance, and departmental policies
University of Richmond	<p>Guidelines for Generative AI Use https://genai.richmond.edu/guidelines/index.html</p>	Institutional guidelines with user autonomy emphasis
University of St. Thomas	<p>AI and Academic Research: https://libguides.stthomas.edu/ai</p> <p>White Paper, Crossing the Threshold Together: Bridging Innovation and Integrity in the Age of AI: https://www.stthomas.edu/_media-library/_documents/about/ai-white-paper.pdf</p>	Research-focused with institutional white paper; values-based approach
University of Toronto	AI Task Force and Guidelines	Canadian institutional context;

	https://ai.utoronto.ca/guidelines/	task force governance model
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We acknowledge that our sample of 20 artifacts representing 12 frameworks, while diverse, cannot represent the full range of institutional approaches to AI literacy. Our focus on publicly available artifacts may exclude innovative practices occurring at classroom or departmental levels. Additionally, our collaborative’s disciplinary positioning within writing studies and technical communication may limit our perspective on AI literacy approaches in other fields. The rapid evolution of AI technologies and institutional responses means our analysis captures a particular moment in an ongoing transformation.

Positionality Statement

As a collective of educator-researchers working across diverse institutional contexts—including research universities and regional institutions—we bring varied perspectives to AI literacy implementation. Our collaborative represents scholars in writing studies, technical communication, and design, positioned as both practitioners navigating AI integration within our own classrooms and researchers studying these phenomena. This dual positioning shapes our methodological choices and analytical perspectives, as we are simultaneously subjects and objects of the very institutional frameworks we analyze.

Our shared commitment to social justice and ethical technology engagement influences our analytical lens, leading us to prioritize questions of equity, student agency, and critical reflection over efficiency or technological determinism. We acknowledge that our disciplinary backgrounds in rhetoric and writing studies predispose us toward critical, humanistic approaches to technology integration, which shapes both our selection of artifacts for analysis and our interpretive frameworks.

Coding Results

Our thematic analysis of the 20 artifacts and corresponding 12 institutional AI literacy frameworks yielded a comprehensive coding structure that evolved through our collaborative analytical process (refer to Appendix A for coding worksheet). Table 2 presents the cumulative outcomes from our initial coding phase, which identified representative codes and preliminary categories, and our focused coding phase, which developed these into substantial categories with detailed descriptions. The initial coding

process generated specific, descriptive codes that captured discrete elements within the frameworks, while the focused coding phase consolidated these into broader thematic categories that reveal patterns across institutional approaches. This iterative coding process allowed us to move from granular observations to conceptual frameworks that illuminate how institutions are structuring their responses to AI literacy challenges. The eight substantial categories that emerged from this analysis—ranging from AI Governance Infrastructure to Community & Industry Relations—represent the primary domains through which institutions are operationalizing AI literacy initiatives and reveal the complex, multi-dimensional nature of institutional AI integration efforts.

Table 2. Cumulative outcomes from step 1 (initial coding) and step 2 (focused coding) analysis.

Initial Coding: Representative Codes and Preliminary Categories	Focused Coding: Substantial Categories and Descriptions
<p>Institutional Governance & Strategic Positioning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI task forces/working groups • Institutional oversight and committees • Cross-institutional collaboration • Values-based governance • Granular policy-making within institution • Institutional approval requirements • Large-scale faculty recruitment • National/international responsibility • Institutional strategies for relevance • Campus-directed expectations • Educational institutions must evolve 	<p>AI Governance Infrastructure</p> <p>Institutions establish cross-functional governance bodies that develop comprehensive policy frameworks incorporating risk assessment protocols and compliance mechanisms. These structures prioritize data protection through temporary policy frameworks that enable granular institutional control while ensuring regulatory compliance with standards like GDPR and FERPA. Strategic workforce development initiatives integrate security and risk management considerations, facilitating proactive institutional engagement that promotes administrative efficiency integration across organizational units.</p>
<p>Pedagogical Innovation & Integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backward design approaches • Alternative/authentic assessments • Syllabus adaptation and flexibility • Transparent discussions with students • Pedagogical flexibility and adaptation 	<p>Educational Transformation</p> <p>Institutions implement comprehensive curriculum redesign strategies alongside assessment innovation that emphasizes authentic assessment approaches within inclusive pedagogy frameworks. Faculty development programs and professional</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframing assignments • Rubric-based assessment • Critical thinking focus • Process-oriented instruction • Student reflection and metacommentary • Archive deliverables for assignments • AI as tutoring tool • Regularly updated resources provision 	<p>development workshops receive strategic resource allocation to support pragmatic pedagogical integration that positions AI as a collaborative tool. Educational transformation encompasses AI tutoring integration with personalized and adaptive learning systems, supported by template and tool provision through structured guidance frameworks.</p>
<p>Student Agency & Competency Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI literacy development • Citation ethics and disclosure • Critical awareness of limitations • Academic honesty concerns • Student choice and consent • Personal accountability • Unique learning paths • Equal access to tools • Immediate application focus • Career preparation and workforce readiness • Creative output capacity • Check with instructors for clarity 	<p>Learning Empowerment & Literacy</p> <p>Institutions cultivate critical digital citizenship through academic integrity frameworks and responsible use protocols that emphasize skill-building across speaking, writing, and conceptual-operational domains. Students develop skeptical engagement capabilities alongside bias detection skills and evaluation criteria mastery that support authority and expertise development. These literacy initiatives maintain a human-centered attitude while advancing domain expertise development that prepares students for future career demands through comprehensive competency-building approaches.</p>
<p>Ethical Dimensions & Human Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy and data security • Accuracy/trust/validity concerns • Bias and discrimination awareness • Environmental awareness • Copyright and plagiarism • Human-centered mindset • Academic integrity maintenance • Honest and realistic uses • Emotional intelligence and creativity • Post-critical stance on technology 	<p>Values Integration & Ethics</p> <p>Institutions develop ethical decision-making frameworks that integrate global ethical standards with institution-specific values, including Catholic intellectual tradition and faith-based perspectives that ensure community values alignment. These frameworks incorporate social justice considerations and sustainability promotion while maintaining algorithmic bias awareness that protects against discriminatory outcomes. Values integration emphasizes teacher rights protection and human agency preservation as fundamental principles that</p>

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	guide ethical AI implementation across institutional contexts.
<p>External Engagement & Partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal partnerships and grants • Private industry connections • Policy making influence • Public engagement • Community-engaged teaching • Cross-institutional leadership • Industry bridging and collaboration • Collective production of knowledge • Societal implications awareness 	<p>Community & Industry Relations</p> <p>Institutions foster public-private collaboration and cross-sector discussions that enhance government services while contributing to national and global policy discussions. Workforce development initiatives and professional development programs emphasize future career preparation that promotes accessibility and equity across diverse populations. Economic development focus drives societal impact initiatives through global collaboration platforms that facilitate knowledge sharing and partnership building.</p>
<p>Risk Management & Compliance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data protection protocols • Security compliance • Staff training requirements • Environmental impact awareness • Bias mitigation strategies • Academic integrity violations • Institutional and extreme caution • GDPR compliance • Plagiarism detection unreliability 	<p>Technology Risk Frameworks</p> <p>Institutions implement comprehensive risk assessment protocols with ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems that enable continuous improvement through sustained stakeholder engagement. These frameworks incorporate failure risk alerting mechanisms while exercising caution regarding AI detection tools, recognizing that disciplinary variation requires tailored approaches to risk management. Legal compliance frameworks integrate accessibility reviews to ensure equitable access while maintaining institutional responsibility for identifying and mitigating potential harms. Risk management strategies emphasize proactive identification of technological vulnerabilities alongside responsive adaptation to emerging challenges and regulatory requirements.</p>
<p>Professional Development & Autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy support for instructor autonomy 	<p>Professional Empowerment</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabus flexibility and options • Final responsibility for assessment • Human oversight requirements • Self-enrollment opportunities • Faculty Learning Communities • Workshops and training availability • Consultations and support • Encouraged vs. required participation 	<p>Institutions prioritize faculty choice and flexibility through competency development programs that recognize subject matter expertise while incorporating digital mindset assessment to support professional growth. These empowerment initiatives foster new pedagogical relationships that advance through progressive competency levels, integrating knowledge, skills, and values development within foundational understanding frameworks.</p>
<p>Institutional Leadership & Mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University must lead community • Modeling wise AI application • Guiding toward relevant careers • Developing community capacity • Administrative applications integration 	<p>Strategic Institutional Positioning</p> <p>Institutions embrace educational leadership roles that provide community guidance while responding to institutional evolution imperatives that demand strategic positioning for continued relevance. Mission-driven decision-making serves as the foundation for these positioning efforts, ensuring that AI integration initiatives align with core institutional values and purposes.</p>

Following initial and focused coding, theoretical coding (step 3) has led to the next set of insights that illuminate how institutions are navigating the complex landscape of AI literacy implementation. Through this final analytical phase, three primary themes emerged that characterize institutional responses to generative AI in educational contexts. First, we examine how institutions currently define and operationalize AI literacy within their frameworks. Second, we analyze the significant convergences and divergences in institutional approaches to AI integration. Finally, we explore the persistent tensions and unresolved questions that continue to challenge institutions as they develop AI pedagogical approaches, revealing the ongoing struggles between competing priorities and values in educational technology adoption.

Findings 1: Current Definitions and Operationalizations of AI Literacy

Our analysis reveals that institutions are conceptualizing AI literacy as a fundamental educational capacity requiring systematic competency development rather than optional technical skill acquisition. The Digital Education Council AI Literacy framework exemplifies this approach, “tak[ing] a human-centred approach to AI literacy, emphasising the importance of human skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence” while “offer[ing] higher education institutions with structured guidance on developing AI literacy approaches that will equip individuals with key foundational AI competencies.”

Across frameworks, AI literacy encompasses multiple dimensions including critical evaluation capabilities, ethical reasoning skills, and technical operational competencies. Institutions consistently emphasize preserving human agency within AI literacy development, positioning humans as active decision-makers who leverage AI tools while maintaining oversight, authority, and values-driven judgment. The University of Groningen (UG) makes this explicit, emphasizing that “Students must always be able to take responsibility for verifying and analysing information, and for their own academic substantiation” and that “Lecturers bear final responsibility for the assessment of students and the content of the teaching.”

This approach suggests institutional consensus that effective AI literacy requires strengthening rather than replacing human capabilities, with competency frameworks designed to enhance rather than substitute for critical thinking, creativity, and ethical reasoning. The movement toward progressive competency levels indicates recognition that AI literacy development requires scaffolded learning approaches that advance from foundational understanding through applied expertise to innovative integration within disciplinary contexts. UNESCO’s framework demonstrates this progression by outlining “15 competencies across five dimensions” that are “categorized into three progression levels: Acquire, Deepen, Create.”

Findings 2: Convergences and Divergences in Institutional Approaches

Institutions demonstrate remarkable convergence around core principles while diverging significantly in implementation strategies. Universal commitments include maintaining human oversight, preserving academic integrity, and ensuring mission alignment.

UNESCO's framework exemplifies this convergence, having been "Developed with principles of protecting teachers' rights, enhancing human agency, and promoting sustainability." Similarly, the University of Pittsburgh acknowledges that "it is imperative to uphold the principles of academic integrity and ethical conduct" while recognizing "both the potential benefits and the challenges of using generative AI technologies."

Yet institutions adopt fundamentally different governance philosophies. A critical distinction emerged between resource-provision models that support informed faculty decision-making and prescriptive approaches that establish specific policies and compliance requirements. This philosophical divide reflects deeper tensions about professional autonomy and institutional control. The University of Pittsburgh represents the flexible approach, acknowledging that "all instructors will approach generative AI in their classrooms according to their own levels of knowledge, skill, and comfort with this new technology." In contrast, the UG provides "ten basic rules" while noting that "additional rules may apply at the level of your faculty, degree programme, and course unit."

Systematic variation patterns also emerged across institutional types: research-intensive universities emphasize AI's innovation potential and economic development impact, while teaching-focused institutions prioritize pedagogical integration and student learning outcomes. Geographic and regulatory contexts create additional divergence, with European institutions emphasizing regulatory compliance while US institutions focus on institutional autonomy and faculty choice. Despite these differences, institutions explicitly recognize the need for contextual adaptation. As the UG states: "There is no one-size-fits-all approach for this, as the impact varies per degree programme and per discipline."

Despite these differences, all institutions operate within multi-stakeholder governance networks involving government agencies, industry partners, and international organizations, suggesting that effective AI governance requires collaborative approaches that span organizational boundaries.

Findings 3: Tensions and Questions in AI Pedagogical Approaches

The analysis identified significant tensions that institutions continue to navigate without clear resolution. A central tension exists between viewing AI integration as an institutional survival strategy versus optional enhancement, with multiple institutions explicitly

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recognizing being at an educational “crossroads” that demands fundamental pedagogical transformation. This creates both urgency and uncertainty about appropriate response strategies, as evidenced by Penn State’s acknowledgment that “The AI landscape is evolving rapidly, with its capabilities constantly improving and new tools being released daily” and that “these guidelines for AI use may change as the field progresses.”

The University of Pittsburgh captures this institutional tension, describing how “The revolution in the capabilities and availability of generative AI tools has caused both excitement and consternation in higher education, not always in equal measure.” This urgency manifests in institutional imperatives for workforce preparation, as James Madison University (JMU)’s task force explicitly aims to “Prepare students to use AI as they enter the workforce” while ensuring the institution develops “AI-related policies that are just and equitable to all stakeholders.”

Additional tensions emerge around balancing faculty autonomy with institutional coordination, as sophisticated professional development models attempt to provide structured support while preserving individual choice and professional judgment. The UG attempts to navigate this balance by stating that “The UG aims to train its students within the context of their degree programmes to become competent and responsible users of AI tools” while acknowledging that “Faculties can therefore supplement the UG policy with their own rules and activities to suit their own context.”

The democratization of educational technology governance through increased student voice and agency amplification raises questions about traditional authority structures and decision-making processes. Perhaps most significantly, institutions struggle with the requirement that AI initiatives align with core institutional mission and values while adapting to rapidly evolving technological capabilities, creating ongoing tension between innovation and institutional identity. The University of Pittsburgh acknowledges this challenge, recognizing that “As a new and rapidly evolving tool that will powerfully affect education and most other social and cultural domains, generative AI presents fundamental concerns” and that institutions “will all need to pivot frequently and reassess how we use those tools.” The rejection of one-size-fits-all approaches, while pedagogically sound, generates implementation challenges around consistency, quality assurance, and institutional coherence that remain largely unresolved.

Vignettes of Local Programmatic Approaches

Following our systematic analysis of existing institutional artifacts and their respective frameworks, we turn to collaborative autoethnographic reflection on our own local programmatic approaches to AI integration. These six vignettes—drawn from our experiences at James Madison University, Central Michigan University, University of Richmond, University of St. Thomas, University of Pittsburgh, and University of Central Florida—provide concrete illustrations of how the theoretical tensions identified in our framework analysis manifest in practice. Rather than prescriptive models, these accounts offer grounded perspectives on the lived realities of implementing AI literacy initiatives within specific institutional constraints and cultures. Each vignette covers both successes and ongoing challenges in our attempts to balance efficiency pressures with ethically reflective pedagogy, revealing how local contexts shape the translation of broad institutional frameworks into classroom practice. Through these reflective accounts, we illuminate the gap between policy aspirations and pedagogical realities while demonstrating how educator-researchers navigate competing demands for technological integration and social-justice-oriented teaching. We provide a summary of these narratives in Tables 3A and 3B. A full version of these accounts is included in Appendix B.

Table 3A. Summary of local programmatic approaches to AI integration (Mollie, Gustav, Daniel).

Educator	Mollie	Gustav	Daniel
Program Context	James Madison University (JMU) Technical communication program; teaches required writing courses for undergraduates	Central Michigan University (CMU) Undergraduate technical communication major; graduate technical communication program; teaches specialized TPC courses	University of Richmond Communication & Writing department; teaches professional writing and communication courses
Current Institutional Approaches	Task force exists to develop recommendations; no specific university-wide policies yet implemented	Small institution with resources available but no organized institutional approach yet; faculty have autonomy to experiment	Institutional approach emphasizes academic integrity concerns; guidelines focus on detecting and preventing misuse rather than pedagogical integration
Key Activities	Case studies examining AI dangers and limitations; comparative brainstorming exercises (traditional methods vs. AI); reflective writing assignments on responsible AI use	Image AI prompting lessons; plans to develop assignments using multiple AI bots in conversation; designs restricted GenAI assignments to maintain critical thinking	Cover letter generation comparison exercises; critical analysis of AI capabilities and limitations; experimental use of institution-provided AI tools

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Primary Challenges	Significant time constraints with multiple new course preparations; balancing critical perspectives on AI with workplace preparation needs; lack of clear institutional guidance	Preventing decrease in critical thinking skills; preparing students for AI-saturated professional environments while maintaining humanities values	Fear-based institutional approach limits pedagogical innovation; emphasis on integrity concerns rather than learning opportunities
Personal Stance	Experiences tension between preparing students for AI-integrated professional futures and personal alignment with "refusing GenAI" movement	Advocates "critical futuring" approach—examining how AI-integrated futures might work and how to make those futures better for humanities disciplines	Embraces technology with appropriate caveats; seeks to move beyond institutional fear toward thoughtful integration

Table 3B. Summary of local programmatic approaches to AI integration (Katlynne, Jialei, Jess).

Educator	Katlynne	Jialei	Jess
Program Context	University of St. Thomas (UST) Multiple writing courses across curriculum; Writing Center and program administration roles	University of Pittsburgh Composition program; First-Year Writing	University of Central Florida (UCF) Undergraduate Technical Communication program; brings industry practitioner perspective

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<p>Current Institutional Approaches</p>	<p>Strongly pro-GenAI institutional messaging; administration encourages integration and experimentation; extensive resources provided</p>	<p>Comprehensive institutional guidelines emphasize ethics, inclusivity, and responsible use; multiple resources across teaching center, IT, and writing center</p>	<p>Faculty Multimedia Center provides AI resources and support; institution encourages exploration and experimentation</p>
<p>Key Activities</p>	<p>ChatGPT prompt comparison exercises for definition writing; students serve as AI adoption consultants; critical evaluation of AI outputs and processes</p>	<p>Scaffolded multimodal composition projects; critical analysis of AI-generated content emphasizing whose voices/norms are encoded; ethics-focused revision exercises</p>	<p>Discussions of AI ethics guidelines with students; facilitates student experience sharing about real-world AI use; conversations about responsible professional use</p>
<p>Primary Challenges</p>	<p>Junior faculty time constraints for pedagogical development; rapid platform changes require constant adaptation; access to resources does not equal time to implement mindfully</p>	<p>Tool access inequities among student populations; data privacy restrictions limiting certain pedagogical approaches; navigating between comprehensive policies and classroom realities</p>	<p>Not yet integrated into major assignments; balancing student readiness with pedagogical development; learning from students' existing AI practices</p>
<p>Personal Stance</p>	<p>Caught between "push away from hype" (maintaining critical perspective) and "pull toward preparation" (equipping students for AI-integrated workplaces)</p>	<p>Strong social justice commitment guides implementation; asks students to consider "Whose language, whose norms, whose imagination is encoded in GenAI's output?"</p>	<p>"Positively concerned"—sees value in AI tools while maintaining strong ethics focus; emphasizes student agency and responsible use</p>

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Together, the vignettes reveal three primary tensions educators navigate when implementing AI literacy initiatives. First, educators face significant challenges working within institutional constraints that often conflict with pedagogical innovation. The institutional frameworks vary dramatically, from the absence of policy at JMU and CMU to fear-based restrictions at Richmond to enthusiastic promotion at UST. This variation creates a persistent gap between what educators believe students need to learn about AI and what institutions actually support or allow. Second, all educators express a fundamental tension between preparing students for an AI-integrated future while maintaining critical perspectives on the technology. Mollie articulates this most directly:

I feel torn between the need to prepare students to use GenAI as part of their future careers, the priorities of assistant professor life that make keeping up with rapid technology change and related pedagogy challenging, and really resonating with “Refusing GenAI in writing studies.”

While this tension manifests differently across contexts, it remains a universal concern among all contributors. Third, time and labor constraints pose significant challenges, particularly for junior faculty who struggle with the additional labor required to thoughtfully integrate AI pedagogy. As Katlynn explicitly notes, “access to resources does not mean instructors have the time to translate those into mindful teaching practices,” highlighting a critical gap between institutional expectations and the support provided for implementation.

Despite these diverse contexts and challenges, several shared pedagogical strategies emerge across the vignettes. Most educators employ comparative analysis exercises, having students compare AI-generated content with human-created work through activities involving cover letters, definitions, and brainstorming sessions. Critical reflection appears as another common thread, with educators incorporating reflective writing and discussions about AI use, limitations, and ethical implications into their courses. Many also adopt scaffolded integration approaches, starting with traditional methods before introducing AI tools, ensuring students understand foundational concepts before engaging with technological augmentation. Perhaps most notably, all educators emphasize ethics, focusing on responsible use, bias awareness, and critical questioning of AI systems and their outputs. As Jialei explains, this approach “encourages students to ask, ‘Whose language, whose norms, whose imagination is encoded in GenAI’s output?’”

The vignettes also provide valuable insights into student engagement patterns, particularly through Jess’s observations of how students actually use AI in their daily lives:

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Many used ChatGPT for things like helping to summarize notes from courses for studying; a few mentioned using it for help in math courses to simplify how to solve math problems; many English as a Second Language (ESL) students suggested they used it to help revise their emails and other professional communication in the workplace.

Importantly, students appear to view AI as an “enabler rather than doer” and demonstrate awareness of its limitations, suggesting a more nuanced understanding than institutional policies often assume.

These local approaches collectively reveal that effective AI literacy pedagogy requires institutional flexibility that balances guidance with instructor autonomy, explicit support for faculty development including time allocation, recognition of AI literacy as an ongoing process rather than one-time training, integration of social justice perspectives addressing access, equity, and bias, and student-centered approaches that acknowledge varied needs and uses. Gustav’s reflection on his “critical futuring” approach captures this complexity: “If we aren’t addressing critically how futures with AI ‘work,’ how can we make those futures better for the humanities?” The vignettes demonstrate that while institutional frameworks provide structure, meaningful AI literacy development occurs through educator innovation within—and sometimes despite—these constraints. The persistent gap between policy and practice suggests a need for more responsive, educator-informed institutional approaches that support rather than constrain pedagogical experimentation, recognizing that as Mollie asks, “How can I teach students meaningfully about GenAI when I feel like refusing it, have so many other learning objectives to meet, new course preparations almost every semester, and the rest of my job to do?”

Further Discussions: The Need for Slow and Reflexive AI Literacy

This analysis of our institutional frameworks and instructors’ local contexts illustrates the complexities of responding to this pedagogical moment in TPC writing instruction. In alignment with writing studies scholars’ articulations of the writing assistant paradigm, many institutional frameworks present AI literacies as an interplay of technical, ethical, and critical competencies in which careful human involvement is key. Such an approach emphasizes the necessity of human interpretation and collaborative negotiation with AI systems, rather than perfunctory adoption. Even so, some institutions may communicate

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conflicting messages about GenAI by encouraging GenAI use while simultaneously positioning this use as an activity that needs to be policed to avoid cheating or plagiarism. Students and instructors understandably need guidance on how GenAI use may support or fail to support learning, but as discussed in our reflections, some institutions have not offered specific policies to help instructors communicate the nuances involved in producing writing with GenAI. Further, presenting student GenAI use as something to be suspicious of furthers a negative, distrustful view of students that limits pedagogical innovation and collaboration.

Also evident in these frameworks is an underlying ambiguity around how to locate and implement specific GenAI pedagogical practices, how and when to make use of any available institutional resources, and how to navigate instances where institutional guidance might be unavailable or conflict with equity, justice, and student-centered instruction. Instructors are not always clear on how to approach GenAI pedagogy in specific, prescriptive ways that might support key competencies. Some institutions do offer concrete practices for teaching with GenAI. In analyzing our individual experiences, we noted successful activities and assignments centered on GenAI that we had tried out in our courses. However, our reflections noted the challenges of cultivating the many dimensions of student AI literacies; for us, this means preparing students for professional roles in which they might work with GenAI while also preparing students to critically respond to GenAI use that promotes oppressive practices. Moreover, as instructors, we need to be able to prepare ourselves to develop the pedagogies that will best benefit our students. Providing lists of resources about GenAI activities or assignments, syllabus statements, or the technical details of GenAI does not mean instructors are provided with the focused time needed to craft mindful AI pedagogy. Institutions stress the urgency of retooling pedagogy to respond to GenAI, but this sense of urgency may not always be applied to providing instructors with support for the work required to do so.

In examining our institutional and individual contexts, we argue for a reflective, reflexive, and justice-centered heuristic that program leaders in TPC, communication design, and related writing studies fields can draw from when developing AI curricula. As instructors, we often ask our students to think metacognitively about their writing practices with the goal of strengthening those practices, but we may not always ask ourselves as writing instructors and administrators to slow down and reflect on how we approach GenAI in our classrooms, departments, and institutions. This emphasis on “slowing down” is rooted in slow pedagogy, which itself was precipitated by the increase of slow movements in food, art, travel, and many other areas (Leddy & Miller, 2024; Shaw, Cole, & Russell, 2013). Slow

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pedagogy represents deliberate, intentional, reflexive, and contemplative practices that attempt to counter cultural expectations about learning as being time-efficient, productivity-focused, and a means to the “end” of acquiring a high-paying job. As Leddy and Miller explain, “Slow involves a way of being in the world, one that is thoughtful, engaged, located, relational, and reflective; it is praxis” (p. 85). A slow pedagogy is a mindset in which learning is about facilitating sustained attention and reflection in the classroom. Such a mindset is difficult to foster specifically in a culture in which technologies like AI develop at break-neck speeds. Similar to sentiments expressed in the AI refusal movement in writing studies (Sano-Franchini et al., 2024), slowing down in relationship to technology does not mean instructors must reject all technologies outright—instead, instructors make intentional choices about when and how to involve technology in learning, or if it should be involved at all. Slow pedagogy also functions as a decolonial teaching methodology that foregrounds equity, inclusivity, and justice.

In crafting a “slow” reflective heuristic, we draw from Leddy and Miller’s (2024) tenets of “slow pedagogy” to generate questions for considering AI pedagogies and curricula development. Leddy and Miller identified these tenets by analyzing overlapping conceptions of slowness in both European and Indigenous traditions. Together, these tenets hold that slow pedagogy is:

- Experiential: embodied and lived
- Place-conscious: tied to physical, material spaces
- Deeply relational: focused on examining relationships with others and our world
- Connecting inward: attention to emotions and spirituality (pp. 65–66).

We use each of these tenets to anchor our questions about how students, instructors, departments, and institutions might experience GenAI pedagogies. The questions presented here are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a starting point for a slow, intentional praxis that cultivates critical AI literacies. To operationalize these principles, we suggest a reflective heuristic designed not as an exhaustive framework but as a starting point for ongoing institutional dialogue about AI literacy development. These questions come from the tensions and challenges identified in our analysis and are organized around the key relationships that shape literacy initiatives.

Table 4. Reflective heuristic for AI literacy development efforts.

Level	Guiding Questions for Reflection and Action
Educators	<p>How do I feel about writing and teaching with AI platforms? What are my embodied experiences of using AI for writing, research, or teaching?</p> <p>What pedagogical labor do I perform when considering AI integration in writing instruction? What is my experience of this labor? Do I feel supported?</p> <p>How can I maintain critical perspectives on AI while preparing students for AI-integrated futures?</p> <p>What practices can I learn from my students' experiences with AI that might inform my pedagogical approaches?</p>
Students	<p>How do students feel about writing with AI? How do their positionalities (e.g., linguistic, cultural, economic) affect their attitudes about and access to AI?</p> <p>How are students using AI in meaningful ways that support their writing processes?</p> <p>How can we center student voices in AI literacy curriculum development rather than positioning them as passive recipients of institutional policies?</p> <p>What do students' existing AI practices reveal about their needs and capabilities?</p>
Programs & Departments	<p>How can we better support all instructors (graduate students, adjuncts/contingent faculty, pre-tenure faculty, etc.) in learning about AI?</p> <p>What professional development opportunities address both technical competencies and critical reflection?</p> <p>How do we balance pedagogical innovation with institutional compliance requirements?</p>

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	What resources and time allocation do we provide for thoughtful AI integration?
Institutions	What is our orientation toward AI? How is it presented or discussed, internally and externally? Does our institutional approach consider the social and material impacts of AI beyond campus boundaries? What support do we offer instructors, students, and staff related to AI? Are opportunities to support pedagogical work available? Do we have partnerships or contracts with AI platforms? How might these partnerships affect students, instructors, and departments? How do our AI policies align with our stated institutional values and mission?

One of the challenges of implementing a “slow” pedagogical approach to teaching AI literacies revolves around time. In a world of fast-paced technological development where efficient productivity is praised, it may not always be feasible for faculty or students to “slow down” and spend additional time reflecting on their writing interactions with GenAI. However, a slow, reflective approach does not have to result in increasing the amount of time spent on the writing process. Instead, it might mean practicing intentional use and non-use of these platforms.

Conclusion

To summarize, our analysis reveals that while institutions demonstrate remarkable convergence around principles of human oversight and ethical consideration, the persistent gap between policy aspirations and pedagogical realities suggests that current approaches inadequately address the labor, equity, and implementation challenges that meaningful AI literacy development requires.

The tensions we identified across both institutional frameworks and educator experiences point toward a fundamental reconceptualization of AI literacy as an ongoing process of critical reflection rather than a set of competencies to be efficiently acquired. Our

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collaborative vignettes demonstrate that educators are already developing innovative pedagogical approaches that balance preparation for AI-integrated futures with critical engagement, yet they do so often despite rather than because of institutional support structures. This suggests that effective AI literacy initiatives must move beyond resource-provision toward sustained investment in the kind of reflective practice that slow pedagogy enables, recognizing that thoughtful integration requires time, support, and institutional commitment to complexity over simplicity.

The reflective heuristic we propose offers one pathway toward more socially just AI literacy development, but we acknowledge significant limitations in our analysis that constrain the generalizability of our findings. Our sample of 20 artifacts representing 12 institutional frameworks, while diverse in institutional type and geographic location, cannot represent the full range of approaches to AI literacy currently emerging across higher education contexts. Our focus on publicly available artifacts, such as policies, guidelines, resources, and statements, necessarily excludes innovative practices occurring at classroom and departmental levels that may not be captured in formal institutional documents. Additionally, our collaborative's disciplinary positioning within writing studies and technical communication shapes our analytical perspective in ways that may limit insights relevant to AI literacy development in other disciplinary contexts.

For TPC programs, writing program administrators, and professional writing faculty specifically, our findings suggest that AI literacy development cannot be treated as a discrete competency to be efficiently transmitted through workshops or policy documents. Rather, it requires sustained engagement with the ethical, rhetorical, and social justice dimensions that have long characterized our disciplinary commitments. TPC programs are uniquely positioned to lead institutional conversations about AI integration precisely because our field has always understood literacy as a complex sociotechnical practice rather than mere operational skill. The slow pedagogy approach we advocate aligns with TPC's established traditions of user-centered design, ethical communication, and attention to power dynamics in technological systems. For program administrators, this means creating structures that support faculty experimentation and reflection rather than mandating uniform approaches; providing time and resources for pedagogical development rather than expecting instantaneous adaptation; and centering conversations about justice, equity, and student agency in all AI-related decision-making. For faculty teaching in TPC contexts, our heuristic offers questions to guide thoughtful integration that honors both professional preparation imperatives and critical pedagogical commitments.

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We encourage scholars across disciplines to examine how AI literacy development unfolds within their specific contexts, particularly attending to the experiences of students, contingent faculty, and educators working within resource-constrained environments whose voices are often absent from institutional policy development. Future research might explore how the tensions we identified manifest differently across institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and student populations, while investigating the long-term effects of different AI literacy approaches on student learning, faculty well-being, and educational equity. The slow pedagogy heuristic we propose offers not a final answer but an invitation to sustained dialogue about how educational institutions might chart more thoughtful paths forward amid continuing AI development.

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Appendix A: Coding Worksheet for AI Artifacts & Frameworks

Please use this worksheet for your coding of the curated generative AI artifacts and frameworks. **When you've finished coding, please include your worksheet in the Complete Coding Worksheets folder under the appropriate institution/organization.**

This first phase of coding focuses on the audiences that are most likely to be considered or implicated in generative AI frameworks: **academic institutions, instructors, students, and other/additional audiences.**

Use the table below to keep track of significant pieces of language, ideas, or themes that emerge from the AI framework as pertaining to these audiences.

Framework Title: [Write Title or Website of Framework here.]

Audiences	Descriptions	Codes (Highlighted; can include verbatim quotes)	Possible Themes
Institutions	Organizations and administrative entities responsible for implementing AI literacy initiatives at systemic levels, including policy development, resource allocation, and organizational frameworks.		
Instructors	Educators directly responsible for delivering AI literacy instruction, encompassing pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, and classroom implementation strategies.		
Students	Learners across educational contexts, focusing on competency development, skill acquisition, and learning outcomes.		
Additional Audiences	External stakeholders beyond traditional academic contexts, including industry professionals, policymakers, community members, and broader societal considerations.		

You can also keep track of any emerging codes or possible themes that might not fit in the audience-focused categories above. Feel free to include those here below:

- ...

Appendix B: Full Version of Local Programmatic Vignettes

Mollie - James Madison University (JMU)

At the institutional level, JMU has had a task force made up of faculty and staff from across the university working on understanding potential uses and implications of AI, but as an ongoing project, specific guidance in terms of policy/practice has yet to be determined. As instructors, we are largely on our own beyond a couple of specific directives (like many places, we are not to put protected/proprietary/private data into unapproved AI systems, and DeepSeek AI is specifically banned). Personally, I feel torn between the need to prepare students to use GenAI as part of their future careers, the priorities of assistant professor life that make keeping up with rapid technology change and related pedagogy challenging, and really resonating with “Refusing GenAI in writing studies” (Sano-Franchini et al., 2024).

Currently, I teach courses in health and medical writing and research methods in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. I focus on weaving what I’ll call loosely critical technology literacy into all my courses, with some focus on GenAI. I often spend a day or week talking with students about how GenAI works, its limitations, and how to use it ethically. For example, in a food and health rhetoric course last semester, we talked about the perils of GenAI through a case study of AI-written mushroom foraging books with deadly mistakes. I also incorporate a brainstorming activity when it’s time to choose research/writing topics: first, I ask students to do “old-school” brainstorming through freewriting, mind mapping, or exploring (search engines, Wikipedia, social media); next, they pair up and complete a modified version of Helen Choi’s prewriting interview activity (2022); and lastly, they brainstorm with GenAI using their own prompts and/or ones I provide. As a full class, we then discuss affordances and limitations of the different modes, and I push us to think about GenAI’s replication of systemic oppression, issues of linguistic justice, and impacts on the environment and different groups of people. I also incorporate reflective writing, and lately have included a question asking students to discuss if they used AI while completing the assignment, and if so, what they learned about writing from it. My overarching goal is to prepare students to ask critical questions of and about the tools they use, how those tools might replicate or perpetuate harm, even if indirectly, and therefore how to work toward better collaboration and co-creation with technology. I’d like to do more, but my ongoing challenges are time and focus—how can I teach students meaningfully about GenAI when I feel like refusing it, have so many other

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learning objectives to meet, new course preparations almost every semester, and the rest of my job to do?

Gustav - Central Michigan University (CMU)

My institution currently is somewhat small, and so addressing AI is not really organized in a meaningful way (although a university-wide committee is looking at how we can integrate AI). Currently, I am in a business information systems department, so some of the concerns of a humanities department may not be present as much. However, that doesn't mean it does not inform my approach. This leaves me with a much wider ability to experiment. I am thinking about institutional goals, classroom learning and new work (composition, design) practices introduced by GenAI. In this, I am currently interested in developing different work methods surrounding GenAI for my students, and how to teach with (multiple) AI bots in conversation. I assume many in the humanities may shudder at the thought of integrating GenAI, but my approach is that of a *critical futuring* approach: If we aren't addressing critically how futures with AI "work," how can we make those futures better for the humanities?

Approaches to GenAI in my classroom have been at the introductory phase, with lessons on image AI prompting and introducing them to GenAI-enabled design and ideation (with a heavily restricted one assignment allowing GenAI). For the future, I am interested in integrated AI tools that subscribe to different AI bots (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity, but also Dall-E, Ideogram) and allow students to put these bots in conversation with each other in knowledge work. That is, these models allow for bot-stacking where multiple people can work with multiple AI models in the same conversation. For instance, a person may prompt ChatGPT on a topic, then take that input and use Perplexity to get strictly bounded sources, then ask Claude to take that output and revise, and ask Dall-E to generate a visual based on the text within the same window. I am concerned about the decrease in critical thinking skills and the increase of system 1 thinking (automatic thinking) over systems 2 thinking (deep thinking). At the same time, I feel challenged by how people in various professional contexts (business, but also education, marketing, insurance, medicine) are using multiple AI bots in their workflow to get things done. The great challenge, for me, is to address not just equity and social justice (making sure that students recognize bias and help underrepresented populations), but to recognize that GenAI represents a new type of work practice, and I am needing to prepare students for that AI-enabled work world while challenging them to fully develop as humans and critical agents in their thinking and writing.

Daniel - University of Richmond

Small Top-25 Private Liberal Arts University in the Mid-Atlantic Region

My institution's approach to AI has focused largely on ensuring that students' academic integrity remains intact, since students have the ability to engage generative AI in writing. The impetus for this approach seems to be based largely on fear and concern: Fear that students will use generative AI to think and write for them, and concern that AI may encourage or enable LLMs and bad actors to thwart the educational mission of the institution. The headlines of the student AI usage guidelines offer insight into these fears and concerns, shown in the order they appear on the student guidelines page:

- Academic integrity
- Intellectual property
- Perspective and bias in AI
- Data privacy and security
- Effective use
- Important questions to ask

The "effective use" section appears to be the only portion of the guidelines to highlight possible benefits of AI use, possibly implying the expectation that students are more likely to use AI for harm than good.

My approach to AI in the classroom has been to embrace the technology as a tool with caveats rather than warn students away from the technology. I ask students to use different generative AI tools (using our home-built generative AI tool rather than asking students to use their own generative AI accounts) to generate cover letter versions for an employment project after first generating their own cover letter. Students are then asked to examine similarities and difference between the cover letter they authored and those generated by generative AI tools, and then to examine differences among the generative AI versions as well, in order to unravel some of the different ways that LLMs are created and used to generate content, and also to examine capabilities and drawbacks of using generative AI in professional writing scenarios. While multiple scaffolded goals are at work in this assignment, the generative AI component of the assignment seeks to unveil some of the concerns raised by our institutional approach while also encouraging experimentation with the capabilities of generative AI in non-academic settings. It is my hope that this approach provides both critical tools for analysis and practical approaches for using AI in the workplace.

Katlynnne – University of St. Thomas (UST)

I feel both a push away from and pull toward GenAI pedagogy—a push away from the onslaught of hype and quick adoption of GenAI platforms and a pull toward the responsibility to help students prepare for the ways they will undoubtedly encounter these platforms in their lives. My institution has been very pro-GenAI in its messaging to faculty by making clear statements that faculty should *thoughtfully* integrate platforms into teaching and research. Personally, I resonate more with those in TPC and related fields about the threats that GenAI poses to issues of equity, such as linguistic diversity, environmental sustainability, students' cognitive development, and the labor market. These justice-centered concerns can't be ignored in our teaching.

In feeling caught between the push and pull, I've tried to implement some GenAI pedagogical activities in my courses that balance GenAI use and critical assessment of GenAI. One activity asked students to input slightly different prompts asking ChatGPT to define TPC. We then compare the output. The objective is for students to consider how important it is to think critically about the wording of prompts and to simply have them spend some time engaging with a GenAI platform. In a separate activity, I have also had students act as consultants who are charged with determining whether their mock organization should integrate a specific GenAI platform. I saw this exercise as taking a step back from jumping right into GenAI use; instead, I wanted students to spend time evaluating what GenAI platforms do and if they should be used. Both activities went well enough, though I've walked away from these classes not sure if they were enough to deepen students' thinking about GenAI. The big challenge I feel that I face is related to time – as junior faculty, I feel I don't have the time to do the research, practice, and overall preparation it would take to thoughtfully prepare students for the work they might do with GenAI. This is made even more complicated by the rapid development of these platforms. As they change, our pedagogy might need to change, which then requires time to make changes. GenAI has and will continue to be deeply integrated into our lives, meaning that if instructors are to promote critical AI literacy, the labor of developing GenAI pedagogies must be supported more explicitly. Like other institutions, my university created a hub of GenAI resources. But access to resources does not mean instructors have the time to translate those into mindful teaching practices.

Jialei - University of Pittsburgh

As a digital media and technical communication instructor at the University of Pittsburgh, my integration of GenAI into the classroom is informed by both institutional guidelines and

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a commitment to social justice. Two current practices I've implemented highlight how I navigate GenAI in alignment with my institution's evolving AI policy with a strong focus on ethics and inclusivity. One of the primary ways I integrate GenAI is by designing scaffolded multimodal composition assignments that build students' critical AI literacy. For instance, students begin by composing digital artifacts such as posters, podcasts, or short videos using traditional creative tools. Then, in a second phase, they revise or remake their compositions with the assistance of GenAI tools such as Adobe Firefly and DALL.E. This comparative approach invites students to reflect on not only the efficiency or novelty of GenAI but also its influence on their design choices and agency. This project encourages students to ask, "Whose language, whose norms, whose imagination is encoded in GenAI's output?" By foregrounding reflection questions like this, students learn to recognize the potential disconnect between GenAI's output and their design visions, evaluate the ethical implications of machine-generated content, and assert their creative agency as digital media designers and technical communicators. This practice aligns with University of Pittsburgh's emphasis on supporting GenAI use that "respects diverse student voices" and promotes "inclusive learning practices."

