Program Review
2004-05 Planning and Review Committee

PRC Review: B.S. in Technical Communication

Program Director: Bruce Maylath

PRC Consultants: Edward Harris and Jonna Gjevre

Purpose of the review: This new program is being reviewed in the fifth year to assess the quality of the B.S. in Technical Communication.

Committee Findings: The Planning and Review Committee recommends that this program continue to be one of UW Stout’s degree programs for the ongoing seven-year cycle, and that recommendations made by the committee be implemented.

Abstract:

The B.S. in Technical Communication prepares students for employment in a rapidly evolving field. In alignment with UW-Stout’s mission, the Technical Communication program emphasizes communication, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. The UW-Stout tradition of “hands-on” experience and active learning is reflected in the program’s emphasis on problem solving, usability, and applied knowledge. Additionally, the program incorporates new learning and teaching strategies that are part of the UW-Stout’s high-tech digital campus. The degree consists of 124 credits of general education and professional coursework and is unique at UW-Stout (and in the field of technical communication) for blending applied professional fields into the requirements for the degree. As a new program in its fifth year, the B.S. in Technical Communication is housed within the English and Philosophy Department and is being reviewed for the first time. Although some tension exists between the needs of the program and the general education mission of the department, the faculty is working hard to find a balance that will best serve the needs of the students. This is a solid, quality program.

Process Followed for Current Review:

In the fall of 2004, data on the program were collected from students, key instructors within and outside the departments, and advisory board members. The program director and PRC committee received the data, and it was analyzed by the program director and by the PRC consultants. The PRC consultants met with the program director to review the procedure and offer assistance. The program director then submitted his self-report to the PRC, presented the report, and responded to questions. The PRC discussed the program director’s self-study and developed this report, using feedback from PRC members. The program director was allowed to provide input on a draft of this report prior to its submission to the PRC.

Previous Review:

Not applicable, as this is a new program in its fifth year.

Program Strengths:

1. Job placement in the field for the program’s graduates is exceptionally high. Despite local competition from three of the largest technical communication programs in the country, Stout graduates are found to be in great demand, as one key instructor observes, because the program has helped them to be “quite versatile and sought after.”
2. Student recruitment and program development has been rapid, and in less than five years, the program has emerged as one of the 10 largest technical communication programs in the country.

3. The program is highly regarded nationally, with internationally recognized figures in industry serving on its advisory board.

4. The program director has received strong support for his commitment to the program and its design, as well as his knowledgeable and effective leadership, accessibility to students, and strong connections to industry.

5. Key faculty within the English and Philosophy Department are credited for being knowledgeable and committed to students. An advisory board member points to the "commitment of teachers" as a major strength, and one student writes, "I think most of the major professors are passionate about what they teach." Students praise instructors for having high standards, being "willing to help," and teaching effectively. Faculty members are also praised for what one student describes as their "knowledge of the industry and its components."

6. Students and other stakeholders express high levels of confidence in students’ ability to analyze documents, create usable design, and write effectively.

7. The curriculum design of the program is praised for its "broad spectrum" and "visionary approach," its responsiveness to changing conditions or current trends, its "interdisciplinary elements," and the program’s emphasis on what one student calls “multiple types of writing.”

8. "Continuous improvement": At a retreat in the fall of 2004, stakeholders worked together to envision and develop curriculum revision that will address changes in the field, and a steering committee has been formed to address contemplated program changes.

Program Concerns:

1. Salaries and heavy course loads have made it challenging for the program to acquire and retain faculty who specialize in technical communication.

2. The assignment of key roles to generalists in the program has resulted in a number of challenges for the program:
   a. There is some student dissatisfaction related to a few instances of instructors’ limited knowledge of sophisticated software programs and other technical issues.
   b. There is some student dissatisfaction related to the quality of advising, since the complexities of the program are not always well-understood by instructors who are new to the program.
   c. There is some frustration within the department. A sense of program ownership and buy in is not shared by all department members.
   d. There is some frustration related to workload pressures.

Facilities and Resources:

1. Students and instructors repeatedly emphasize serious deficiencies in availability and quality of lab/software.

2. Some students and advisory board members believe that more should be done to publicize the program. Increased visibility on campus is a goal. The program is attempting to deal with this problem by having key faculty members visit every ENGL-102, -112, and -113 section in the weeks leading up to spring Advisement Day and by conducting a statewide writing contest on campus for high school students in the spring.

Curriculum:

1. Curriculum overlap is identified within the English and Philosophy Department and with other contributing departments. Some students and key faculty within the department observed

2. Stakeholders observe that some English courses either overlap or lack connection with courses outside the department. Instructors within and outside the department may need better communication with each other. Art 101 and GCM courses are singled out.

3. A slight disagreement exists as to whether the program should increase or diminish offerings in core writing skills in favor of adding curriculum focused on new technologies. Student surveys reveal divided opinions on this issue.

Recommendations to the Technical Communication Program Director:

1. Work with other department members; continue to review the curriculum in an effort to avoid unnecessary overlap.
2. In cooperation with the department chair and the college dean, continue work to develop and implement a solid program marketing plan.

Recommendations to the English and Philosophy Department Chair:

1. Be supportive of the program director and his efforts to purchase adequate software needed to better serve the students.
2. Be supportive of the program director and his efforts to seek department faculty support and participation.
3. Be supportive of the need to develop and implement a solid marketing plan designed to increase student enrollment and retention.
4. Be supportive of the program’s need to recruit and retain faculty qualified to teach in the program.

Recommendations to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences:

1. Be supportive of the program director and the chair in their efforts to identify and fund the purchase of software for the program.
2. Be supportive of the need to develop and implement a solid marketing plan designed to increase student enrollment and retention.
3. Be supportive of the program’s need to recruit and retain faculty qualified to teach in the program.