Using 'Community' Needs to Promote and Expand WAC

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What's in a Name?

We know that many WAC initiatives start as grassroots efforts to meet local curricular needs, and that success depends on the extent to which these initiatives gain institutional support. However, as the missions of institutions change to account more fully for preparing students for their roles as citizens and workers, WAC initiatives need to be more aware of the needs of the larger community as well as the university community.

At Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC), we are building our writing programs—our Technical and Professional Writing Program (TPWP) and our First Year Writing Program (FYWP)—using information we are gathering from our local business community and from faculty across the campus. We do not have a formal WAC program, but we have reshaped our writing programs through surveys and interviews that connect formal writing program courses with increased writing and presenting in courses. Furthermore, we have connected the writing and presenting with the needs of employers and not-for-profits. The results say "writing across the curriculum" although the names of our programs do not.

Building Connections—
Technical and Professional Writing

TAMU-CC offers a minor in Technical and Professional Writing. The program has been small for many years, with as few as ten students in the program at any one time. A common misconception that students often express is that

there are no opportunities for technical writers in the Coastal Bend area (the counties in and around TAMU-CC). The 18 credit hour program originally consisted of a service course that was required for Criminal Justice majors; a course in writing for the professions intended for students enrolled in the minor, most of whom were English majors; a course in desktop publishing; a course in computer-aided reporting that was rarely offered; a course in on-line research and editing; and a topics course.

Because of the small number of students enrolled in the minor, and the faculty's feeling that if the courses were updated more students might be attracted to the major, we reviewed the program during the 2000-2001 academic year. The goals of the review were

- to redesign and build a program that will meet university, departmental, and community needs and goals and
- to build connections between the program and the larger university community and the Coastal Bend community.

As part of this program review, we surveyed local businesses to determine what types of jobs were available, and what skills were perceived as being important for technical and professional writers. In August of 2000, we mailed 500 surveys to a representative sample from the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce and Corpus Christi Hispanic Chamber of Commerce membership lists. The return rate was 10%, and follow-up interviews were conducted with those respondents who indicated they would like to work collaboratively with our students. We have now identified new internship opportunities for students and formed ongoing service learning collaborations. For example, students have worked with the Boys and Girls Club of Corpus Christi to write grants, develop web sites, and coordinate technology training. (For survey results, go to http://critical.tamucc.edu/~loudermilk/twpro/tw_survey_report.htm.)

The survey also helped us to set program goals that will make our students successful. The survey results indicated that how we define technical writing matters in the Coastal Bend area. The survey identified 35 specific positions that require technical and professional writing skills; the majority are high-paying administrative jobs.

Respondents were asked to list types of writing/documents required on the job. Most documents were familiar (letters, memos, and reports), but we used the skills ranked most important in redesigning our program. We now focus on gathering information, planning, ethics, identifying document development tools, designing documents, and analyzing audience and purpose. We emphasized the local community, but part of the program review gathered information about job opportunities and required skills from national resources, such as the Society of Technical Communications and their listserve, Techwr-L.

The new TPWP, still an 18 hour minor, now reflects the findings of the program review. The service course is still offered but has been expanded and focuses on community collaboration. The course is now required of Criminal Justice and Computer Science majors. The Writing in the Professions course is being redeveloped as a linked learning course that will emphasize different areas each semester it is offered. For example, one section may concentrate on Nursing students. Flexibility in course delivery will be needed to fit the demands of Nursing program students. We developed two new courses, Writing in Networked Environments I and II. Desktop publishing is still offered, as is the topics course. All courses teach project development; students choose projects that prepare them for future careers.

Aligning the Technical Writing Class with Workplace Communities

The results of the community survey have reshaped our entry level technical writing course for students from across the curriculum. The survey outcomes emphasized that context drives the distinct tools and rules used to create documents as well as how documents are distributed and consumed: A safety and health specialist operates in a context different from that of a juvenile probation officer, and their written products are shaped to each setting. The survey helped us realize that we need to move away from a prescriptive approach (creating assignments based on format without understanding the student's academic needs and future professional needs) to a constructivist approach that shifts inquiry and the decision-making process to students. The assignments provide many opportunities for students to place themselves in their future workplace contexts, use knowl-

edge gained in the coursework for their majors, learn about genres used in that context, decide what skills they need to develop, and become involved in the community as productive communicators.

The key portfolio assignments allow students to work within their own settings, including their majors and their future career area. Each project requires them to become more involved with specific settings and the larger community. (Detailed descriptions of the portfolios are available at http://www.tamucc.edu/~cardenas.) The three portfolios are "Writing on the Job: Understanding Workplace Literacy"; "Applying for a Job: Recognizing and Implementing Strategies"; and "Responding to a Community Need: Generating Viable Solutions."