A second practice involves asking students to conduct critical analyses of AI-generated content in both everyday and professional writing genres, such as résumés, infographics, or health communication materials. Students examine the outputs produced by ChatGPT or other GenAI systems and assess them in terms of their tone, accessibility, accuracy, and potential bias. The students then revise the outputs through the use of plain language, cultural inclusivity, and user-centered design. This project not only develops students' technical writing skills but also highlights ethical concerns related to misinformation, stereotyping, and linguistic erasure. As Pitt's policy advises, "the human touch is still required." These exercises help students develop their skills in refining and revising GenAI's output.

These practices, however, come with challenges. One challenge is the limitations regarding tool access. My institution acknowledges the importance of accessibility, yet not all students have equal familiarity or comfort with GenAI platforms, and it remains difficult to bypass the paywall if students are interested in using the paid versions of GenAI tools. I've responded by building in scaffolded digital literacy supports and assigning collaborative work to foster peer learning. Another challenge is navigating data privacy concerns, especially given my institution's caution against inputting student-generated content into free GenAI tools. I've had to limit certain activities, such as open-ended AI testing, and instead emphasize hypothetical scenarios or anonymized data. Still, these

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projects demonstrate the pedagogical value of integrating GenAI critically and ethically. My institution's refusal to endorse unreliable AI detectors, primarily due to their disproportionate harms on non-native and multilingual students, also helps me to develop trust-based and formative assessment over surveillance. Rather than treating GenAI as a shortcut or a threat, I position the technology as a sociotechnical artifact that students can reshape through critical reflection, cultural creativity, and ethical engagement.

Jess - University of Central Florida (UCF)

As an industry practitioner, I find it valuable to incorporate AI in the classroom to allow the opportunity for students to understand and practice responsible use of AI. I have implemented conversations of AI through discussions. In one discussion, I asked students to first read about the ethics of AI in writing and then discuss two or three guidelines that "technical communicators should abide by in order to be responsible users of AI." In this discussion, I had students generate a list of "AI ethics statements" that would guide their use of AI in the classroom.

I often say that I learn more from my students than they learn from me—mostly because students are likely coming in the course with more technical knowledge than I have and have kept up with the use of sophisticated technology. Thus, in another discussion, I asked students about their use of AI and to discuss the strengths and limitations of AI.

I was delighted to learn about students' various uses of GenAI. Many used chatGPT for things like helping to summarize notes from courses for studying; a few mentioned using it for help in math courses to simplify how to solve math problems; many English as a Second Language (ESL) students suggested they used it to help revise their emails and other professional communication in the workplace because their style and tone did not fit their audience (one student even said that it has helped improve their communication at work significantly). One student mentioned they used it to revise their social posts to be more attention-grabbing, and one student used it to synthesize recipes for cooking in the way they wanted. I was excited that all of these uses appeared to be relevant to their unique need and responsible. They appeared to be using AI just like any other digital tool that improves humans' abilities. We use many digital tools to increase our productivity, reduce manual workload, and enable us to extend our cognitive capacity. Students appear to use AI for these reasons, and they were aware of the "hallucinations" AI could have and appeared to consider AI as an enabler rather than a doer.

Overall, I have not yet incorporated the use of AI in major assignments, but have stimulated conversations of AI to gain students' perspective and bring attention to

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responsible use. I have started to use the phrase, "positively concerned," when discussing AI in the context of TPC. I believe this captures the idea that AI has value and students should learn how to use AI effectively, but the concern part underscores the need to incorporate ethics and responsibility within the framework of using AI in the classroom.

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Katlyne Davis is Assistant Professor of technical and professional writing in the English Department at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. As part of her work with the Building Digital Literacy (BDL) research cluster with the Digital Literacy Institute (DLI), she studies the pedagogical labor involved in preparing to teach with generative AI platforms. She also studies the digital labor of technical communication as it relates to content strategy and user experience. Her work has been published in *Communication Design Quarterly* and *The Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy*.

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Jessica Campbell holds a PhD in Texts and Technology and a Master's in English – Technical Communication from the University of Central Florida (UCF). Her expertise lies at the intersection of technical and professional communication (TPC) and human-computer interaction (HCI), with a focus on healthcare. She brings extensive disciplinary and industry knowledge in user experience (UX) research and design. Her research centers on mixed-methods studies of health information technology (HIT). Jessica authored the text, *User Experience Research and Usability of Health Information Technology* and has

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Prospective Students' Insights: Identifying Barriers to Graduate School

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Abstract Given recent attention to recruitment and retention of marginalized students in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) graduate programs, this study identifies barriers and expectations of prospective applicants. The study argues that academic institutions must prioritize the voices and needs of applicants to shape program design and recruitment practices. Drawing inspiration from the social justice turn, this research aims to decenter the recruiting institution by offering actionable recommendations that align with applicants' aspirations within the limitations of existing academic structures.

Focus groups conducted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) reveal the challenges undergraduates face when considering graduate education, including institutional rigidity, inadequate institutional support, and financial burdens. In light of the broader context of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) laws, which complicate efforts to foster inclusive environments, this study underscores the importance of mentorship, institutional backing, and targeted recruitment initiatives in enhancing access to graduate education. We provide readers with actionable recommendations for mitigating participant-identified barriers to graduate education—even in politically restrictive states—aiming to create more supportive and welcoming environments for marginalized applicants in search of TPC graduate programs.

Keywords Access and engagement, barriers, focus group, graduate education, recruitment, retention

The social justice turn has inspired academic programs in technical and professional communication (TPC) and related fields to recruit more students from underrepresented backgrounds into graduate programs (e.g., Popham, 2016). However, graduate faculty and program administrators cannot assume that merely diversifying graduate programs in terms of student demographics will lead to improved futures for such students, much less support the goals of justice. Gaps in support and shrinking academic job markets challenge such assumptions. For example, research shows that graduate student mentorship needs to be improved (Moeggenberg, 2022) and that the number of academic positions in rhetoric and composition and TPC-related fields have been decreasing (Ridolfo & Lindgren, n.d.). Yet many graduate programs may not be well prepared to support students who want to pursue careers outside of academia (Kelly, Tobin, & Linder, 2023), and many graduate students rack up significant debt in pursuit of a graduate degree¹ (Hanson, 2022). In this era in which graduate education does not guarantee a more stable or prosperous future, we must rethink recruitment as a social justice practice grounded in care, transparency, and structural support (Alexander & Walton, 2022; Popham, 2016).

Graduate students—particularly those from historically marginalized communities—deserve more than access to admissions; they deserve meaningful support throughout their programs to ensure the experience leads to opportunity rather than disillusionment. In other words, knowing that graduate education does not guarantee economic mobility or career stability, recruiting efforts must include sustained, meaningful support throughout the graduate experience. Our primary argument in this article is that graduate recruitment should not be about shaping students to fit the university—it should be about reshaping universities to meet the needs, goals, and lived experiences of students.

At the time of writing this manuscript, anti-DEI laws and the reversal of affirmative action challenge our collective ability to act boldly, but the approach we advocate in this article allows us to move with intentionality and care. Numerous states have enacted anti-DEI legislation that has the potential to prevent or hinder efforts to create inclusive and welcoming environments for underrepresented students within graduate programs. These laws also restrict the ability of higher education administrators to integrate diverse perspectives into curricula while limiting considerations of all relevant factors in admissions decisions (refer to Anabire et al., 2024 for a select list of these restrictions). Yet

¹ As of October 2022, the average debt among PhD holders was \$132,268. Refer to Hanson (2022) for more statistical details.

these restrictions need not prevent TPC scholars from making targeted changes to our websites, curriculum, and student support services to address applicant concerns. Such targeted changes can make our programs more appealing to a wider range of potential applicants, including minoritized applicants. As Anabire et al. (2024) remind us, those with the power to reveal, reject, and replace injustice have the responsibility to do so—especially in graduate education, where the stakes are high, the labor is uneven, and the outcomes remain deeply stratified.

We argue for a flipped model of graduate recruiting that centers applicants' realities rather than institutional imperatives. While traditional recruitment models often focus on helping students navigate existing systems, we propose a both/and approach: supporting students in navigating current institutional realities *and* redesigning programs to reflect what students say they need. Such an approach acknowledges that successful recruitment is inseparable from retention (Alexander, 2023), mentorship (Moeggenberg, 2022), and career preparation—all of which require sustained institutional commitment and distributed responsibility across roles. In our flipped model, administrators must serve as strategic equity stewards: aligning resources, policies, and curriculum with evolving student needs. Recruiting professors must act as cultural agents who champion justice by advocating for applicants, mentoring with intention, and pushing departments toward curricular and structural inclusion. And graduate students, often overlooked, must be empowered as peer navigators whose lived experiences provide invaluable insight to prospective students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Academic institutions that lack flexibility and fail to accommodate the experiences and contributions of minoritized communities tend to create hostile and unwelcoming environments. With this in mind, we conducted an IRB-approved study (protocol #13098) in hopes of creating more ethical and effective graduate school recruiting and retention efforts based on the goals and expectations of prospective underrepresented applicants. Specifically, we conducted a series of focus groups at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to learn about undergraduates' expectations of graduate school, what goals they hope graduate school could help them achieve, and what barriers they anticipate could prevent them from pursuing a graduate education (e.g., graduate certificate, master's degree, or PhD).

In the literature review below, we overview existing research on the importance of mentorship, institutional agents, and word-of-mouth recruitment in higher education. We then describe our research methods and present three findings identifying potential barriers that focus-group participants said could prevent them from applying to graduate

programs. We end with actionable recommendations that offer strategies for program administrators who are dedicated to inclusion, even in academic institutions affected by politically charged and restrictive climates. As you, dear readers, prepare to take a deep dive into the student perspectives highlighted by this research study, we ask that you give yourself permission to explore opposing viewpoints in hopes of enhancing your recruitment and retention initiatives.

Literature Review

When looking at ways to enhance or create inclusive recruitment initiatives, graduate recruiters must first explore their margin of maneuverability as an iterative process. For example, in Kristen Moore and others' (2021) piece, the authors explicated the relationship between inclusion and oppression by walking through the 4Rs: Recognize, Reveal, Reject, and Replace. Understanding that the 4Rs is an applied theory of inclusion, the authors provided an example of how to apply the theory to unjust academic paper reviewing but argue that this concept can be "deployed in a range of contexts...including the margin of maneuverability" (p. 1), which is what we have done for this manuscript. In other words, we used this applied theory to include the voices of potential applicants whose concerns should directly inform the design of our graduate programs and student-support services.

In similar fashion, Rebecca Walton and others (2019) called for TPC scholars to repurpose the use of power to address inequities. In the context of recruiting from an ethic of care, we argue that our power has the ability to influence change by creating better recruitment initiatives that center the marginalized. Relevant to considerations of recruitment and retention, self-concept² and self-efficacy³ are two qualities that support the success of minoritized students in graduate programs (Meador, 2018; refer also to MacPhee et al., 2013). These qualities can be enhanced through effective mentorship and support by institutional agents who guide students through processes such as applying to graduate school. Through the support of institutional agents (Dayley, 2020; Ramirez, 2011), students get access to stakeholders who provide insider knowledge. When we say *insider knowledge*, we are referring to the information and understanding of how to successfully navigate higher education (e.g., degree timelines, where to access institutional support,

² In this context of graduate recruitment, *self-concept* relates to identity. In other words, our self-concept is a view we have of ourselves, which is often a different reflection of our true self and how we are perceived by the world (Hattie, 2014).

³ When we say *self-efficacy*, we are referring to one's ability to accomplish academic tasks, which often affects educational interests (MacPhee, 2013). When recruiting from an ethic of care, it was important to us to conduct a focus group where potential applicants could explore, discuss, and share their interests, in order for us to better understand their perceptions of graduate school.

funding opportunities, to name a few). Jamal-Jared Alexander and others (2022) argued how “[m]any applicants, particularly [underrepresented students], have little access to insider knowledge” (p. 3). For example, a study by Audrey Meador (2018) examined recruitment and retention factors of minoritized students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and highlighted the importance of mentorship programs and how “mentorship positively affected retention” (p. 68). Although Meador’s qualitative case study focuses on retention in STEM fields, we contend that the same arguments can be made across *all* academic fields.

Specifically, Alexander (2023) provided TPC-related fields with a blueprint of how institutions can intervene to make their universities more socially just environments for graduate students with the programmatic implementation of mentorship organizations. These organizations often provide insider knowledge that aids students in navigating higher education. Alexander created programming for minoritized graduate students that provides them with mentorship and a behind-the-scenes look at how other underrepresented scholars (e.g., recently graduated students, all-but-dissertation [ABD] candidates, minoritized faculty and administrators, etc.) navigate higher education. Throughout his piece, Alexander asserted that having access to institutional agents who understand the lived experiences of applicants and new students is a key retention initiative that should be implemented at predominately white institutions (PWIs). Indeed, our focus group participants indicated trepidation about navigating PWIs specifically, a finding that aligns with this scholarship and reinforces the need for mentorship.

While Alexander’s (2023) approaches for enacting socially just retention initiatives are fairly new, it is important to note that scholars in other fields have been enacting similar approaches since the turn of the 21st century. For example, computer science scholars, William Aspray and Andrew Bernat (2000), created a report to assist those involved in computing-related programs at research universities who are in need of improving their recruitment and retention of minoritized graduate students. They provided 25 practical recommendations in four categories for programs to consider, with each category containing a general discussion followed by a course of action. One recommendation highlights the importance of involving one’s university in partnership with minority-serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs). This approach can help prospective students expand their personal networks to better prepare for graduate school while also gaining access to current graduate students to learn about the program and campus culture. Such partnerships therefore create opportunities for word-of-mouth recruitment. By *word-of-mouth recruitment*, we mean unofficial communication about one’s own experience in a

program, often shared peer-to-peer. Similar to Meador's (2018) approach with STEM fields, we argue that Aspray and Bernat's research is applicable to the TPC field.

Word-of-mouth recruitment can address applicants' fear of insufficient institutional support because current graduate students can share their experiences navigating the institution. What makes word-of-mouth recruiting particularly effective is the experience level of the person offering the information (Van Hoye et al., 2016). Therefore, applicants are likely to value this information since it is based on personal experience. This social influence of recruitment can promote social capital and a sense of belonging, as those on the receiving end are often provided with a more holistic view of the school, town/city, and even the state. In a time where DEI initiatives are constantly being attacked, this holistic view is a major concern for many minoritized applicants, and certain federal laws can restrict how they maneuver and survive. Understanding that word-of-mouth is often how TPC programs attract students, we argue that using this as an applicable recruitment tool can help mitigate trepidations while also helping applicants have a better understanding of places and spaces that may (or may not) be challenging and scary—depending on their unique needs and circumstances.

Understanding that word-of-mouth can be an influential source of positive insights given by a current stakeholder at “various stages of the recruitment process, in which more immediate attraction outcomes mediate the effect on more distant outcomes” (Hoye et al., 2016; refer also to Jaidi et al., 2011), this method of recruitment provides more insightful and credible information since it often enacts the strategies of relational recruitment (Alexander & Walton, 2022). In other words, recruiting strategies that establish and build relationships can center around the lived experiences of potential applicants.

Methods

Data Collection

We designed a study to address the following research questions:

- What conceptions of graduate school are held by HBCU undergraduates who know or think they are interested in going to graduate school?
- What goals do they think graduate school will help them meet?
- What barriers do they anticipate could prevent them from beginning or completing a graduate degree?

We collected data using multiple focus groups to (a) maximize the number of participants with whom we could engage in a short period; (b) learn from the reactions, interactions,

and differences in perspectives as participants responded to each other; and (c) explore perspectives of a minoritized group that has become a focus of recruiting efforts in our field. We held a total of four focus groups, two focus groups each on two HBCU campuses in the Southeastern US in spring 2023. Every focus group was audio-video recorded and was approximately 90 minutes long.

We began by seeking common experiences likely to be shared by focus group participants: for example, asking how participants selected their undergraduate university. Discussing common experiences can build cohesiveness in a focus group, which can lead to livelier discussions (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2015). We then transitioned to the topic of focus, generally letting the conversation flow naturally as long as it was on topic. When we intervened, it was to draw quiet participants into the conversation to ensure everyone could contribute and to redirect the conversation back to relevant topics. As conversations wound down, we introduced a new question or a follow-up question to elicit more detailed responses. We asked the following questions of every focus group: What do you think grad school is good for? What do *you* hope to get out of grad school? Do you know where you might study? What information would help you choose schools to apply to? What might keep you from grad school? Refer to the appendix for the complete focus group prompt, including follow-up questions, to which we referred during data collection. During the discussion, we took notes on not only the spoken conversation but also nonverbal communication: e.g., surprised looks or expressions of agreement. We ended the focus group discussion by asking if anyone wanted to share something they thought we should know but had not had a chance to say yet. After the focus group discussion, we distributed brief paper surveys to collect demographic information.

For reciprocity, we gave each participant a \$50 gift card and met with undergraduate students to share information about graduate school, preparing strong application materials, and selecting a graduate program. On one campus, this took the form of serving as guest speakers in an undergraduate technical communication course; on the other campus, we held an information session on graduate school applications open to any interested undergraduate (not just participants). We also shared our contact information with research participants for any follow-up questions and subsequently met with participants over Zoom to answer questions about selecting graduate programs.

Participant Demographics

Given the exigence of this study (i.e., efforts to diversify the field of technical communication in general and TPC graduate programs specifically), participant

demographics are highly relevant, so we asked about a range of characteristics on the paper survey. We requested some information, such as gender and race/ethnicity, with open-answer questions to enable participants to self-describe. Allowing participants to self-describe, especially for race/ethnicity and gender identity, follows best practices of inclusive survey design (ALBA, 2023), as does the practice of requesting as little information as needed to address the research question (Brown, 2023). Therefore, instead of requesting that participants write in a specific sexual identity, for example, we asked whether the participant identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, offering answer options including *Yes*, *No*, *I don't know*, and *Decline to answer*. We note that such best practices are essential for all studies involving survey instruments, not only those investigating inclusion-related research questions.

A total of 28 undergraduate students participated in the four focus groups. All participants self-described as Black (n=18) or African American (n=10). They ranged in age from 18–24, with both the average and median age being approximately 21 years. Eight participants identified as male, 16 as female, and four as non-binary⁴. Four participants identified as a person having a disability, nine as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, seven as first-generation college students, and 11 would be the first in their family to attend graduate school. These responses suggest that the focus group participants varied in meaningful ways, occupying multiple, layered positions of marginalization and privilege that may be relevant to graduate school recruiting and retention. For example, according to the most recent US census data, only 26.2% of Black Americans 25 years or older had earned at least a bachelor's degree (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2025), but a full 75% of our participants were not the first in their family to earn a college degree. This suggests that our participants may be better equipped with personal networks to help them navigate institutions of higher education than many Black Americans. Context such as this is useful for interpreting findings and for estimating the degree to which the findings may apply to underrepresented graduate program applicants more broadly.

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed first by AI, followed by two rounds of human correction, referencing the video as needed to confirm accuracy. We then conducted a thematic analysis, driven by our research questions. After individually reviewing the transcripts repeatedly, we jointly identified broad themes by which to code the data. To support

⁴ All binary participants wrote in their sex, while the four non-binary participants wrote in their gender.

validity, we ensured that themes were not only prevalent in the data in terms of frequency (i.e., a sizable amount of data) but also in distribution (i.e., mentioned by multiple participants in every focus group). We jointly coded the data, coming to consensus on each application of a code and refining code definitions as appropriate. To support the analysis, for each piece of coded data, we included a brief restatement of the codable unit in our own words and a brief explanation of its relationship to the code. After the first round of coding, we reviewed the coded data to evaluate coherence within each code. Subsequently, we repeated the same analysis process for two of the codes to develop (and code for) subcodes.

Findings

This manuscript reports a subset of findings related to potential barriers to graduate school:

- **Finding 1: *Institutional Rigidity*** Participants were concerned that institutional structures were incompatible with the needs of their lives. Examples include narrow curriculum and rigid degree timelines that were not designed to easily pause one's progress toward the degree.
- **Finding 2: *Insufficient Institutional Support*** Participants were concerned about having sufficient support to navigate problems. Examples include poor advising and administrative snafus that affect students' progress toward their degrees.
- **Finding 3: *Financial Constraints*** Participants were concerned about being able to afford graduate school. Examples include high costs of housing and reluctance to take on additional debt.

Institutional rigidity: I'm concerned that institutional structures are incompatible with the needs of my life.

One of the potential barriers that participants mentioned could prevent them from applying to graduate school was that educational institutions are inflexible in ways that do not accommodate their lives. They spoke about this barrier in different ways: inflexible degree timelines, inflexible curricula, and geographical inflexibility.

Participants mentioned that flexible degree timelines would make graduate school more compelling. Most undergraduates may be required to take full course loads. This requirement can make it difficult to balance academic and personal commitments. This experience has led to participants' desire for graduate programs that offer flexible degree timelines. Often, it is scholarships or financial aid, not the university, that requires students to maintain full-time status. However, if students are unaware of this distinction,

they may not realize that attending graduate school part-time is a viable option. A participant was surprised when their father explained that with pursuing a master's program, they could decide the pace of their degree and complete the program on their own terms:

I was on the phone [with] my dad yesterday, and I was like, "What, what if I have to, like, work full-time before I get to, like, start my master's? I don't wanna go back to full-time right now. Like, I'm having fun. I'm doing this." And my dad was like, "You don't have to take a full course load." And I was like, "I don't?;" he was like, "You don't. Like, you can do it at whatever pace you want to."

For this participant, programs with flexible timelines will appeal to them, making graduate school more immediately accessible since it would not necessarily require a full-time commitment. This participant had previously assumed that graduate school would mirror their undergraduate experience, with rigid requirements for full-time enrollment. As this participant demonstrated, misunderstandings about funding requirements versus university policies can shape perceptions of graduate education. In reality, part-time enrollment may be possible depending on the chosen funding sources. This comment highlights the need for mentorship in guiding undergraduate students through the realities of pursuing a graduate education. Mentorship about pursuing a graduate education can help dispel misconceptions by providing firsthand insights into the flexibility of graduate study, including options for part-time enrollment and self-paced degree completion. By engaging with mentors, undergraduate students can make more informed decisions about pursuing graduate education, alleviating apprehensions based on inaccurate assumptions.

Also, when asked where participants think they might go to pursue a graduate degree, some participants mentioned they wanted to go to programs that offer the ability to extend their degree timelines or pause their progress toward the degree:

When it comes to my PhD, I'm looking literally anywhere and everywhere, um, and keeping my options open and looking for places that offer really good benefits and also offer, um, kind of extended time to finish. Like, one of the programs in Chicago offers nine years to finish your dissertation. I don't think it's going to take that long, but life happens. And if life happened real hard, then I, like, I have some [wiggle] room. And that is intriguing to me.

Earlier in this focus group, this participant shared that they were in remission from cancer, and their life experience had already made them aware that unexpected challenges could

slow their progress toward completing a university degree. While they may not anticipate needing the whole nine years provided by the program to complete their PhD, a flexible degree timeline provides the necessary wiggle room to accommodate unexpected life events, ensuring they can extend their program if needed to finish their degree successfully. The fact that they do not expect to take the full nine years but still find the option appealing underlines how inflexible degree timelines could create stress and uncertainty for students and can pose a barrier to getting a graduate degree.

Participants also expressed a desire for flexibility in resuming their studies after pausing their degree. One participant shared concerns about the challenges of improving their GPA after taking time off to give birth:

When I came here in 2015—it's 2023 now, and I still haven't graduated, but—so when I first came here, I was very active. I was a student leader, everything. Um, I got pregnant my sophomore year, flunked out all my classes. [...] I've already messed up so much trying to bring that GPA back up. Like, it's easy to let it go down, but trying to build it back up is twice as hard.

This participant's experience shows how inflexible degree timelines in undergraduate programs can create significant barriers to completion. After becoming pregnant in their sophomore year and not passing their classes, they found it difficult to recover academically. Even years later, they were still struggling to graduate, perhaps due to institutional constraints that did not accommodate non-linear academic journeys. The expectation that students progress within a fixed timeframe, without sufficient mechanisms for GPA recovery or extended degree completion, ultimately made graduate school feel out of reach for this participant. We searched the website of this participant's undergraduate institution but did not find any explicit information on how students can pause their degree when life happens. We suspected that institutions might have information or policies regarding pausing one's degree, but this information might be hard to find or for students to access, hence creating a situation where students think they do not have the option to pause their degree. The participant's concern highlights the need for graduate programs to be more flexible in timelines, and to be explicit and clear about such flexibility and the policies governing it to ensure that students have the opportunity to complete their degrees despite life's unexpected challenges.

Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about inflexible curricula, particularly the limited flexibility in course selection. Some participants shared a desire to engage in enrichment activities beyond their graduate programs, such as taking piano, skiing, and Taekwondo courses. These activities, often associated with the middle class, represent

opportunities for personal development and enjoyment that some students may not have had access to previously but are interested in pursuing as they approach graduate school. For some participants, the desire to engage in such extracurricular activities was not simply about hobbies; it reflected a longing for enrichment opportunities that an inflexible curriculum does not support.

This example highlights how inflexible curricula can limit students' ability to explore interests beyond their core academic requirements. The concern also emphasizes the potential disconnect between the experiences of minoritized students, who may not have had access to such enrichment activities, and the opportunities available to them in graduate school. Such opportunities need not be credit-bearing. Whereas a typical liberal arts undergraduate education is broad, including requirements well outside a student's major, one key difference between most graduate and undergraduate degrees is the stronger disciplinary focus of a graduate degree. We suggest that universities clearly communicate the range of enrichment activities available to graduate students whether they are credit-bearing or extracurricular so students can make the most of their graduate education and engage in well-rounded personal and professional growth.

Participants also appreciated programs that allow for specialization and the creation of academic paths tailored to their career goals. Many of the participants resonated with the direct quote below:

The programs that have caught my eye the most are the programs that offer an umbrella and then, uh, certifications or, like, concentrations. Um, because that shows me that, like, there's a kind of like a pendulum that you can kind of ride through, um, to make it so it fits you more.

This participant expressed a strong preference for customizable programs, which suggests that inflexible, one-size-fits-all degree structures may not meet student needs. The ability to "ride a pendulum" implies a desire for flexibility in shaping their education to align with personal interests and career goals. Such flexibility need not be extreme but rather could offer a limited set of tracks or paths that could allow students to customize their degree toward a particular career goal. Such tracks could include courses both within and outside of technical communication programs: for example, drawing upon curriculum in data analytics, graphic design, or instructional technology, for example, to appropriately supplement technical and professional communication curriculum in support of students' professional goals. When graduate programs lack this flexibility, students may feel constrained by narrow academic tracks that do not fully accommodate their goals, and

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such constraints can discourage prospective students from applying to such programs. Another participant speaking on the ability to specialize in a particular area of study said:

I would probably say if there's an opportunity to do research, like, with a master's degree, like, under a professor or something like that [...] like, along with getting your master's. Like, I know some schools will allow you to actually go out if you want to do your own research on a certain subject or topic or whatever, and it can be, like, along with your master's.

This comment illustrates how the flexibility to pursue one's own research while completing a master's degree can significantly enhance a student's experience. The participant values graduate programs that allow them to engage in research projects alongside their coursework, seeing integrated research experience as a necessary element of a flexible curriculum.

Lastly, when asked what appeals to the participants in graduate programs, one participant compared the curriculum of two universities, explaining that more flexible curriculum makes the program at one university more appealing:

[University name] caught my attention a little bit. They were talking about how you can, um, with your Bachelor's degree here at [University name], you can take that and transfer over to them and go into a graduate program.

This participant was particularly drawn to a university that allowed students to transfer directly from their bachelor's degree into a graduate program, suggesting that inflexible curricula at other institutions may make the transition to graduate studies more difficult. Some programs may require students to navigate complex admission processes, fulfill additional prerequisites, or repeat coursework, which can discourage prospective applicants. By contrast, institutions that offer clear, structured pathways from undergraduate to graduate studies remove unnecessary hurdles.

Finally, the desire for online or distance graduate programs was prominent among participants, as these options would enable them to stay close to family and avoid the need to relocate. One participant, who had experienced recent health challenges and was concerned about COVID-19 protocols, found online graduate programs offering a variety of courses and concentrations particularly appealing. Programs with flexible and extended timelines for completion also attracted this participant's interest:

A big barrier is trying to find a place that I can do majority distance, and there aren't that many programs in the field that I want to enter that offer that. And it's hard to

figure out who would be willing to be accommodating because I also don't wanna move right now. So trying to figure out how I can, like, stay in my community and also move forward, um, without, I guess, getting in over my head and, like, working with people who don't have the, um, like you brought up earlier, not having the infrastructure to support what it would mean to have distance students.

For this participant, staying within their community and avoiding situations where they might feel overwhelmed or unsupported was central to their decision-making when choosing a graduate program. The ability to remain geographically stable and close to home while still receiving the necessary academic and institutional support was a key factor in determining which programs felt accessible and viable.

This finding highlights the importance of institutions designing programs that acknowledge and accommodate the diverse lives and needs of students. Institutions with all the inflexibilities mentioned in this finding may discourage potential students from applying to their graduate programs or completing such programs.

Insufficient institutional support: I'm concerned I won't have the support I need to navigate the institution when I encounter a problem.

In this finding, focus group participants experienced two distinct scenarios:

1. Some participants encountered problems but did not receive sufficient institutional support to navigate them. This lack of support led to concerns about their ability to succeed in graduate school, particularly when considering attending a PWI far from home.
2. Other participants faced challenges but received adequate institutional support, which made them feel valued and confident in their ability to complete their degrees.

Some participants expressed frustration and anxiety over their inability to progress academically, describing a lack of effective support from institutional agents, such as academic advisors, as a primary barrier to achieving their academic milestones on time. For example, participants mentioned that they often find themselves unsure about which courses to take to stay on track for graduation. This uncertainty was compounded by the actions of some academic advisors who, rather than providing clear guidance, seemed ill-informed and unhelpful:

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I kind of take my education [in]to my own hands 'cause my school, they said, "Yeah, I'll get you an associate's degree." But as I got closer to achieving it, [...] when I started getting close to it, they, you know, it was, I would get emails back like, "I really don't know if you should take this." Or, "Yeah, you can take this," and then two weeks later, the class gets canceled or something like that.

This participant's experience with academic advising reflects a broader challenge faced by many students in the study. Unclear guidance, inconsistent communication, and last-minute course cancellations created unnecessary obstacles, ultimately forcing them to take their education into their own hands. Similarly, another participant recounted discovering, over a year later, that their advisor had retired, leaving them without an advisor to guide them:

But, like, when I started out, my advisor, she was not that great. She had retired, and I didn't even know she retired and, like, I didn't find out 'til a year and a half later. So, like, I was, I've basically been my own advisor.

The institution didn't provide the support this participant needed in completing their degree; they had to navigate the institution on their own. The registrar's or advising office may have failed to inform the participant about their new advisor; this gap in communication seems to reflect a systemic, institutional problem. These experiences highlight the lack of support from institutions—where disorganization, poor communication, and bureaucratic inefficiencies make it harder to navigate degree requirements. When students can't rely on their institutions for clear advising and structured pathways, they face delays, frustrations, and uncertainty. This situation can lead them to believe that graduate studies is unattainable, fearing that they will encounter the same institutional failures that hindered their undergraduate experience, ultimately discouraging them from pursuing a graduate degree.

Another kind of problem that some participants encountered with insufficient institutional support was when an error on the part of the university directly impeded some participants from pursuing their desired major. A specific example was when a housing mistake by the university led to some of the participants being removed from their majors, causing uncertainty about whether they could get back on track to complete the degree they originally wanted or whether they should pivot to a new major:

I truly do not know what it was, but something messed up to where the system was wrong. I just got screwed. I think it was me and one of my other friends, we, a couple people just got screwed. We got dropped from our majors. And either you had to run

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the risk—Like my friend [name], she didn't get housing until September, and that was because she decided to stick with her major and just work through it. I'm an out-of-state student. I was like, "I can't." [...] I was supposed to graduate this semester. But since I switched, I gotta graduate next fall. So I had to basically add an extra semester that I had to pay out of, out of my own pocket.

This participant's experience illustrates how a lack of institutional support can disrupt students' academic progress, sometimes forcing them to change majors at the last minute. A housing crisis led to the participant being dropped from all their biology classes, forcing a last-minute major change just to secure a place to live. Instead of receiving institutional support, they were left scrambling between departments, desperately trying to enroll in any available courses. The university's failure to prevent or rectify these errors had severe consequences: increased financial burden and an extended graduation timeline. The student who was able to major in their desired field had local support—they could live with family while waiting for on-campus housing. In contrast, the more vulnerable participant, an out-of-state student without those resources, was forced to change majors just to secure housing. This example highlights not only the consequences of institutional inefficiencies but also how they disproportionately impact the most vulnerable students. Participants expressed concerns that they would be even more vulnerable at a PWI far from home, without the networks they had relied on as undergraduates to navigate these institutional barriers.

This lack of support and the frustration of constantly navigating bureaucratic obstacles makes students question their ability to succeed in graduate school. If this kind of institutional failure happens at the undergraduate level, students fear it will only continue or worsen in graduate programs, discouraging them from further pursuing advanced degrees. The uncertainty and last-minute changes contribute to a sense of instability and distrust in the institution: (a) whether it provides accurate information, and (b) whether it cares about students. Further, participants expected to receive a higher level of care at an HBCU than at a PWI, increasing their trepidation regarding graduate programs at PWIs specifically.

In contrast, some of the participants highlighted several valuable resources, including counseling and development services, career services, student support programs, community engagement opportunities, tutoring, mentors who check in on them, and academic coaches who advocate for their success. Additionally, the TRIO Student Support

Services STEM⁵ went above and beyond to assist students, particularly first-generation students, to ensure they receive the resources they need to thrive. These services play a crucial role in motivating and supporting students across all areas of their lives and helping them navigate institutions.

In summary, this finding revealed how lack of institutional support created significant barriers for some students. Participants reported experiences where they were subjected to poor advising, lack of communication, and administrative errors that disrupted their academic progress. These experiences often led to unnecessary delays, added financial burdens, and forced changes to their academic paths, ultimately affecting their confidence in the institution's ability to support them. These institutional failures not only hinder students' ability to graduate on time but also create doubts about their potential to pursue further education, especially graduate school. The availability of support where students felt they mattered to the institution also created an environment where students' needs are met and will be relevant to their decision on which graduate program to apply to.

Financial constraints: I'm concerned that I can't afford graduate school.

It did not surprise us that participants believed financial constraints could pose a barrier to grad school. However, the ways participants framed these concerns were insightful and sophisticated, adding nuance to our understanding. When discussing financial barriers, participants suggested that (a) they found paying for graduate school more daunting than paying for their undergraduate education, (b) that they want to be reasonably confident they can afford to complete a graduate degree before they apply to the program, and (c) that financial concerns are intertwined with mental health concerns.

Several participants suggested that paying for a graduate degree seemed even more challenging than paying for their undergraduate degree. For example, one participant's parents were paying toward their undergraduate expenses, but that was a stretch for their family:

I have a twin brother, so we're always in school at the same time. And my parents have been struggling to, like, afford, like, our undergrad. So graduate [school] is just like a different animal, and I don't know if, like, we can afford it.

⁵ TRIO SSS STEM is a federally funded student support service for first-generation college students and students from low-income families who are pursuing science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and health science fields.

For this participant, their undergraduate education is possible with their parents' help, but if their parents are unable to contribute toward their graduate degree, then it seems out of reach. Relatedly, many participants have student loans and are reluctant to take on additional debt for graduate school:

Well, I just spent all this money going to undergraduate, right? Now I'm in debt, right? And I have to start working, and I have to be a productive member of society. No one cares that I have aspirations and dreams to be something bigger. You know, I have to start, you know, paying taxes and making money. And I still have this burden of, like, "Oh man, I have to start paying for this [grad school] as well? I don't know how much this is gonna cost, as well as working on top of that!"

Comments like these suggest the strategies participants are using to pay for their undergraduate education may not be possible or palatable ways of paying for a graduate degree, making graduate school feel more daunting.

When participants were high school students looking ahead to college, their high school teachers and guidance counselors often played a key role in helping them locate and apply for scholarships. These support networks also proactively reached out to high school students and initiated this support themselves. In fact, several participants explained they selected their undergraduate institution largely because of its free application week *and* that their high school guidance counselor or a university representative met with students that week to help them fill out the application. Such experiences highlight the importance of outreach to share insider knowledge, such as applying to a particular university during a particular week. In contrast with their high school experience, many participants said they feel much less aware of how to pursue grad school funding:

I feel like it just needs to be a better way for us to find those resources because everything, we hate to say, but everything trickles down to money at the end of the day. So, like, some people could use a grant and not know nothing about it.

In summary, the strategies that helped participants secure funding for their undergraduate degrees were not applicable to graduate school, which left many feeling uncertain about how they would find funding or even calculate the total cost of a graduate degree. This pattern in the data suggests that graduate program coordinators committed to diversifying their graduate student body should not assume that minoritized potential applicants can use the same support networks and strategies for securing graduate school funding that they used for their undergraduate education. It also suggests that proactive outreach and education about funding mechanisms specific to graduate education could be important

strategies for addressing the concerns of underrepresented potential applicants like our research participants.

A second point that arose when participants discussed financial concerns was that they wanted to be reasonably confident they would have the funding to complete a graduate degree before they apply to the program. For example, when we asked one of the focus groups what might make it hard to go to graduate school, the first response was, “[To] maintain the funds for graduate school. ‘Cause I mean you, you could get to college here for the first year and then the second year roll around and then you’re a fish outta water.” Responses like this indicate that participants are concerned not just about initial financial hurdles, such as moving costs, but also about securing ongoing funding throughout their time in a graduate program. And focus group participants required information about ongoing funding earlier in the process than we had expected: when deciding where to apply. The response below is representative of what we heard across the focus groups in response to the question, “What information would help you decide where to apply?”:

Scholarship funding. Just benefits that are offered to students who enroll in their master’s program or additional opportunities that can, like, make their program more, more opportune for you. Like, oh, you guys are offering money and just stuff that’ll help me. It’ll make the process of me being a master [student] in your program easier than someone else’s program. I think if they just, you know, clearly state this information, and they put it somewhere that’s easy to find, then it’s gonna be easier for me to say I like this school better than this school.

In other words, focus group participants are seeking detailed information about funding packages when weighing various programs, and they are doing so *not* to decide which acceptance offer to take but to decide where to apply in the first place. This means when graduate program websites lack detailed funding information, they may be turning away potential applicants without even realizing it.

Some readers may think these potential applicants need to be educated about norms, such as applying to many graduate programs and awaiting acceptances before comparing funding packages. However, focus group participants helped us understand that such norms may not work for some applicants—especially those who lack financial safety nets such as savings accounts or family members who could cover their costs in an emergency. Focus group participants shared examples of emergencies—such as a health problem, unexpected pregnancy, or unanticipated caretaking demands—that could derail or delay their education:

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When you have a health scare, which happened to me last, uh, summer, the money that I was going to have to, like, take my GRE and, you know, housing and stuff like that was out the window. And I was like, “Oh my goodness, like, I’m gonna be graduating in May. I, I don't have time for this, right?!” So now I have to, like, wait a little bit longer, maybe like a year to actually go to graduate school. So I’m just trying to financially get back on my feet.

Participants are savvy adults who recognized the financial risks involved with delaying their entry into the workforce by making a multi-year commitment to attend graduate school. For such a risk to be worth taking, they wanted to be reasonably confident of sufficient ongoing funding before paying application fees.

Third, when participants discussed financial barriers to graduate school, they often linked financial concerns to mental health—a linkage which graduate program administrators should be sensitive to. Participants used words like *stressed*, *stressful*, *struggling*, *burden*, *hard*, and *biggest concern* when discussing financial considerations. When asked specifically what might make graduate programs at PWIs appealing enough to apply, responses often focused on financial support:

Researcher: What would you look for from a PWI grad program? What would make you apply?⁶

Participant A: Scholarships would make me apply.

Participant B: Scholarships.

Participant C: Grants. Money.

Participant D: Scholarship. Definitely a scholarship.

Yet financial considerations were not the only relevant factor in deciding where to apply:

I think sometimes it’s hard to find particularly, like, grad programs at HBCUs that are not underfunded. Like, a lot of them, like, when I look at PWIs, it’s crazy. [...] I think sometimes that can be stressful if you don’t go to a school that’s known and doesn’t have the same resources. So you’re, like, “Oh I don't want to go to this school because what if they treat me awful ’cause I’m Black or I’m a Black woman.” And then you want to go to this other school ’cause you’re like, “Oh, there’s Black

⁶ This question emerged based on the focus group’s discussion, allowing for follow-up questions to suss out more information from participants.

women that are graduates here.” But they don’t have the, the funding, and they don’t have, like, the same safety net that a PWI would have.

The comparison above explicitly weighs the likelihood of experiencing racism but receiving more funding at PWIs versus experiencing more sense of belonging yet receiving less funding at HBCUs. Such comparisons illustrate how financial and mental health considerations can directly conflict, especially for minoritized applicants.

In contrast, other participants shared a cost-saving strategy that supports their mental health: selecting a university in a region where they can stay with relatives. When we asked one focus group, “What might make it hard to go to grad school?” the first two responses specifically focused on financial concerns, with one participant saying it would be especially challenging to attend a program where they couldn’t save money by living with their parents. A third participant extended this idea by sharing their experience of transferring to an HBCU after experiencing mental health challenges at a school farther from home:

Um, I’m lucky enough to be able to stay with my mom and come here. I, um, commute. I don’t live anywhere near here and, um, life, it can be hard. Um, that’s one reason why I did transfer here because when I was at my old school, my mental health was really bad, and I did not care if I, like, failed. I was just so worried about getting better. And now that I’m here, I can say my mental health is a lot better. Uh, there are struggles that I do have, and I do have a therapist to talk to, but even now it sometimes still is hard. But my grades are better. Um, and my mom, she sometimes, she sometimes get it, she gets it and other times she doesn’t. And, um, it’s just like, “Do I wanna continue to try and do this for myself or do I wanna, um, give up?” So I think just, like, being at home and being able to commute is a lot easier for me because I’m with someone who can, I can try to talk to rather than being cooped up into a small space and just, like, struggling.

This quote shows that for some potential applicants, living at home is not only a cost-saving measure but also a mental health necessity.

In summary, it’s not surprising that participants were concerned that financial barriers could prevent them from pursuing their goal of earning a graduate degree. But thoughtful analysis of *how* participants discussed these concerns reveals important nuances. Specifically, participants felt that paying for graduate school seemed even more challenging than paying for an undergraduate degree, participants were seeking reasonable assurance that they could afford to complete a graduate program before they

applied to it, and participants often linked financial and mental health considerations. Understanding participant perspectives at this level of detail can help program administrators address financial concerns, potentially broadening the pool of applications they receive, improving the diversity of their graduate program, and conveying care to potential applicants.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Technical communication graduate programs have long been concerned with meeting student needs, particularly in terms of offering career-relevant curriculum (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2001; Meese & Wahlstrom, 1988; Melonçon, 2009). Our focus group study demonstrated that this concern continues to be pertinent. In fact, additional findings of this research which are not reported here include participant concerns that graduate school should offer sufficient career advancement to be worth the investment of time and money. But in investigating potential barriers to both *applying to* and completing graduate school, we found that more comprehensive support is required to ethically recruit and retain underrepresented graduate students. The focus group participants helped us to understand both more fully and more concretely some of the potential barriers they believed could prevent them from applying to graduate school, or at least from applying to particular graduate programs. These anticipated barriers are summarized below:

Institutional rigidity can make graduate programs less compelling to potential applicants, particularly those who are caregivers, those who are paying for their own education, and those who experience life changes during graduate school. Yet we suspect that many university stakeholders do not realize their program website and other materials may signal that the design of their program or institution is incompatible with many potential applicants' lives. Indeed, not a single focus group participant indicated that they had reached out or were planning to reach out to grad school representatives to inquire about potential flexibility that was not mentioned on the program website. Rather, several participants said that if a program appears to lack the flexibility they were seeking, they simply did not consider applying to such programs. This suggests to us that institutions may be unaware they are turning potential applicants away.

Focus group participants shared multiple examples of problems that required **institutional support** to navigate—problems they had experienced firsthand and that friends, family members, or classmates had experienced. Participants related how difficult and frustrating it was to navigate problems caused by incorrect information or other institutional errors, despite being at an HBCU where many participants had longstanding

family connections and nearby personal networks to draw upon. Given these challenges, participants feared that navigating their institution in graduate school—particularly at a PWI far from home—would be even harder. It should come as no surprise to those of us who work at universities that these institutions do not always work as designed. Yet we suspect it is rare indeed for university websites and other materials to convey the institutional support systems that students can draw upon when mistakes are made. One possible reason for this gap may be that program administrators and other university stakeholders are unaware of this concern and its potential for preventing people from applying to programs where they do not know what resources to draw upon should they run into problems requiring institutional support.

The third potential barrier to graduate school was mentioned by every participant in all four focus groups: **financial constraints**. Participants were concerned they simply could not afford to earn a graduate degree. Although tuition costs were mentioned, it was living expenses that participants mentioned most frequently—particularly housing costs. In examining participants' language, we note they used the term “scholarships” almost exclusively when discussing desired financial support rather than terms more commonly associated with graduate school funding such as *fellowships*, *teaching assistantships* or *graduate instructorships*, and *research assistantships*. As we mentioned in the methods section, the percentage of research participants who were not first-generation college students was almost three times greater than in the broader US population of Black Americans. Thus, these participants may be better equipped with networks that can impart insider knowledge than most minoritized potential applicants, so we find this language pattern to be significant. Program administrators seeking to encourage applications from members of underrepresented groups should consider defining/explaining terms like fellowships and assistantships to more clearly convey available resources to help students pay for graduate school.

Given the potential barriers above, we recommend ways that programs and the institutions that house them could mitigate these potential barriers, and we explicitly note the importance of making potential applicants aware of these efforts. Below, our recommendations are organized chronologically, grouped by (a) actions targeting support for applicants before and during the application process and (b) actions focused on supporting graduate students during onboarding and across their time to degree.

Applicant support: Before and during the application process

Participants said they are seeking graduate degree programs that allow for the customization to tailor curriculum to their interests. We emphasize here that customizable curriculum should be communicated to *applicants*, not just to current graduate students, as participants shared that they are seeking information about how to customize their education to their own career goals as part of the process for deciding where to apply to graduate school.

Such customization could be enabled in a variety of ways. For example, revising more traditional master's curriculum into a suite of stackable certificates could not only allow graduate students to choose certificates that most interest them—thereby customizing their degree—but also could enable students to earn smaller credentials on the way to the final degree. If “life happens” and students find themselves unable to finish a master's degree, they could still complete a credential to enhance their resumes, making them more marketable for promotions or new professional opportunities even without completing a graduate degree. However, we recognize that a comprehensive redesign of graduate curriculum may not be possible at every institution, and targeted tweaks of existing curriculum also can create opportunities for students to customize their degree. So, we note as well that more traditional approaches to curricular flexibility could also be relevant: e.g., offering tracks within a degree, building in room for electives, offering directed studies, and facilitating graduate internships.

When faculty members revise graduate program curriculum to enable customization, they should also consider questions of career relevance. Given the expansiveness of technical communication and the fragmented nature of our field's graduate curriculum (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2001), it can be challenging for a single program to adequately prepare students for diverse roles across industries. To inform curricular updates, Lisa Melonçon (2009) recommended that TPC graduate programs review their curriculum in partnership with stakeholders such as employers and alumni who have their fingers on the pulse of local hiring demands. She specifically suggested considering local factors in updating curricular foci, a recommendation that resonates with our findings in this study. Local factors are especially relevant to applicants hoping to attend graduate school close to home, since many of these graduate students would go on to seek careers within or near their communities.

The field of technical communication does not map to a corresponding job title like “technical communicator,” nor even onto a single career path or industry (Brumberger & Lauer, 2020). So, it can be especially important to scaffold applicants in recognizing relevant career possibilities and, subsequently, in planning their degree to support specific career goals. For example, a student with coursework in user experience (UX), qualitative research methods, and visual design may be well positioned to pursue industry positions such as Interaction Designer or Information Architect, whereas a student focusing on inclusive pedagogy and writing with AI may be better positioned for an academic career or positions in instructional design. Therefore, in addition to simply conveying on a program website that degree customization is possible, we suggest programs illustrate such customization with a few example degree plans. Ideally, example degree plans would link to articles about corresponding careers as well as alumni spotlights, conveying how the degree prepared them for their current career.

We also recommend that, in online materials and conversations with potential applicants, program administrators share how existing structures can support graduate students, especially in navigating surprises or customizing their graduate school experience. For example, at Utah State University, the English Department director of graduate studies (DGS) meets individually with graduate students every semester to check on their progress toward the degree, review upcoming course offerings, and answer questions. This meeting is where the DGS can suggest strategies like applying for a leave of absence or registering for summer credits to allow for a reduced load in the fall. And because tuition costs are often calculated based on the number of credits for which students are registered, these meetings also allow the DGS to help students recognize how to minimize their costs: for example, registering for an additional course one semester to take advantage of tuition breaks. If a graduate program includes structured support such as annual or semesterly one-on-one meetings with the graduate director, program administrators should not save that information for orientation, but should share such information on websites and messages to applicants.

Focus group participants also told us that resource gaps can signal to potential applicants that the institution is not designed to support students like them. The most common examples we heard from focus group participants related to their needs as parents. For example, campus housing may be available for single students or for married couples with or without children, but not for single parents. Similarly, struggles with securing affordable childcare on or near campus can create barriers for graduate student parents. Healthcare coverage is another potential gap area: Certain types of coverage (such as gender-

affirming care, fertility treatment, and mental health support) may not be covered. We note that other resource gaps may disproportionately affect international students. For example, whereas many universities offer free income tax preparation for students who are U.S. citizens, international students are often excluded from this support despite the fact that their income tax preparation is likely to be more complex and they are less likely to be familiar with US income tax processes. Again, because focus group participants were discussing these resources in the context of selecting where to apply to graduate school, we suggest it is important for programs to share such information not only with current students but also make it available to potential applicants.

Of all the barriers focus groups discussed, resource gaps may be the most difficult to address because, ideally, they call for structural solutions at the university level. We hope this article will be useful to university administrators making the case for structural solutions to better support underrepresented graduate students, serving as research-based evidence of how resource gaps pose barriers not only to completing a graduate degree but even to applying for admission. In addition to advocating for structural solutions at the university level, we encourage faculty to intervene in tactical ways as possible. Such approaches could include posting information about non-university community resources on graduate program websites, for example, affordable childcare programs, housing support services, low-cost/no-cost tax preparation, affinity groups supporting veteran students or international students or single-parent students. We also encourage programs to get creative in using one-time money in ways that can have an outsized positive impact on multiple student groups. Specific needs and opportunities vary, of course, but as an example, several Utah State entities split the cost to offer a free student shuttle to international grocery stores in Salt Lake City. Such support not only meets immediate needs but also signals care for students, indicating to potential applicants that the institution could, indeed, be a good fit for them.

Student support: Onboarding through degree completion

Other information may be more appropriate for supporting current graduate students than potential applicants. For example, focus group participants said they wanted flexibility in their degree timeline. Some participants offered examples of life events that could pause their progress toward the degree, such as having children or falling ill, whereas other participants wanted to slow their progress toward degree to savor their graduate school experience by conducting additional research, taking electives outside their home department, and building up their professional networks. The specific circumstances experienced by graduate students and their specific funding sources will affect what

possibilities are available for modifying their degree timeline, so we suggest that addressing flexible degree timelines may be largely suited to current graduate students rather than applicants. In general, our recommendations regarding timelines are to make existing policies as clear as possible, including any cascading effects on issues like funding. For example, it is common for graduate programs to have policies in place regarding a leave of absence (the ability to pause one's progress toward the degree without incurring fees or losing one's academic standing and with the ability to take up one's progress toward the degree without financial penalty or reapplying to the program). We encourage graduate programs to make such policies easy to find and to define/explain terms like "leave of absence" or "hardship withdrawal" for first-generation college students and others new to this vocabulary.

Similarly, programs should make clear the implications of decisions like changing one's status from full-time to part-time. Such decisions can affect a student's eligibility for funding such as assistantships, scholarships, and federal financial aid, as well as related financial matters like student loan deferment. Some US states have laws prohibiting the awarding of financial aid for courses that are not required for the student's major, which has implications for students seeking to savor their graduate school experience by studying a wide range of topics. This financial aid constraint is another reason to consider building electives into graduate programs and promoting non-credit-bearing opportunities such as student clubs, internships, and affinity groups.

Utah State PhD students have an annual review with Technical Communication and Rhetoric faculty to assess not only their degree progress but corresponding goals relevant to each student's career objectives, for example, plans for publications, conference proposals, professional networking, and research design. These regular individual meetings offer built-in opportunities for students to share when a change in their circumstances may affect their progress toward degree. These meetings also offer opportunities to discuss any conflicting information or advice students may have received and provide institutional support to help students navigate problems. In these meetings, program administrators and other faculty can answer questions, interpret policy, and help students think about their options. Such regular support can also help students feel comfortable reaching out at other times of year if they encounter institutional problems and need support navigating them.

Graduate student peers are also valuable resources for learning how to navigate institutions. Often the most useful advice for navigating problems comes from a peer who has navigated a similar situation at the same institution. We note that peer mentorship can

take different forms and that each approach can have strengths and drawbacks: whether peer mentors should be assigned or student-selected, whether participation should be opt-in or opt-out, whether areas of focus should be identified by students or designated by the program, how to compensate the labor of peer mentors. We encourage TPC graduate programs to explore different models of peer mentorship in cooperation with graduate students to identify options likely to work well for your particular graduate student population, available resources, and other considerations.

In conclusion, many TPC academics, including the authors of this article, are committed to diversifying our academic programs by welcoming students who are members of underrepresented groups. This commitment requires that we center the needs of the potential applicants we are inviting and seek ways to meet those needs within the constraints of our academic institutions. In the current climate of anti-DEI legislation, enacting this commitment is particularly difficult, but also particularly important (Alexander, 2025). Additional research is needed to further advance this effort. For example, recruiters, graduate program directors, and researchers could co-design studies with marginalized communities through participatory action research to identify how best to modify existing programs or design new programs to meet community needs. Other future research could analyze comparative case studies of institutions that have successfully implemented equitable recruitment practices to identify potentially transferrable findings. Together, approaches like these could enable TPC programs to focus on specific local and geographic contexts, supporting more targeted and community-responsive recruitment efforts that center students within those areas. Meanwhile, we hope that the research reported in this article will be useful to program administrators and graduate faculty who are seeking ways to make their programs more inviting and supportive of graduate students—especially those who are members of underrepresented groups.

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Appendix: Focus Group Prompt

Focus Group Questions:

- What do you think grad school is good for? or what is grad school for? or why do folks get graduate degrees?
- What do you hope to get out of grad school?
 - What are your career goals?
 - Follow ups on other implied goals: for example, if they say it could give me an edge: “Why might getting a master’s degree give you an edge? What kind of edge?”
- Do you know where you might study?
 - Why there? How did you hear about it? Why does it appeal to you?
 - How will you go about choosing a school or a program? Whom will you ask? Where will you look? Why?
- What information would help you choose schools to apply to?
 - Where can you get that info?
- What might keep you from grad school?
 - If you decide not to go, why might that be?
 - What might make it hard to go to grad school?
 - What concerns do you have about going to grad school?

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A Field-Wide Examination of Assignments in the Service Course in Technical and Professional Communication

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Abstract Our goal is that field-wide insights can assist TPC program administrators (PAs) and faculty in considering the kinds of assignments that should be included in their own service courses. We asked the question: If we gathered information on assignments students are asked to complete from a diverse range of institutions across the US, would a set of common field-wide assignments emerge? And if so, do the common genres align with what TPC knows about the genres most frequently written in the workplace? Data gathered from syllabi (n=90) revealed the most common assignments across the service course in the US are reports, proposals, job materials, instructions, presentations, and business correspondence. Findings suggest faculty should consider the number of assignments, improve terminology used in syllabi and assignments, and improve assignment design.

Keywords Assignments, curriculum, service course, technical and professional communication, field-wide

The technical and professional communication (TPC) service course is an “introductory course...for nonmajors” and is typically instituted “as a service to other departments and programs on campus” (Melonçon & England, 2011, p. 398). The course focuses on “problem solving, and learning to communicate information that has real cultural, legal, and ethical obligations” (Melonçon, 2018, p. 208) and also how to “adap[t] emergent knowledge to specific workplace or community-based contexts” (Scott, 2008, p. 382).

We are not alone in centering the service course as a place for research. Some focus on the courses’ sustainability (Carnegie, 2018; Schreiber et. al, 2018b; St.Amant, 2018). Other scholars have examined a wide variety of topics, such as teacher feedback in the service course (Sara Doan, 2019); grading contracts (Litterio, 2018); teaching genres (Boettger, 2014); course design for specialized audiences (Arduser, 2018); and outcome use (Newmark & Bartolotta, 2021). However, our goal is to add to this existing work and to address the call to “critically reflect on service courses” as a “place to build programmatic research,” (Schreiber et al., 2018a) while also taking up the scholarly concern that this course has not been studied over diverse institutional contexts (Read & Michaud, 2018). We wanted to study the service course while also addressing TPC’s need to “understand what we are teaching,” and we seek to “share that knowledge broadly with others in the field” (Rose & Turner, 2025, p. 3). Our aim was to uncover *what* assignments are being used within service courses across a variety of institutions and *share* those findings with the field.

We decided that an applied practical study would be most beneficial to gain a deeper understanding of what is being taught in the service course over varied institutional contexts. In similar ways to work on student learning outcomes (Griffith et al., 2024), we intend to offer a field-wide snapshot of assignments in the service course from a diverse range of institutions. This type of programmatic work aims to uncover *in situ* practices from across institutions within the field, rather than a deep analysis of local practices. Programmatic work of this kind is crucial because “the implications of any findings ... serves as program development ... [and] makes a faculty reflective by giving them something on which to reflect” (Hesse, 2012, p. 153). Programmatic research also provides valuable insights for the field of TPC, and “embodies our ethical obligation to audit and analyze what we know and practice in the name of writing and teaching” (Hesse, 2012, p. 153). TPC does not have a baseline across the field that showcases what is currently being assigned in the service course. A baseline is important for continuous improvement because it encourages programs to “systematically reflect on their own

programs and as importantly reflect with other peer programs” (Schreiber & Melonçon, 2019, p. 260).

We approached this research with a general inquiry: If we gathered information on the assignments students are asked to complete from a diverse range of institutions across the US, would a set of common field-wide assignments emerge? And if so, do the common genres align with what TPC knows about the genres most frequently written in the workplace? We begin by reviewing the existing literature, which guides our understanding of assignments within TPC. Then, we explain our methodology and the methods used to analyze data about assignments. Lastly, we offer the results, discussion, and implications for TPC. We conclude with calls for future research.

We hope these field-wide insights can assist TPC program administrators (PAs) and faculty in considering the kinds of assignments that should be included in their service courses based on evidence from practice rather than relying on assumptions or lore. Critical and continual reflection on assignments taught in TPC programs helps establish a connection between the work students are asked to do in the classroom and the work they will be called to do after graduation.

Literature Review

We chose to focus on assignments because it is “through engagement with assignments, [that] students acquire the skills and knowledge” needed for their professional lives (Zarlengo, 2019, p. 25). Further, previous scholarship on the service course has called for future research to look at assignments across the field (Melonçon, 2018). In our review of scholarship specific to TPC and the service course, we could find no studies that brought together field-wide data about assignments in practice. Thus, we pick up the call to look at assignments in the service course across the field.

At the time of this writing, the only insights into service course assignments from a field-wide perspective may be found in textbooks. While textbooks offer instructors a starting point to inform the creation of a course, the decisions instructors make as they populate the course with tasks reflect their pedagogical values, and it is our goal in studying assignments to gain some insight into these values. Of note is the fact that 93% of the institutions in our sample included a textbook in their syllabi, yet no two syllabi were identical. A textbook offers a single instantiation of an approach to teaching the TPC service course. However, Read and Michaud (2018) observe, “Although some instructors may follow the outline of a textbook to the letter, others might dip into a book now and again to touch on certain topics or use the book behind the scenes as a resource for

planning lessons” (p. 234). We agree that it is difficult to make inferences about textbook use and pedagogy, simply from the fact that textbooks have been selected (Read and Michaud, 2018). And, as G. Edzordzi Agbozo, Isidore K. Dorpenyo, & Godwin Y. Agboka (2024) additionally remind us, textbooks often present students with a monolithic view that creates a false sense of reality for students about what TPC looks like in the varied workplaces. Combined with the fact that changes to a text take an incredibly long time, TPC needs to take care in using textbooks as a standard. Rather they should be seen as one piece of a larger puzzle in understanding teaching and learning. The data from the syllabi that we present below offers deeper insights into approaches to facilitating student learning beyond the content of a text. Thus, we acknowledge the role of textbooks as part of the necessary scholarly conversation around assignments, but we also want to highlight other ways of knowing about assignments that may be more reflective of actual practice.

We limited our examination of the literature to scholarship that discussed assignments in the TPC service course. Assignments in other courses within TPC degree programs have different goals and objectives. To get a better sense of how our data might fit into the TPC service course landscape, we felt this limitation would help us narrow down scholarship to those with comparative examples.

TPC has examined specific approaches to assignments that work to connect theory to practice through assignments that employ client-based projects (Balzotti & Rawlins, 2016; Burnett et al., 2022; Robles & Baker, 2019) or service-learning projects (Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2016; Matheson & Petersen, 2020; Baniya et al., 2022; Campbell, et al., 2024). This focus on service learning and client-based projects gives insight into what the field values. However, many service course programs do not have the resources or instructional capacity to include these types of projects. There is value in these types of assignments, but, in large part, the specialized nature of these approaches are not easily scalable in locations with large service course programs, nor are they sustainable for a service course labor pool that is primarily contingent (Melonçon, 2017; Melonçon et al., 2020; Rieger et al., 2023). Therefore, we look at all types of assignments found in a broad range of service courses.

We found two studies that examine the relationship between assignments in an engineering service course and what practicing engineers write, which intersects with the second part of our research question. Don Cunningham and Jill Stewart (2011) explored what types of documents architects and professionals spend their time writing and concluded that participants spent the most time writing correspondence and technical reports. Similarly to this study, Ann Marie Francis (2018) found that practicing engineers

spend their time reading and writing business correspondence and argues for faculty to “consider the types of writing engineers are required to do in their daily jobs” (p. 69). Both studies provide important information about writing in the workplace, but neither places this information in relation to teaching and learning in the service course writ large. In the interest of foregrounding teaching and learning, we wanted to cast a wider net to uncover the types of assignments that were being used within the TPC service course.

Even though the TPC service course serves thousands of students a year, the field has few insights into assignments and their efficacy for achieving the overall learning goals of the service course. Recent work examines the impact of different assignments on student learning. Using a continuous improvement model, Michelle Sonnenberg and others (2024) analyzed an information design assignment across a service course program and came to understand specific ways the assignment could be improved to enhance student learning. A key finding pointed to the insight that the existing assignment asked students to do too much, which meant they did not achieve the main goal of the assignment. In another example, Lisa Melonçon and others (2024) explore how well students achieved a rhetoric student learning outcome. This finding supports the goal of strengthening the pedagogical approach to teaching rhetoric and the student uptake of that learning objective. One of the results was improving assignment clarity. Furthermore, Justiss Wilder Burry and others (2024) wanted to understand how well students performed when they selected an assignment with an equity and inclusion issue embedded in it. What they found was that more students self-selected into the other assignment choices, but the ones who chose to do the inclusivity-focused assignment demonstrated an awareness of empathy and appropriate language use, as well as “starting to negotiate issues of relative power dynamics and POV when positioned as a company employee in a realistic workplace setting” (Burry et al., 2024, p. 135). These three studies provided important insights into how students interact with and respond to certain assignments. However, while these studies go beyond a single classroom to examine courses across a program, they are limited to a single institution.

Studies on student learning and student reactions to assignments made us question the process by which instructors or TPCPAs make decisions about what assignments to include in their courses. In other words, what assignments are instructors across diverse institutions having their students complete in practice? We set out to gather data, the first of its kind in the field, to offer a baseline of practice.

Research Methodology

Our methodological approach to the research study design is based in part on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL): “Scholars of teaching and learning are prepared to mess with the world even more boldly than their colleagues who are satisfied to teach well and leave it at that...they examine the quality of those practices and ask how they could have been even more effective” (Shulman, 2002, p. viii). Therefore, engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning sits at “the edge of most disciplines, calling on but also going beyond the normal knowledge practices of most fields” (Huber, 2006, p.72). Building from SoTL scholarship, scholars in TPC created a taxonomy of research questions to help guide programmatic research initiatives, and they categorized four kinds of questions: description, practice, impact, and inquiry (Schreiber & Melonçon, 2026). Description research questions are meant to “gai[n]...baseline knowledge of programmatic features and practices at the course, program, and/or field level” and gather “information on current practices” (Schreiber & Melonçon, 2026, n.p.). Our descriptive research questions were:

- If we gathered information on assignments students are asked to complete from a diverse range of institutions across the US, would a set of common field-wide assignments emerge?
- Do the common genres align with what TPC knows about the genres most commonly written in the workplace?

With our research questions in hand, our next step involved determining what data we might gather that could help answer these two questions. We decided to use course syllabi and the descriptions of assignments included in the syllabi as our main artifact for analysis because of the history of their use in TPC pedagogical research (Chong, 2016; Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018; Melonçon, 2019; Faris & Wilson, 2022; Tham, 2022; Rose & Turner, 2025) and because they provide insights into the everyday practice of teaching.

Process for Gathering Data

TPC does not currently have complete data on the number of institutions where the service course is offered. Thus, we were unable to create a quantitative sampling plan with a high confidence interval and instead opted to use a purposive sample, which is a sample that is “used in qualitative (QUAL) studies and may be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study’s questions” (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 77). In purposive sampling, “particular

settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1997, p. 235). Purposive sampling allowed us to use our professional networks and contact TPC PAs and faculty who were teaching the service course or directing a service course program. To gather our materials, we emailed faculty directly with a request for their syllabi. The institutional review boards (IRBs) from the University of South Florida reviewed this project (PRO#00033052). Based on the terms of those IRBs, information is shared in aggregate, and institutions are only identified by their Carnegie Classification® (2021).

Institutional Representation

Our final data set consisted of 90 syllabi, and Table 1 outlines the types of institutions included in this data set.

Table 1. Type of institution by Carnegie Classification and number of syllabi in the data set. (N = 90)

Type of institution	Classification definition	Syllabi
R1	Doctoral Universities—Very High Research Activity	28% (n = 26)
R2	Doctoral Universities—High Research Activity	14% (n = 13)
R3	Doctoral/ Professional Universities	10% (n = 9)
M1	Master’s Colleges and Universities—Larger programs	24% (n = 22)
M2	Master’s Colleges and Universities—Medium programs	5% (n = 5)
MS	Master’s Colleges and Universities—Small programs	1% (n = 1)
BAC	Mixed Baccalaureate/Associate’s Colleges	3% (n = 3)
Associates (A)	Associate’s Dominant	12% (n = 11)

The majority of syllabi, 65%, came from a technical writing or communication course, while 10% are from a technical and professional writing course. Professional writing courses comprise 7% of the sample, and the remaining 20% is a wide array of courses with names such as Professional Writing Skills, Technical Report Writing, Technical Writing and Document Design, and Business and Professional Writing. The majority of courses, 60%, are offered at the junior or senior level.

Process of Data Analysis Through Collaborative Coding

We use *code* to mean “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative...attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” and this coding process is iterative (Saldaña, 2009). We supplement this understanding of Saldaña’s approach with an attention to being systematic (Geisler & Swarts, 2019). The systematic and iterative nature of coding is illustrated through the process of creating and revising our coding scheme as we worked, which we discuss in the next three sections.

Assignments Included

One researcher, who was the one with the most time in the field, created the initial code list based on a preliminary review of the syllabi and working knowledge of assignment genres. This list contained 22 codes. In a trial run to see if the initial codes would work in practice, we made some immediate changes. We recognized that we wanted to focus on major assignments where the students were asked to produce a substantial product. Thus, we did not include homework, quizzes, other participation components (such as discussion board posts or reading responses), or other tangential grading mechanisms that were not written work.

We did keep exams (midterm and/or final) as assignments. The frequency of both midterm and final exams suggests that instructors viewed them as formative to their course to evaluate comprehension or knowledge of key concepts. Thus, we agreed to code *exam* into our dataset.

We also decided to add the code of *reflection* for assignments that asked students to self-reflect on their learning. While many assignments included the word reflection in their title, we only coded assignments as reflection if the assignment description indicated that the student would be asked to engage in self-reflection of learning. This same approach is applied to all assignments. Even if an assignment was given the title of *memo*, we used the assignment description to determine if it fit the definition listed in our shared table of codes.

We also talked through the initial codes to decide how to capture projects that had multiple components. We determined that we would code the individual generic parts of the projects. For example, a collaborative recommendation report that may take up to 4–6 weeks of the term may include a proposal, a final report, and a presentation. This project would then have three codes attached to the three assigned parts of the larger project. This decision complements the strategy of using genres as coding categories and works toward the larger goal of finding out what types of assignments are being included in the service course.

At this stage, we also created secondary codes. We included seven secondary codes to provide additional information for analysis (e.g., a primary code of report and a secondary code of recommendation). We initially had *collaboration* as a primary code but recognized it needed to be a secondary code. For example, if an instruction assignment was collaborative, we coded it first as *instruction* (the genre of writing) and then as *collaborative* (the method of working with other students). After the review and initial discussion, the original coding list went from 22 codes to 16, and we then included seven secondary codes. Refer to Appendix A for the complete code list.

Collaborative Consensus Coding

Our research team of four included two early career scholars. These two completed the initial coding, which means that two researchers split the assignments and coded their halves. Then, the whole research team discussed these codes. Unlike Peter Smagorinsky (2008) who advocated for code agreement to be reached through discussion, we found that because our team was made up of researchers at varying levels of their careers, the collaborative discussion was more productive *after* individual attempts. This was because we view collaborative research as a learning process, and allowing early career researchers to make the first attempt before coming together to discuss their own interpretations is an effective approach for both the research project and for gaining experience as a researcher. Thus, this process allowed space for our differing expertise and knowledge, and it also allowed for discussions of differences until we arrived at a consensus, which ensured that all our expertise was recognized and integrated.

After coding all assignments, we had 57 assignments that needed to be discussed for consensus. Some assignments were collapsed into others due to similar goals or assignment weights. For example, if an institution had multiple instances of an assignment, we read the description to see if they were similar. If so, we counted it once, thereby collapsing two codes into one. We did this through a contextual reading of the assignment descriptions versus the course as a whole. We also considered what the

assignments seemed to be doing in regard to the outcomes. For example, one institution (R3) attached a presentation to two assignments (a proposal and a report). Because the presentation was linked to a larger assignment, we only included one instance of the presentation since this assignment was not introducing presentation skills a second time but instead trying to enhance that original learning outcome.

Lastly, we also collapsed assignments that focused on job materials because, similar to the above example, they were working towards one singular outcome or goal. For example, one school (R3) listed multiple assignments as part of the course: Application (Cover) Letter, Resume, and/or CV. Because these assignments were working towards having students understand the goal of job materials, we collapsed this into the *job* code. We did this for all institutions that listed multiple steps to assignments related to job materials (i.e., cover letters, resumes, CVs, statements of purpose, or job applications).

Consistency Coding

Consistency coding is “the internal process of ensuring that we applied the same code for like items” (Clegg et al., 2021, p. 22). As one of the final parts of the coding process, consistency coding was done by one researcher who did not do the initial coding of the assignments. In this step, only six assignments were noted for consistency issues. Following the same process of collaborative, consensus coding described above, the authors discussed the six assignments and updated them based on those discussions.

Outside of these six assignments, consistency coding did uncover an inconsistent application of what assignments were to be included. There were 32 assignments that were tagged, and after discussion, all 32 were deleted. These tagged and then deleted assignments were a combination of different parts of the “job search” assignment and activities that were part of in-class exercises or homework that we had agreed not to include. This step offers an important final check to ensure the quality and validity of the coding process, and it emphasizes the importance of the iterative and systematic nature of coding (Saldaña, 2019; Geisler & Swarts, 2019).

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the sampling plan. Because this study is based on convenience and purposive sampling, the data can only be generalized to the specific population it is drawn from, rather than the entire population. While the findings are representative of a particular sub-population, they can be useful in establishing a baseline

on which to build for future research. This baseline can also be used by TPC PAs, who want to continue to develop their programmatic work.

An additional limitation is the data gathered. For example, using syllabi comes with the understanding that the document itself is limited in what it entails. Also, with the increasing use of learning management systems (LMS), information that would be traditionally housed in syllabi (i.e., fuller assignment descriptions) is distributed in other locations. With only the syllabi, we were limited to the most basic type of information about assignments.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we return to our first research question: If we gathered information on assignments students are asked to complete from a diverse range of institutions across the US, would a set of common field-wide assignments emerge? We address this question by reporting the findings from the field-wide analysis of 519 assignments at 90 institutions. We begin by discussing the most common assignments and examining the way assignments are scaffolded in a syllabus. We then offer an explanation of what those assignments are and then relate them to the existing literature in TPC. Lastly, we discuss the incorporation of collaboration as a feature of assignments.

Types of Most Common and Unique Assignments

The data are broken down in two ways:

- Total assignment
- Unique assignment

The total assignment column represents each assignment counted in the data set (N = 519), while the unique assignment column removes any duplicate assignments at the same school (n = 462). This distinction aligns with work on learning outcomes (Griffith et al., 2024) that made this distinction to separate the total number of assignments collected and the assignments that overlap within each school. We present the summary of the coded assignments in Table 2.

Table 2. Summarizing the coding of total number of assignments (N = 519) and unique assignments (n = 462).

Code (n = 17)	% Total	% Unique
reports	17% (n = 89)	13% (n = 63)
proposals	11% (n = 60)	12% (n = 59)
job materials	10% (n = 56)	11% (n = 55)
business communication	10% (n = 56)	10% (n = 47)
presentations	10% (n = 54)	9% (n = 45)
instructions	10% (n = 52)	10% (n = 50)
miscellaneous	4% (n = 23)	4% (n = 20)
visual	4% (n = 22)	4% (n = 20)
exam	4% (n = 22)	4% (n = 22)
definition and/or description	4% (n = 22)	4% (n = 20)
analysis	3% (n = 16)	3% (n = 14)
portfolio	3% (n = 14)	3% (n = 14)
research	2% (n = 12)	2% (n = 12)
style	1% (n = 7)	1% (n = 7)

The most common assignments were *report*, *proposal*, *job materials*, *business communication*, and *presentations*. The order of the top five assignments did shift slightly when comparing the total versus the unique assignments.

The unique category “eliminates any duplicate” assignment at the same school, which means that each assignment code was only counted once per school (Griffith et al., 2024).

For example, if an institution has five assignments for their course, but two of those assignments were reports, unique codes would then only count *report* once. The difference in total assignments (N = 519) versus unique (n = 462) was 57 assignments.

We specifically address our research question by examining the unique assignments that appeared the most in our dataset. Six assignments were found at half the institutions in our study. As noted in Table 2, there was a considerable gap between this set of six assignments and the remainder of the assignments; thus, the reason we bring them forward. Refer to Figure 1.

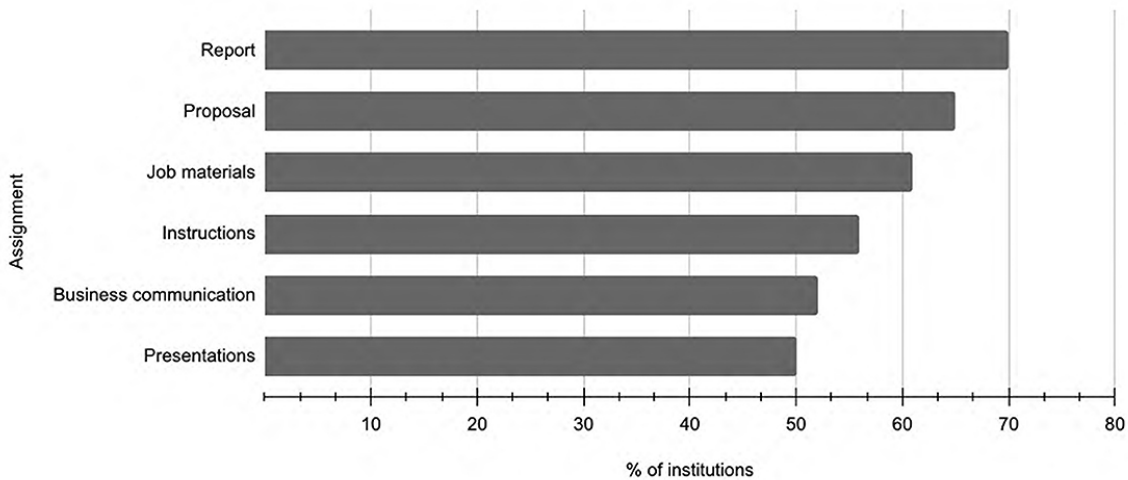


Figure 1. Most common assignments

It is important to note that although these assignments emerged as the most common, we are not advocating for the uptake of these assignments just because they appear frequently. Instead, we are placing the findings—what the data tells us—in relation to existing scholarship in the field.

Scaffolding of Assignments

The assignment data indicates that many assignments were constructed to assist students with gaining more proficiency and confidence with writing in a gradual and layered process. It seems that many instructors are scaffolding their assignments, building on previous work to deepen student understanding of certain course concepts. According to educational research, “scaffolding is construed as support given by a teacher to a student when performing a task that the student might otherwise not be able to accomplish” (van de Pol et al., 2010, p. 274). This is seen when instructors build a course with smaller assignments that build to a larger one. Additionally, each major assignment is

used as a stepping stone to larger ones later on in the semester. The goal behind scaffolding is for “learner[s] [to] internaliz[e] the support structure associated with the scaffolding and, in the end, teacher scaffolding is no longer needed as the learner can provide his or her own support” (van de Pol et al., 2010, p. 275).

In TPC, Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber (2021) argued that assignments should “construc[t] pedagogical scaffolding to emphasize outcomes, interactions, relationships, and projects” (p. 154), so we examined the data to see any patterns and found that there were some connections between the way assignments were presented. For example, in our data collection, one school (R2) included five assignments (resume, report, PowerPoint, instructions, and a group proposal), and was coded as *scaffolding* to a proposal based on the organization within the syllabus that listed the proposal as the last assignment in the course. It should be noted that this data was based on where the assignment was located in a syllabus and how it was listed in relation to the other assignments. This does not account for schools that included common assignments early in the semester, such as a report or proposal, but ended the semester with a final presentation (this would be labeled as *presentation*).

Out of the 90 syllabi analyzed, the majority of them (40%) scaffolded the assignments to build to a final *report* project (see Figure 2).

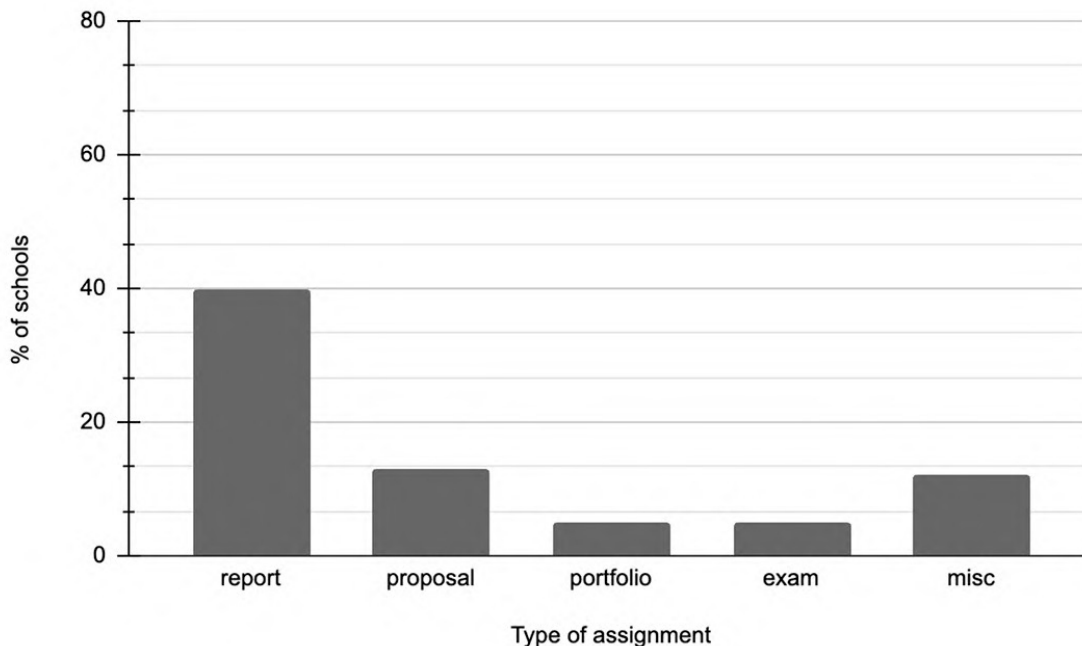


Figure 2. Scaffolded to assignment

These reports ranged from feasibility to recommendation to progress reports. The second largest category (13%) was the use of *proposals* as a final project, while the remaining categories, *portfolio* (5%) and *exam* (5%), were only seen in a small number of schools. The remaining schools scaffolded to assignments such as usability testing, website creation, creating instructions, or editing. Additionally, only 5% of schools included a reflective component, which was typically located at the end of the course.

Discussion of Common Assignments

In the sections below, we discuss the common assignments found within the TPC service course.

Reports

Reports were assigned at 70% of institutions in our sample (see Figure 1), which is the largest category of assignments. We also did secondary codes for *report* to capture the specific type of report that students were being asked to produce (if this information was clear in the syllabus or assignment description). The most common types of reports were *feasibility* and *progress*. Other types that we could code included *recommendation*, *technical*, *analysis*, and *information*.

As Figure 2 shows, the report was the most scaffolded within a course, meaning that 40% of schools had their course built to a report of some kind. Some institutions also included multiple instances of the report; for example, one school (M1) included a technical report, a progress report, and a feasibility report.