Students Benefit in Many Ways:
- They make a connection between the classroom and the community.
- They put into practice the knowledge gained in their coursework.
- They construct a broader definition of learning and knowledge.
- They learn to operate within the expectations of their future workplace.
- They model the kinds of writing typical of a particular setting.
- They become familiar with various genres of writing and conventions they must follow.
- They begin to understand the kind of expertise that a workplace demands.
- They identify skills and tools they must possess to become effective and valued employees.
- They gain a sense of the clients served by the written and oral presentations.
- They discover the personal values of individuals who interact with them as they work through the assignments.

Students respond positively to their experiences, and we see these changes in the statements students make in frequent memos they write to inform classmates (not just the instructor) about their progress. One student wrote about visiting with a Safety and Occupational Health Specialist at the Corpus Christi Army Depot and learning that the docu-

ments he writes "are very important, because people have been injured, and he must document the injuries and study the circumstances to prevent the accidents from recurring." A second student, an engineering major who worked with an engineer, created for part of his Workplace Literacy portfolio a memo explaining the status of the design phase for a new aircraft jack. This task required that the student include with the memo a diagram showing the parts of the jack and the progress to date on each of the design sections. Not only did this student develop a writing product related to his future career area, he also implemented skills that he was currently learning in his engineering classes.

We also see these changes in the comments we receive from students at the end of the semester: "I like being able to make decisions for myself," and "I have learned how to work through a project more on my own without having the teacher tell me what to do." Students find the changes challenging at first, but by semester's end they have a much greater understanding of writers and managers' writing and responsibilities. Students learn from other students as they collaborate in groups and share details about their projects and the many choices made to get the job done. They leave knowing about the methods they employed as well as methods other students discovered and used. At the end they realize that by making certain choices they can actually shape outcomes, for better or worse, and they are more connected to and prouder of the final products they develop.

Our students learn about writing not just within the context of rules of form, style, and correctness, but in the context of a decision making process for achieving results. This work crosses curriculums and engages the community.

Connecting to the Larger University Community

During the fall of 2001 we sent a survey to all university faculty (360) to learn how faculty in other departments use writing in their courses. We wanted to develop stronger connections between their assignments and our writing programs. We chose a survey to gather first-hand information from as many faculty members as possible. We also prepared questions and conducted face-to-face interviews with faculty in every department across campus. These conversations uncovered which writing skills students bring into their classes and the kinds of help they need.

While many of these interviews were held one-on-one, we were able to attend a faculty meeting of the Nursing and Health Sciences Department as a group. Interviews have also been held with the Accounting, Economics and History faculty members. These interviews formed new connections to other Colleges within the University: the School of Business and the School of Arts and Humanities. Answers to two questions from the interviews (What kinds of practice in communications (written and oral) do your majors need? and How do you think this practice could be improved, perhaps with collaboration with the English department?) elicited information we have used to make changes.

Overall, teachers in these first four groups indicated their students need practice in critical thinking and in documenting sources, especially online sources. The Nursing faculty noted that clear, concise, non-ambiguous writing is most important. For example, nurses have to be sensitive and not use language that frightens the patients or their families; they have to use unbiased language (and actually be unbiased); they must have a clear sense of their audience; and they have to practice concise documentation, especially when charting information.

The Nursing faculty pointed out another important issue that we often confront when we are planning WAC initiatives. Since there is not much room in their curriculum for adding another course, we have to find other ways to support writing in their program. They suggested a technical writing course that would link to their core courses and also use the nursing texts. We have had initial discussions with the Nursing faculty to begin planning such a course.

Faculty from the other departments also shared valuable information regarding the writing skills their students need, which has helped faculty in the FYWP revisit the focus of some courses. For example, many of the faculty interviewed said that their students do need more practice in critically analyzing what they are reading, and they need more practice in stating a claim and backing it up with evidence. Also, as a result of the interviews, the first semester of the FYWP sequence has been redesigned so students now work on developing arguments.

Conclusion: Integrating Writing across the Curriculum— A Model Built on Community Needs

We are doing many things at TAMU-CC to help students improve writing skills. All of our FYWP and TPWP classes are held in computer classrooms. More collaboration is encouraged in the linked courses, especially between the composition faculty and seminar leaders. Students in the TPWP are involved with the community in many ways, and discussions have begun to incorporate more service learning opportunities in the FYWP. And while we have never had a formal program in place for WAC, the data we are compiling from these surveys, interviews, university connections and community connections will continue to contribute to the WAC that is in fact, if not in name, going on at our university.