Reports have long been a staple of TPC pedagogy, with the first record we could find in 1951, when James W. Southern discussed the teaching practices of the report. Others have also discussed teaching the analytic report (Nelson-Burns, 2004); the lab report (Dave Kim & Wendy M. Olson, 2020); report writing in specific fields (Jones & Freeman, 2003); and decision criteria for a recommendation report (Baake, 2007). Further, Dorothy Winsor's (2003) classic study of the writing of engineers from academia to the workplace discussed report writing in both locales. The prevalence of the report assignment intersects with the field's ongoing scholarly attention to this genre.

Proposals

Proposals were assigned at 65% of institutions in our sample. The *proposal* code represents the genre of a proposal based on the title or assignment description, and we consider a proposal a type of document that puts forward a plan for solving a problem.

We also found that proposals were popular as a scaffolded assignment, with 13% of institutions building their course to end with a proposal. Some of these proposals assigned include *group proposals*, *business proposals*, and *final project proposals*. Each institution also only included one instance of a proposal assignment. The exception was a school (M1) which only assigned a *proposal report practice* and a *course proposal* and did not include any other assignments but the proposals.

TPC has examined the proposal as a key genre of the field, with some arguing that current practices continue to highlight the form of the proposal rather than its rhetorical context (Feng et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2019). In a study of the significant differences in the topoi of academic proposal writing versus nonprofit grant proposals, Emily Barrow DeJeu (2024) also concluded that there are specific rhetorical moves that should be made in a proposal, and those rhetorical functions should be included when teaching proposals.

Job Materials

This code focuses on documents related to a job search and appeared at 61% of the institutions. This assignment most often asked students to complete a resume and cover letter, with fewer assignment descriptions asking for a job ad to be analyzed as well.

Similarly to proposals, institutions only included one instance of job materials within each course. The exception was one school (R3), which had two job-related assignments, the resume and cover letter. This does not mean that other schools did not include a variation of this assignment, but that this was the only school to separate and list them as individual projects.

TPC scholars have looked at the resume assignment because of its prevalence in coursework (Berdanier et al., 2021; Fillenwarth et al., 2018). Notably, Chalice Randazzo (2016) suggested that the job materials assignment be taught as a research project “which empowers students and legitimizes educators’ expertise” (p. 278). As we discuss below in the *considering assignments* section, the emergence of this assignment as common suggests a problematic theme of focusing on a genre used to get a job, rather than the writing done within a job.

Instructions

The *instruct* code represents the genre of instructions, based on the title or assignment description, and this assignment appeared at 55% of institutions. We define instructions as a document that prompts the user to act. Many of these assignments focus on the steps or the how-to of a task, and may also be called documentation, process, or procedural. In

the data, instructions were seen as an early or midway assignment, they were never used to build to a larger project. Many of the instruction assignments were simply labeled as “instructions,” however, some institutions used titles such as “instructions with graphics” or “group video instructions.”

This genre has long been a staple of TPC research (Hovde, 2022). Pedagogically, the field has several studies that focus on the use of free report manuals in the form of iFixit projects (Carnegie, 2018; Eggleston & Rabb, 2019; Getto et al., 2014). The assignment data further underscores this genre’s importance in the field.

Business Communication

The code *biz comm* is a shortened version of business communication. *Biz comm* was included as an assignment at 52% of institutions and refers to letters, memos, and emails. Many of the assignments required students to write a form of business correspondence in response to the instructor or as a response to a prompt. For example, one school (M1) had the following instructions: “You will write and revise a memorandum announcing a new 'E-mail Etiquette' policy at your workplace.” Similar to the above section on instructions, business communication assignments were used primarily as an early or midterm assignment, and not as an assignment that needed to be scaffolded to at the end of the course. Many of the institutions included one to two instances of a biz comm assignment, with some examples being labeled as “correspondence, business letter, memorandum,” or “interview memo.”

TPC scholars have also studied letters (Popham, 2008); emails (Blackburne & Nardone, 2018); and memos (Amare & Brammer, 2005), while business communication scholars have also noted the prevalence and importance of these genres in curricula (Moshiri & Cardon, 2020).

Presentations

This code identified the requirement of an oral presentation, based on the title or assignment description, and appeared at 50% of institutions. The range of assignments included in this code includes oral presentations as summaries of other genres, such as reports; presentations to focus on creating visual aids such as PowerPoint; or speeches. All of these align with common practices outside of higher education and emphasize the need for oral communication skills and knowledge. TPC scholars have also examined the efficacy and effectiveness of teaching presentations (Craig et al., 2008).

In addition to the data in Figure 2, many schools included a *presentation* component (20%) with their final project. The type of presentation ranged from individual presentations to group presentations. The presentation was also typically assigned alongside a report or proposal.

Collaboration

Rebecca E. Burnett and others (2013) defined collaboration as “intentional, sustained interaction toward a common goal” among people who “have shared goals and exchange information and knowledge” (p. 454). Because collaboration is a valuable skill for students to learn, we chose to include this as a secondary code. For example, an assignment could be coded as a *report* or *proposal* and then also have a secondary code of collaboration (*collab*).

Out of 519 assignments collected, 9% (n = 50) had a secondary code as collaborative, and the most common types of assignments that were collaborative included: *presentations* (n=11), *proposals* (n=11), *reports* (n=10), and *instructions* (n=10).

When analyzing the *collab* code, the assignments were usually seen as a larger project in which students would be asked to work as a group or team. For instance, one school (R1) had four assignments that included a collaborative aspect: two presentations, a report, and a proposal. Another way collaboration was seen was through a collaboration statement on the syllabus that often emphasized how collaboration should work. For example, one ML institution wrote that as a required component of the course, students were “responsible for updating one another and me [the instructor] about assignment development and progress. In addition, you also are responsible for negotiating together all aspects of your work, including planning, drafting, revising, file managing, and scheduling of assignments” (ML).

Additionally, some assignments used the collaborative statement to explicitly discuss why collaboration is such an important skill to learn, and indicate a general approach to assessment:

In the “Real World” technical writing and communication is a collaborative effort. Sometimes that collaboration is easy, with team members participating equally, sometimes not. But regardless of the situation, everyone shares in the risks and the rewards of a team project. It is very important that you develop the skills to work collaboratively with your coworkers, that you learn to listen and incorporate the research and knowledge that each team member brings to the table, and that you

learn how to build consensus. Therefore, the final two projects will be a group group projects [sic].

However, having said that, I will take into account individual effort within work groups. Expect to evaluate your own and your team members' performance on group assignments. (ML)

This emphasis on collaboration extends beyond the assignment data. In the field of TPC, collaboration goes beyond classroom practices and has been a focus of research by Edward C. Brewer and Terence L. Holmes (2016) as well as a consistent theme in existing literature (Burnett et al., 2022; England & Brewer, 2018). Looking at the types of assignments that include a collaborative aspect is useful because it not only allows us to get a sense of how collaboration is valued as a skill, but it also shows us the types of assignments that other institutions are using to teach this skill.

Use of Common Assignments

Similar to Figure 1, which focused on the percentage of institutions that included each type of assignment, Figure 3 highlights how many of those same schools included multiple instances of the common assignments.

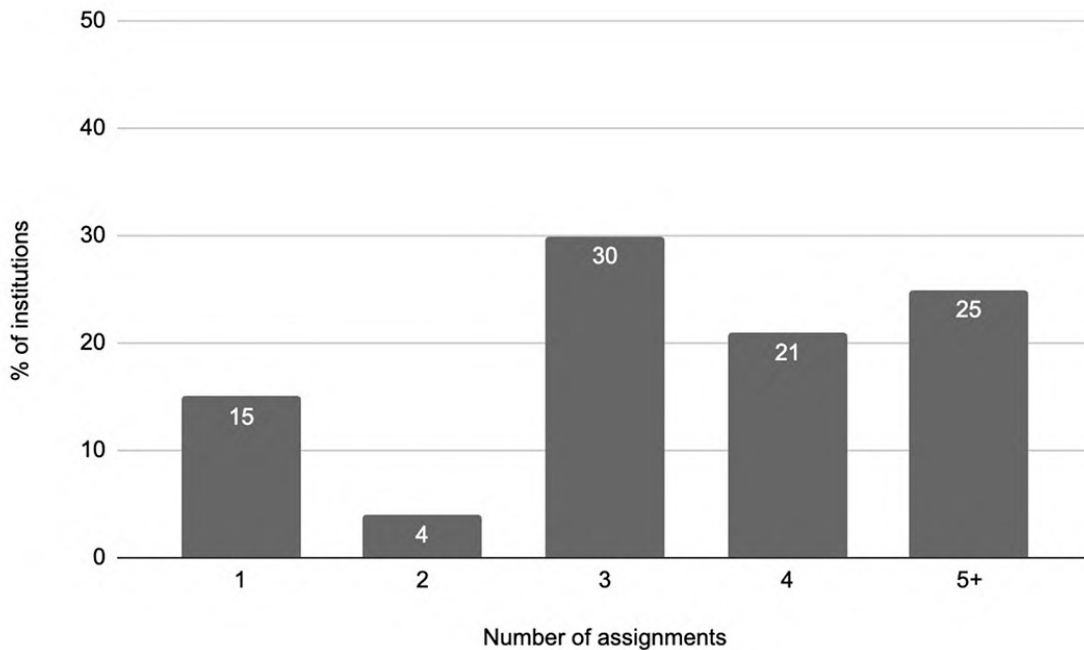


Figure 3. Number of schools that include a common assignment

For example, while there was a range in how many of the common assignments (reports, proposals, job materials, instructions, business communication, and presentations) were used, each institution included at least one of the common assignments. While the majority of schools included between three (30%) and four (21%) of the assignments, there were some that included five or more (25%).

What TPC Faculty Can Do with this Data Right Now

In this discussion section, we draw on the assignment data to offer ways in which TPC PAs and faculty can immediately consider and/or implement changes in the service course at their institution.

Consider Assignments and their Application to the Workplace

We focused on the top six assignments because of their prevalence across the service course and the fact that these genres have been discussed in the TPC literature through time. Since one of the goals of the service course is to prepare students for the writing they will do in the world of work, we wondered, do the common genres align with what TPC knows about the genres most commonly written in the workplace? The answer to our second research question is mostly yes.

Around 10 years ago, Stuart Blythe and others (2014) reported on key genres written in the workplace, and this has since been updated by a “communication in the workplace report” (Pigg et al., 2022). The findings of Pigg et al. are important because their results not only align with the top five genres mentioned in our study but also with other assignments shown in our data, such as visuals, descriptions, and instructions. Additionally, the data from our study also aligns with research on workplace writing, such as Tina Coffelt and others’ (2022) research on business communication that asked employers what professional communication skills were needed. Lastly, the emphasis on collaboration in writing and communication is also consistent with a key skill needed in the workplace. When paired with current scholarship, this research offers an important data point to have alongside other data when making decisions about service course curricula and preparing students to write outside of higher education.

While the top five genres from our study align with current workplace practices, there was one assignment that did not coincide with the type of writing engineers do in the workplace (Cunningham & Stewart, 2011; Francis, 2018): the job material assignment. Rather, this assignment is a pre-professional genre used to get a job. The job materials assignment

raises interesting questions for the field to grapple with for course and assignment design. Here is a comment from one R1 institution:

There is a common misconception that [course title redacted] is a course in which students work on their resumes. In fact, it is not a major assignment in the [redacted] curriculum because it comes under the heading of pre-professional writing (rather than professional writing), and many of your home colleges already provide instruction in resume writing appropriate for your field. I encourage you to make use of the University's resume resources available at [redacted].

As noted above, Randazzo (2016) has made clear that if this assignment is in a TPC course, it has to be taught in rhetorically sophisticated ways. Without a doubt, an argument can be made that the job materials assignment can teach important rhetorical concepts, but the majority of job materials assignments were focused on simply writing a resume rather than thinking through how to align the resume with a specific purpose and audience.

Consider the Number of Assignments

As noted above, we only coded assignments that had points (or weights) associated to them in the syllabus, and as we worked through the data, we became interested in the number of assignments students were asked to do. Refer to Figure 4.

Figure 4 illustrates the number of assignments in a service course as it relates to the percentage of institutions. The largest percentage of institutions, 20% (N=18), are assigning five major assignments in a term. But what we found most interesting was that a little more than half of the institutions in the data set, 52%, assigned six or more assignments in a term. If a traditional semester is 14–16 weeks, we began to wonder how students can complete these assignments and understand the skills they are building. The literature from educational research and composition studies all point to the need for ample time to practice as a key factor in students improving their writing (Hattie & Timperley, 2016; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Anderson et al., 2015). Moreover, if TPC is invested in revision as a key component of learning how to write, time would need to be allotted to teach the revision process.

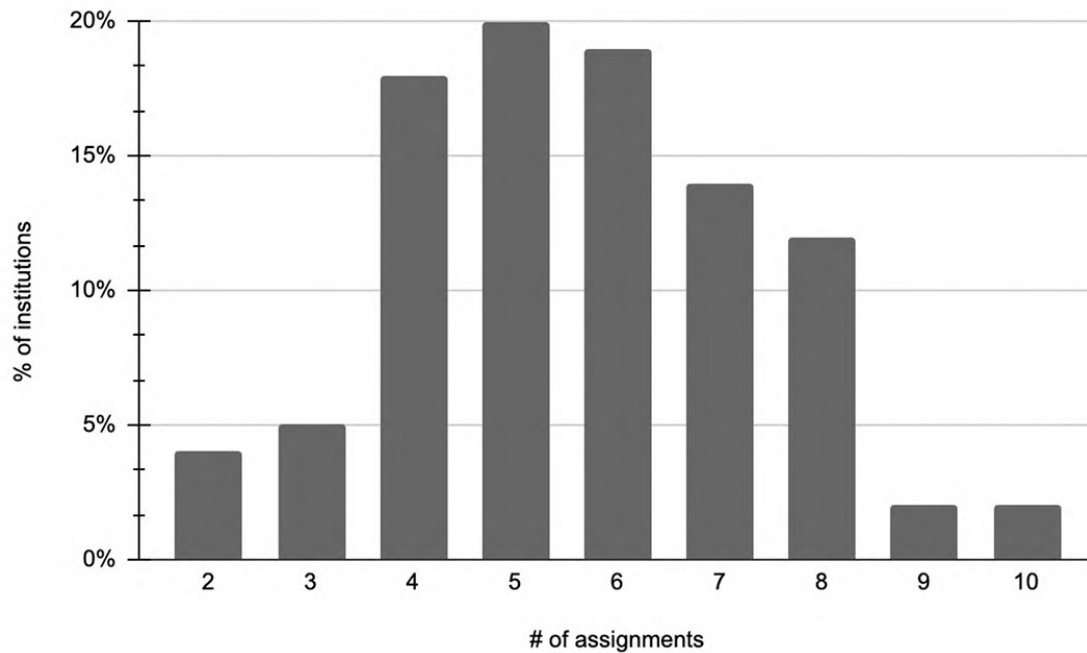


Figure 4. Percentage of institutions with number of assignments per course

A question arises here: Are faculty assigning too many things? Generally, the syllabi were so filled with assignments and sub-parts of assignments that we could imagine little time left to revise and incorporate meaningful feedback. Even the most common number of assignments, 5, raises questions about how to give students sufficient time for revision in a standard semester. The schedules often had students drafting something new without the full benefit of revising the previous assignment. Thus, using the field-wide data as a guide, we would encourage TPC PAs and faculty to seriously consider reducing the number of assignments in the service course.

Write Student-Focused Expectations Using Transparent Terminology

In this section, we want to highlight the lack of transparent terminology and language that was student-focused. Our research team is intergenerational, with one member of the team being a graduate student with a strong interest in TPC pedagogy. They consistently voiced their frustration during the coding process as they were unable to decipher the terms of art included in the syllabi. Being unfamiliar with discipline-specific terms can cause confusion and a lack of engagement. This is most noticeable in the terminology used in course descriptions as well as assignment names and descriptions. Without clear

language and clearly defined expectations, students experience a great deal of unnecessary stress and may fail to make connections between concepts and practice.

In some cases, the course description appears to be written to a specific audience that is clearly not the student. One school (A) uses the course description as a place to talk about how the outcomes of this course have been established by faculty, admin, and a board of trustees, and how this course guarantees that students achieve necessary goals, without ever actually giving the student an understanding of tangible goals. This description tells us nothing about the course, other than the fact that they (those in charge) are proud of it. Another school (R1) seems focused on sharing the word count and length of assignments, as well as information on what credit students can receive for certain courses. Different schools outline different goals for the service course, with some schools using the course description as a checklist of assignments and grade distributions, and others pointing toward how this course will translate into the work students do after graduation. In these types of descriptions, no connection is made between what the student will get out of the course and how they will achieve those goals in the course.

As noted previously, many institutions require a collaborative assignment. Instructors often used vague descriptions of collaboration. For example, an instructor at an M1 described the group project by noting that students “will work individually and in teams,” without any further description. This makes it hard for students to understand what work will be done individually and what work should be done in teams. Another M1 simply stated that the collaboration assignment is a university requirement. Failing to explain the value of collaboration or the ways collaboration will be practiced in the course can potentially discourage the student from developing a deliberative approach to collaborative work as a skill they can use in other contexts and present the assignment as another item to fulfill on a checklist.

Another example of clarity in language is the oft-seen phrase, “This assignment is pretty straightforward.” The assumption that the assignment is already clear or simple minimizes the work students do as they learn and limits individual students’ learning processes. It also discourages students from asking for more clarification or explanation from the instructor. Writing an assignment description that clearly outlines goals and the steps to achieve those goals will empower students to engage with the learning process rather than assuming students will understand the assignment from the title and a one-sentence description.

Additionally, there was a pattern of broad statements. For example, one school (M2) explains that the course talks about rhetorical theory needed for effective documents in

professional contexts, without any further detail. Statements made by others (R3) point out that technical writing happens in an organizational context but then state that the goal of smaller tasks is to teach students how to produce one larger project. From a student perspective, the connections between the daily assignments and the broader concepts of the field are missing.

There are many examples of terminology used without a definition or explanation of that terminology. For example, the phrase “hands-on” was widely used without explaining what that actually meant. We can see where “hands-on” is used as an identifier to mean *not a lecture course*, but it’s also a term that many students may not understand in the context of a writing course. Closely related are terms that are used to describe the type of writing done in the service course: transactional, instrumental, applied, and real. As faculty, we understand why and how these terms may appear in a syllabus, but we agree that terms need to be defined. We cannot assume students know what certain terms mean in relation to writing. In particular, the use of “real” can be problematic because it assumes other types of writing that students have done (or will do) are less “real” or important than what the service course will be doing. The term implies that the world they currently write in is *not* real. There is an overwhelming trend to talk about these courses as though they are the first instance of “real” writing for students, but there is no definition of what is real or how the material or assignments relate back to the “real” world.

In addition to terminology, language that discusses concrete tasks is especially important. As the data suggests, many syllabi include language that does not explicitly give an indication of what the students are going to do or how they will reach a larger end goal. For example, one school (A) explains that the class will “teac[h] you to write in ways that will get you a job, good grades on four-year college papers, admission to an important program, approval of a project you conceived, or other real-world rewards.” This school also warns students that they may be “overworked, frustrated, and possibly angry because it will turn [their] long-held beliefs about writing upside down.” This kind of statement asks students to make a huge, ostensibly uncomfortable jump between the general overview of the course, and what they might be required to do. There is a significant end-result promise, without looking at how each task gets us to that goal beyond stating that the tasks will be difficult or frustrating.

We offer these examples to illustrate that additional care and attention need to be paid to the language used in the syllabus and assignment descriptions. Many students read these materials and yearn for more clarity about what the course entails and why the material matters to their educational goals. Using clear and transparent language that is meaningful

to students is definitely something that is within the power of each instructor teaching the service course.

Focus on Assignment Descriptions

Writing assignment descriptions that focus on building skills allows students to understand why they are doing those assignments and helps faculty to create a logical progression within the course. Assignment descriptions manifest a throughline that transparently communicates the goals of an assignment, its relationship to other assignments, and the goals of the course. Research from the field of education has shown that clear assignments that are connected to learning goals help enhance the success of all students, but especially the success of first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented college students at statistically significant levels (with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect for underserved students) (Winkelmes et al., 2016). The syllabus introduces the student to the course as a whole. Thus, the syllabus represents an opportunity to show students not only what they will learn, but how they will learn it. Assignment descriptions should encourage students to engage with the material and explicitly communicate how their work will apply what they are learning. The assignment descriptions from this study suggest that TPC is not fully leveraging the opportunity afforded in the syllabus to make the important connection between outcomes and assignments. The following examples illustrate trends in the assignment descriptions we found in the syllabi.

You will be responsible for an individual project and the written components of it (a proposal; a progress report; a data report; a recommendation; and a PowerPoint presentation). It's important that you find a topic you find relevant and interesting. The topic may relate directly or indirectly to your current job or future career or education plans. The topic must be approved by me. This type of project is called: A Comparative Feasibility Research Study. (M1)

Despite a discussion of the importance of topic selection, this description does not connect genre-based deliverables to a rhetorical context or exigence. Further, by stating that the topic must be approved by the instructor in order for the student to proceed, the instructor situates the work within the classroom, which both limits its meaning to the student and its relevance to a broader context.

Email Etiquette Memorandum

Mavridou-Hernandez et al.: A Field-Wide Examination of Assignments

You will write and revise a memorandum announcing a new “E-mail Etiquette” policy at your workplace. This assignment is worth 10% of your grade; in addition to earning points for writing the 250-500 word memorandum, you will also earn points for participating in a group workshop. More specific guidelines will be posted in the assignments section of this course. (M1)

This description provides details about assessment, but little information on how this assignment achieves the goals of the course or helps students learn. While the description states that more information will be given, it is important to consider that the syllabus represents an opportunity to situate the major assignments within the broader context of the course as a whole. Making connections between assignments and between assignments and outcomes allows students to see how their work facilitates learning.

Progress Report

As a team, you will write a progress report regarding the recommendation assignment. The progress report will be in the form of an internal memorandum addressed to the course instructor. The progress report must include an introduction that clearly identifies the project scope and summarizes accomplishments and problems, if any. The report must also accurately and concisely indicate work completed, work remaining, as well as both estimated time and actual time spent in clearly identified and separate sections. Finally, the conclusion will report progress as positively as possible without minimizing problems encountered. The final version should be accompanied by a completed progress report planning guide. (M1)

This highly prescriptive approach to genre removes context and rhetorical exigence from the assignment. In so doing, the act of creating this type of report becomes an exercise in following rules, rather than a discovery of the type of information that might be necessary in a progress report and how to structure the information so it is useful to readers. As such, it is unclear to students why they should do this work or what they are getting out of it beyond a grade. When confronting the progress report in the workplace, students' knowledge of the genre is one of format. An assignment description in the syllabus does its best work by showing students the connection between what they are doing and why it matters.

The double-bind of the service course is the aim of providing insights into workplace communication genres and activities while still being constrained by the learning

environment. The service course classroom cannot and should not model a workplace. As Melonçon (2018) notes, teaching genres must not overshadow the context and exigencies that produce these genres:

Pedagogically the field has to turn its attention back to teaching rhetorical practices and exigencies—on the actions that produce things, not the resulting objects they produce. We need to teach proposing, not proposals; instructing, not instructions; reporting, not reports. Teaching de-contextualized forms is not helpful in preparing students for future careers that will use and incorporate generic forms in a multitude of ways. (p. 212)

The groundwork for this endeavor is laid in the syllabus. It is in this document that the student is introduced to what they will learn and how that learning will happen. To best serve students, assignment descriptions should explain clearly and transparently how the work the students will do connects to what they will learn and how the assignments facilitate that learning over the course of a term. To do this, assignment descriptions should communicate to the student that the conventions of a genre are informed by rhetorical elements such as purpose, audience, and organizational culture. Further, the assignment should make transparent the connection between what they will learn and how they will learn it. And finally, instructors should leverage the opportunity they have in the syllabus to show the students the course holistically, making connections between the major assignments in the course as they build toward the achievement of course goals.

Where does TPC go from here with Assignments?

Our research is not meant to be a prescriptive approach to what instructors should assign in the service course. Rather, we strive to “lead to continuous reflection and improvement in how we teach and how we administer programs” (Melonçon, Rosselot-Merritt, & St.Amant, 2020 p. 93) and to ensure that it “remains relevant and responsive to changes in the 21st-century academy and economy” (Read & Michaud, 2018, p. 230). With this iterative and reflective approach, this study provides TPC PAs and faculty with a field-wide snapshot of service course assignments being assigned in practice. We looked at syllabi to gain insight into which assignments instructors prioritized and how instructors put assignments together as they created a course designed to achieve course goals.

In examining assignment descriptions from 90 institutions, we coded 519 assignments. We were able to answer our research questions, as a group of assignments did emerge as the most common across the service course in the US. Those assignments were reports, proposals, job materials, instructions, presentations, and business correspondence. We

were also able to confirm that collaboration was highly prevalent as a component of assignments. The assignment data offers insights into what faculty feel are the goals of the service course, as well as goals for potential areas for improvement in teaching and learning, such as considering the number of assignments and improving terminology used in syllabi and assignment descriptions.

We encourage TPC PAs and faculty to consider their local contexts when using this data as part of their deliberations for updating the service course. Kate Navickas (2022) argues that there is a “pedagogical imperative to be more conscious of how the values we are committed to are signaled in assignment texts” (p. 40). Part of this pedagogical imperative related to assignments and their relationship to the service course is the pressing need for more empirical research.

Future research should consider gaining insights into how faculty approach assignment design and the values that underscore service course development. These conceptual ideas intersect with Griffith et al. (2024) when they ask important questions: “What is the purpose of the service course?” and “What can TPC PAs and faculty reasonably expect the course to do for students?” (p. 61). We have these same questions in light of the assignment data. In addition, using quasi-experimental design, TPC researchers could work to understand approaches to assignment terminology and descriptions that work best for students. Research could also work to examine how both students and instructors understand genre and delve into current pedagogical approaches for teaching genre.

No field-wide discussion of the service course can be completed without some mention of labor. We recognize that the vast majority of service courses are taught by contingent faculty, which means that the issue of time and labor takes on new meaning (Melonçon & England, 2011). In fact, the task of creating assignments is often not open to contingent faculty since many do not have the opportunity or the deep disciplinary knowledge to contribute to the creation of course content. As noted by Melonçon et al. (2020), acknowledging the complexity of contingency requires considering labor limitations as well as institutional limitations and support.

Studying assignments affords a meaningful examination of the intersection between practically “what we do” and “what it means.” Getting students where we want them to be at the end of the course relies in large part on creating meaningful assignments that align with the goals of the course. Negotiating the practical need for skills-based learning and the conceptual ability to navigate an evolving workplace is fundamental to the work of assignment design within the service course. But an intensified attention to the assignment—what we are asking students to do—is central to what we are asking them to

learn. If TPC PAs and faculty hope that students will transfer skills and knowledge gained from an assignment in a future workplace or civic context, then we owe it to the students to pay more attention to the assignment.

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Appendix A

Primary code	Description	Secondary codes
job	Combined for all documents related to a job search.	Type of document
instruct	Genre of instructions (based on the title or short description); may also be called documentation, process, or procedural. A document that prompts the user to act.	
report	Genre of report (based on the title or short description). Documents that use research to disseminate information or to solve a problem.	Type of report
proposal	Genre of proposal (based on the title or short description). Type of document that puts forward a plan for solving a problem.	
present	Genre of oral presentation (based on the title or short description).	
ethic	Any type of assignment where the assignment's goal is focused on the topic of ethics.	
visual	Any type of assignment where the assignment's goal is focused on visuals or design (e.g., any visual genre such as just graphics or a brochure and other assignments like our info design assignment would be coded with this code).	
DoD	A genre of technical definition and/or description. Use this code for either or both. Add secondary.	Definition, description or both

style	Any assignment (or cumulative series over a course of a term) focused on writing style such as grammar, re-writing sentences, active/passive verbs, etc.	
research	a stand alone assessed assignment that is clearly research; could include bibliographies or documents that summarize research (note: this is not used for translation assignments where students may be asked to re-write an academic article for a specific audience).	
analysis	More of an academic assignment that is analyzing rather than producing.	
biz_comm	Genres of business correspondence (based on the title or short description).	Memo, email, letter
exam	any type of exam	Mid, final, mid/final
port	any indication that a portfolio is a key part of the course	
misc	Miscellaneous assignment that fit no other category; use sparingly	Be specific with type assignment.
reflection	Anything where students are asked to reflect on learning or the things they've done	
	When the assignment noted it was done in collaboration	collab

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The Capstone Journey: Touchpoints and Temporalities in a Redesigned Master's Capstone Process

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Abstract Capstone experiences provide important opportunities for learning that integrates theory and practice while developing situated and reflective knowledge. However, reflection and integration are challenging to plan and enact from a programmatic perspective. In this article, we discuss how students' perceptions and experiences of academic time shaped their perception of a capstone course in our master's-level technical communication curriculum. Drawing on our observations of students' performance in the capstone class alongside a small-scale interview inquiry, we discuss how we came to empathize with students' experiences of the course and learning process. We follow our analysis with a discussion of how temporalities (as experiences of institutional time structures) shaped our capstone redesign. We designed a capstone journey with many planned student touchpoints both within and outside typical formal curricular structures to address students' perceived struggles. Our article adds to the literature about capstone pedagogy in technical and professional communication by focusing on the role of academic infrastructure (specifically organizational policies, material, and social relationships) on students' perceptions of learning time, while offering a model for capstone redesign that distributes integrated learning across multiple interactions with people and information.

Keywords Capstone, graduate education, temporality, user journey, pedagogy

Capstones are enduring, project-based pedagogical experiences in many technical and professional communication (TPC) programs. In our local context, we have struggled in recent years with adapting our graduate-level capstone projects and course to students'

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evolving learning and professional needs. Our interest in capstone pedagogy arises from a desire to use integrative and reflective pedagogical approaches to help students build knowledge that can be adapted to new contexts. We have found that existing higher education temporalities often resist this kind of learning. By temporalities here, we refer to “durable means of perceiving, experiencing, and ‘making’ times (as we also perceive, experience, and re/create spaces in relation to wider discourses, histories, and contexts)” (Bunn et al., 2019, p. 1410). Students’ ways of moving through the world and perceiving the time and space of learning are habituated through everyday participation in courses, semesters, and academic years—through their interaction with institutional infrastructures. We find that higher education institutions often encourage ever more modular segmentation of learning in our course offerings and ever more-individualized educational trajectories. These orientations to educational experiences, endorsed by educational institutions and discourses, create challenges for the kind of learning associated with capstone courses and projects. As a result, the integration and synthesis associated with effective project planning, aligning learning over time, and connecting important course concepts to career goals may be particularly difficult for students who are habituated into thinking about learning in more short-term and disconnected ways.

In this article, we draw on recent literature, our reflections as instructors and administrators working with an MS in Technical Communication program, and a small-scale interview analysis to highlight the often-overlooked role that habituated responses to academic temporalities play in affecting students’ capstone experiences. In doing so, we offer a reflection on capstone courses that emphasizes how focusing on temporalities can inform new learning designs. Drawing on interactions with students, we suggest that achieving the learning goals associated with capstone projects means finding creative ways to scaffold integrative and reflective practices throughout a program of study, intentionally arranging interactions with people and information. This work of scaffolding is challenging, however, because it often exists in tension with how higher education is structured, thus causing tension around issues such as labor for both students and faculty.

To provide an example and draw out these themes, we describe the recent experiences in and redesign of our master’s-level capstone process, which was reimagined to create a more coherent student-user journey through a master’s degree program. With a focus on programmatic lenses, our example explores how we have tried, failed a few times, and tried again to create a more integrated and scaffolded learning experience for students in a contemporary higher education setting. Based on what we have learned, we provide a

contextualized example of why programs may want to consider shifting from positioning a capstone course as a standalone, culminating learning experience into understanding it as an activity or process distributed across formal curricular and co-curricular programmatic “touchpoints” over time, to borrow a term from user experience design. Again, we approach this discussion aware of the difficulties of doing so and of our own ongoing struggles to effectively adapt to students’ changing learning needs.

Capstones in Technical Communication Pedagogy

Capstones are typically project-based learning experiences that enable students to synthesize and apply knowledge gained through a program of learning. They are also typically associated with times of transition from academic learning in a degree program and into whatever lies beyond, which most students, faculty, and program directors hope will be the beginning of a meaningful professional career and the beginning of life outside the university as an educated citizen (Durel, 1993). Capstone experiences are generally associated with synthesizing and integrating prior disciplinary learning rather than introducing new concepts (Henscheid, 2000); thus, capstone experiences vary significantly across different academic disciplines, where different kinds of research and practical experiences will be central to students’ learning and future practice. For example, capstones in many disciplines are academic research experiences that involve a long, developed paper including academic problem-setting, primary research or extensive literature review, and presenting results and conclusions (Hauhart & Grahe, 2012).

Technical communication capstones can vary significantly but have a few distinguishing qualities. Lisa Melonçon and Joanna Schreiber’s (2018) extensive study of undergraduate capstone courses across technical and professional communication programs in the US was helpful for identifying unique challenges, as well as for describing similarities and differences across programmatic approaches. As Melonçon and Schreiber described, technical and professional communication (TPC) capstones can take on wildly different forms, from independent studies to topic-based courses to courses that facilitate completing individual or group projects. Within this diverse conceptualization of what capstones can mean, Melonçon and Schreiber found that 73% of undergraduate TPC capstones involve project-based client work and 66% include a portfolio, both of which add complexity to the kinds of knowledge and work that students are expected to practice. The importance of client projects is not surprising, given the important role that these experiences play in helping students understand the realities of technical communication in practice (Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015). Melonçon and Schreiber further argue that the knowledge and integration expected of TPC capstones is complex because of the

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inherently fraught relationship between academia and industry in TPC. While, in general, capstones often involve students in independent research or creative production in which they demonstrate their ability to read, think, and write in ways that align with the conventions of their disciplines, Melonçon and Schreiber argue that capstones in TPC exist at a nexus between both theory/practice and academia/industry that makes the experience in technical and professional communication unique. As they put it, undergraduate capstone curricula position the course as a space that “brings together theories and practices of the academic field and the workplace” (p. 322) but also “brings together the tensions among industry, the academy, and technology” (p. 329). Echoing the disconnects that Jay Gordon (2009) has described, capstone experience can thus easily become too anchored to the goal of “getting a job” or performing in expected and easily accommodated ways for industry and employers, losing the deep conceptual and often disruptive learning that is central to TPC.

Some of the challenges related to capstone projects overlap with challenges in TPC graduate education more generally. Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber (2001) suggested that graduate education in TPC can be challenging to plan and coordinate effectively because of the interdisciplinary nature of faculty expertise, the diverse nature of student prior expertise, and the different goals of graduate students after the degree across different industries and academic fields. Our program expects that our students at the end of their programs will not only understand academic frameworks and knowledge that shape academic conceptions of TPC, but also engage in acts of *praxis* and apply frameworks in organizations they may enter after graduation as employees. Frequently, employing new and innovative TPC strategies also means working against the grain of current practices, drawing on critical and ethical knowledge while leading and guiding new solutions. Melonçon and Schreiber thus argue that we must position capstone experiences to emphasize critical and theoretical competencies, rather than positioning capstones as facilitating easy entry into industry positions.

From the literature on capstones across higher education, we find a broad discussion of challenges that echo and extend what we know from prior field research. Nicolette Lee and Daniel Loton’s cross-disciplinary research (2019) emphasizes how capstones are expected to meet a variety of purposes, including increased communication and critical-thinking skills, improving the quality of program graduates, and increasing student confidence and preparedness, just to name a few. These intersecting purposes led Lee and Loton to describe capstone design as a “high-risk activity” that is “weighted with expectations far greater than other curricula” (p. 147). Part of these higher expectations

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can be associated with the role of capstones in what Randy Bass (2012) has called the “post-course era,” in which courses “are the primary tools for managing time, staff, and resources” but no longer can be assumed to be “the primary place where the most significant learning takes place” (The Post-Course Era section para 1). Instead, experiences that cross courses, integrate learning, and/or provide unique high-intensity experiences are crucial to student success; capstone courses, along with internships, collaborative projects, learning communities, and writing intensive courses function as particularly important ways that students create meaning within higher-education contexts today. When the important integration work for which the capstone is responsible is limited to one course, recent qualitative research documents significant time pressures and obstacles that have called for more structure and mentoring strategies, including attempts to structure capstone learning over multiple semesters and courses (Colclasure & Granberry, 2025; Rice & Shannon, 2016).

While scholarly research in TPC has provided a strong sense of the pedagogical challenges inherent in this kind of learning experience, only a few have discussed how these challenges have affected their own program’s curricular decision-making. For example, Dànielle DeVoss, Laura Julier, and Jonathan Ritz (2013) provided an in-depth example of how they designed a portfolio-based capstone course in dialogue with particular institutional “Liberal Learning Goals” and discussed how their position in the College of Arts and Letters affected the possibilities and framing of their course. Most scholarship discussing institutional impact on capstones has focused on undergraduate capstone experiences or collaborative work focused on capstones for students in engineering and computer science disciplines (Burnett et al., 2022). From this prior research, we have learned much about how institutional assessment mandates at particular institutions shape the possibilities for capstone experiences programmatically. For example, Shelley Thomas and Becky Jo McShane (2007) drew on Jo Allen’s (2004) work when calling for those designing effective learning processes to take control of assessment “rather than suffer the consequences of ‘mandated outcomes’” (Allen, 2004, p. 94). Similarly, Barbara J. D’Angelo and Barry Maid (2009) emphasized programmatic assessment when discussing institutional elements that impact capstones, arguing that “assessment practices are created as a result of mandates or pressure from administrators, accrediting bodies and agencies, or external testing agencies” (p. 160).

While perceptions of assessment are important, we suspect that other kinds of institutional structures beyond programmatic assessment also shape the possibilities for capstone learning. In addition to understanding how TPC has positioned the goal and

structure of capstones, this project is informed by the recent importance of infrastructure as a concept to frame how student learning experiences are deeply intertwined with and co-constituted by relationships with the interconnected policies, materials, texts, people, and technologies associated with a program, department, and institution at large. Recent writing studies focus has emphasized the role of writing process and written texts as an infrastructure for coordinated human activity (Read, 2019; Read & Frith, 2022). Here we draw on the technical communication and writing studies thread of infrastructural scholarship that focuses on the agentive role that relations play on programmatic and curricular possibilities (DeVoss et al., 2005; Grabill, 2010). We thus use the term *infrastructure* to refer to the institutional relational arrangements of people, tools, values, and habits that lend meaning and material constraint to situations in which our students learn. As we will discuss in more detail, university infrastructures became important to understanding capstones because of their role in shaping students' lived experiences of time. Students' enactment of academic temporalities—enabled and constrained by institutional infrastructures taken up through semester calendars and repeated course schedules—played an important role in their assumptions about what constitutes effective learning and participation in a capstone process. In the following section, we discuss our institutional context in order to provide context for those institutional relations and how they shaped our analysis of and redesign of a capstone learning experience.

The Capstone Project in the North Carolina State University MS in Technical Communication

When we began discussions about our master's capstone experience in 2023, our capstone experience had long been institutionalized in our program as a hybrid between a capstone course and an independent study. All students in our program took one required course in their final nine hours called Projects in Technical Communication. This in-person three-credit course was taught by a core graduate faculty member in the technical communication program. While this course was a seated, face-to-face experience, students worked on individual projects that they proposed, building from their prior coursework and work experiences. To guide them, they were assigned to one or more faculty advisors who were not the course instructor. These advisors worked with students on formulating projects, creating project milestones, and writing up and presenting projects to share their learning. All students were required to turn in a written (or designed) artifact, as well as to present their learning in a capstone symposium attended by all faculty from the program. During this symposium, they defended their work while answering questions from faculty members.

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Some issues that indicated we needed to rethink our capstone emerged as we realized that there were tensions among what students needed to be able to do in order to be successful proposing, creating, and presenting effective capstones and the realities of our institutional context. For example, in our experience working with students between 2015 and 2023, we found that even our strongest students experienced great difficulty in their project proposal process. At North Carolina State University, capstone courses are one-semester projects. In one iteration of the capstone, we attempted to have students propose their project solely during the 15-week semester in which the capstone was taught. We found that there was an advantage to this approach in that students had strong support from the capstone instructor while formulating a project. However, the major disadvantage was that the typical 15-week schedule did not allow effective time for students to propose, gain permission for, complete, write/design, and present an effective capstone project fully within the course time. It created particular difficulties for students who wanted to do more complicated or robust projects such as IRB-approved research or partnering with clients outside the university who were working on their own timelines. In another iteration of the capstone, students wrote a proposal in the fall semester independently prior to the capstone course. The advantage of this approach was an improved timeline; however, the disadvantage was that students lacked support for effective problem-setting and were often overwhelmed by the critical comments of faculty. Without a great deal of guidance, students, understandably, prioritized the immediate fall course work rather than the capstone work.

To attempt to respond to this problem, our faculty brainstormed a solution that involved moving the capstone course to the penultimate semester prior to graduation, rather than taking it in the final semester. We reasoned that this would enable our program to use another existing first-year core class more strategically as a space where students could work through problem-setting and methods for their projects under the supervision of graduate faculty, while also creating the possibility that students could extend their work beyond the fall semester if needed. While we had initial success in pitching this idea to department and college administrators, eventually this plan failed because our university's Graduate School policies came too much into conflict. For example, university policies and structures designed to provide more time for students to work on capstone or thesis projects (such as waivers that enabled teaching assistants to be full-time with only six hours of coursework) would not be able to be used until their final semester. Moving the capstone into the penultimate semester ultimately failed because it was out of sync with university policies for master's programs.

Thus, when we began the 2023 redesign plan that we discuss in this article, we already knew that the values, beliefs, policies, tools, and habits invoked through activities in our program, department, and university would shape how students approached our capstone. We had already struggled against the constraints that these relations had created for our capstone design. For example, we were aware that the 15-week semester would constrain what a capstone project could be and how students could complete it. Additionally, as directors, we were aware that, while we have a creative faculty committed to industry success for our students and willing to think outside the box about how to work in and around constraints, we would ultimately need solutions that could be sustained in our particular organizational and educational environmental needs.

Gaining Insight into Students' Perspectives on Their Experiences

One element that we knew should further inform our redesign of the capstone course was a better understanding of students' experiences and perceptions. In order to better account for students' perspectives, we drew from IRB-approved¹ interviews with recent graduates of our program from the years 2023 and 2024. This inquiry was part of a larger project that one of the authors took on when beginning a role as the department director of graduate programs. In this project, the researcher invited recent graduates from across the department's three master's-level graduate programs to discuss their program journey from initial recruitment to coursework to culminating capstones to graduation, using semi-structured interviews that asked students to narrate their perceptions and experiences. To recruit students, she sent an invitation email to all students who had graduated in the previous five years who had indicated in exit surveys that they were open to receiving future email from the department.

Four graduates of our program from the years 2023 and 2024 responded to this email invitation as part of this project and completed the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with one co-author. While the number of students interviewed was very small, our goal for using this data in our capstone redesign process was to add depth and nuance to what we knew about students' experiences of the capstone based on our access to other assessment materials such as students' perceptions of instruction and student exit interviews (not discussed in this article nor covered under this IRB). The students interviewed represent a number of common user types in our program: a full-time student with a teaching assistantship, a part-time student working full-time while finishing the

¹ #27270

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program, a full-time student who did not have funding to attend and commuted a long distance, and a full-time student who transitioned among roles during their time in the program. The goal was to conduct a small study that enabled program administrators to better understand patterns in how students experienced our programs and their capstone projects, and we believe we reached data saturation around themes connected to the capstone experience even with a small group.

Interviews with students were conducted over Zoom between July and October 2024. Again, rather than focusing only on students' capstone experiences, questions in the interviews were designed to have students reflect on and provide a narrative description of their experiences of time across the degree program, enabling us to better understand how the capstone fit into their perceptions of the experience. These interviews ranged in length from 32 minutes and 2 seconds to 50 minutes and 49 sections. Interview transcripts were collected from the Zoom cloud, corrected, and de-identified. Because of her role in the larger research project as described above, one author analyzed these interviews for themes related to students' perceptions of the capstone experience and also identified major "milestones" in the program experience as articulated by students. To complete this thematic analysis, the researcher used a deliberately interpretive and reflexive approach to trace key turns of phrase, moments of emphasis, and narrative formation. Themes were developed inductively by tracing patterns and relational links across the interviews through interpretive memos, rather than by aggregating discrete segments (Terry et al., 2017). This method was appropriate given the small, exploratory inquiry and narrative nature of the interview protocol and responses. The researcher shared and discussed de-identified memos with the other coauthor, which enabled both researchers to reflect on students' perceptions and perceived milestones as sources of knowledge alongside faculty and administrative perspectives, which we used in reformulating our approach to the capstone project. Table 1 describes student participants with further details about our interviews.

Participant	Graduation Date	Description of Program Experience	Length of Interview
MSTC-a	Spring 2023	Full-time student on TAship within department	40:02
MSTC-b	Spring 2024	Full-time student, nonfunded, commuting	50:49
MSTC-c	Spring 2024	Full-time student, funded on TAship for second year outside the department	34:31
MSTC-d	Spring 2024	Part-time student, completing program while working full-time	32:02

Table 1. Student participants and interview descriptions.

Analysis of Students' Experiences and Themes Shaping Redesign

In this section, we discuss themes that arose from analyzing and integrating our own faculty perspectives on students' capstone struggles with student perspectives articulated in interviews.

Our Perspectives on Students' Struggles

As faculty and program administrators who worked with students, we noted that students struggled to integrate learning from prior courses into their project ideas. Instead, they often approached the capstone as if it were disconnected from prior experiences. Alongside this observation, we noted that students often came up with extremely ambitious project ideas that were not of-scope for a one-semester project. As a result, students often began a project that was much too large and then found themselves three-quarters of the way through the course with a project that could not be completed.

Relatedly, we noted that students often struggled in creating meaningful project management plans for their projects and sticking with them. What became clear to us is that students relied heavily on the rhythms of the semester and project structures and

timelines provided by instructors. Deprived of these, they had no real experience of accurately assessing resource management and project timelines, two key components of successful capstone project management. While many students had some experience working with external clients, those relationships were often negotiated and managed by instructors. In the capstone process, students found themselves having to create their own norms of time-use and relationship-maintenance, rather than relying on a structure created by courses they have taken. We further observed that many of the students had problems in balancing their relationships with their clients, course instructor, and advisors as capstone stakeholders simultaneously. While accomplished in dealing with instructors or clients as stakeholders, having to balance project stakeholders with different projects had become very difficult and, in the students' minds, competing rather than complementary.

Student Perspectives on the Capstone

In interviews, students noted many of the same pain points that we as faculty had observed. However, when paying attention to how students positioned the capstone within their broader experience of the program, students articulated a particular focus on time, affect, and the need for more resources for understanding the range of supportive genres that are coordinated together in the capstone process. Understanding students' experiences helped position the challenges that we described above more from students' own perspectives, which helped us to empathize with the difficulties students encountered with learning within higher education's temporal norms.

First, students described that their overall degree experiences felt like they took place extremely quickly and in a state in which students felt they constantly needed to be accountable for meeting goals in the present, rather than looking forward to the future or backward to reflect on the past. As Participant MSTC-b put it, the attitude they tended to bring to the program was one that put them into a perpetual present: "Okay, I need to get through this this semester. I need to get through these to the next semester." It became clear through discussions that students would need explicit support to remember what they had learned in early semester courses as a result of this feeling of operating in a perpetual present. As MSTC-b said, "I barely remember the classes I took."

In addition, students described experiencing the first year of their master's program as focused on theories and foundations and were often relieved to feel in the second year that they could transition to more hands-on work with information and content. As one student put it, "The first year was like, okay, I have to do this theory and it's not that interesting, but

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I don't have a choice" and "a lot of it was more technical towards the second year, which I liked better" (MSTC-c). We take from this that students often felt relief at the idea that they could leave theory behind during the capstone year and that they looked forward to the praxis elements of our program. Of course, we as faculty expected the opposite: that students would use their theoretical and conceptual knowledge to generate both ideas for projects and foundational approaches to complete them. Capstone projects in our program required students to hearken back to the theoretical learning of their first year and draw on it extensively to design approaches rather than leaving it behind in favor of practical work. We found this student perception of experience particularly striking, given Melonçon and Schreiber's call for programs to emphasize the importance of theoretical, critical, and methodological learning, rather than allowing capstones to become overly focused on spaces for a neutral uptake of industry skills.

In the interviews, students articulated how an experience of time and of leaving behind theoretical and conceptual learning often led to feelings of anxiety or dissatisfaction when it came time to put together a great capstone idea, as well as an overt disconnection from much of their more "theoretical" learning. As MSTC-d put it, the capstone moment in the program felt like one where the intensity of the pace of the program really sped up: "Once we got towards the end, it felt like things got very fast like they always do." As a result, the capstone process felt much more stressful than other elements of their experience. As MSTC-c put it, "When I think about that time [of writing the capstone], I think it was more survival mode." For us as faculty, "survival mode," means that very little reflection and learning is taking place. In our interpretation, this feeling of time led to underdeveloped project plans that led to problems down the road: situations like MSTC-c who remarked, "I ended up having to completely like ... almost restart the capstone, using a different idea."

Students we spoke with also unanimously suggested support for the capstone project that took place throughout the program and long before the capstone course or even before the capstone proposal. As MSTC-d put it, "I just think a little bit more upfront work so you can plan would be helpful for people like me." Others such as MSTC-c were more specific about the particular timeline that they thought would help provide adequate support to students: "In the ... like the first semester or second semester that first year, [students could begin] thinking [about] the logistics of a capstone project. And then, as the students go through electives and get more ideas, they could start putting that together." This student summarized, "We need some constant reminders." We understood this suggestion not as needing more curricular infrastructure but students needing more tools to build their own thinking about what their capstones could or should be and more tools

for envisioning what that work would be like for them. In other words, we saw it as a challenge of demystification and local infrastructure building—providing new kinds of relational resources.

Beyond ways to solve the problem of the temporal experience of the program, students' feedback also suggested spatial interventions that would be poised to overcome the distributed information about the capstone that they experienced. As MSTC-d noted, "When I submitted, I was very much like, I really don't know if this is what I'm supposed to be doing." Other students noted that they were not always aware of expectations or how to find information they needed to progress in their work. MSTC-b also discussed how she had noticed that many students needed support for aspects of writing that might be assumed: "There are some things that aren't taught to students, really, now that they were taught to me. And so that has a big impact on how people perceive instruction in the classroom."

Redesigning Our Capstone Approach

Based on what we learned from students, we had a better sense of how our own insights and their experiences should inform a capstone redesign in the context of the local institutional infrastructures we have described. In attempting to understand students' experiences of the capstone as related to their overall degree journey, we began to understand how institutional infrastructures shaped habits of mind that informed some ultimately unhelpful approaches to our capstone project. Students in our capstone course found themselves in new territories of longer projects with less direct instruction or plan provided to them, while balancing multiple stakeholder needs in a particular course setting. Some of their challenges also related to the unique temporal experience of our program. They were approaching their capstones without much scaffolding to help them remember the "slower" parts of our degree, while experiencing what felt like a faster-paced race to the finish line at the end. Unlike their experiences in courses that provided shared touchstone readings or well-defined deadlines, students were asked to hearken back to a time in their degree that they found convenient to forget.

Similar issues have been discussed in the broader higher education literature. Matthew Bunn, Anna Bennett, and Penny J. Burke (2019) position higher education institutions as "powerful engine[s] of temporal changes" and emphasize that students are often positioned to interpret institutional time structures as "neutral, decontextualised and unproblematic" (p. 1411). Anna Bennet and Penny J. Burke (2017) similarly argue for more complex understandings of "time management" practices, where students are often

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encouraged to better manage time without being provided resources or knowledge that will enable them to better understand the temporalities disciplined through academic systems. They show how often “time management” strategies are relayed to students as related to issues of personal responsibility. Closer to home in technical communication and writing studies, Devoss et al. (2005) of course were also concerned with issues of time and temporality in their contributions to bringing infrastructure into understanding students’ experiences in our courses.

Through this inquiry, we also began to reflect on the interrelationship of infrastructure and temporality as they informed students’ experiences of learning. Infrastructure and temporalities are distinct concepts. Organizational infrastructures (created through relations of policies, materialities, and social structures) created the conditions that supported academic temporalities as unique experiences of time, as well as the accompanying habits of mind disciplined through them. Students at the graduate level, for example, often have been successful in feeling the ins and outs of how to be successful with the academic calendar. They have internalized semester rhythms to classes and have, often as well, internalized where projects will fall within the 15-week increments that we use to divide up courses. This internalized temporality does not come to being through spontaneous generation. Rather, it is an internalization of the expectations and disciplining power of academic infrastructures. While students respond to and are disciplined by these infrastructures and their accompanying systems, they are rarely aware of the policies or digital materialities affecting them. For example, a student might understand the role of the syllabus in shaping their work in a class, including course policies, but they are rarely aware of the work of university committees, requirements made by graduate school for inclusions of policies, reminders from directors of graduate programs, all of which come to bear on syllabus statements.

Thus, to better plan for how students perceived their programmatic experiences, we had to take similar steps as we had in prior years to creatively detach our point of view away from internalized and familiar ways of understanding time and learning in our institution. Students helped us understand that we needed to deal with the temporality of the academic calendar, program progression, and individualized planning demands of the capstone experience in new ways, away from the traditional infrastructure of the university. For example, students’ sense of a perpetual present in which they were constantly triaging current work was working against our goal for teaching them foundational concepts early in the program so that they could apply them over the course of their careers. Furthermore, students’ sense of relief at finally escaping “theory courses,”

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during their first year was working against our desire for students to transfer theoretical and conceptual learning in order to design effective praxis in their capstone projects and future career. It was clear that we needed new tactics both to promote and reinforce their memory and metacognition, as well as new resources in the course itself that worked to take students out of survival mode and into a more comfortable relationship with structuring and planning a project from their own unique interests and positions. Furthermore, we needed to model for students how to create their own infrastructures for successful project completion rather than solving these inevitable problems for them (Hart-Davidson et al., 2007). And, we needed to do this in a way that would not be vetoed by department, college, or graduate school administration because it was at odds with policies or practices external to our program.

We should note, as discussed above, that temporalities do not describe all of the challenges that we found our students were facing, and we do not mean to oversimplify capstone learning challenges by emphasizing habits of mind related to time only. However, we found rethinking temporalities to be a particularly generative means for designing alternative approaches to our capstone. Thus, a first step to redesigning the capstone for the Fall 2024/Spring 2025 academic year was to change our approach to where and how the learning of the capstone course was situated in time and space, distributing the work of capstone preparation across curricular and co-curricular moments and touchpoints across the program. Specifically, we designed an expanded proposal process for the semester prior to the capstone course through which students receive guided support from the program director in remembering and integrating theoretical insights from their first year of course work, understanding the logistics of the capstone course and process, coming up with effective problems to research, and writing an effective proposal that was of an appropriate scope for the capstone course.

In Figure 1, we visualize the overall changes in approach to where capstone-related learning and preparation took place inside our program during the fall 2024 semester as a result of our changes. These changes were made leading up to our Capstone course offered in the spring of 2025. The following subsections describe redesigned aspects of this approach, which begins much earlier in students' time in our program.

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	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 10	Wk 11	Wk 12	Wk 13	Wk 14
Program Wide Listserv Sends	Orientation	Capstone Process for Fall	Capstone Process Description	Capstone Info Session Details					Capstone Draft Workshop Details		Capstone Draft Workshop Reminder			
Individual Conversations					1 on 1 w/ director as needed			1 on 1 w/ director as needed		1 on 1 w/ director as needed			1 on 1 w/ director as needed	1 on 1 w/ director as needed
Workshops						Capstone Info session						Capstone Proposal Workshop		
Key Questions	"What is the capstone process?"	"How will Capstone work for us?"	"How is Capstone used?"	"What is expected of me?"		"What work does a capstone do?"	"What do I want to do for my capstone?"	"Is this a good capstone idea?"	"What are my peers writing?"	"When should I start?"	"What am I trying to do?"	"What have others done with their proposals?"	"What can I take from others to make better?"	"Is this document persuasive?"
Students Deliverables							Intention Form				Workshop Draft			Proposal Final

Figure 1. Visualization of Fall (precourse) capstone process.

A New Support Process

One point that became clear was that interactions with students around the capstone needed to exist long before the capstone course began. These interactions needed to more actively prepare students for the temporalities of capstone-thinking processes. In the redesigned proposal process, the director of the MS program, with students, created six touchpoints (up from two) across the semester prior to their capstone course. The touchpoints were as follows:

1. Describe capstone during orientation
2. Attend capstone information session
3. Fill out capstone proposal intention form
4. Submit capstone proposal draft
5. Attend capstone proposal workshop
6. Submit final capstone proposal

These touchpoints solved several problems we identified in the prior capstone experience. Touchpoints created several, ongoing points of contact in which students would need to explicitly look both forward into their project goals and backward into the courses that had shaped their thinking. It provided the opportunity for the director to provide an overview of the capstone purpose and to review how students might go about choosing a project focus. It provided an opportunity for students to refine over several tries the idea for their research, and it also enabled peer review and discussion.

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Additionally, other communication touchpoints were created to keep contact with students and instructors throughout the semester via the program listserv. This constant flow of information kept second-year graduate students oriented to the process even when meetings were distributed across the semester. While intended for second-year master's students, these broadcast messages served two important functions for the department as a whole. First, while first-year students did not directly participate in the capstone process, these broadcast messages created an early awareness of that process. When they reached their second year, they would already have a sense of what the capstone process would look like from the director's public communication with the previous year's cohort. Much of the anxiety produced by the capstone related to the unfamiliar nature of this new, odd form of university-sanctioned writing. Students struggled with understanding how capstone writing could exist both inside and outside the classroom setting. Thus, by thinking differently about the temporal learning, we were also able to address other issues (unfamiliarity with genre and process) that themselves were not directly related to time. Second, program faculty were busy with their own classes, research projects, and administrative positions. While very familiar with their role in the process, they were not always fully aware of where students were within the process and therefore how to best assist students. Listserv announcements helped orient the faculty to where students were in their process helping them have conversations with students about potential topics and projects. With this drip content, faculty could better field questions and scale answers to the appropriate level for where students were in their capstone process.

Redesigned course sequence and deliverables

By embracing the notion of temporalities, the redesigned course taught students to consider the unique demands of reflective practice and problem framing in technical communication contexts. By emphasizing the intersections of disciplinary knowledge and local contexts for practice, we supported students in solving important field problems, drafting relevant portfolio documents, and writing experience reports that demonstrated mastery of key program learning outcomes.

Making experience reports a key genre of the capstone process in our program was one way that we responded to students' request for more support around the particular genres of the capstone process. Experience reports are identifiable professional genres in our field that are specifically designed to emphasize reflective practice in bringing theories of TPC into dialogue with practical action and design. They are documents that have both academic and industry audiences and authors. When we introduced the deliverables for our redesigned capstone, we emphasized three deliverables: a design or research project,

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a five- to 10-page, single-spaced ACM-style experience report, and an oral presentation. We described the project as an individual work that “institute[s] a procedure or solve[s] a specific problem. It might consist of the writing, design, and production of an online or print document such as: a website, a help system, a procedures manual, a technical report, or a protocol.” We introduced the experience report as a written document “that describes the exigence for your project, your research/design process and presents reflections on the methodology or applications. Strong experience reports discuss both benefits and drawbacks of design approaches used and clearly call out lessons learned.” Our goal for distributing the capstone project simultaneously across three genres was to ensure that students frame projects as multifaceted and meaningful to multiple audiences in multiple ways.

Another change to the capstone course that we instituted involved shifting final presentations into a venue that encouraged more discussion and dialogue between academic and industry audiences. As a result, in addition to fellow students, alumni, and program faculty, we invited our industry networks to hear and respond to our students’ capstone projects. Specifically, we reserved sessions in our yearly industry/academia conference organized by our student association explicitly for capstone presentations. Our goal in this shift was to help students more tangibly strive for projects that make contributions to the field that could help improve everyday practice. By shifting from a defense scenario that emphasized students’ ability to respond to their professors and toward a public conference presentation that brought academia and industry into conversation around students’ contributions, our goal was both to help students anticipate their extension into industry networks while also emphasizing the importance of their theoretical and critical knowledge. Again, students were shown in their preparation that their projects must meet multiple audiences simultaneously rather than those that exist in only the academic temporality they were accustomed to.

Furthermore, we adjusted the timeline and structure of the semester so that students were asked to conceptualize and complete the project deliverable prior to writing the experience report that asked them to reflect on the project’s exigence, connection to the field, and implications. The major assignments for our redesigned capstone course included the following:

- **Project Frame and Methodology (final draft due around week 5):** Students in our capstone course first revisited their proposals from the prior semester in order to articulate a more deeply developed framework for their project. During the weeks prior to this assignment due date, students read brief articles on problem-setting,

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common genres of research report writing, and writing effective methodologies. Readings on these topics responded to students' desire for a more detailed discussion of how to approach common research and practical genres in TPC, and we discussed explicitly how academia/industry dynamics in the field would require them to carefully negotiate where they find sources and how they situate the goals of their projects. This important work in the first five weeks of the course prepared students to clearly understand their project purpose, exigence, and methodology.

- **Preliminary Findings Memo and Presentation (due around week 8):** Around halfway through the semester, students drafted a project update memo that provided information on the status of their introductory research and/or deliverable designs. This memo enabled us to have a standard, shared project management milestone that all students must respond to, even as they were asked to take individual responsibility for managing their individual project workflow. This project update and set of drafts enabled advisors to evaluate whether students had made enough progress to complete their projects during the course of the semester, and also created an important moment for receiving feedback around the halfway point of the semester while there was still time for them to change course if needed. Course sessions during this phase of the semester focused on project checkpoints and peer review that built from the particular needs and projects of the students enrolled.
- **Formatted Draft of Experience Report and Final Design Deliverables (final draft due around week 14):** In the penultimate week of the semester, students in the capstone submitted a formatted, full draft of their experience report and deliverables for their advisors and course colleagues. These documents represented a completed project that was only subject to requests for revisions from their advisor. During the weeks prior to this due date, students studied the genre of the experience report by reading and mapping samples from ACM-SIGDOC, which enabled them to understand typified responses as well as variability in the genre. They also practiced working with the design templates for the experience report in order to create a document with professional formatting attributes that looked and felt appropriate to be shared professionally.
- **Practice Presentation and Slide Deck (due during week 14):** Students practiced an oral capstone presentation with visual aids prior to the final presentations. The presentation situated and discussed the project's purpose, contribution, and process and uses appropriate visual aids. In the course sessions prior to this session, we discussed effective visual document design conventions for their

presentation and also discussed how the genre of the oral presentation should differ significantly from how they present their project in their experience report.

- **Oral Capstone Presentation and Question/Answer Session (due during week 15):** Finally, students gave an oral presentation of their project followed by a question-and-answer session. In the presentation, students demonstrated rhetorical awareness and an ability to reflect on actions taken in designing and completing the project. We reserved the week between week 15 and the final exam date as a “release valve” where students could address revisions to the project suggested by their advisors.
- **Peer Reviews:** At multiple points during the semester, students reviewed their peers’ drafts with productive feedback comments that described, evaluated, and suggested revisions. These comments were assessed by the authors of the paper for usefulness and acceptability based on number and quality.

Takeaways and Final Thoughts

Breaking with elements of academic infrastructure by orienting our solutions away from internalized and familiar temporalities of the university calendar and expected program timeline, we were able to create new patterns of labor and learning for ourselves and our students. The shift in mindset from foregrounding institutional lenses to foregrounding student lenses allowed us to see new educational opportunities for the capstone in our program. At the same time, this move helped us model for students how to plan and manage projects that were not defined by academic temporalities and that required them to work outside course and academic calendar constraints.

As a result of our design, we believe our capstone experience has become better representative of the entire master’s experience (both curricular and cocurricular) through integrating applied research product management, client deliverables, and applied disciplinary knowledge. However, we also want to highlight the real challenges of teaching and supporting reflective practice and synthesis in the context of higher educational infrastructures we have described. Our solutions attempt to partially break with existing academic infrastructure restrictions and frictions associated with learning in our institution, but in doing so, they involve students and faculty in work “off the clock,” outside of traditional organizational infrastructures such as academic and course calendars. Such work can be devalued by students who may understand it as not meaningful as graded work in ongoing courses. Furthermore, it asks administrators to take on additional work outside of, or at the very least bending, the infrastructures of recognized labor structures that may not be adequately compensated. In other words, learning

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solutions that attempt to cross the curriculum and co-curriculum can be labor-intensive, both for students and administrators. They are not solutions or products that fit well into efficiency or customer-service models of education, and it has been the case anecdotally that students have sometimes resisted the “extra work” that has come along with having extended support. We also recognize that we work with a great deal of privilege and autonomy in our Carnegie R1: Doctoral Universities—Very High Research Activity University, which is also classified for lower access and higher earnings potential. While others may not have the freedom or organizational social capital to act as independently or innovatively as we did, we think our project still offers a model for how others may look beyond typified patterns and cycles of time and labor toward more innovative solutions in their own context. Finally, we should highlight that we recognize that our interview inquiry was small and focused, and that further empirical research drawing from multiple forms of data will enable us to analyze both students’ perceptions and their direct performance in our new capstone format.

Capstones are powerful educational experiences, “high impact” in the language of our institution. Asking students to engage in meaningful projects that will help them launch careers also means asking them to thoughtfully work within infrastructures shaping their experiences in our programs and universities. More ambitiously, it also asks them to build the infrastructure of their own approach to creating learning and the deliverables that evidence it: new genres, new relationships with clients, and new personal labor practices. The knowledge-building and skills that these challenges and opportunities teach are essential skills for young professionals to have in an uncertain and constantly changing professional world. Students must become comfortable in personal adaptation to be successful in their careers, understanding what infrastructures and practices they must build for themselves. We hope that we have modeled this for students in our master’s program, and we look forward to continuing to adapt our approach as our institutions and students change.

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From Editing and Writing to Editing/Writing: Reframing a Professional and Technical Communication Program through Critical Archival Studies

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Abstract Recent scholarly, social, and technological shifts prompted revisions to an editing course in a professional and technical writing program after reactions from students revealed persistent views of editing as mere error correction, undermining the course's learning outcomes. Guided by concepts from critical archival studies (CAS), course revisions reframed editing as *editing/writing*: A socio-cultural, interpretive practice shaped by power, context, and technological mediation. These changes, including an application of CAS to L.M. Montgomery's journals, prompted a broader program-level rethinking of writing and editing as inextricable practices with ethical and cultural impact. This showcase concludes by considering implications for programs that prepare students to navigate authority, authenticity, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in professional and technical communication.

Keywords professional communication, technical writing, program administration, editing, artificial intelligence, critical archival studies

This piece describes a situation familiar to program administrators whose curricula must cover a wide range of professional communication concepts, including technical writing. Given the need for students to possess a range of adaptive skills when composing their future workplace communications, especially regarding linguistic representation, marginalization, and the use of AI and other technologies, it is important that when reviewing curricula an administrator addresses any lacks in student readiness. Described here as a demonstration is one course's curriculum, offered by a university's professional and technical writing program, that introduces students to the varied demands of the editing profession. This course is analyzed and the results extrapolated to the broader program.

Students' perceptions of the editing industry are explored, as they were revealed during recently taught class. Without understanding the complexities of this profession, students may not be equipped to respond successfully and appropriately to its dynamic nature. The students' understanding of editing, shown to be reductive and monolithic, persisted throughout the class, and in fact were shown to be reflective of simplified views of writing as well. These revelations suggested a deficiency in the larger program curriculum and required administrative attention. Program-level decisions about curricula must move students beyond reductive views of professional communication; these views may prevent spotting how socio-cultural influences upon the work may render the professional's editorial decisions as themselves a form of writing, for example. A more deliberately integrated programmatic approach that overlaps editing and writing can avoid problematic course compartmentalization within a larger communication program.

This showcase thus describes how the consequences of editing practices overlap with those of professional writing practices, using a critical archival studies (CAS) approach to explore how editing is embedded in various communication contexts. One historical illustration of *editing/writing* (as opposed to editing-or-writing) can be seen in the publication of author L.M. Montgomery's¹ personal journals. The socio-cultural influences under which the series' editors performed their work reveals how power dynamics involved in archiving and memory blur the lines between editing and writing. The L.M. Montgomery journal project, when seen through a CAS frame, offers an example for approaching the concepts of editing, writing, and editing/writing as an academic program philosophy when designing curricula.

Background: Disciplinary Identity, Program Structure, and Recent Swerves

A now lengthy history of efforts to specify a disciplinary identity in professional and technical communication can influence administration of academic programs in this field. Discussions in the literature have ranged from Platonic *techne-versus-*empeiria** debates (Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Miller, 1979; Rutter, 1991) to socio-cultural critique (Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022; Bazerman, 1983; Haas, 2012; Herman, 2020; Mallette, 2024; Thralls & Blyler, 1993). And socio-cultural approaches to the field themselves have been expanded, for instance Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaaq and Breeanne Matheson's (2021) study of the decolonial frameworks often found in disciplinary scholarship. Regardless of the lens

¹ Montgomery was a prolific author but is known for writing *Anne of Green Gables*.

used, such discussions of disciplinary identity act as reminders of an administrator's responsibility when shepherding a program and teaching the field's content.

While the scholarship may debate how technical communication programs should bear out a particular identity, one common goal throughout the discussions has been to position the field and distinguish itself among other disciplines, such as English education, business communication and visual design (Corrigan & Slomp, 2021; Pringle & Williams, 2005; Rosselot-Merritt, 2020). The emphasis on defining identity boundaries may not support all programs, however, such as those that are smaller or must teach not only technical communication content but also content from sister fields. Lisa Melonçon and Sally Henschel's (2013) review of 185 technical and professional communication (TPC) undergraduate U.S. degrees found that "58% of programs require courses outside of the department either as a minor, subject matter focus, professional expertise, or similar term" (p. 54). Within these institutional contexts, administrators of smaller, cross-pollinated programs must make creative and productive decisions to continue promoting technical communication's content.

Lately, this historical work of disciplinary identity-making and its attendant academic program defining has been affected by acute swerves, notably the widespread availability of artificial intelligence (AI) platforms (Jones, 2023; Mollick & Euchner, 2023). The education and other experience that professional communicators bring to the industry must equip them to face these dramatic changes. Below, I describe how students' perceptions from an editing course in a small, cross-pollinated program in professional and technical communication revealed a lack of student readiness for socio-cultural changes in the workplace, and the impact of those revelations for the larger program.

Context: Program and Student Stakeholders

I coordinate a professional and technical writing program at a US midwestern regional comprehensive university; while students can declare the program's minor, many take program courses a la carte in fulfillment of various majors, minors, and certificates across campus. Students in the humanities make up a significant proportion of the program's demographics, often enrolling because several of the program's courses are required to fulfill a popular literary publishing certificate. Their classmates from outside the humanities, meanwhile, enroll because they are required to take program courses to learn about communication in their respective fields, such as accounting, public relations, and supply chain management. The program's diverse population means that any change to a

course's curriculum has implications beyond that particular class (Yancey, 2009; Addison & McGee, 2010).

Program courses are bound by student learning outcomes (SLOs) vetted at the institutional level. The program's course sequence begins with introductory professional writing principles and progresses through curricula focused on document design, technical communication, the profession of editing, project management, and special-topics documentation. In essence, SLOs expect the program to address all things communication in workplace contexts. The result unsurprisingly must be a range of course topics and content that have evolved in tandem with industry and educational trends (Dodson, 2025; Mehlenbacher, Balbon & Mehlenbacher, 2025; Reinhart et al., 2025): rhetorical reasoning, ethical decision-making, document design and multimodal analysis, revision as a deliberate process, collaborative work, and attention to audience awareness, among others. In the face of these evolving trends, one of the constants for the program over the past two decades has been the assignment of community engagement projects in upper-level courses. Rather than undertaking hypothetical scenario-based work, students collaborate with organizational clients to produce needed professional-level communications.

While the SLOs contribute to an overall program understanding of professional and technical communication, they historically have also reflected certain assumptions about communication practice. Enactment of the outcomes at the course level thus may no longer sufficiently respond to current student and industry needs, especially in the wake of profound phenomena such as the arrival of public-use AI platforms. As discussed below, specific examples from the program's editing course can be seen as symptomatic of certain broader program-level concerns. Studying these concerns through a CAS framework can offer productive solutions to both the course and the program.

Editing Course as Symptom of Program Concerns

Within the program, I teach an upper-level course called The Profession of Editing (English 4780/5780), meant to introduce students not only to instrumental editing tasks but also to the larger editing industry. This comprehensive approach is meant to prepare students for the various challenges and work they will encounter as professionals. Curriculum topics extend from this course's SLOs: Acquisition of "content knowledge via an examination of editing strategies and responsibilities in scholarly and professional settings.

[Enhancement of] critical thinking and communication skills through an emphasis on understanding of editing resources, editor roles in document development, and the

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politics of grammar and style” (University of Northern Iowa, 2024). Students undertake a sequence of assignments designed to develop their editorial eye, address a variety of error types, and distinguish among editing approaches (e.g., developmental, copyediting, proofreading).

Practically, the editing course fulfills its SLOs a series of scaffolded assignments, meant to give students a range of editing experiences. The assignments also expose students to a variety of content, including professional, creative, and academic manuscripts. A focus on digital technology is threaded throughout the entire curriculum. The first assignment introduces students to the course’s overall approach before they move on to perform editing practices via three subsequent projects. Because the assignments embody the class’s learning outcomes, two of them are detailed below, as they are significant milestones within the larger course trajectory that students move through.

During the first assignment, the Errors Portfolio, the main point is not to simply spot handbook-defined “errors” but also to understand why in some situations, certain content in fact may not be “erroneous.”² That is, students are meant to acquire a more nuanced understanding of errors as social and cultural artifacts that goes beyond basic fixing mistakes:

- Students must find five different editing errors found in various texts, whether scholarly, trade, or popular. The students analyze errors using each text’s rhetorical situation and describe the potential consequences of the error, however minor.
- The assignment further emphasizes approaching the portfolio as a professional would; students need to adhere to formal citation guidelines when documenting the errors’ sources and submit a deliberately curated portfolio.
- I also ask students to keep a project log alongside their hunt for errors, informally recording their thought process when selecting which to include in the portfolio.

In the subsequent Editing a Creative Manuscript assignment:

- Students acquire a creative manuscript, ideally one that appears to deliberately use colloquialisms, dialects, or other vernacular language. They then find a suitable publication venue, analyze its rhetorical situation, and make appropriate editing marks, queries, and suggestions on the manuscript.
- Another requirement is to communicate editorial decisions effectively to the author-client; students must compose a cover letter that captures the overall

² In the US Midwest, for instance, it is common to answer the question “How are you?” with “I’m good.” Responding with the technically correct “I am well” likely would be considered unusual, even odd.

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editorial response and persuades the author to adopt the suggestions, by framing their edits within the context of the publication's audience and the manuscript's purpose. This component of the assignment addresses editor-author interactions and helps students develop their diplomacy skills.

- In addition, students compose a memo directed to the instructor, justifying their decisions and demonstrating a deeper understanding of editorial principles and their application in a non-hypothetical context.
- As with the Errors Portfolio, the Editing a Creative Manuscript assignment requires that students maintain a project log.

Although the Errors Portfolio and Creative Manuscript assignments both stress the importance of considering a text's situation when making editorial decisions, the latter assignment increases in rhetorical complexity. Teasing out the differences among the manuscript markup, letter, and memo components is meant to help students balance the many expectations that come with editing decisions. The Creative Manuscript project emphasizes the importance of considering not only the publication's target readers and their contexts, but its in-house situation (e.g., the publication's mission, submission vetting process, etc.). And when marking the manuscript, students are prompted to consider how their edits can enhance the author's intended meaning and style, particularly in relation to the use of non-standard language.

Recent scholarly, social, and technological shifts, however, have indicated that the current editing curriculum may not be achieving its learning outcomes. Despite the comprehensive nature of the course's assignments, they have not seemed to dispel students' simplified notions of professional editing. During a recently taught class, students' assigned projects and content from their accompanying project logs suggested that they were not satisfactorily prepared to handle the ethical, representational, and technological challenges typical of editorial decision making. The following describes how these challenges particularly drove my reconsideration of the editing curriculum—and more to the point, a rethinking of the larger professional and technical writing program.

Program-Level Concern: Editing, Writing, and Editing/Writing

Despite the program's—and by extension the editing course's—emphasis on rhetorical complexity, students' project logs suggest that writing and editing were perceived as distinct entities. Writing was seen as an initial act during the composition process and performed by an author, while editing appears only later in the process as corrective, not meaning-making. For instance, during the Creative Manuscript assignment, a manuscript

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may challenge students when they are trying to make decisions about preserving or adjusting language that does not conform to a handbook. Concerned about disrespecting authorial voice, students frequently left any unconventional language entirely alone rather than address it or even discuss it with the author. One student described prioritizing the author's voice over their own editorial instincts as consciously holding back suggestions that felt more personally motivated than author-centered. Rather than querying an author about language use, students also often resorted to a workaround by only looking for publishers that invite submissions from lesser-heard voices, or feature a similarly nonspecific mission statement.

Students also struggled with distinguishing the variety of rhetorical situations involved in this multi-task assignment. Several students were reluctant about having to write the memo, mistakenly seeing this component of the project as redundant (rhetorically synonymous with the letter), and more of an academic exercise than editing work. Often, students would draft the assignment's components linearly, meaning they first would finish the markup, then write the letter, then the memo, and finally the log, rather than spotting how the components could be placed in conversation with each other during simultaneous drafting.

These assumptions about writing and editing as distinct acts along the composing process perhaps are not surprising, given how the program used to compartmentalize its courses. Classes once were titled and their curricula scoped according to genre (e.g., "Designing Manuals and Handbooks"), which now seems almost quaint in today's need for complex, overlapping communication practices. The legacy of these assumptions may trickle down into a particular course's assignments, classroom activities, and students' definition of what constitute "writing" and "editing." My curricular revisions, to move the program beyond the genre-specific, had been guided by writing studies literature that explores the relationship of professional writing and editing. However, the scholarship's influence on the program's SLOs, by itself, may no longer sufficiently address how socio-cultural factors can influence practice, e.g., how they blur the lines between editing and writing.

Writing studies definitions of editing and writing have not always regarded the two as overlapping. Michelle Corbin, Pat Moell and Mike Boyd (2002), for example, draw a line between technical editing and technical writing by emphasizing the unique skills and perspectives each role brings to the information development process. Later texts, such as Carol Saller's (2009) *The Subversive Copy Editor*, also begin to blur editing and writing acts. The shift from editing-or-writing to editing/writing reflects a larger disciplinary change in approach (e.g., Mackiewicz [2011, 2014]; Mackiewicz & Riley [2003]). This change often

was tied to the complexities of editing as it occurs within various writing situations, which importantly are affected by the social nature of writing (Horner & Kopelson, 2014). In short, static execution of the professional and technical writing program's SLOs was increasingly occurring within significant social changes and the disciplinary shift from editing-or-writing to editing/writing. Even though the program SLOs do include an integrated understanding of professional communication, the curriculum itself may not have significantly helped students to experience writing and editing as interconnected.

Program-Level Concern: Student Dispositions toward Rhetorical Analysis

The Errors Portfolio can be a challenge for students, despite the assignment of companion exercises and the project log. The difficulties also suggest larger dispositions that many students exhibit throughout the program's courses. Although the Portfolio's components are designed to facilitate rhetorical awareness in keeping with SLOs, many students struggled to see errors as more than violations of standard handbook rules for grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Comments in the project logs reveal this challenge. One student received a meme from a friend and, while they did not see the humor in the meme that the friend saw, included it in the portfolio simply because it appeared (to the student) to contain erroneous content. Rather than clarifying a target audience, then assessing whether those readers would regard the misspelling as sufficiently distracting from the text's intended humor, the student automatically assumed it to be problematic. Another student used the song "Ironic" by Alanis Morissette in the portfolio, because the situations described in the song by definition did not constitute instances of irony.

The Portfolio and Creative projects' challenges seem to risk keeping students at a more basic, instrumental level of professional and technical communication, despite the projects' merits. Students may hold onto a basic view of editing because some moments during the projects may not require collaboration or consultation, such as correction of obvious misspellings. The course's curriculum therefore may confirm students' reductive view of editing yet give them the language for disguising it, however unintentionally. That is, when they encountered blurry challenges with no one correct answer, students reacted by performing the actions of basic copyediting yet costuming their decisions as complex ones, "honoring" an author's voice not through reflective editorial markup and conversation between editor and writer, but by merely picking a publication venue with nonspecific submission requirements, for example.

These trends from the editing class—a rigid definition of content “correctness” and attempts at objectivity when working with authors’ work—do not suggest concerns only from one specific curriculum, however. They would seem a trickle-down effect from long-time program challenges, especially students’ uncertainty regarding the writing process’ nonlinearity, rhetorical analysis and collaborative nature.

Program-Level Concern: Student Dispositions toward the Writing Process

Clues from throughout the program suggest one possible cause of students’ views. Given the demographics that typically enroll in the classes, my students often bring a certain academic writing experience with them. The bulk of their college-level writing experience invokes the current-traditional model, where surface-level error correction is emphasized, and the composing process is single-author and one-directional, moving through traditional “select-narrow-amplify” phases (Crowley, 1998). This model can result in a composing experience that is decontextualized. Drafting becomes a conversation limited to the text and whoever is writing it, and any outside, contributing voices are limited to secondary sources that the writer accommodates into the text rather than engaging with the socio-cultural framing of the sources. As a result, students unfamiliar with the messiness of a non-linear, collaborative, multi-vocal composing process (Sommers, 1980) learn to regard writing as a straightforward endeavor, written by a solitary author, and free from grammar, mechanical, and punctuation errors. In contrast, the editing course’s SLOs, as with those of the professional and technical writing program’s entire curricula, are meant to emphasize recognizing how editing and writing participate in and even bolster professional knowledge and power systems.

Recent social swerves, such as those brought on by artificial intelligence tools, have intensified students’ dispositions and thus challenged the program’s work to achieve its outcomes. Such swerves, coupled with the pre-existing culture of immediacy and the fragmented composing encouraged by digital media platforms (Fraschillo, 2023), increase both students’ uncertainty about what counts as “good” communication and their use of perceived reliable guides such as templates and writing formulas.

Program-Level Concern: Artificial Intelligence

Challenges to the program’s SLOs especially became revealing with the arrival of public-use AI tools. AI platforms made clearer the gaps between the learning outcomes as a bar to be met, and student readiness to meet them. Among the downstream consequences are future professional problems for students, as technological agility is a non-negotiable skill

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for professional communicators. The industry itself perceives AI as a mixed blessing. Ellie Taylor (2025) recommends that professional communicators would do well to integrate AI into their communication teams and lean into abilities unique to humans: Sensitivity to context, ethical decision-making, and rhetorical analysis (para. 5–7). Parker Cook (2023) warns, however, that such advice “assumes that the writers [already] have the necessary editorial skills to bring their ChatGPT-generated work to a higher standard” (para. 4). Justin Salani and Mass Masona Tapfuma (2025), focusing on AI as a disruptive innovation in the publishing industry, explicitly argue that the technology should only be complementary to writing, editing and publishing work, as it does “not have [the] emotions, ethics, and moral sense that facilitate the achievement of desired effects in a piece of writing” (p. 11). AI may streamline some tasks and increase efficiency, but informed human oversight is essential so that communication practices result in contextually appropriate content, work that goes far beyond sentence-level correctness.

Specific competencies promoted by the program’s SLOs, especially rhetorical and contextual awareness, could guide how AI’s limitations are addressed. As such, students’ persistently reductive approaches to editing and writing become even more of a prospective liability. Professional communicators’ use of the technology must involve skills to elevate AI-generated content, so that it reflects the subtlety of its context. A study of ChatGPT by Ho Ling Kwok, Yining Shi, Han Xu, Dechao Li and Kanglong Liu (2025) shows that generative AI is less effective with culturally nuanced content like literary works (p. 2) and might not adjust its language style to specific genres, raising concerns about preserving authors’ voices and genre-specific style (p. 10, 11). Clémence Pasteur (2024) elaborates on limitations of the technology in editorial situations. One interviewed editor noted that AI’s “strict correctness” can “diminish the emotional and conversational aspects of a story,” which are important in engaging a reader and preventing content from seeming “offensive or taken out of context” (p. 78). Even more, AI’s known struggles with the “hallucination problem” (p. 28), whereby it creates ideas not based on any perceivable fact, also makes a critical human eye crucial while editing/writing. Unprepared communicators may labor to meet these realities of the profession in order to produce high-quality work, to the detriment of their careers and the content they edit/write.

Perhaps more problematic, AI’s homogenizing of language challenges the program SLOs’ emphasis on ethical decision-making, especially as inexperienced professional communicators may struggle to address issues of linguistic representation and marginalization when writing and editing. A lack of experience with adaptive communication can hinder the professional’s ability to effectively engage with and

professionally advocate for a variety of voices. Lately, the industry has turned some attention to representation not just in the content published but among the decisions behind the work. Amy Reading (2024) argues how editors' largely invisible work also can obscure a lack of representation, by hiding their gatekeeping role and enabling a lack of accountability for perpetuating a status quo. Chris Jackson (2017) believes that "representation" in the industry is treated as an abstract concept rather than a reality: "I don't think ... people get any pleasure from hearing me talk about this thing that doesn't exist... And yet we keep talking about this abstraction, this thing that doesn't exist, as if it could be conjured through the power of lectures and panel discussions" (p. 223). Keeping the topic of representation at the conceptual level slows communicators' and scholars' attempts to address it.

By necessitating a sophisticated level of ethical evaluation and revision when communicators edit/write content, AI's arrival did not cause, but did accelerate, a disconnect that in hindsight had been growing between the program's learning outcomes and students' mastery of them. Although I had designed and revised program SLOs and curricula as guided by writing studies research, tensions between the industry's current socio-cultural realities and students' response, for instance their persistent, decontextualized view of editing, showed the problems with treating writing and editing as separate or sequential acts. In that sense, the SLOs risk being only a series of administrative boxes to check rather than an integrated program vision.

CAS offers a framework to synthesize outcomes in rhetorical analysis, collaborative meaning-making, and editing/writing. This frame is an opportunity not to add new outcomes to the program but instead reconsider how they might be enacted through its courses, including the editing class, and increase students' preparedness for industry demands.

Introducing Critical Archival Studies into Professional and Technical Communication

A critical archival studies approach challenges traditional views of archiving as neutral, decontextualized work, i.e., simply moving content into storage. CAS is a recent addition to larger scholarship on archival studies (Berbesi & Tognoli, 2024) but had been nascently building through other research on knowledge work and community archiving (Caswell, Punzalan, & Sangwand, 2017). Andi Gustavson and Charlotte Nunes' (2023) review of this concept point especially to community archiving research as having demonstrated the need for archival critique, as community projects frequently would reveal the "gaps and

silences” of certain voices within community-driven archive projects (p. 8). A CAS approach actively intervenes into established archival practice by questioning decisions to preserve and disseminate certain voices and the contexts that supported those decisions, and by advocating for transparency in archival practices. The approach has been rapidly taken up by scholars and archival practitioners (Han, 2025) and now influences discussions about archiving within social sciences disciplines (Bach & Freund, 2024; Luft & Subotić, 2025), incarceration sites (Gustavson & Nunes, 2023; Overdorf, 2021), and academic contexts (Maurer, 2025; Robinson-Sweet, 2024), to name a few.

As CAS research has developed, its focus on power structures in archiving collaborations has crystalized the framework’s priorities, including a dedication to care, affect, political advocacy, and equitable relationships in archiving. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016), taking a feminist approach to promote an “ethics of care,” redefine the archivist’s role as having a “mutual affective responsibility” with others connected to archiving, such as those who create, use and are the subject of recorded material (p. 24). This emphasis on care challenges the idea of professional objectivity by paying attention to the human stakes involved during archival decision-making (p. 31). Other work from Cifor (2016) connects an ethic of care with affect theory, arguing that the archivist’s emotional responses to material are an influential part of decision-making. By emphasizing the role of emotion rather than encouraging archivists to distance themselves from it, the author argues that they can better recognize how reactions to material suggest its impact on users and possible ways it might be used (p. 12).

In turn, the value for emotion and ethical care advocated by CAS renders archival decisions a political act. Jarrett Drake (2016), arguing that the purpose of traditional archival practice “is to *curate* the past, not *confront* it” (para. 5; emphasis in original), describes how archival silences surrounding Black lives only proves that every act of material selection and its arrangement either reinforces or disrupts existing power structures. He contrasts conventional archival practice to what he believes it should be, “liberatory memory work” that regards each material record as a site for advocacy (para. 6). As such, with each record is an opportunity for archivists to include memories that historically have been left out. Similarly, CAS emphasizes how archiving relationships are political. T-Kay Sangwand’s (2018) work as a transnational archivist prompts her to use a “contributive justice” understanding of global collaborations among archivists. For the author, all stakeholders in an archival project have the responsibility to share in decision-making. To do otherwise only reproduces power imbalances and perpetuates silences in recorded memory (p. 2). Because the CAS framework intersects care, affect, advocacy,

and equitable collaboration as mutually supportive priorities, it leans into the ethical and political implications of textual work, by placing concerns about power and representation at the center.

Even as writing studies scholarship helped me frame the program's approach to communication acts as socially and rhetorically situated, still elusive was a fuller view of the ethical, affective, and power-laden dimensions of editorial labor. CAS can provide that approach, not by challenging other disciplinary scholarship but by expanding it; reframed as editing/writing via CAS, communication practice becomes revealed as cultural intervention as well as rhetorical negotiation. When seen through this approach, the case of L.M. Montgomery's journals becomes a specific example of how editorial decisions about her work were also writing actions that preserved, reshaped, and redefined cultural memory.

Critical Archival Studies and the Example of L.M. Montgomery

Over the past forty years, Montgomery's diaries have undergone two published versions: First as a series of *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, then as a series of *The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery*. In 1985, editors Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston published the first of what would be five selected volumes. The volumes span Montgomery's private writing between 1889 and 1942 and reveal a sometimes shockingly different persona from the fanciful, cheery characters she created. Throughout the volumes, the editors provide introductions and annotations that explain Montgomery's entries and offer readers a deeper understanding of her life and work. As subsequent volumes were released, however, a shift appeared in the editors' behind-the-scenes commentaries.

In the first volume, Rubio and Waterston primarily discuss Montgomery's literary value and her journals as a historical document, rather than her celebrity value as a globally known author. The second volume provides a more intimate look at her personal life, and the third volume greatly reveals Montgomery's rich introspective life. The fourth and fifth volumes turn more so toward the external. As a famous author and the wife of a minister, Montgomery faced repeated personal challenges and triumphs as a woman, mother, professional writer, and public figure. These were compounded by her husband's severe mental illness and Montgomery's own struggles with debilitating depression. In these final volumes of the journals, Rubio and Waterston also analyze how Montgomery's thoughts

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and reflections about her experiences occur alongside changing roles and expectations for women in the early 20th century (1985; 1987; 1992; 1998; 2004).

During the *Selected Journals*' 19-year publication timeline, Rubio and Waterston increasingly reveal not only the technical difficulties of editing Montgomery's prolific content but also the professional devaluing they faced as female scholars who were editing an author of children's literature, and a female one at that. Unsurprisingly, Volume I's introduction makes the case for recognizing Montgomery's contributions as intellectual and significant, and the editing work by extension as equally important: "Because the journals are so full and frank and cover such a long period, and because they are the work of a successful professional writer, they provide a degree of information, anecdote, and personal history that makes them unique in Canadian letters" (1985, p. xxiv)

Rubio and Waterston also take care to limit their editorial role by defining it as more of a custodial role, secondary in action compared to Montgomery's original texts. They comment that they had corrected the author's spelling for the sake of clarity, but left other errors intact to preserve authorial voice, such as Montgomery's increased use of slang over time. As they mention, "Either aging or a less formal society seem to have diminished Montgomery's earlier fastidiousness in language. She slips into contemporary slang: has 'the willies' or notes that a friend is 'a scream'" (p. xxv).

However, by Volume V's publication in 2004, the editors' introductions and their other published research alongside the journals were explicitly arguing that editorial work plays a key role in shaping an author's legacy and how different editions of a text can reflect evolving social and cultural values. Instead of describing their own editorial notes as static and subordinate metatexts, Rubio and Waterston define editing as a significant, changing influence, pointing out that the network of individuals and institutions involved in an editing project, not just its lead editors, generate iterative interpretations of a manuscript (Gammel & Lefebvre, 2016).

In terms of how CAS scholarship focuses on and intersects care, affect, political advocacy, and equitable archiving relationships, its priorities can expand socio-cultural understandings of text mediation such as those discussed by writing studies. That is, CAS offers a complementary expansion of writing studies' value for context, audience, and social engagement, by seeing text material not only as a passive socio-cultural artifact but also a result of deliberate socio-cultural intervention; an editor's decisions, however unwittingly, become recognized as acts of socio-cultural intervention along relational, affective, and political lines. As such, the L.M. Montgomery journal project becomes an example not only of changes to a manuscript but also changes in gender expectations,

trends in the publishing market, and most significantly the editors' decisions about the caretaking of the author's legacy. Montgomery's journals thus are revealed to be a demonstration of editing/writing in action, as the editing of each volume both (re)writes and preserves public memory and its role in societies and cultures.

Reconsidering the L.M. Montgomery Journals

At the beginning of *The Selected Journals* project, Rubio and Waterston were bound by funding logistics, often tied to prevailing views about gender. It was not until later in the project when the editors felt as if they could call out their professional constraints. During their work on the project within a pre-ebook economy, “[s]elected’ was the key word”—financial concerns and an unproven audience prompted edits that omitted a great deal of Montgomery's original content and tightened the journals' narrative (2012, p. ix). These business pressures were fueled by gendered pressures. Rubio (2001) recalls one grant assessor dismissing the proposed Montgomery project as “lack[ing] discrimination,” which in that context was a coded way of expressing skepticism about popular women's writing and its audiences (pp. 52–53). Those views dissuaded the editors from taking greater risks with their decisions, instead editing toward a coherent, single-focus narrative that would demonstrate the journals' value according to prevailing literary criticism beliefs. While a writing studies reading of the editors' situation would emphasize the intersections of audience, socio-cultural norms, and genre, CAS adds to this emphasis to show the editors' decisions as political efforts to legitimize Montgomery, occurring in an atmosphere where cultural legitimacy was unequally recognized.

As financial support, technology, and academic attitudes changed during *The Selected Journals* and into *The Complete Journals* projects, Rubio and Waterston's decisions gained some latitude. The *Complete* series introduced meta narratives via the inclusion of diaries by Montgomery's friend Nora Lefurgey Campbell and relative Charles Macneill, loosening the *Selected* journals' tighter narrative by showing how a community of voices shaped Montgomery's work. These decisions on the *Complete* volumes did not merely add content to the *Selected* volumes; during the course of the two projects, Rubio and Waterston were increasingly able to signal their care for, not just custody of, Montgomery, by editing/writing the boundaries of the author's life and allowing it to be revealed as humanly messy.

CAS helps to name the qualitative factors underlying the more obvious changes in the editors' decisions. Caswell and Cifor's (2016) ethics of care emphasizes how archival responsibility includes a sense of mutual obligation to all creators and subjects involved in a commemorative project (pp. 24–25). Rubio and Waterston's editing/(re)writing of their

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previous work on the journals signal their awareness of this responsibility. By more widely contextualizing Montgomery's voice via their later decisions, the editors enabled a richer legacy of the author and her community to exist in public memory.

It is not an overstatement that the effects of the journal projects were wide and profound. The *Selected* volumes directly led to the launch of the L.M. Montgomery Institute and a biennial global conference (LMMI, 2025). These and many other resulting scholarly events and publications became a feedback loop where each piece of research created an audience as much as satisfied a fan base. Irene Gammel's (2008) investigations into Montgomery's legacy reveal how as an act, the recursive edited/written mediation of Montgomery's content itself is a cultural text, reminiscent of Jerome McGann's call to see the history of a text's iterations as much a subject of inquiry as the actual text in question (1991). By *editing* repeated versions of a text, an editor also *re/writes* its social role and impact. Later published volumes of Montgomery's work further echo Drake's demand that archiving be intervening liberatory memory work, not just a single-perception record of what happened (2016, n. p.). Ultimately, the overall evolution of the journal projects and their tremendous impact echoes Sangwand's (2018) concept of "contributive justice;" the Montgomery editorial network came to share the authority to interpret the author, as it broadened to include other scholars, Montgomery fans, and community knowledge from the several locations where Montgomery lived.

Revising the Editing Course through CAS

Bringing together writing studies' contributions with a CAS approach explains Rubio and Waterston's journey with Montgomery's content, resulting in an example of editing/writing that in turn can inspire my administrative decision-making for the larger professional and technical writing program. Writing studies scholarship had guided the curricula, for instance, with the goal of helping students move past the idea of editing as basic error correction and think of their work as rhetorically situated and socially embedded. Nonetheless, my students persisted in seeing editing as an activity that only follows and "cleans up" previously written content, a tendency that has accrued greater urgency in the wake of recent historical swerves, especially technological. The CAS-reframed Montgomery project suggests that I might revise program curricula to approach editing as *editing/writing*, a relational, affective, and political action whereby editing decisions write (and even overwrite) cultural memory. The comprehensive reconsideration of editing work in turn would impact all of the editing course's content, from workshops to assignment components to topic guides during class discussions, as described below.

Memos and Project Logs as Intervention Documentation

CAS's focus on intervention has implications for the memo and project log components of the Editing a Creative Manuscript assignment. A writing studies' influence had meant these documents were cast in the editing course primarily as reflective opportunities; students were expected to justify their decisions in terms of audience expectations and genre conventions (Miller, 1984). A CAS extension of this influence suggests that the memos and logs might be seen not only as justifying documents between teacher and student but also as archival commentaries, in that a student has consciously intervened into a manuscript project through editorial decisions. Just as Drake (2016) argues that memory workers must confront how their decisions reinforce or disrupt power structures, Rubio and Waterston eventually were able to reveal and question the gendered and market pressures during their early work on Montgomery's *Selected Journals*. In that vein, I could ask students to account in their memos how their choices meant that certain ideas in their assignments' manuscripts would be preserved, reframed, or even erased.

Class Projects as Questions about Authority

Given how the revised memo assignment emphasizes a student editor's interventions, the editing projects assigned throughout the course raise the question of how authority plays a role in the work. The editing course curriculum already treated the projects, which involved actual manuscripts rather than hypothetical scenarios, as writing studies-defined distributed work between students and authors (Spinuzzi, 2003). CAS enriches this approach by prioritizing authority when looking at distributed work relationships. Sangwand's (2018) notion of contributive justice makes explicit the power dynamic of shared authorship, as she argues that all stakeholders in an archival project should contribute to the decision-making. Her call for equitable labor recalls the growing influence of Montgomery scholars' work after publication of the initial *Selected Journals*, and Rubio and Waterston's increasing inclusion of both that scholarship and the fandom world of Montgomery's dedicated followers (Rubio, 2001). In the editing class, the CAS-reframed projects should ask not only how students are collaborating with their authors but also who has (and should have) the power to decide a published version of a manuscript.

Table 1 itemizes my revisions to a CAS-extended editing curriculum. During this reconsideration, mapping CAS onto writing studies' previous influence is not a case of simply adding on, but a more comprehensive response to my students' needs in the face of their persistent struggles and recent scholarly, social, and technological swerves.

Table 1. Impact of CAS-Inspired Revisions at the Class Level

Editing Course's Original Assignment/Activity	Writing Studies Influence	CAS Extensions
Memos and project logs	Focus on rhetorical situation and genre; communication as a power artifact	Editing as a deliberate intervention into how memory is represented; transparency of decisions to indicate editorial care
Class projects as focusing on issues of authorship	Collaboration as an act of distributed authorship between editors and writers	Shared authority as justice and shared decision-making as contributive justice

The implications of this curricular redesign extend beyond the editing course. Because the class operates within a small professional and technical writing program that must address all things communication through a variety of curricula, the course's CAS reframe would not be successful if it occurred in isolation from the larger program.

Reconsidering the Larger Program: Take-Aways and Future Directions

Writing studies has long grounded the program's SLOs in rhetorical awareness, collaboration, and responsiveness to socio-cultural context, and these should remain priorities. CAS, meanwhile, emphasizes these priorities first as values-laden and tied to issues of power, cultural memory, and intervention. Revising the editing course curriculum consequently raises a challenge for the larger program: Ensuring that students graduate not only as skilled communicators but also attentive to the qualitative, high stakes in their future tangible digital and archival work.

Memory Work through Reflection Work

While the editing-or-writing binary has always been resisted at the assignment level, there has been silence regarding the political and ethical stakes of fusing editing and writing at the program level. Specifically, if one class is going to act as a site where editing is memory work as discussed earlier, then programmatic consistency requires me to confront how the larger program is encouraging students to emphasize, revise, and even erase. In writing studies scholarship, students' acts of student reflection have been studied and described

as the result of heightened rhetorical awareness and a sensitivity to context (e.g., Nowacek, 2011). But reflections that students are asked to make should move beyond reporting reactions to also comment on the ripple effect of their work.

That is, when students perform any reflection throughout the program's courses, it is important to ask how they regard themselves through their decisions, i.e., as neutral actors or as participants in cultural memory work. The project logs, which are assigned not just in the editing course but across all the program's upper-level courses, for instance should involve questioning the tools used such as publication layout software. Doing so recognizes how certain memory work becomes legitimized through instruments that perpetuate and challenge. Importantly, these questions are not ones to merely be handled during project logs or class discussions, but rather threaded through the program's entire stance, in order to help students spot the force of their editing/writing work.

Peer Workshopping as Care

Workshopping in the program had followed writing studies' emphasis on collaboration and mediated networks (Spinuzzi, 2007). CAS adds a dimension to this approach by defining workshopping of program assignments as a care action, aligning with Caswell and Cifor (2016)'s argument that anyone involved in the preservation of content has a "mutual affective responsibility" toward content creators and subjects. Put another way, the program should focus on humans as much as their creations. Collaboration, whether between student editors and authors in the editing class, or among students during peer workshopping across all program courses, is a negotiation of power through authority.

In addition, Cifor's (2016) focus on an archivist's emotional disposition toward the content is a reminder that draft analyses should focus on every decision as an ethical one. Rubio and Waterston, for instance, moved from a sense of custodianship to an "ethics of care" orientation during their work on *The Complete Journals*, by inviting an increasing number of voices into the journal content that had been previously excluded in the *Selected* volumes. Throughout the program's courses, peer workshopping actions could be deliberately seen as having the potential to amplify and sustain certain voices (and the risk of doing so at the expense of others).

Class Projects as Questions about Affect

Issues of authority and constraints during editing/writing, as revealed by socio-culturally contextualizing and analyzing the work, may not account for the entire picture, however. CAS brings the question of affect into acts of rhetorical analysis, with Cifor (2016) even

linking archivists’ awareness of their emotions directly to ethical responsibility. Much like Rubio and Waterston’s increasing ability to admit their personal dispositions as their work on Montgomery continued and her public memory evolved with each volume’s publication, the program’s SLOs should encourage students to mull how their affective responses to their decisions are not distractions from the work but flags about their ethical responsibility toward it.

Class Projects as Interrogations of Technology

The question of authority is made even further complicated when considering the implications of using AI and other technology. The “social justice turn” in writing studies scholarship has generated important discussions about justice when looking at inequities in the creation, design and use of content (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019). CAS elaborates by showing how AI generation is an intervention with socio-cultural and ethical consequences. Just as Rubio and Waterston had to negotiate between the factors that inhibited them with the *Selected* volumes versus their increased technological ability to intervene with the *Complete* volumes, the program’s courses should focus on how AI interventions may amplify some points of view and render others invisible—and the ethical oversight required when an editor/writer must make those complicated decisions.

Table 2. Impact of CAS-Inspired Curricular Revisions at the Program Level

Program Methods and Topics	Writing Studies Influence	CAS Extensions
Acts of reflection	Documentation of editor/writer’s decisions during the creation process	Editing/writing process as a socio-cultural act reshaping cultural memory and voices represented
Peer workshopping	How socio-cultural networks shape meaning during collaborations	“Ethics of care” as shared obligation and responsibility among all stakeholders (not only editor/writers) in memory work
Editor/writer authority	Editor/writer awareness of each communication act’s rhetorical situation	Affect as a key component of editing/writing decisions; care-focused reflection as ethically necessary
Interrogations of technology	Editing/writing as shaped by technological systems; critique of inequities in digital design and usage of content	Digital (including AI) tools as socio-cultural interventions and thus with ethical consequences

Table 2 itemizes my CAS-elaborated rethinking of the professional and technical writing program. Again, mapping CAS onto writing studies' guidance is not an effort at replacement, but an extension of the program mission as embodied by its SLOs.

Final Thoughts

If a professional and technical writing program can be CAS-reframed not as curricula where writing “ends” and editing “begins,” but rather how fused editing/writing is an opportunity to be accountable, all of us administrating, teaching, and researching in such programs may increasingly appreciate how awareness is insufficient if responsibility is not also named. Because students in our programs already are learning to contextualize their work rhetorically, we can walk them toward seeing themselves insofar as they shape the memories living within those contexts. It is an expanded approach to administration and pedagogy that goes beyond instrumentalist strategies for making students more ethically workforce-ready.

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Leveraging AI for Data-Informed Resume Writing: A Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract AI-enabled applicant tracking systems (ATS) increasingly mediate how resumes are evaluated, requiring technical and professional writing (TPW) programs to prepare students for both human and algorithmic readers. This article presents a framework for teaching data-informed resume-writing that integrates web scraping and large language model (LLM)-supported analysis. In a case study in an undergraduate technical writing course, the author examines how students used that framework to analyze job descriptions and employ AI tools ethically during revision. Findings suggest the framework strengthens students' AI literacies and supports more strategic, audience-centered resume design that accounts for both human and AI users of resumes.

Keywords resume, AI, applicant tracking system, pedagogy

In today's job market, resumes often must pass through increasingly sophisticated AI-driven systems before they reach human reviewers. While Pew research data shows that people tend to feel uneasy about AI's role in hiring and employee evaluation (Raine et al., 2023), the reality is that AI-enabled Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) are used by many employers to sort, rank, and filter candidates. Exact numbers regarding how many companies use AI in the hiring process vary, with some sources claiming that up to 99% of companies use AI in some capacity (Schellmann, 2024). Regardless of the exact number, the presence of AI in the hiring process continues to grow as we move further into the AI age. As technical communication faculty, we must prepare students not only for the human audience of their resumes, as we have done so well for decades, but also for the algorithmic systems that now act as gatekeepers.

The resume is already a central and widely taught component of technical and professional writing (TPW) courses. In a national survey of 154 instructors across a wide range of US institutions, Sarah Read and Michael Michaud (2018) found that over two-thirds of those surveyed include professional development genres like resumes and cover letters in their curriculum, and nearly all courses rely on genre-based frameworks as a key

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learning outcome. Other scholars have studied the pedagogy of the genre, including interrogations of how professionalism is constructed and taught in resume assignments (Racelis, 2024; Randazzo, 2024), as well as examinations of how nontraditional students' prior work experience can reshape instructional approaches to professional documents (Quick, 2012). Despite the prevalence of this genre in our curriculum, current pedagogy often overlooks the growing role of AI in the job search process. For instance, Kathryn Lookadoo and Sarah Moore's 2024 study highlights a significant inconsistency in how AI-driven ATS are addressed in textbooks, with many overlooking or ignoring the ATS altogether (Lookadoo & Moore, 2024). This inconsistency seems to support the conclusions of the students from Chalice Randazzo's 2016 study on resume pedagogy, in which students perceived professors as unreliable sources of information about job documents.

This paper aims to address this gap by proposing a pedagogical framework, which could be used as one large assignment or divided into smaller assignments, for teaching data-informed resume writing using large language models (LLMs). The proposed framework utilizes a web scraping methodology, which not only helps students craft more targeted and effective resumes but also equips them with essential AI literacies that are applicable across various professional contexts. The paper concludes with a short case study implementation of the framework in a course titled ENGL 3303: Introduction to Technical Writing, which illustrates how the approach supported students' ability to make more intentional, data-driven rhetorical decisions in their resume drafts.

Literature Review

As AI is increasingly used to mediate how candidates are evaluated, writing a resume has become more than a matter of presentation; it is now a site of algorithmic negotiation. To prepare students for this new terrain, educators must first understand the tensions and transformations reshaping the hiring process.

AI in the Hiring Process

The use of AI in hiring processes has elicited a wide range of reactions, from resistance to acceptance, complicating efforts to prepare students effectively for this evolving landscape. Christine Malin and others (2023) found that HR professionals hesitated to adopt AI due to ethical concerns and competing "manual" versus "automatic" beliefs about AI's capabilities, though both groups cited high costs and unclear benefits as barriers. Conversely, Damian Canagasuriam and Eden-Ray Lukacik (2024) documented the growing normalization of AI-assisted asynchronous interviews, noting that applicants

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who used ChatGPT performed better but were still viewed as “cheating,” highlighting ongoing tensions around fairness and authenticity in AI-mediated hiring.

Ishita Chakraborty and others (2024) offered yet another view, showing that AI-human hybrid models in video interview analysis improved hiring outcomes by enhancing workforce quality up to 67%. These hybrid hiring models integrated posture modeling, conversational analysis, and LLMs, demonstrating that the use of AI, when paired with human judgment, can boost efficiency and broaden access to talent. The success of hybrid approaches suggests why companies are increasingly relying on AI in the hiring process, and why educators must adapt quickly to help students develop critical AI literacies for this landscape.

Pedagogy for Critical AI Literacy

Pedagogical literature across disciplines increasingly urges educators to emphasize critical AI literacies to prepare students for emerging workplace and civic contexts. From a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) perspective, Siu-Cheung Kong and others (2024) argued that learners must develop the ability to collaborate with AI, evaluate outputs critically, and adapt in changing environments. Drawing on rhetoric, composition theory, and technical writing, Stuart Selber (2024) complicated these views by showing how earlier calls to “forget technology, remember literacy” (Selfe, 1988, p. 69) risk framing literacy as neutral and one-directional. Instead, Selber positioned AI literacy as dialogic, an opportunity to reassess norms and reimagine programmatic practices. Although grounded in different disciplinary traditions, both perspectives emphasize that AI instruction must move beyond functional tool use and instead cultivate critical AI literacies.

Scholars looking at more nuanced integrations of AI into TPW curricula have begun identifying the programmatic and pedagogical foundations needed to prepare students for an AI-mediated workplace. Jason Tham and others (2022) argued that AI integration is not an optional enhancement but a programmatic imperative requiring new literacies grounded in data-driven practice and an expanded understanding of human and nonhuman agency. Their work emphasizes that emerging systems distribute agency across humans, interfaces, and automated processes, highlighting the need for students to interpret, design, and ethically navigate these hybrid environments. Selber (2024) extended this argument by noting that the use of AI rarely reduces labor and instead shifts work to other stages of the writing process, making human judgment and rhetorical awareness even more essential. He further contended that students must now know more (not less)

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about technical communication to use AI effectively, particularly in genres where usability, accuracy, and safety are paramount.

The integration of AI critical literacies into the TPW classroom, however, can be fraught with complexity. Peter Cardon and others (2023) noted that while instructors recognize AI's potential to improve efficiency in professional writing and communication, they also express concerns about diminished critical thinking, weakened authenticity, and threats to academic integrity. These concerns underscore the need for instructional strategies that help students engage with AI ethically and thoughtfully. In resume pedagogy specifically, where AI tools can directly shape how students construct professional identities, Timothy Ponce (2024) found that prompt construction plays a central role in AI-generated resume quality. High-confidence prompts produced more tailored and compelling resumes, whereas low-confidence prompts yielded generic results, reinforcing the importance of teaching students to prompt strategically and collaborate with AI intentionally.

Given the complexities of AI integration into hiring practices and the pedagogical challenges it creates, there is a clear need for approaches that both prepare students to navigate these realities and help them leverage AI's potential in a job market filled with AI-enabled ATS. Resume pedagogy offers a particularly powerful site for this work, as it combines a widely taught professional genre with the very technologies reshaping how candidates are evaluated.

Teaching Data-Informed Resume Writing

Building on the understanding of AI's impact on hiring practices, this section introduces a pedagogical framework designed to teach students how to create data-informed resumes by leveraging generative AI, specifically LLMs. A data-informed resume is one that goes beyond generic descriptions of skills and experiences, using insights derived from relevant data to ensure alignment with current job market trends, employer expectations, and industry-specific requirements. This framework emphasizes the concept of text as data, treating resume content and job descriptions as datasets that can be analyzed and refined through AI tools.

This pedagogical approach to teaching data-informed resumes can be broken down into four parts:

1. Understand text as structured data
2. Apply web scraping techniques to gather relevant data
3. Analyze the data using LLMs
4. Create or update resumes based on findings

Text as Data

In the context of AI-driven hiring practices, understanding how text functions as data is crucial for effectively teaching students to create data-informed resumes. When introducing the concept of data, students are provided with the following working definition:

Data is any collection of information that can be systematically recorded, organized, and analyzed to extract meaning and insights. This can include numbers, words, images, or any other kind of information that can be interpreted.

Therefore, text, much like the numerical information students often recognize as data, can be treated as structured data that can be systematically analyzed to extract insights. “Text as data” refers to breaking down language into meaningful components (e.g., words, phrases, sentence structures) that reveal trends across documents. This perspective helps students view job postings as datasets that can be mined to guide resume decisions.

Understanding text as data also supports students’ comprehension of how LLMs function. LLMs process text by tokenizing it into smaller units (Rajaraman et al., 2024) and learning patterns across billions of such tokens. By recognizing that LLMs analyze text as structured data, students can more effectively use these tools to identify linguistic patterns across job postings and refine resume language accordingly. This approach helps align resumes with employer expectations and improves their suitability for AI-enabled screening systems.

Web Scraping to Gather Job Data

Next, this section introduces students to the process of gathering job-posting data through web scraping, which is critical for understanding the skills, qualifications, and experiences employers seek in their respective fields. The discussion outlines how students can gather relevant data, as well as how to clean and code it for easy accessibility by the LLM, an essential step that is often overlooked by students and novice users. Ethical considerations associated with web scraping are also briefly addressed.

Scraping the Data

To help students align their resumes with industry requirements, the process begins by guiding them in gathering job postings that reflect their career interests. The following steps outline how educators can facilitate this process, ensuring that students effectively identify, collect, and organize these postings for subsequent cleaning and coding.

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1. **Identify career interests:** Have the student begin by identifying job postings that match their general career interests. Have them think about broader roles that align with a field, such as “Marketing Coordinator,” “Software Developer,” or “HR Specialist.”
2. **Navigate to a career website:** Have them go to a popular career website, such as Indeed, LinkedIn, or Glassdoor.
3. **Search for relevant job postings:** Use the search function to enter job titles aligned with the career focus. Apply filters to focus on broader categories (e.g., entry-level, industry) without narrowing by specific locations. For this kind of task, we are more focused on the text data rather than location restrictions.
4. **Select relevant job postings:** Once they find relevant job postings, have them read through them carefully, focusing on sections that list skills, qualifications, and responsibilities.
5. **Copy job posting content:** If the post is determined to be relevant, highlight and copy the entire job posting, making sure to include details on required skills, qualifications, and responsibilities.
6. **Save to a document:** Paste the copied content into a Word document, Google Doc, or plain text editor (such as Notepad or TextEdit). Keep multiple job postings in one organized document for easy comparison and analysis.
7. **Gather multiple postings:** Aim to collect several postings—ideally between 30–50 job postings—from different companies and sectors to capture a diverse set of hard and soft skills commonly sought after in the student’s desired roles.

Cleaning and Coding the Data

Once job postings are gathered, the next step involves cleaning and structuring the data to prepare it for LLM analysis. This involves the following:

1. **Cleaning the data:** When copying job postings from career websites into a text file, formatting issues like extra line breaks, bold text, or unexpected fonts may be pulled in as well. Students will need to remove this extraneous formatting to ensure consistency. In Word or Google Docs, students can use the “Clear Formatting” feature to simplify the text and remove any hidden elements that could potentially interfere with analysis.
2. **Adding structure with tags:** After cleaning, students will organize their data using simple XML-style tags. For instance, they will insert open and close tags around each job posting (e.g., <job#> and </job#>). This helps the AI tool identify and analyze each job listing as a separate unit. Tagging provides clarity, making it easier for AI tools to process multiple postings without lost meaning, ultimately leading to more precise outputs.

The steps of cleaning and coding the data are vital for getting the most relevant analysis out of an LLM, especially when dealing with textual data like job descriptions. Tags create

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clear boundaries between postings, allowing the AI to accurately assess each individual job listing for its skills, requirements, qualifications, and other relevant attributes. Without structure, the AI might mix up content from different postings, leading to inaccurate or misleading analysis. Likewise, data that contains excess formatting can also throw off the ability of an LLM to provide an accurate analysis. Cleaning and structuring the data in this way ensures that students can derive meaningful insights from the job postings, which in turn allows them to make informed decisions when updating their resumes.

Ethical Considerations of Web Scraping

Web scraping, while a valuable tool for gathering publicly available data, comes with ethical challenges that educators must address with their students. It is important to consider issues of privacy, legal compliance, and the impact on website functionality. Even though data might be accessible, this does not always mean it is ethically permissible to scrape and use it without caution.

One useful framework for approaching these challenges is “algorithmic thinking in the public interest” (Luscombe et al., 2022, p. 1023). This concept encourages ethical decision-making by balancing the need for data collection with public responsibility, transparency, and respect for privacy. Students should be guided to respect website terms of service, avoid collecting personal identifiers, and understand the broader implications of their data collection activities. Emphasizing these ethical considerations helps ensure that the use of web scraping remains responsible and aligned with ethical best practices.

Analyze the Data Using LLMs

Next, this section explains how to guide students in using LLMs to analyze the job data they have gathered. This process helps students extract key skills, qualifications, and attributes that employers seek in their industry, enabling them to create resumes that align closely with market expectations while also developing AI literacies applicable in a range of professional contexts.

Step 1: Setting Clear Objectives for Analysis

Before starting with any AI analysis, encourage students to reflect on what they want to learn from the data they have gathered. Here are some guiding questions they can use:

1. What are the most commonly required skills in these job postings?
2. Are there specific qualifications or certifications that frequently recur?

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3. What key language or phrases do employers use to describe roles in this industry?
4. Are there particular tools or technical skills that are emphasized across multiple postings?

These reflective questions help students direct their AI analysis toward extracting the most valuable information for updating their resumes. Importantly, note how this process begins with their own analysis of the data before ever engaging the LLM, encouraging them not to assume that the AI-generated output is the only correct answer. By comparing their initial analysis to the AI's results, they may uncover differences that warrant further investigation.

Step 2: Inputting Data into an AI Tool

Once the students have clear objectives, they can begin analyzing the job posts. They should start a new session with an AI tool like ChatGPT or any available LLM and paste their cleaned, tagged job postings into the chat. Provide a prompt to help focus the AI's analysis, such as the following:

I have collected job postings for roles I am interested in. Please analyze this text to identify the most commonly required skills, qualifications, and attributes across these postings. Additionally, highlight any key patterns in the language employers use to describe these roles. [paste job posts]

This prompt guides the AI toward extracting the insights needed to refine the resume effectively.

Step 3: Asking Follow-Up Questions to Deepen Analysis

Encourage students to ask at least three follow-up questions to gather deeper insights into the data they have collected. Examples of follow-up questions include:

1. What are the most frequently mentioned skills or qualifications in these job postings?
2. How does the language and tone vary between higher-level and entry-level positions?
3. Which certifications, technical tools, or software are mentioned most often?

These questions will help students drill down into the details, enabling them to create a well-targeted resume that directly addresses what employers are seeking. Additionally, this process prepares them to consider the professional development they may need both immediately and in the future if they continue along their intended career path.

Step 4: Saving and Organizing the AI's Outputs

Once the LLM has provided responses, students should be sure to copy, save, and organize the content. It may be helpful to categorize the outputs into sections like “Key Skills,” “Qualifications,” and “Commonly Used Language.” This organization will allow them to effectively refer to these insights as they begin updating their resumes.

Step 5: Interpreting and Applying the Data

Now that the students have gathered results from the AI, it is important to take time to interpret these results. The goal is to translate the findings into actionable content for their resumes. Students should ask themselves:

1. Which trends and skills are most relevant to the job roles I am aiming for?
2. Which qualifications do I possess that align well with what is being sought by employers?
3. Are there any skills or qualifications that are frequently mentioned but missing from my experience?

This kind of reflective exercise asks students to think critically about AI outputs, ensuring their resumes not only reflect the findings in the data but do so in a thoughtful and critical way. This kind of reflective exercise helps students foster AI critical literacy by developing a practice of questioning and evaluating AI-generated content to maintain control over how it impacts their final output.

Create or Update Resumes Based on Findings

With a solid understanding of the key skills and qualifications required in their field, students can now harness the power of AI to craft a resume that effectively highlights these attributes. Whether they have an existing resume that needs improvement or are starting from scratch, AI can be used to refine and optimize the content to align with current job market expectations.

While AI tools can generate resumes from scratch, the two approaches offered below assume that students are beginning with an existing resume draft, allowing AI to provide targeted feedback or assist with rewriting key sections. Modifying an existing draft is emphasized because there is significant value in initially creating a resume independently. This process encourages students to think about their skills holistically without the influence of an LLM's interpretation of their professional experience. The two approaches below focus on partnering with AI in the writing process, utilizing a “human in the loop”

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model in which the user reflects upon and interacts with AI output at each stage of the multi-part exchange (Anders, 2024).

Approach 1: AI as a Review and Feedback Tool

In this first approach, the AI appears as a coach for students, offering suggestions to enhance their existing resume drafts in light of their gathered data. Here's how to help students use AI in this capacity:

1. **Input the resume draft:** Students should begin by copying and pasting their current resume draft into an AI tool like ChatGPT. They can provide context to the AI by mentioning the specific skills and qualifications they have identified through their job posting analysis. **Example prompt:** *“Here is my current resume draft. Based on my analysis of job postings, employers are looking for skills like project management, content creation, and technical writing. Can you review my resume and suggest how I can highlight these skills more effectively?”*
2. **Request specific suggestions:** Once the AI has reviewed their resume, students should reflect upon the initial review and ask for targeted suggestions to strengthen particular sections based upon the initial review. Encourage them to be specific about which parts need work, such as their “Professional Experience” or “Skills” sections. **Example prompt:** *“Can you suggest ways to improve my Professional Experience section to better highlight my project management and content creation skills?”*
3. **Review and revise the feedback:** Students must critically assess the AI's feedback from both initial review and the specific follow-up questions to decide which suggestions make sense in the context of their unique experiences. This is important because AI-generated suggestions need to be curated to ensure they accurately reflect the student's professional background and goals.

Approach 2: AI as a Rewriting Tool

In the second approach, students can deploy a more AI-centered, data-driven tactic by using AI to rewrite sections of their resume in ways that better align with the job market trends they identified.

1. **Provide context for rewriting:** Students should start by giving the AI clear instructions for what they want rewritten, specifying the skills or experiences they need highlighted based on their data analysis. **Example prompt:** *“I collected 30 job postings for jobs that interested me. Here is what I found when analyzing those postings. [insert relevant findings] Could you help rewrite the Professional Experience section of my resume to emphasize the most common hard and soft skills I found in the data? Here is my current Professional Experience section. [insert resume section]”*

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- 2. Review AI's suggestions for accuracy:** The AI will then generate revised content based on the prompt provided. It may modify bullet points, enhance descriptions, or suggest alternative phrasing. Remind students that they need to verify the AI's suggestions to avoid inaccuracies or exaggerations. **Example AI response:** *“Coordinated cross-functional projects to ensure adherence to deadlines, improving the team’s on-time delivery rate by 20%. Developed user manuals and technical documents, simplifying complex processes for end users.”*
- 3. Final refinement:** The AI's content should serve as a foundation, but students must personalize it. They need to make final adjustments to ensure the resume accurately reflects their experience and maintains a professional tone that aligns with their career goals and personal brand.

Important Considerations for Both Approaches

While LLMs can help align resume content with job descriptions, students must be mindful of key considerations when using artificial intelligence for this type of work. The following list, though not exhaustive, provides a useful starting point to encourage students to think critically about the use of AI and its role in resume writing.

- 1. Always review AI-generated content:** Encourage students to carefully review every piece of AI-generated text. AI can sometimes misunderstand context or introduce inaccuracies. A thorough review ensures that the final resume accurately reflects the student's skills and experience.
- 2. Tailor AI's suggestions to the individual:** The AI's recommendations are often general and may not capture the unique elements of a student's background. Remind students to make adjustments to ensure the final resume represents their individuality and lived experience.
- 3. Balancing AI assistance with the personal touch:** While AI can enhance a resume's clarity, structure, and emphasis on key skills, it is important for the resume to retain the personal element that sets the candidate apart. Students should use AI to polish and refine their resume, but ultimately ensure it reflects their own voice. The former will help them get past the AI, while the latter will appeal to the human reader on the other side of the ATS.

By keeping in mind these considerations, students can more successfully leverage generative LMM tools to create resumes that are well-tailored to the expectations of employers, helping them stand out in an AI-driven hiring environment.

Case Study Pilot

Although this assignment has been taught for three semesters, the experimental data for this pilot case study was collected in once section of ENGL 3303: Introduction to Technical Writing at Texas State University in fall 2025. The data collection was approved by the

institution's IRB (IRB #10435). Due to limited student response to the consent process, the experimental data pool only contains responses from three (n=3) participants. To supplement this low number of participants, the author offers his own reflection of teaching the assignment for the past three semesters.

Experimental Methodology

Participants were recruited from a pool of 25 enrolled students, all over the age of 18 and taking the course in an asynchronous online format. After students completed and received grades on the resume assignment and its associated reflection, the researcher sent a recruitment email inviting them to voluntarily participate by allowing the researcher to qualitatively analyze their submitted reflections. No compensation was offered for participation. During the consent window, three (n=3) students agreed to have their data used as part of this study.

Before analysis, the researcher removed all identifying information from each reflection. This included names, email addresses, or any personally identifying references students may have included. The subsequent thematic analysis was guided directly by the two student learning outcomes associated with the resume assignment:

- **Analyze job descriptions for data-driven targeting:** Students will be able to analyze job descriptions to identify key skills, qualifications, and language patterns that inform the development of tailored resumes for semi-technical audiences.
- **Use AI tools ethically in the resume-writing process:** Students will be able to responsibly integrate AI tools into their resume-writing process to support drafting and revision while maintaining ethical human oversight and ensuring accuracy, clarity, and specificity.

Using these outcomes as an interpretive frame, the researcher coded the de-identified reflections to determine how students in the experimental pool described their ability to gather and analyze job posting data, how they interpreted responses generated by LLMs, and how they negotiated the relationship between AI-supported analysis and their own rhetorical decision-making during resume revision.

Results

Using specific elements of the framework to guide their logic, students in the experimental pool clearly articulated critical reflections that show how the assignment supported the two resume-focused student learning outcomes (SLOs).

SLO 1: Analyze Job Descriptions for Data-Driven Targeting

Across the three reflections, students consistently described a shift from seeing the resume as a chronological list of experiences to viewing it as a strategic, data-informed document. Many explicitly framed the resume as “a form of technical communication” that must communicate complex information clearly to both human recruiters and AI systems, and students reported using job descriptions as datasets.

A common pattern involved identifying recurring competencies across the large, scraped data set and then reorganizing or rewriting their resumes to foreground those skills. All students noted moving technical skills sections closer to the top of the document, revising bullet points to emphasize measurable outcomes, and highlighting specific tools named in postings. One student majoring in construction science management, for instance, described resume writing as “problem-solving, figuring out how to present data [...] in a way that matches what employers want.” Students contrasted this approach with previous practices in which they “would’ve just written down everything [they have] done without much strategy” and now recognized the resume as a targeted argument that pulls on data to direct rhetorical choices rather than a neutral record.

Some students also demonstrated emerging awareness of audience segmentation within semi-technical audiences. They recognized that hiring managers and ATS each privilege different kinds of rhetorical signals, and they attempted to design resumes that remained readable for humans while being legible to automated systems. For instance, one student explained that they wanted the document “to make sense for both people and computer systems without sounding like [they were] trying too hard.” Overall, the reflections suggest that students were not only able to identify patterns in job descriptions at scale through the large number of jobs scraped but also to use those patterns to make more intentional rhetorical decisions about how to represent their skills and experiences.

SLO 2: Use AI Tools Ethically in the Resume-Writing Process

All students reported using AI tools at some point in their reflection, and almost all specifically framed these tools as assistants rather than replacements. Students used AI to rephrase bullet points, improve grammar and clarity, suggest stronger action verbs, standardize formatting, and condense or reorganize text. Several also discussed their approach to AI analysis of the scraped dataset, asking the AI to summarize multiple job postings, extract common skills, or generate checklists of qualifications that could then inform their drafting or revision of the resume.

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At the same time, ethical concerns were a recurring theme in the reflections. Students repeatedly emphasized that their resumes needed to remain accurate and authentic. They described rereading every AI-generated suggestion, editing wording to sound more like their own voice, and rejecting any content that exaggerated or misrepresented their experience. One student summarized this stance by noting that AI “should be used as a tool instead of abusing it and making it do the work.” Another emphasized that, although AI helped with grammar and layout, “the ideas and words stayed my own.” These reflections highlight a conscious effort to keep human judgment at the center of the writing process.

Interestingly, while students most often talked about this ethical stance on AI in context of the resume assignment, they also extended their discussion beyond the immediate assignment. Students connected ethical AI use in resume writing to broader professional responsibilities, especially in high-stakes domains. For example, stated that overreliance on AI could “lead to laziness and having no thought process on [their] own,” a risk they wanted to avoid in future professional writing. Collectively, the reflections indicate that students not only used AI tools to support drafting and revision but also developed a clear sense of what responsible AI integration looks like in professional communication contexts, balancing efficiency with honesty, personal accountability, and control over final decisions.

Reflection

In addition to the student reflections analyzed in this pilot, teaching this assignment across three semesters has provided important instructional insights into how students engage with data-informed resume writing and AI-supported revision. Because the assignment is embedded within a resume assignment that carries immediate professional relevance, students often approach the work with a level of seriousness and investment that differs from other course assignments. This heightened engagement creates opportunities for deeper conversations about how AI functions in professional contexts, what its limitations are, and how students can maintain rhetorical agency while using AI-assisted tools.

Teaching this assignment has also created space to address longstanding topics within technical and professional communication about voice, authorship, and standardization. Technical communication has often been mischaracterized as purely formulaic, yet students’ interactions with AI make visible the importance of preserving individual voice even within highly structured professional genres. As students revise their resumes using insights derived from scraped job postings and LLM-supported analysis, they must

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continually evaluate which revisions strengthen clarity and alignment with employer expectations while still accurately representing their experiences and identity.

Finally, this assignment has provided a meaningful way to help students understand how AI-mediated systems participate in evaluating their professional materials. Many students express relief in learning how Applicant Tracking Systems function and how resume language can influence automated screening. From an instructional perspective, this transparency helps demystify hiring technologies and reinforces the importance of teaching students how to navigate AI-mediated professional environments. These observations, while distinct from the formal thematic analysis presented above, provide additional context for understanding how this framework functions in practice and why students appear to engage with it productively.

Looking Forward

While HR professionals remain cautious about fully adopting AI-based hiring strategies (Malin et al., 2023), research suggests that hybrid human–AI models are becoming more common and can strengthen decision-making in the hiring process (Chakraborty et al., 2024). Given this shift toward more AI use in the hiring process, the programmatic imperative to engage AI identified by Tham et al. (2022) seems even more pressing than ever. TPW educators must prepare students to write resumes optimized for both human readers and AI-enabled systems.

The pedagogical framework presented here offers one approach for meeting these demands. By positioning text as data and emphasizing ethical human oversight, the framework helped students craft resumes that are both audience-centered and ATS-aware. Based upon the student reflections examined in this case study, the framework seems to have helped students gain the ability to both analyze job descriptions for data-driven targeting and to use AI tools ethically while maintaining ownership of their content.

As AI continues to influence hiring, TPW programs will need adaptable, evidence-based strategies that prepare students to navigate these tools confidently while preserving the human judgment central to professional communication. While this framework is one part of that expanding puzzle, more work is needed to understand how AI can be used effectively in technical writing, especially because, as Selber notes, “AI both solves and creates problems” (2024, n.p.).

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From Incident to Insight: Understanding AI Model Lifecycle Management Through Case Analysis

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Abstract Understanding the AI lifecycle—the series of tasks and decisions that shape an AI project from conception to deployment—is essential for ensuring responsible AI practices. This article presents a hands-on teaching case designed for technical and professional communication classrooms, where students examine lifecycle failures in actual AI incidents. This approach helps students gain a deeper understanding of AI model lifecycle management in real-world contexts.

Keywords AI lifecycle, generative AI, AI incidents, responsible AI, technical communication pedagogy, case analysis

Introduction and Rationale

As AI systems become integral to sectors ranging from healthcare to transportation, pressing questions arise: How can we ensure these powerful tools serve society safely, fairly, and ethically? A key to addressing this challenge lies in understanding the *AI lifecycle*—the sequence of tasks and decisions that guide an AI project from conception to deployment (De Silva & Damminda Alahakoon, 2022; Data Science PM, 2024; Gcore, 2024). AI model lifecycle management “manages the complicated AI pipeline and helps ensure the necessary results in enterprise” (Ishizaki, 2020). More than a series of technical steps, the AI lifecycle provides a framework for making informed choices that shape the behavior and societal impact of AI systems. De Silva and Alahakoon (2022) developed a comprehensive AI lifecycle model comprising three overarching phases (design, develop, and deploy) and 19 constituent stages that trace the journey of AI models from inception to production. These stages span from problem identification to reviewing data ethics, data preparation, risk assessment, and performance monitoring and evaluation.

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Implementing effective AI lifecycle management strategies provides numerous advantages for organizations. These include maximizing model reliability and performance, optimizing resource use, improving scalability and explainability, and, most critically, promoting responsible practices that help prevent harm (Deepgram, 2024; Dupont, 2024; Gcore, 2024). Nevertheless, managing the AI model lifecycle presents significant challenges. These include growing model complexity, the need for rigorous data quality and governance, and the difficulty of interpreting sophisticated systems. Moreover, addressing model bias, often rooted in flawed or historical data, requires proactive strategies such as diverse data collection and bias auditing to foster ethical AI development (Dupont, 2024).

AI lifecycle management has drawn increasing interest across sectors. For instance, Troy Tazbaz and John Nicol (2024), specialists at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Digital Health Center of Excellence, published a blog post outlining how lifecycle management can support the delivery of safe, effective AI-enabled healthcare. They proposed leveraging Life Cycle Management (LCM), a business management methodology foundational in software development since the 1960s. They mapped traditional lifecycle phases onto specific AI development steps, resulting in a seven-stage model structured as a cycle: planning and design; data collection and management; model building and tuning; verification and validation; model deployment; operation and monitoring; and, finally, real-world performance evaluation. This final stage loops back to planning and design, reflecting the iterative nature of AI development. Their model also details the technical and procedural considerations associated with each phase, offering a structured approach to managing risks while ensuring effectiveness and ethical compliance.

Furthermore, the AI lifecycle approach aligns with the principles of *Responsible Artificial Intelligence (Responsible AI)*, which emphasizes developing, assessing, and deploying AI systems in safe, ethical, and trustworthy ways (What is Responsible AI, 2024). For example, Microsoft's Responsible AI Standard (2022) articulates six guiding principles—fairness, reliability and safety, privacy and security, inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability—which provide a comprehensive framework to guide AI development. Integrating AI lifecycle management into technical communication courses offers students the opportunity to explore how Responsible AI principles apply at each phase of AI system development.

In addition to industry-led explorations, scholarship in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) has developed pedagogical frameworks for teaching AI literacy and ethics. Many scholars emphasize the need for multi-level integration. Nupoor Ranade and Marly Saravia (2024) call for engagement at the institutional, curricular, and classroom levels, advocating both the adaptation of existing courses and the creation of new

instructional modules. Similarly, Matthew Vetter et al. (2024) proposed a “local ethic” framework, stressing that ethical engagement with AI should be grounded in the specific values and contexts of individual classrooms. In parallel, Danielle DeVasto and Zsuzsanna Palmer (2024) demonstrated through classroom experiments that how AI is integrated into a curriculum can deeply influence students’ ethical reasoning and conceptual understanding of AI’s societal implications. Finally, Peter Cardon et al. (2023) offered an AI literacy framework for professional contexts, organized around four dimensions: application, authenticity, accountability, and agency. Taken together, these contributions reflect an emerging consensus in TPC: that pedagogy must move beyond technical skill-building to help students critically navigate the ethical, rhetorical, and institutional dynamics of AI systems.

Building on this growing body of pedagogical work, this article presents an instructional activity designed to introduce students to AI lifecycle management through a hands-on, analytical investigation. Students examine real-world AI projects that experienced significant failures, identify the lifecycle stage(s) where issues emerged, explore underlying causes, and propose corrective actions. Through this process, they not only deepen their technical understanding of lifecycle management but also enhance their critical AI literacy and ethical awareness.

The activity unfolds in four structured steps:

1. Step 1 introduces AI lifecycle concepts through targeted readings to prompt class discussion.
2. Steps 2 and 3 guide students through a case analysis, where they investigate failures in actual AI incidents.
3. Step 4 concludes with a debrief, in which students present their findings, reflect on lifecycle mismanagement, and consider how Responsible AI principles might prevent similar failures.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, I describe the context of the activity, outline student learning outcomes, and offer step-by-step implementation guidance. Next, I provide an assessment plan for instructors. The article concludes with a discussion of the activity’s strengths, limitations, and suggestions for future iterations.

Activity Design

Context

I implemented this activity in my upper-level undergraduate course, *Responsible AI in Communication*, in Fall 2024. Offered through the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology, the course fulfills a humanities requirement for students from a wide range of majors. The activity took place during a 75-minute session in the first unit of the course, which introduces foundational concepts in artificial intelligence. Prior sessions addressed questions such as What is (generative) AI? What is an algorithm? What is machine learning? What is a large language model? and What is Responsible AI? These topics provide students with the technical and ethical groundwork necessary to understand the AI lifecycle.

Although developed for this specific course, the activity is highly adaptable for other communication-focused classes, such as courses covering computers and writing, communication and emerging technologies, communicate science and technology to the public, contemporary issues in professional communication, human-centered design, AI ethics, and responsible AI. Its interdisciplinary relevance makes it a valuable addition to curricula that address the social, ethical, and technical dimensions of emerging technologies.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

By the end of this activity, students will be able to:

1. Define and describe key stages of the AI lifecycle.
2. Analyze real-world AI system failures to identify which AI lifecycle stage(s) contributed to the failure.
3. Evaluate the underlying technical, organizational, or ethical factors behind lifecycle mismanagement.
4. Apply Responsible AI principles to recommend improvements to flawed AI lifecycle practices.
5. Communicate findings through structured presentations and engage in reflective discussion on AI ethics and lifecycle governance.

Four Steps of the Activity

Step 1: Preparation Session (10 minutes)

The session begins with a warm-up designed to reinforce students' understanding of the AI lifecycle and its critical stages. To prepare, students are assigned two short readings prior to class. During the first 10 minutes, the instructor facilitates small-group discussions centered on the following prompts:

1. Thomas, Rob. (2019). The AI ladder: Demystifying AI challenges

Authored by Rob Thomas, Senior Vice President of Software and Chief Commercial Officer at IBM, this booklet introduces AI in enterprise contexts and outlines four key stages of the AI development pipeline:

- **Collect:** Simplify and make data accessible
- **Organize:** Establish a foundational analytics framework
- **Analyze:** Build and scale AI systems with transparency and trust
- **Infuse:** Operationalize AI across the organization

The AI Ladder framework provides organizations with a structured approach to transforming raw data into actionable insights. It emphasizes streamlining data collection, organization, and analysis to create a foundation for a governed, efficient, and adaptable AI strategy.

Since this resource predates recent advancements in generative AI, instructors may wish to supplement it with a more current reading focused on AI model lifecycle management. Such materials can be sourced from professional organizations (e.g., the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence), academic research databases (e.g., ACM Digital Library), or industry-focused hubs like Hugging Face, which offer documentation and tools on model versioning, deployment, and lifecycle practices.

2. Dupont, Maxim. (2024, May). Mastering AI model lifecycle management

This trade publication, accessible to college-level readers, addresses fundamental questions about AI lifecycle management, including its definition, importance, components, challenges, best practices, and tools. To build on the broader phases outlined in Thomas' AI Ladder, Dupont (2024) broke the lifecycle down into five specific stages (refer to Figure 1):

- **Data Preparation and Preprocessing:** Collect and clean data to ensure it is accurate and suitable for model development

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- Model Development and Training: Choose and refine algorithms using performance metrics to build a reliable predictive system
- Model Evaluation and Validation: Assess the model’s accuracy, precision, and recall using validation datasets to confirm performance benchmarks
- Model Deployment and Monitoring: Deploy the model into production systems and actively monitor its performance to detect emerging issues
- Model Governance and Maintenance: Manage version controls, retraining, and updates to maintain security, compliance, and relevance

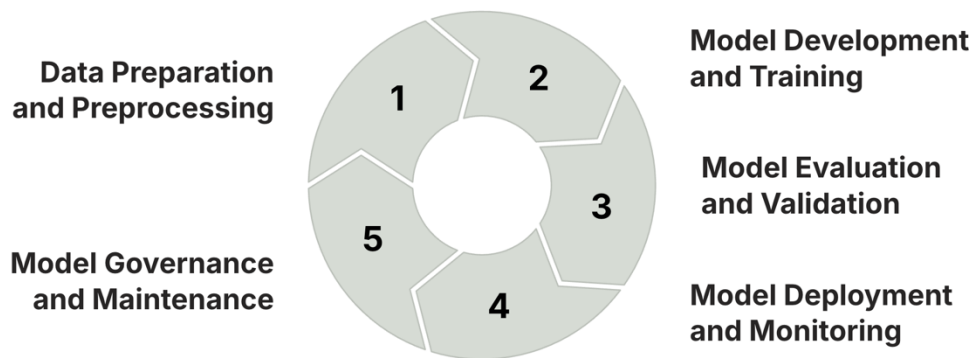


Figure 1. AI model lifecycle management process

Importantly, the AI lifecycle is not linear. Rather, it is an iterative process in which stages are revisited to incrementally refine and improve the model (see Figure 1; Data Science PM, 2024). Instructors can help students connect these AI lifecycle stages to familiar procedural frameworks in their disciplines, such as the writing process or the design thinking model, to scaffold the integration of new concepts with existing knowledge.

Step 2: AI Incidents Investigation (15 minutes)

In small groups of three to four, students select an AI incident from the AI Incident Database, a publicly accessible, crowdsourced platform launched in November 2020 to track documented harms caused by AI systems (McGregor, 2020). In 2022, the database became part of the Responsible AI Collaborative, an initiative dedicated to “identifying, defining, and cataloging artificial intelligence incidents.” The platform is intended to make AI system failures more visible and analyzable for developers, researchers, educators, and

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policymakers, with the goal of preventing or mitigating future harms (Responsible AI Collaborative Founding Report, 2022).

The database includes over 5,000 AI incidents, defined as “an alleged harm or near harm event to people, property, or the environment where an AI system is implicated” (Editor’s Guide, 2025). It is important to distinguish between an AI incident and an AI issue—the latter refers to potential harm that has not yet occurred or been detected. Each entry in the database includes a unique ID, date, summary, taxonomy classifications, timeline, and links to supporting reports (typically drawn from news and social media coverage). This structure is comparable to incident reporting systems in fields like aviation and cybersecurity. Students navigate to the “Discover Incidents” page (refer to Figure 2), where they can search for incidents using keywords or filter by criteria such as source, incident date, language, authorship, and tags. Students may also explore clusters of related incidents using the database’s *Spatial Visualization* page, which visually maps patterns across AI failures.

According to a recent newsletter published by the AI Incident Database, more than 80 new incident IDs were added between April and May 2025 (Atherton, 2025). Many of these incidents reflect an intensification of previously identified trends, including deepfake scams, AI-enabled fraud, the misuse of generative tools to produce nonconsensual or harmful content, and the global spread of mis- and disinformation. These patterns underscore the evolving and increasingly complex landscape of AI-related harms.

The screenshot shows the AI Incident Database (AID) website interface. The header includes the AID logo, the text "AI INCIDENT DATABASE", a language dropdown set to "English", and social media icons. The main content area features a search bar with "Type Here" and a search icon. Below the search bar, there are filters for "Display Option" (set to "Incident and Issue Reports"), "5047 results found", "Sort by" (set to "Relevance"), and an "Export" button. There are also "Clear Filters" and "More filters" options. Below these are filter buttons for "Classifications", "Source", "Incident Date", "Published Date", and "Language". The main content area displays three incident cards. The first card is titled "Is Starbucks shortchanging its baristas?" from cbsnews.com (2015), featuring a Starbucks logo. The second card is a tweet from @MarietjeSchaake (2022) about a Meta chatbot. The third card is titled "Hundreds of AI tools have been built to catch covid. None of them helped." from technologyreview.com (2021), featuring a photo of a person in a blue protective suit in a hospital setting. A left sidebar contains navigation options like "Discover Incidents", "Spatial View", "Table View", "List view", "Entities", "Taxonomies", "Submit Incident Reports", "Submission Leaderboard", and "Blog".

Figure 2. Screenshot of “Discover Incidents” page in the AI incident database

After selecting a case, students share initial impressions within their groups. Guiding questions include:

- What is your first impression of the incident?
- What do you assume went wrong?

Students then individually examine the incident reports to understand the context, stakeholders, and technical aspects of the failure.

Step 3: AI Lifecycle Failure Analysis (15 minutes)

Once familiar with their selected incident, students spend the next 15 minutes analyzing the case collaboratively. The goal is to identify where in the AI lifecycle the failure occurred and how it could have been prevented. Groups respond to the following guiding questions:

- At which stage(s) of the AI lifecycle did the failure occur?
- What were the root causes of the failure?
- What ethical considerations, if any, were overlooked?
- How could lifecycle management practices have been improved to prevent this failure?

Each group documents their responses in a shared Google Slides deck, with one slide designated per group. Each slide includes pre-filled prompts to ensure consistent analysis across teams.

Step 4: Group Presentations (35 minutes)

The activity concludes with group presentations, in which each team shares their case analysis using a designated slide. Each group is allotted approximately seven minutes, making this portion of the session about 35 minutes total for five groups. Presentations follow a structured format:

- A brief introduction of the selected AI incident
- Identification and analysis of the lifecycle stage(s) where failure occurred
- Discussion of ethical considerations that were overlooked or insufficiently addressed
- Summary of key takeaways and recommendations, with a reflection on how their understanding evolved through the analysis

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

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This section presents a rubric for evaluating students' presentations on real-world AI lifecycle failure cases (refer to Table 1). The assessment criteria are aligned with the SLOs identified earlier in the activity. The total score for the presentation is 100 points, distributed across five key areas:

1. Understanding of AI Lifecycle Stages (SLOs 1 & 2)
2. Root Cause Analysis (SLO 3)
3. Application of Responsible AI Principles (SLO 4)
4. Presentation & Communication (SLO 5)
5. Critical Reflection & Engagement (SLO 5)

Criteria	Excellent (Full Marks)	Good (Minor Gaps)	Developing (Some Gaps)	Needs Improvement	Points
Understanding of AI Lifecycle Stages (SLOs 1 & 2)	Accurately identifies relevant lifecycle stages and clearly explains their role in the failure case. Demonstrates deep conceptual understanding.	Identifies relevant stages with minor gaps or unclear explanations.	Partial identification; explanations are vague or inaccurate.	Lifecycle stages are misidentified or missing.	20
Root Cause Analysis (SLO 3)	Thorough, well-reasoned diagnosis of technical, organizational, or ethical causes. Uses evidence from the case and theory.	Logical causes identified; some evidence or theory used.	Causes are too general, lack specificity or depth. Limited evidence.	Superficial or incorrect analysis with little to no justification.	20
Application of Responsible AI Principles (SLO 4)	Clear, actionable recommendations grounded in ethical frameworks (e.g., fairness, transparency). Demonstrates high-level ethical reasoning.	Recommendations align with ethical principles but are underdeveloped or general.	Limited or vague ethical application; lacks strong reasoning.	Recommendations are weak, unrealistic, or unrelated to Responsible AI.	20
Presentation & Communication (SLO 5)	Organized, clear, and professional delivery. Slides or visuals enhance understanding. Team or individual speaks with confidence.	Mostly clear and organized; minor delivery issues. Visuals are adequate.	Some clarity issues; inconsistent organization or delivery. Visuals may be lacking.	Presentation is disorganized, unclear, or unengaging. Poor visuals.	20
Critical Reflection & Engagement (SLO 5)	Offers insightful reflection on lifecycle management and Responsible AI. Engages thoughtfully with peer discussion/questions.	Reflection is relevant but lacks depth. Engages with discussion.	Reflection is brief or surface-level. Limited peer interaction.	Minimal or no reflection. Does not engage in discussion.	20

Table 1. AI Lifecycle Case Analysis Presentation Rubric

Conclusion: Autoethnographic Reflection on the Activity Design

As this article does not present student data, Institutional Review Board approval was not required. Instead, I offer an autoethnographic reflection on my instructional experience with this activity. I observed that while many students initially approached AI failures as purely technical problems, they ultimately came to recognize that these failures often stem from deeper systemic issues, such as inadequate data governance, lack of

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transparency, weak accountability mechanisms, or insufficient ethical oversight. Through the case analysis, students became skilled at identifying which stages of the AI lifecycle were implicated in the failures, most commonly data collection, model training, or inadequate validation during deployment. In doing so, they surfaced a wide range of ethical concerns, including bias, privacy violations, and threats to public safety. These realizations helped students better appreciate the broader societal responsibilities of AI developers.

This activity effectively introduces students to the complexities of AI lifecycle management by integrating real-world case analysis, fostering critical thinking, and enhancing their ethical awareness. A key strength of the activity lies in its ability to help students connect technical processes with ethical implications—an essential competency in the context of responsible AI development (Dupont, 2024). Moreover, the use of incident analysis as a pedagogical strategy reinforces a systems-level perspective. Students learn to see the AI lifecycle not as a linear sequence but as a dynamic, interdependent process, where failures at any stage can trigger cascading effects (De Silva & Alahakoon, 2022).

However, several limitations and challenges emerged in implementing this activity:

1. **Technical complexity:** Some AI incidents involved technical details or proprietary algorithms that exceeded students' existing knowledge. This challenge echoes Dupont's (2024) observation that model complexity and interpretability remain significant barriers to effective AI lifecycle management.
2. **Time constraints:** The limited class time poses a challenge for conducting thorough investigations. Given the breadth of AI lifecycle stages and the potential complexities of certain incidents, students may struggle to perform deep analyses within a single session.
3. **Limited access to tools and documentation:** Students relied primarily on publicly available incident reports and lacked access to internal documentation or technical platforms commonly used in enterprise AI lifecycle management, such as IBM Cloud Pak for Data (Ishizaki, 2020) and Microsoft's Responsible AI Toolbox (2026). These platforms, while powerful, often require institutional subscriptions, posing accessibility challenges in classroom settings.

To address these limitations, future iterations of the activity could be expanded in both scope and duration.

1. Instructors can select AI incidents with clear, accessible documentation, enabling students to focus on lifecycle and ethical analysis without being overwhelmed by technical complexity.

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2. Dividing the activity across multiple sessions or developing it into a project-based module would provide students with more time to engage deeply with each stage of the AI lifecycle. For advanced courses, incorporating multiple case studies for comparative analysis could further support pattern recognition and critical evaluation across diverse AI failures.
3. Instructors could integrate open-source tools such as TensorFlow, PyTorch, or Kubeflow to simulate aspects of AI lifecycle management, offering students hands-on experience with model debugging and risk assessment. For advanced courses, using multiple cases for comparative analysis could encourage students to identify patterns and variations across incidents.

In sum, these adaptations would enhance students' technical engagement and more effectively prepare them for ethical decision-making and responsible practice in AI-related fields.

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Moving Program Reviews into the Future: Strategically Positioning Technical and Professional Communication

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Abstract Since its inception, the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) has emphasized both the development and quality of technical and professional communication (TPC) programs. This article traces the evolution of CPTSC’s external program review process, from early definitions of program quality in the 1970s and 1980s through the late-20th-century rise of outcomes-based assessment, to contemporary efforts to align reviews with program sustainability. Program review is distinguished from program assessment, in that reviews encompass broader factors—faculty, governance, resources, recruitment, and strategic positioning—while integrating assessment data as one component. While assessment literature in the past two decades primarily focused on identifying and mapping learning outcomes within curricula, CPTSC’s External Program Review Taskforce (ExPRT) establishes a comprehensive external review that evaluates programs beyond individual student performance.

The article details the updated review guidelines, reviewer recruitment processes, fee structures, and support materials. The new model emphasizes a consistent, replicable process including pre-review preparation, onsite evaluation, and post-review reporting, designed to help programs navigate budgetary pressures, increased accountability demands, and a competitive higher-education landscape. A case study from Arizona State University’s Technical Writing and Communication program illustrates how aligning curriculum revision with external review requirements strengthens program coherence, scaffolding, and long-term viability.

Keywords Learning outcomes, program assessment, external program review, CPTSC, evaluation

In its first ten years, the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) saw rapid development of technical and professional communication (TPC) programs, so much so that members argued that CPTSC needed to not only focus on what went into a program (Pearsall, 1984) but also “the promotion of quality in our programs” (Kelley, 1984, p. xii). Fifty years later, CPTSC continues its efforts to support the development of quality programs through external program review. This article is intended to update CPTSC members on the new external review service created by the CPTSC External Program Review Taskforce (ExPRT). It outlines the history of CPTSC program reviews and the rise of TPC outcomes-based assessment, presents a brief case study describing the role of assessment in program review, and, finally, explains the current work of CPTSC to foster effective program review.

History of CPTSC Program Review

For CPTSC, program review has been an ongoing concern since the formation of the organization. At the inaugural meeting of what would later become CPTSC, Thomas Pearsall noted that TPC programs shared several problems and challenges. At the top of his list was the question: “What elements make up a successful TPC program?” (Pearsall, 1974, p. 6). As the number of established TPC programs increased, members argued that CPTSC needed to not only focus on what went into a program (Pearsall, 1984) but also, as previously stated, on the promotion of program quality (Kelley, 1984). In 1985, Patrick Kelley, then CPTSC president, noted that an evaluation in terms of quality of the programs listed in the third edition of *Academic Programs in Technical Communication* (a joint publication of CPTSC and the Society for Technical Communication) would be “a disheartening experience” (p. viii).

However, what constitutes quality and how it should be reflected in a program review would be an ongoing question. In 1986, the CPTSC conference examined this question. The discussions showed that CPTSC members viewed quality and program review comprehensively, based on results, curriculum, administration, teaching, and students. For example, Sherry Little (1986) argued that if programs supplied students “with knowledge that allowed them to achieve entry level positions” (p. 188), then the quality of the program could be determined by the number of job placements and the satisfaction of employers with the performance of the graduates. Regarding curriculum, presenters argued that a quality program needed both TPC courses and an even mix of courses from the humanities and the sciences (Corey & Gilbertson, 1986) or from literature and rhetoric (Jaffe, 1986). A balance between theory and practice with an emphasis on the practical at

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the undergraduate level and theoretical at the graduate level was also a requirement (Corey & Gilbertson, 1986; Jaffe, 1986; Hayes, 1986).

Additionally, presenters argued that quality programs also needed flexible course content to enable innovative teaching and to facilitate industry contacts through faculty consulting, student internships, and advisory boards (Corey & Gilbertson, 1986; Jaffe, 1986).

Administrators needed to be diplomats, translators, visionaries, and leaders of change in a dynamic field (Haselkorn, 1986; Samuels, 1986; Zimmerman, 1986). For teachers, quality was demonstrated in a knowledge of the discipline, an ability to do technical writing, skills at helping students develop their talents as technical writers, and a demonstrated respect for science and technology (Coney, 1986; Harris, 1986; Geonetta, 1986). In considering quality in terms of students, presenters focused on key skills and abilities that students would obtain as part of their education, including interpersonal skills; technical proficiency; effective, rhetorically-based communication skills; professionalism; ability to produce a range of successful products/documents; and critical, analytical thinking (Lay, 1986; Jones, 1986; Severson, 1986; Kaufman & Eldridge, 1986).

Following the conference, Patrick Kelley raised the question of how CPTSC would facilitate reviews, and thereby, enhance its ability to influence the quality of education in scientific and technical communication. He proposed the creation of a program advisory board made up of past presidents of the council, who would serve as consultants responsible for coordinating external reviews (Samuels, 1987; CPTSC, 1987). Instead, in 1989, the executive committee created a Program Review Board (PRB) planning committee that would be responsible for designing, promoting, and implementing the review procedures (CPTSC Executive Committee, 1989).

In the following year, discussions about program review continued at the CPTSC conference. In considering what a program review should assess, Carol Lipson (1990) argued that, in addition to curriculum and size of faculty, program review should include the availability of resources to support programs. While this would include equipment, travel, library holdings, staff, and other such resources, it would also include training, mentoring, supporting, and professionalizing teaching staff. Carole Yee (1990) reasoned that program review should also include a description of organizational culture and faculty performance. Jimmie Killingsworth (1990) added that the review should be formative (focusing on strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement) rather than summative (focusing on the success or failure of results) and involve systematic qualitative analysis of the complex interactions between course content, teachers, and

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students. Overall, conference participants still viewed program review as a comprehensive evaluation, including all aspects of a program's context as well as its content.

In 1991, the PRB presented the first application and guidelines for program review to members for discussion. The application was extensive, requesting not only information identifying the institution and type of program but also information about course offerings, faculty, administration, and governance. The guidelines for self-study included the following sections: focus of the review (concerns and future plans); curriculum (courses and goals, syllabi, instructional methods and materials, testing, grading practices, and internships); program administration (institutional and program structure and administrator's job description); faculty development (current conditions and support for faculty development); support services (type and definition of service, personnel for support services, and administration); and finally, the appendix (statistical information, student evaluations, course descriptions, CVs, etc.) (PRD, 1991). The response from members was generally positive (Lay, 1991), with many recognizing that self-study needed to be an ongoing activity for every program (Lipson, 1991; Jaffe, 1991).

The first program review was piloted in 1995 with the program at Michigan Technological University (MTU), using the guidelines for self-study first published in 1991. Cynthia Selfe, the director of the MTU program at the time, made several recommendations for revising the guidelines. She also recommended that the service be advertised to other directors. The membership voted to approve the program review process (CPTSC, 1995) with an understanding that the self-study guidelines would be revised based on current and future program reviews.

In 1997, New Mexico Tech underwent the program review process. This review became the foundation for confirming the effectiveness of the program review guidelines. Recommendations for revision included developing guidelines for reviewers (support, honoraria, and purpose of report), but no further revisions were proposed for the self-study (CPTSC, 1997). With CPTSC advertising the program review through the conference program and its website, demand for program review remained constant, with one or two programs reviewed each year.

As more programs underwent the review process, the value of program review became more apparent. Bob Johnson observed that program reviews are especially beneficial in the planning stages and again about five years into a new program (CPTSC, 2002). Pam Ecker noted that while self-studies may be time-consuming to prepare, they are helpful politically because when a designated expert from out of town provides insights about the local program, their opinions are perceived as more credible than a review by internal

faculty (CPTSC, 2002). According to Lu Rehling, program review, with its external reviewer, functioned as a “valuable tool for improving our program, motivating faculty, and encouraging support for our program” (2003, p. 71). In her case, the review “taught the administration much: warding off challenges to our program integrity and how we deliver our curriculum, encouraging more responsible faculty staffing and support policies, and persuasively identifying guidelines for improvement and possible expansion” (p. 71). In essence, the external reviewer serves not only as an evaluator but also becomes an ambassador for the profession, articulating explanations and descriptions of what our field is to institutional administrators and other stakeholders (Herrington, 2003).

In 2004, CPTSC renewed its commitment to the program review process by reinstating the program review committee. While the committee sought to examine and update the self-study guidelines, it also set out to build a foundation of knowledge about program review, and, as a result, it proposed, edited, and published a special issue on program review and assessment in the journal *Technical Communication* (St. Amant & Nahrwold, 2007).

While CPTSC continued its work to establish and refine the program review process, the conversations about program assessment by its members were changing. At the 1999 conference, Linda Driskill and Margaret Hundleby argued that an emerging culture of assessment would require programs to pay closer attention to outcomes assessment (1999). At the 2000 conference, several presenters described the increasing focus on outcome assessment by accreditation agencies such as ABET and the increasing pressure from states seeking to link accreditation and funding to student performance (Munger, 2000). By 2006, discussions about program review focused primarily on linking program assessment with outcomes and core competencies, arguing that this new model would support CPTSC’s approach to self-study. By 2008, outcomes and program assessment had become almost synonymous, leading some members of CPTSC to question the need to focus on program review in light of CPTSC efforts on program assessment (CPTSC, 2008). The program review committee was renamed the program review and assessment committee and, eventually, would just be known as the assessment committee. Much of the committee’s work became focused on research related to identifying program outcomes and their role in assessment.

From Program Review to Program Assessment, and Back Again

As noted, while CPTSC established academic program review processes, scholarship on program assessment simultaneously proliferated, and sometimes distinctions between

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program review and program assessment have blurred. Program reviews can occur on multiple levels; for example, Teena Carnegie (2007) explained that academic program assessment can (and does) occur on institutional, state, and federal levels. Program reviews can also occur as formal or informal processes (Sides, 2007). However, over the course of 2000–2020, many programs in technical communication were being created, and much scholarship focused on the content, development, and assessment of technical communication academic programs. Fewer scholarship studies on program reviews occurred during this period, as assessment and learning outcomes became a primary focus.

Early discussions about TPC programs aimed to outline core principles and concepts. Scholarship addressed pedagogy as well as specific courses such as multi-section technical writing courses, usability courses, and introductory courses. For example, Kelli Cargile Cook (2001) described a layered literacy approach based on reviewing core programmatic curriculum that outlined six key literacies: basic, rhetorical, social, technological, ethical, and critical. This approach acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of TPC work and its potential to “layer” in various ways throughout the curriculum. Others described assessment in terms of specific courses, such as the introductory technical communication course (Cook, 2003) and usability courses (Breuch, Zachry & Spinuzzi, 2001).

Jo Allen (2004) noted the need to move beyond individual courses and toward programmatic assessment, which might examine programs from perspectives of satisfaction, engagement, or learning outcomes. Approaches connected to satisfaction might include surveys of students and faculty about perceptions of program aspects; approaches connected to participation might reflect levels of engagement with courses and/or co-curricular activities; approaches connected to outcomes might reflect the degree to which courses and assignments integrate and reinforce learning outcomes within a curriculum.

Discussions around assessment began to lean heavily toward learning outcomes, which spurred discussions around what, exactly, learning outcomes for technical communication programs ought to look like (Carter, Anson, & Miller, 2003). Discussions around program-level outcomes have often been informed by professional practice in the workplace and a desire to develop core concepts in technical communication programs that bridge academia and professional practice. Kenneth Rainey, Roy Turner, and David Dayton (2005) surveyed and interviewed practicing technical communicators and generated a list of core competencies that graduating students in technical

communication would need in the workplace. Several others have since discussed programmatic outcomes in connection with professional practice (Turner & Rainey, 2004; Williamson, 2010; Coppola, 2011; Coppola et al., 2016; Cosgrove, 2023) and in a special issue of *Technical Communication*, Nancy Coppola (2011) framed this discussion as “Zeitgeist” for the field and articulated core concepts for technical communication education, both academic and professional preparation, including certification.

It is important to note that as technical and professional communication programs have grown, program reviews have not been the focus of the field’s collective scholarship. Rather, discussions around assessment and outcomes sought to secure core concepts of TPC programs, which were important to their growth and proliferation. Thomas Barker (2012) noted that early assessment discussions simply described programmatic areas, while later assessment discussions identified core program outcomes and mapped them within the curriculum. Barker described the shift toward learning outcomes as an analytical approach to program assessment or an approach concerned with the internal connections in a curriculum and what students take away from their experience. To further inquire about program-level outcomes, Barker surveyed TPC programs and learned that outcomes-based approaches were employed most frequently through portfolio assessment, key assignments, and capstone courses (p. 198). Many of these threads have continued to be discussed by scholars in technical communication, regarding identifying key areas of academic programs. As an example, Geoff Clegg and others (2020) reviewed curricular programs of multiple programs and, through a coding process, agreed on a set of primary outcomes that included rhetoric, writing, technology, and design, along with secondary outcomes including ethics, research, collaboration, and professionalization.

Discussions around program-level outcomes have often brought up the issue of professional certification or the creation of a credential to signify professional competence in technical communication (Barker, 2012). As Barker (2012) noted, these discussions increased when the Society for Technical Communication offered a certificate option, Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC), which consisted of a curriculum and an exam to demonstrate professional work. Saul Carliner, Liz Pohland, and Steven Jong (2014) discussed the potential of certification for technical communication and the impact of certification options on academic programs with those programs including professional practice as part of their learning outcomes.

While many assessment discussions in TPC focused on either the creation or application of outcomes, outcomes are only part of the larger assessment picture (St. Amant & Nahrwold, 2007). Recent discussions around assessment point to larger issues around

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program sustainability. Joanna Schreiber and Lisa Melonçon (2019) proposed a continuous improvement model to sustain TPC programs that takes into consideration all aspects of a program beyond curriculum, including recruitment, instructors, and program resources. The GRAM model (gather, read, analyze, make) proposed by Schreiber and Melonçon illustrates a comprehensive review process for TPC programs. Similarly, Scott Kowalewski and Bill Williamson (2023) advocated for a recursive, iterative assessment that responds to evolving curriculum and program design.

In summary, while organizations such as CPTSC established the need for program review, much work over the last two decades has focused on program assessment, including the identification of learning outcomes that outline core concepts of technical communication programs. Further, assessment discussions in TPC have evolved from individual course assessments to identifying program-level outcomes based on curriculum or professional practices. More recent discussions around program assessment have shifted toward holistic program assessment, which reviews more than just curriculum. The conclusion of these discussions is that to achieve greater sustainability, assessment needs to be continuous and iterative.

It is in this most recent context—considering program sustainability—that program reviews continue to be important and helpful. Assessment, as discussed over the past two decades, has identified and mapped learning outcomes within TPC curricula. This work provides an important foundation for program reviews; however, assessment needs to be approached differently in program reviews to ask the question of how program outcomes are applied and how they have succeeded overall. That is, external program reviews need to consider assessment that is not connected to individual student performance or the review of grades of students in particular courses. Rather, program review needs to examine the learning outcomes of a program, review samples of student work from key curricular courses, and develop rubrics or a set of criteria by which external reviewers can determine if programmatic outcomes are being met (refer to Boettger, 2014). In addition, program review involves external reviewers with a self-study that includes assessment as well as an address of other metrics such as recruitment, graduation rates, program resources, and instruction and training. That is, while important, program assessment and its focus on learning outcomes are just a subset of program reviews. External reviewers provide feedback to programs that can be used to support program strategic plans. Moreover, indeed, program review becomes more pertinent and helpful in times of budgetary crises. In this sense, the value of reviews is to help make arguments to support the overall sustainability of the program.

The following case study demonstrates how program review influences program assessment and how developing program assessment in terms of a program review can build more robust and sustainable programs.

Case Study: Revising Arizona State University's Technical Writing and Communication Undergraduate Degree

The Technical Writing and Communication (TWC) program at Arizona State University has a strong history, and as of 2023, the curriculum was about 10 years old. In the spring of 2024, the TWC faculty began a deep look at the program with the goal of reconfiguring the degree and its associated concentrations. Although not connected to the decision to revise the TWC program, the TWC degrees were also scheduled for an external program review in 2025–2026. The external program review is required every seven years by the Arizona Board of Regents, and the TWC faculty saw an opportunity to “double dip” by using the requirements of the external program review to focus on a curriculum revision.

Because the process followed by the TWC faculty to complete the program revision mirrored the requirements for preparing for the external program review, tracing the path followed by the faculty illuminates the differences (and necessary relationships) among program learning outcomes and program assessment, course learning outcomes and assessments, individual assignments and their grading rubrics. In what follows, we present a case study to demonstrate the relationships among the different assessment levels, all of which combine to form the most comprehensive type of assessment: the external program review.

Step 1: Articulate program learning outcomes

Program learning outcomes are why a program exists and achieving them should be the core purpose of instruction and manifested in multiple courses throughout the program. External reviewers require data on students' performance against program learning outcomes, so having well-written learning outcomes is the important first step. The curriculum revision process for TWC generated four core outcomes for the entire program, with each concentration carrying an additional one or two learning outcomes for a total of five or six for each concentration. The four core outcomes appear below (for the sake of brevity, the additional concentration outcomes are not included):

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1. Design communication products in diverse media to communicate complex information clearly, ethically, and persuasively to diverse audiences
2. Apply technical communication research methods to assess user needs that improve the design and impact of technical content
3. Evaluate emerging technologies to determine appropriate methods for delivering content for different audiences and purposes
4. Compose clear, concise, and accurate written documents that achieve a stated purpose

Program learning outcomes form the basis of all assessment, from external review to program level to individual assignments, because, in theory, every assignment in the entire program should be able to logically trace a path back to one or more program learning outcomes.

Program learning outcomes are important to external program review, as holistic, longitudinal data on students' performance demonstrate how students have achieved program outcomes over the period under review, in this case, seven years.

Step 2: Write assessment plans and program assessment rubrics

Arizona State University's program assessment plans and associated rubrics are quite detailed and lengthy. The plan requires programs to:

1. Elaborate concepts that support the learning outcome (LO). Concepts are the things that students learn which demonstrate they are practicing the LO. Think of these as noun phrases.
2. Explain competencies for the LO. Competencies are the steps that students take to learn the LO. Think of these as verb phrases that follow Bloom's Taxonomy (or another one).
3. List at least two measures with an associated performance criterion. Measures are the deliverables housed in a "mastery" course where students should demonstrate their performance on the concept.
4. Explain the assessment process. The process details how the actual work will be completed and by whom.
5. Propose a plan for acting on data. The plan outlines the path for the future, detailing how faculty will utilize the generated data to enhance the program.

This stage is perhaps where most people become confused between programmatic assessment and course assessment. While a specific assignment from a specific course is the “measure” of the learning outcome, the evaluation of student work that occurs in the class is not a consideration. Grading is not assessment because grading measures a particular student’s performance against a rubric or expectations for the course. In contrast, assessment measures an artifact against a separate, programmatic rubric to determine aggregated performance on the deliverable across a sample of students. Additionally, assessments are conducted by faculty who do not teach the course using a rubric from the program assessment plan, not from the course, because the purpose is to collect aggregated data on performance against a program outcome, not performance against a course outcome. So, a relationship exists between a course assignment and a program assessment that *uses* the course assignment as an artifact. In the course, the assignment is used to measure an individual student.

External program reviews rely on assessment of a sample of students’ work against programmatic learning outcomes without regard to a specific student’s performance. The performance reports aggregate data across many students on a single artifact, where that single artifact is meant to measure performance on a particular program learning outcome.

Step 3: Scaffold courses and course learning outcomes

One of the most important parts of creating a successful program is scaffolding courses so that a particular learning outcome is introduced, reinforced, and mastered across multiple courses. In the case of the first outcome above, for example, the concepts are introduced in TWC 201: *Writing for Digital Media*, reinforced in TWC 311: *Principles of Visual Communication*, and mastered in TWC 445: *Content Strategy*. The artifact assessed for learning outcome one above is found in TWC 445.

Individual courses in the sequence, however, contain learning outcomes that support the program learning outcome. For example, in the course sequence above that scaffolds program learning outcome one, TWC 201, the “introduction” course, has the course learning outcome, “Compose documents and create multiple drafts while adapting to specific audiences.” Likewise, TWC 311, the “reinforcement” course, has an associated course learning outcome: “Demonstrate communication production skills for different audiences through the use of different visual media.” Finally, TWC 445, the mastery course, has the course learning outcome, “Identify and define content types and audiences for each content type.” Each course builds upon the previous one, and together

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they lead to achieving the program's first learning outcome, which involves designing products in diverse media for specific audiences.

To use a somewhat clunky metaphor, individual courses and their learning outcomes are building blocks. On their own, each block is unimportant. However, when cemented together through scaffolding, the blocks make a wall, and the quality of the wall is what a program assessment measures. When combined, all the program's learning outcomes (each a wall of bricks from individual courses and specific assignments) form a house. External program review measures the quality of the entire house by individually digging into every wall and every internal system. The external review might uncover that one system or wall is poorly conceived and recommend revision, while complimenting the quality of another system. External program review decomposes the entire house, which means all the smaller parts must have individual integrity so that the entire house can stand.

The newly revised Technical Writing and Communication program at Arizona State University, which began in Fall of 2025 after a year of work, is a different house from what existed before. It maintains some similarities and integrates bricks from the prior house, but its floor plan is fundamentally different from the older program. Using the external program review as the catalyst to build a new house, the program faculty worked from the ground up to create blueprints—the program learning outcomes and a complete assessment plan. The faculty then set about building the house—revising courses and assignments and ensuring that the scaffolding supported students' success at achieving the learning outcome.

While this case shows the relationships of the curriculum pieces for an external program review, it does not consider many other things such as retention, graduation rates, alumni placement, institutional support, or disciplinary trends—all items that intersect with the program's curriculum and can tell us if a program's internal structure is successfully meeting the needs of the larger professional or disciplinary context. Both the internal and the external are necessary, and this case focuses only on the internal components. The complete external program review, with its 151 discrete elements, will be completed in 2026, and only then will we know if the new house—the revised program—will withstand the deep scrutiny of every tiny detail and its relationship to the world outside the walls of the university.

CPTSC Program Review Overview and System

As the prior brief case shows, the reciprocal relationship of outcome assessments and program review constitutes one aspect of a more comprehensive evaluation. As universities face increasing challenges (both economically and politically), examining programs based on a wide variety of factors, including not only student learning and outcomes but also faculty, governance, facilities, financial resources, etc., has become critical. Recognizing this evolution, the CPTSC President and Executive Committee created the External Program Review Task Force (ExPRT) to revise and reinstitute the external program review process. By revising and updating the guidelines and process (Carnegie et al., 2024), CPTSC seeks to provide its members with an important tool for not only improving programs but also enabling programs to better negotiate the challenges that they face in maintaining and retaining their programs.

Work completed

During the discovery phase of its work, the task force located all available CPTSC documents related to external review and examined program review procedures at various universities, at other professional organizations such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and ABET, and regional accrediting organizations. In October 2023, the task force began the second phase of its work, which was to develop guidelines and materials needed for the external review and to present the new guidelines at the October CPTSC conference (2024) for review and feedback.

For this phase, the task force accomplished the following goals:

- Expanded and updated the process for the external review. The process was documented in a guide. The guide was completed before the 2024 conference, so the task force could receive feedback from the members before finalizing the guidelines. The final version of the guide is available on the CPTSC website (CPTSC.org>Resources>Program Review) (Carnegie et al., 2025).
- Investigated fee structures to propose a fee model for CPTSC.
- Designed a form for programs to request an external program review and a form for program experts to apply to serve as CPTSC external reviews. Both forms are available online (CPTSC.org>Resources>Program Review).
- Created a series of exercises to help develop program identity descriptions.
- Presented a draft of guidelines at the CPTSC 2024 conference and gathered feedback from members.

The taskforce agreed that the review process would be repeatable; include all phases: pre-review (application and self-study), the onsite review process, and post review (drafting of report, enabling feedback, and creating final report); and be scripted in a guide to enable reviewers to follow the process consistently and effectively (Carnegie et al., 2025). The review would look at that piece of the curriculum that is TPC (whether this is defined as a program, department, certificate, or component within a degree). However, it would include all TPC programs in a given department or academic unit if that unit contains multiple programs, including, for example, certificates, minors, majors, undergraduate, and graduate.

Implementing the ExPRT program review

In March of 2024, the CPTSC Executive Committee accepted the task force's recommendations and the ExPRT Review service. The Past President will be responsible for overseeing the program review, and this activity will be added to the duties of the Past President in the by-laws.

The Past President will send out a call for reviewers, review and approve applicants, collect CVs, and compile a list of CPTSC-sanctioned reviewers. Reviewers will be members of CPTSC. They have advanced in their academic career, with a minimum of 5 years of experience administering TPC programs. This experience involves reviewing programs and correlating them with the programs they will review, focusing on type, size, home department, and Carnegie classification.

The website will be updated to provide information about the process, including costs and an online form, so programs can easily request external program review services.

The fees for external review align with those of the WPA. Reviews will require an administrative fee to be paid directly to CPTSC. In addition, there will be an honorarium per reviewer. Costs for travel, lodging, and meals are required for each reviewer. These will be paid directly to the reviewer by the requesting institution.

Conclusion

As this article suggests, a concern with assessment and external program evaluation is not new. Indeed, assessment of all kinds has become a staple in higher education over the last twenty or so years. However, since skepticism about the value of higher education appears to be gaining momentum (in the United States, at least), our programs and universities will be held accountable by their stakeholders in new and demanding ways. Even though this cultural trend was not the exigence for the ExPRT project, our work holds value for

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responding to concerns about what our programs— and universities more generally— contribute to society. We cannot avoid external evaluation because the funding for our programs will likely be increasingly tied to demonstrable outcomes valued by legislators, businesses, families, and students.

External program reviews will be critical for technical and professional communication programs to demonstrate their value. According to Lisa Melonçon (n.d.), more than 700 TPC programs exist in the United States which means that the competition is fierce for students in a comparatively small professional field that also, according to the most recent outlook by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025), is only keeping pace with job growth in the US. Equally important, with the rise of sophisticated AI tools and subdisciplines such as UX gaining ground as their own professional domain, TPC programs must be strategic about crafting compelling arguments that demonstrate our unique contribution to society and the world of work. The ExPRT project, along with the guidance for creating effective external program reviews elaborated here, aims to empower programs to craft compelling arguments for securing, sustaining, and growing excellent technical and professional communication programs.

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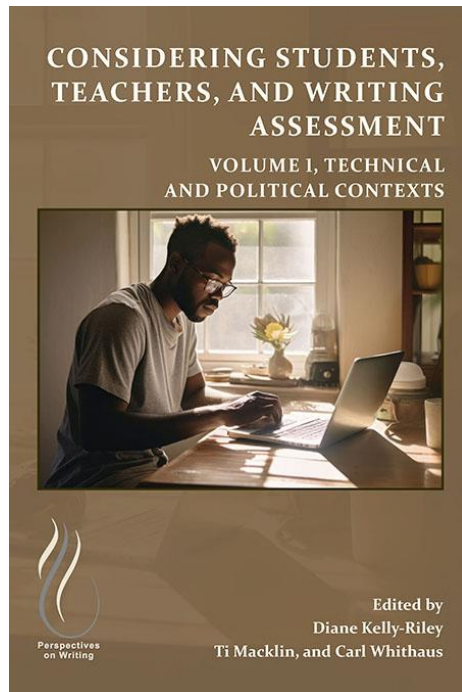
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Designing User-Centered Content, which he co-authored with Jason Tham and Gustav Verhulsdonck.



Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volumes 1 & 2

Editors: Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin,
and Carl Whithaus

Place of Publication: Colorado

Publisher: WAC Clearinghouse

Date of Publication: 2024

Number of Pages: 584 (332 in vol. 1,
252 vol. 2)

Reviewed by

Jordan Dagenais

Michigan Technological University

Keywords: Writing assessment, fairness, reliability, viability, automated scoring, public policy

Editors Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin, and Carl Whithaus have curated a comprehensive list of chapters about the many complex challenges facing the field of writing assessment in their collection *Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volume 1: Technical and Political Contexts* and *Volume 2: Emerging Theoretical and Pedagogical Practices*. This edited collection is part of the “Perspectives on Writing” series of books from WAC Clearinghouse and focuses on articles gathered from the *Journal of Writing Assessment*. Volume 1 offers a wide range of chapters related to the relationship between reliability and validity, the role of politics in designing a program’s writing assessment structure, and the effects of automated scoring on both the assessment of writing and writing itself. Volume 2 dissects many additional challenges related to writing

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assessment, including how fairness complicates and enhances conversations about reliability and validity and a closer examination of the lived experiences of students and educators in an assessment environment. Taken together, these volumes showcase powerful discussions about the current state of writing assessment in the 21st century and will benefit any educator or scholar in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC).

Retrospectives

Each part of this collection is introduced by a retrospective written by a current scholar in writing assessment. These retrospectives serve to capture the past and evolving present of writing assessment as the authors in the collection revisit common issues in the field. For example, David H. Slomp, co-editor of *Assessing Writing*, introduces Part One by looking at the storied history of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* and lauding the critical role it plays in shaping efforts to improve writing assessment. In introducing Part Three, Laura Aull provides an important review of what automated scoring is and the issues it introduces and exacerbates—which are then expanded upon in the section.

Volume 1: Technical and Political Contexts

Part One: Technical Issues in the Assessment of Writing: Reliability and Validity

The authors in the first section of this collection discuss the ongoing struggle between reliability and validity in writing assessment. Reliability in writing assessment is concerned with consistency in scoring—from one student to another, one teacher to another, one school to another, etc. In Chapter 1, “Reframing reliability for writing assessment,” Peggy O’Neill introduces nuance into calls for assessment to be handed over to psychometrics experts in order to improve reliability. O’Neill explains that rather than look at this as a black and white issue—in which either we relinquish total control of writing assessment to the field of psychometrics or separate ourselves from any type of psychometrics-assisted assessment entirely—we must find ground in the middle. By bringing psychometrics experts into the conversation but still maintaining ownership as writing assessors, we can get closer to the reliability that we need. In Chapter 2, “Validity inquiry of race and shared evaluation practices in a large-scale, university-wide writing portfolio assessment,” Diane Kelly-Riley demonstrates the complexity of writing assessment in individual classrooms by examining race as a factor in validity or questioning whether we are assessing what we think we are assessing effectively and accurately. Kelly-Riley reveals through a sequential

regression analysis of student portfolios that an instructor's perceptions of their students influence how they assess their writing in both positive and negative ways. Chapter 3, "Three interpretive frameworks," authored by Norbert Elliot, Andre A. Rupp, and David M. Williamson, continues the investigation into the issue of reliability by examining Common Core curricula in K–12 education. At its most basic, Common Core attempts to create reliability (i.e., consistency) across all schools in the United States. The result, as demonstrated by the authors, reveals the weaknesses of forcing reliability without nuance. Individual students, classrooms, and school districts have different needs and contexts that require human intervention in order to achieve actual reliability. As revealed by the authors, teachers who teach Common Core curricula take part in local adjustments to reach a level of reliability. The authors of this first section of Volume 1 insightfully demonstrate just how complex this balance between reliability and validity really is.

Part Two: Politics and Public Policy of Large-Scale Writing Assessment

The second section of this collection examines the role of politics and the resulting public policy in writing assessment. Chapter 4, "The misuse of writing assessment for political purposes," serves as a succinct explanation of the battle between politics, public education policy, and actual educators. The author, Edward M. White, summarizes, "Political figures love assessment because it allows them to posture about education and pretend to themselves and to others that they are improving education by measuring a simplified version of it" (p. 144). Writing assessment is such a complex ecosystem as to be nearly impossible to systematize effectively, leading us right back to the questions of reliability and validity. As Arthur N. Applebee points out in Chapter 5, "Issues in large-scale writing assessment," from one state to another, we cannot even agree on consistent terminology to be used in assessing writing, let alone the assessment itself by examining the development of the National Assessment of Educational Progress framework in 2011. By closely reviewing this framework, Applebee reveals how complex each component of writing assessment is and explains the detrimental effects that occur for students when assumptions are made during the creation of large-scale writing assessment frameworks. Chapter 6's J. W. Hammond and Merideth Garcia continue the discussion around Common Core curriculum from Chapter 3 in their chapter, "The micropolitics of pathways." As the authors articulate, Common Core ultimately adds additional labor to an already overworked and underpaid population of educators by offering a too-narrow and rigid set of requirements that are neither self-implementing nor self-interpreting. As a result, Hammond and Garcia argue that closer attention must be paid to how instructors

interpret these requirements, referred to by the authors as “micropolitical perspectives.” Chapter 7, “Writing assessment, placement, and the two-year college,” supplies one such example of the ramifications of underinformed public policies regarding writing: the two-year college. Chapter authors Christie Toth, Jessica Nastal, Holly Hassel, and Joanne Baird Giordano explain that the two-year college is a perfect example of how complex issues such as reliability and viability get. They insightfully point out the differing contexts of the students’ arrivals in a given classroom as well as their differing goals, which, when coupled with the “racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of two-year college students” (p. 211), indicate a significant ethical component involved in writing assessment. Part Two of this collection calls upon program administrators to bring writing educators into the conversation in order to create more just and effective public policies.

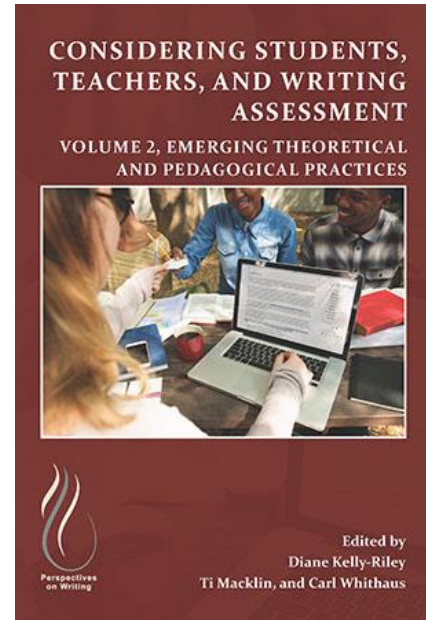
Part Three: Implications of Automated Scoring of Writing

Another component of writing assessment often simplified to the field’s detriment is automated scoring. Michael Williamson in Chapter 8, “Validity of automated scoring,” explains that holistic scoring is traditionally used in writing assessment for a reason—a composition is such a complex entity as to be near-impossible to automate. The authors of Chapters 9 and 10 take a closer look at the effects of automated scoring via case studies. In Chapter 9, “Critique of Mark D. Shermis and Ben Hamner,” Les C. Perelman states clearly and confidently that Shermis and Hamner (2012), an oft-cited unpublished study that points to automated scoring’s reliability, is misconcluded due to the authors’ methodological shortcomings, namely, data gathered that does not evaluate the writing, the bias toward machine assessment, and conclusions drawn without the data to support them. In an effort to push the field toward studies that are more replicable, aggregable, and data-supported, Perelman reveals that some conclusions drawn by Shermis and Hamner are not supported by the data. In Chapter 10, “Globalizing plagiarism and writing assessment,” Jordan Canzonetta and Vani Kannan investigate Turnitin’s push for automated writing assessment. Similar to political leaders pushing for certain policies, Turnitin has a vested interest in automated scoring; if they can establish the rules of the game, their product becomes the de facto solution in automated scoring. Canzonetta and Kannan’s insights are particularly prescient for the field of TPC amid the current flood of AI tools that are reshaping the writing classroom in unpredictable and often detrimental ways. The authors argue for programs to be wary of any company claiming to have the silver bullet solution.

Volume 2: Emerging Theoretical and Pedagogical Practices

Part Four: Theoretical Evolutions: Considering Fairness and Aspiring to Justice

In the first half of Volume 2, the chapter authors discuss fairness in writing assessment, a new dimension in the debate surrounding reliability and validity. As is highlighted in the introduction, forward-thinking scholars such as Peggy O’Neill have been pushing for fairness-minded solutions, such as locally contextual assessment, since 2003. The individual chapter authors offer different approaches to introducing fairness into the equation, such as in Chapter 11, “Moving beyond holistic scoring through validity inquiry,” in which Peggy O’Neill re-examines William L. Smith’s writing placement work from the 1980s and 1990s. O’Neill argues that Smith’s work serves as an important body of work to review to weave fairness into the assessing of writing. In Chapter 12, “Rhetorical writing assessment,” Bob Broad and Michael Boyd offer an analogy of Bohr physics—specifically, the concept of “complementarity”—to better understand the relationship between validity and fairness. Rather than observe them as competing concepts, Broad and Boyd argue, they should be viewed together. In Chapter 13, “Articulating sophistic rhetoric as a validity heuristic for writing assessment,” author Asao B. Inoue extends the analogy exercise of Chapter 12 by looking to the *nomos-physis*—or socially derived customs versus universal customs—concept in rhetoric to understand the place of writing assessment in composition studies. Inoue asserts that writing assessment ought to be more centrally located in conversations about composing to fight for fairness with the same gusto as other social justice efforts. In Chapter 14, “Ethical considerations and writing assessment,” David H. Slomp offers a way to introduce fairness into assessment. According to Slomp, fairness, when introduced correctly, includes sociocultural perspectives, provides access to educational structures, offers opportunities to learn, maximizes construct representations, disaggregates data for classroom-specific analysis, and seeks justice. To become better-informed educators and researchers in TPC, these authors’ expert analyses can serve as a useful guide.



Part Five: Students' and Teachers' Lived Experiences

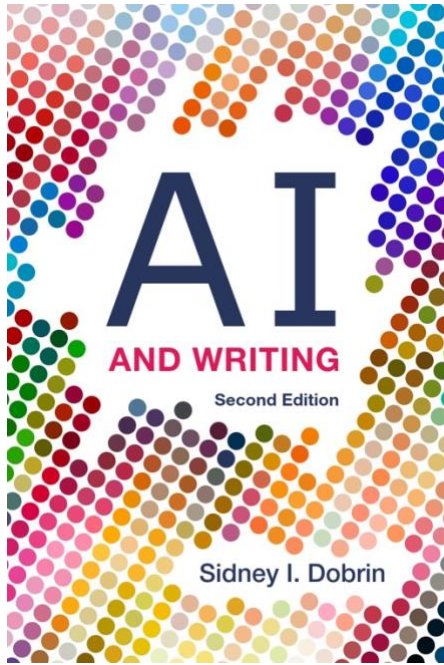
The final section of this edited collection offers specific examples of how educators can take steps toward the goal of fairness in writing assessment. Though the examples within are for composition classes, the lessons that the authors espouse can easily be extrapolated into the TPC classroom. Take, for example, Leslie Henson and Katie Hern in Chapter 16, “Let them in.” The authors examine a policy shift in California that pushed more writing classes to more students, with a particular emphasis on underserved populations. By simply creating more opportunities for access, there has been a positive impact on racial and ethnic disparity in college completion rates, showcasing that sometimes no new ideas are needed, but instead just a reconsideration of who’s being brought into the classroom. In Chapter 17, “Neurodivergence and intersectionality in labor-based grading contracts,” Kathleen Kryger and Griffin X. Zimmerman push the boundaries of labor-based grading contracts (LBGC) by investigating how neurodivergent students engage with them. Based on their investigation, Kryger and Zimmerman offer ways to improve LBGC to best support a wider range of students including student conferences with students wherein the instructor and student find the ideal grading contract together. Scholars and instructors interested in new ideas in the classroom will appreciate Chapter 15, “Civil rights and writing assessment,” by Mya Poe and John Aloysius Cogan, Jr. and Chapter 18, “Engaging in resistant genres as antiracist teacher response,” by Shane Wood. Both chapters excellently speak to antiracism efforts in the writing classroom, with Poe and Cogan, Jr.’s chapter focusing on the distinction between disparate treatment and disparate impact and Wood’s chapter emphasizing how good intentions—such as in the case of grading contracts—can still have violent consequences.

Conclusion

As a compilation, these two volumes edited by Diane Kelly-Riley, Ti Macklin, and Carl Whithaus provide an essential addition to the corpus of writing assessment literature. Touching on prescient concepts in the field such as the push for automated assessment, introducing justice and fairness into assessment, and public policy’s effects on the classroom, any educator or scholar in the field of TPC can find insightful and relevant advice relating to their work. Whether you are an expert in writing assessment or just getting introduced to the field, *Considering Students, Teachers, and Writing Assessment Volumes 1 and 2* is a must-read for those interested in improving the writing classroom.

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AI and Writing

Author: Sydney I. Dobrin
Place of Publication: Ontario, Canada
Publisher: Broadview Press
Date of Publication: 2023
Number of Pages: 208

Reviewed by
Andrew Ridgeway
Methodist University

Keywords: GenAI, AI pedagogy, assignments and curriculum, undergraduate writing instruction, hands-on learning

In *AI and Writing*, Sidney I. Dobrin offers students, instructors, and program administrators a broad overview of what generative AI (GenAI) technology is, how it works, and how it changes writing in professional, academic, civic, and personal contexts. While it was written as a textbook for writing-intensive courses focused on GenAI, Dobrin's book doubles as a starting point for thinking about how large language models (LLMs) can be incorporated into writing assignments, curricula, and program outcomes.

Part 1, titled "Understanding generative AI," is a general overview of AI literacy and writing. Chapter 1 offers a short history of writing technologies and the cultural panic many of them initially caused and suggests human-machine collaboration as a paradigm for thinking about writing with GenAI. For Dobrin, writing is like any other process: Parts of it can be automated. Chapter 2 examines the history of GenAI in more detail and offers a general

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introduction to how GenAI works, while Chapter 3 addresses academic integrity. This last chapter describes different kinds of plagiarism and includes instructions for citing GenAI in APA, MLA, and IEEE formats. This section could function as a stand-alone crash course for administrators and program coordinators looking for an accessible, practical introduction to GenAI.

Part 2, “Opportunities and applications,” is the largest section of the book. Dobrin shifts away from basic AI literacy to examine how GenAI is changing academic and professional writing. Chapters 4–6 focus on hands-on use. Dobrin explains how GenAI can be used for prewriting, research, drafting, revising, and editing. He also describes the characteristics of good prompt writing and the conversation around multimodal composition, visual rhetoric, and the ethics of GenAI images. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss how GenAI is reshaping writing across academic, professional, civic, and personal contexts, the impact this will have on the workforce, and the skills employers will expect their employees to have in the post-AI workplace.

Part 3, “Challenges,” describes potential problems with GenAI. It has two chapters, “Bias” and “Materiality.” The former distinguishes “algorithmic bias,” which occurs when algorithms “privilege specific kinds of information within a dataset,” from “exclusionary bias,” which involve the language and material excluded from GenAI’s training data (p. 76). “Materiality” briefly delves into the ethics of AI supply chains, mineral extraction, and e-waste. These chapters are a welcome inclusion; the material costs of GenAI, in particular, are often overlooked in conversations about the role this technology should play in higher education.

For technical and professional communication programs, the main strength of *AI and Writing* is that it is clear, readable, and written with students in mind. Chapters are short and broken into brief sections and short paragraphs. There are discussion materials at the end of each chapter, which are divided into three types of questions. The “So What?” questions invite students to think about the stakes of the subjects discussed in each chapter. The “Conceptual AI” questions prompt students to think through theoretical issues with GenAI, while the “Applied AI” questions ask students to experiment with GenAI and document or reflect on the results. The former are good for small group discussions and free writes, while the latter offer useful scaffolding for in-class activities and homework assignments. All of this, combined with the clarity of the explanations and examples in each chapter, makes *AI and Writing* a useful on-ramp for instructors and program coordinators who are curious about AI.

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For the field of composition more generally, the book offers a soft pitch for incorporating GenAI into the writing process, along with several good places to start. While other recent collections on GenAI and the classroom, such as *TextGenEd* (edited by Annette Vee, Tim Laquintano, and Carly Schnitzler) and *Composing with AI* (edited by Nupoor Ranade and Douglas Eyman), offer instructors detailed assignment descriptions or step-by-step instructions, the activities in *AI and Writing* are open-ended, student-facing, and focused on encouraging students to experiment with GenAI.

For example, one of the activities in Chapter 4, “Writing with GenAI,” asks students to use a search engine and GenAI tool to research a topic, then compare the accuracy, relevance, and timeliness of the sources each tool provides. Another invites students to write a traditional academic essay about how to use GenAI in college writing assignments by using GenAI for every stage of the writing process, from invention to editing. These assignments can be adapted to many contexts and serve as inspiration for instructors and program administrators who want to help students to test GenAI’s capabilities and limits.

As a general introduction to AI literacy in the classroom, *AI and Writing* could be described as a work of translation. Dobrin is especially effective at introducing and explaining technical terms like “machine learning” and “General Adversarial Network” (GAN) in ways non-specialists can understand. Like any good general introduction, the book seems committed to exploring the breadth of the topic, but there are moments when the text moves too quickly past questions or issues that would be worth examining in more detail. It feels significant, for example, that a work that spends so much time discussing how GenAI will impact the workforce, alter supply chains, and disrupt the economy does not explain how companies like OpenAI monetize their users or what they do with user data. Instructors adopting this text for their course may want to supplement this reading with texts that cover these sorts of ethical concerns.

Many of these questions fall outside the book’s scope. Dobrin does address several major issues raised by GenAI, including its relationship to plagiarism, its environmental footprint, and questions of bias. However, other controversies, like data privacy, surveillance, language homogenization, and deepfakes receive more limited attention, or are not taken up directly. As a result, the final section on the challenges associated with GenAI feels more like a point of departure for further reading and discussion than a broad survey of GenAI’s risks, limits, and potential consequences.

Ultimately, this does not detract from the quality or value of *AI and Writing*, which is a good primer for composition instructors and program coordinators searching for a place to start thinking about what the widespread adoption of GenAI will mean for college writing

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programs. The book is concise, so a graduate seminar or faculty reading group could finish it in a week or two. They could also use it as a reliable foundation for tackling more technical specialist texts. *AI and Writing* would also be a valuable resource for undergraduate students, since a single chapter is short enough for them to read and respond to during a 50-minute class in an inverted classroom model.

While *AI and Writing* will undoubtedly strike some readers as overly optimistic about the creative and economic potential of GenAI, Dobrin is not writing as an AI evangelist. Instead, he is offering a practical approach to GenAI that emphasizes student experimentation, discovery, and dialogue. In that spirit, *AI and Writing* has value as an administrative and pedagogical tool: a clear, usable set of resources that gives composition instructors and program coordinators a shared vocabulary, concrete entry points for curriculum and assessment design, and a practical framework for helping instructors and students test what GenAI can and cannot do.

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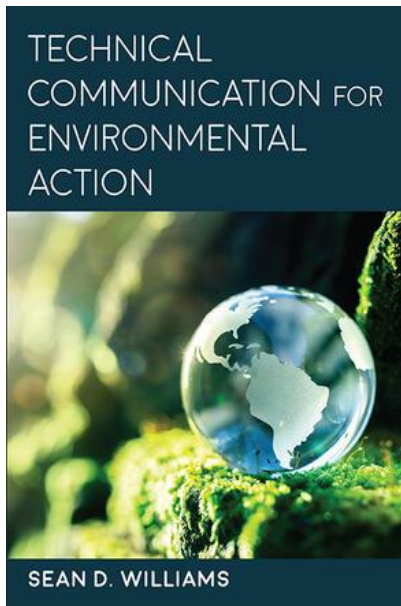
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Author Statement on AI

I used GenAI to transcribe a handwritten draft of this book review. I also used it to copyedit the document and format my References page. The evaluative claims, interpretation, and final phrasing are my own. I verified and edited all AI-assisted output and take full responsibility for the contents of this manuscript.



Technical Communication for Environmental Action

Editor: Sean D. Williams

Place of Publication: Albany, NY

Publisher: SUNY Press

Date of Publication: 2023

Number of Pages: 320

Reviewed by
Jessica Remcheck
University of Minnesota

Keywords: Technical communication, environmental action, praxis, dialogue, pedagogy

Technical Communication for Environmental Action, edited by Sean D. Williams, brings together diverse perspectives and approaches that scholars, researchers, and students can learn from to support and advance environmental action. The book includes an introduction by Williams, 11 authored chapters, and an epilogue by Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke. This collection is timely and necessary because, although research on technical communication related to environmental action is increasing, there is still relatively little guidance on it. Williams explains that the goal of the collection is to provide voices surrounding three rhetorical concepts: *praxis*, *phronesis*, and *dialogue*. In addition to these themes, there is a suggestion to read the chapters according to four topics: Diverse Voices, Narrative Methods, Policy & Process, and Pedagogy. At the end of the introduction, Williams clearly emphasizes the intention for this collection, which is simple but earnest—to prompt environmental action. Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke shares in the epilogue of the collection that these chapters serve as a “roadmap” to this action, clearly

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conceptualizing the ways these chapters work together to inform participation in environmental action, whether through pedagogy, illuminating Indigenous and global perspectives concerning the environment, or through reimagining how public participation can function.

Each chapter presents a form of environmental action and provides guidance for those seeking knowledge, new ways of thinking, ideas for community-participatory research, or expansive perspectives on social justice. From a programmatic perspective, this collection offers actionable and insightful observations for developing meaningful community-participatory classroom experiences, scenarios that provide a lens on social justice, and cases that demystify the often confusing and bureaucratic processes that prevent progress in environmental action.

A prominent and valuable element that stands out in this collection is the inclusion of diverse, localized voices and experiences surrounding environmental action related to technical communication. The first chapter in the collection, by Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq, “When the sound is frozen: Extracting climate data from Inuit narratives,” highlights how underrepresented Indigenous voices hold embodied, localized scientific knowledge about climate patterns, which is often excluded from Western knowledge production. This chapter challenges dominant and colonial perspectives on ways of knowing and shows that studying local, Indigenous narratives about the environment is a legitimate way to more deeply understand climate patterns. Beth Shirley, in Chapter 6, “The narrative of silent stakeholders: Reframing local environmental communications to include global human impacts,” also argues for the inclusion of underrepresented voices in environmental issues through applying the strategy of societal teleconnections. Shirley’s work shows the importance of giving voice to local communities who are often invisible stakeholders in global issues by documenting narratives that bring the experiences of Moroccan women to light. In Chapter 4, “Flood insurance rate maps as communicative sites of pragmatic environmental action,” Daniel P. Richards also shows the importance of taking a localized approach to environmental issues surrounding technical communication. Richards’ account demonstrates how technical communication can raise public awareness of flood risk and dispel misconceptions about flood insurance pricing, helping local communities become more resilient by encouraging individuals to obtain coverage. Together, these chapters emphasize the importance of amplifying marginalized and underrepresented voices in conversations about environmental action and show approaches that center on local, community-specific issues.

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The multiple detailed accounts of community-participatory learning in the classroom constitute a robust contribution to the collection, and each chapter offers a unique understanding of how these courses can be approached. In Chapter 3, “In defense of a greenspace: Students discover agency in the practice of community-engaged technical communication,” Bob Hyland provides an account of a community-participatory course centered around protecting greenspace in the Cincinnati Park system, which continued over multiple semesters. Hyland’s chapter illustrates how community-participatory learning creates a space for students to exercise agency, leading to meaningful environmental action, while also bridging the gap between theory and praxis in technical communication. In Chapter 5, “Collaborating for clean air: Virtue ethics and the cultivation of transformational service-learning partnerships,” Lauren E. Cagle and Roberta Burnes show the benefits of cultivating a partnership between educators and community groups over an extended period and how these partnerships lead to transformation among educators, students, and the community. In Chapter 8, “Writing for clients, writing for change: Proposals, persuasion, and problem solving in the technical writing classroom,” Monika A. Smith illuminates how a community-participatory project in the classroom enhanced rhetorical and technical communication skills among the engineering students, while also fostering a sense of interconnectedness with themselves and the world around them. Lastly, in Chapter 11, “Rhino crash: Teaching science, medical, and environmental writing for social action,” Michelle Hall Kells shares how a partnership with a South African-based rhino conservation group allowed for an “appreciative inquiry perspective” and encouraged students to engage with audiences as global citizens.

Many of the chapters explore the complexities and challenges of public participation in environmental action, as well as the role of technical communicators in addressing them, providing valuable insights to researchers, practitioners, and students interested in advancing a more sustainable future. Dan Card’s Chapter 2, “Boundary waters: Deliberative experience design for environmental decision making,” applies a social justice lens to examine how public participation functions in the environmental review process, revealing inequities and identifying specific areas where intervention is needed to ensure broader and more equitable access. Sara B. Parks and Lee S. Tesdell also seek to make the invisible visible in Chapter 7, “Resilient farmland: The role of technical communicators,” showcasing opportunities for technical communicators in agricultural decision-making, which is often kept private, through a case study in Iowa. In Chapter 9, “Health in the shale fields: Technical communication and environmental health risks,” Barbara George applies stasis theory to show the discrepancies and inconsistencies between how information is provided to the public and how stakeholders deliberate on

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issues. In conjunction with this analysis, George shows how an advocacy non-profit organization can help address these gaps and increase public knowledge of issues and processes, enabling the public to better understand and participate in initiatives that affect them. In Chapter 10, “Participatory policy: Enacting technical communication for a shared water future,” Josephine Walwema provides solutions to increase public participation by examining the policy surrounding South Africa’s governance of the water shortage. Through critical discourse analysis, Walwema shows the technical strategies that assisted the city of Cape Town in creating a policy to secure a successful water future. These chapters work to demystify complex processes and identify areas for intervention to improve public participation in policy and regulatory practices related to environmental issues.

Technical Communication for Environmental Action provides a rich source of information for researchers, practitioners, and educators to reference and build upon. Educators interested in community-participatory learning courses could gain insights and ideas to propose or develop similar courses focused on environmental action at their own institutions. Additionally, many chapters in this collection are appropriate for instructors to assign as reading in various undergraduate courses, such as technical and professional communication, science writing, and courses with a particular focus on the environment. While the collection provides insight into a wide range of topics appropriate for undergraduate learning, one of the most significant is social justice. Many chapters in the collection can be incorporated into social justice units to highlight Indigenous perspectives, global and underrepresented voices, and inequities in public participation practices surrounding environmental issues.

This collection makes visible the widespread technical communication needs in environmental action and provides insight into the vast number of opportunities for those interested in participating. As the climate crisis persists, it is encouraging to see an increase in scholarship in technical communication that offers a range of ideas and actions to advance environmental progress.

Author Information

Jessica Remcheck (she/her) is a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota in Rhetoric and Scientific & Technical Communication. Her research lies at the intersection of the rhetoric of health and science, technical communication, and environmental justice. Currently, she focuses on how decisions are made and communicated in the context of human-induced toxic exposures. She is interested in the public understanding of risk and safety related to environmental toxins and in researching how the public can become better-informed about environmental policy and regulations.