

4

SMALL BUT GOOD

How a Specialized Writing Program Goes It Alone

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My story is of a technical and professional writing program at a state university that grew out of a special major in the mid-1980s, then, unwanted by the English department, formed itself as an independent, interdisciplinary home for a career-oriented minor. The program now also offers a bachelor's degree and a certificate, yet it remains disconnected in terms of administration, faculty, and budget from English, even though that is where both composition and linguistics are housed.

Thanks to its independent status, our program has no responsibility for service courses or general education requirements; nor are its students required to take English courses (beyond graduation minimums). This allows us to focus on developing a specialized, quality curriculum—which is often a challenge for technical and professional writing programs that are housed in English departments. Of course, our focus and our independence also keep us small, yet we have managed to turn that quality into a virtue, with benefits ranging from staffing flexibility to creating a supportive, networked community for our students.

Ah, but, of course, our story also includes its share of mistakes (for example, a university requirement for the initial tenure-track appointment to be joint with English) and travails (we are often misunderstood, undervalued, and subject to benign neglect). Nevertheless our ability to thrive by flying below the radar may have implications for other writing programs that hope to develop specialized degrees and/or those that fear there is no life beyond English.

HISTORY

Technical and professional writing only in recent decades has emerged as a distinct academic field of study. A course of study focused on writing in the workplace prepares students for careers in a well-compensated profession, one that is becoming larger, more prominent, and increasingly more sophisticated in its expectations.

The present Technical and Professional Writing Program at San Francisco State University grew out of the Career and Technical Writing Program, which offered first a minor in 1983 and then an undergraduate certificate in 1984.

THE CAREER AND TECHNICAL WRITING MINOR AND CERTIFICATE

The initial program was designed by an interdisciplinary team that included tenured/tenure-track faculty from three university departments, all located in separate colleges (then called “schools”) of the university: the English department (College of Humanities), which includes a composition program and offers writing courses required for all undergraduates; the design and industry department (College of Creative Arts), which teaches graphic design and industrial product design and which requires an “industrial communication” writing course; and business administration (College of Business), which requires a “business communication” writing course. This team also received crucial assistance from a part-time instructor who also was a professional technical writer and editor. He taught the first actual courses in Career and Technical Writing (CTW).

From its inception, the CTW program was interdisciplinary. It included coursework not only under a CTW prefix, but also from English, design and industry, educational technology, the Center for Interdisciplinary Science, journalism, computer sciences, business, broadcast communication arts, and other departments. It was agreed that the program would be housed in Humanities but would function as a freestanding minor, independent of any department. The minor and certificate were identical twenty-four-unit programs: the minor was taken by students matriculating for a bachelor’s degree; the certificate, by students who were either post-bachelor’s or who (with a minimum of fifty-six undergraduate units already completed) had decided not to apply for a degree.

The CTW program provided two core courses, in writing and editing, and an internship/final project course. The program borrowed an applied graphic design course from design and industry for a fourth core requirement. It also assembled an interdisciplinary list of electives from across the campus in writing, editing, graphics, and publication, as applied to a number of fields or professions. CTW allowed computer programming and applications courses to be taken for elective credit. The program also designed one elective of its own in grantwriting and

another in museum and gallery writing (the latter cross-listed with anthropology, art, and classics).

All CTW courses (about three were offered each semester) were taught by part-time faculty. The final projects were carried out under the aegis of willing individual faculty members. The associate dean of the college, one of the faculty members from English who had helped to found the program, was also its first supervisor, acting as coordinator, advisor, and internship director.

The CTW minor program was aimed at students who were interested in studying the humanities, but who also wanted some career-oriented education to increase their employability upon graduation. The program also welcomed students who were already majoring in science, business, or some technical field, and who wanted to improve their writing skills in that field or who wanted primarily to be writers rather than researchers or practitioners in that field.

During CTW's years of operation, its student body was a mix of those two populations, with humanities majors outnumbering the science/technical majors by about five to one. This ratio fairly closely matched the academic preparation of professional technical writers at the time, with the majority being drawn from the ranks of English, creative writing, liberal studies, and similar majors.

THE TPW PROGRAM AND BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROPOSAL

The CTW program proved to be quite popular, considering its small size, negligible budget, and low profile: at any given moment, it accommodated about fifty students who were actively pursuing a minor or certificate, plus numbers of others taking individual courses out of interest. In addition, students began inquiring from the outset about a major. In fact, individual majors were designed for about a half-dozen students each year between 1984 and 1990.

It was because of the continuing demand for a major that the faculty active in the program prepared a bachelor of arts degree proposal, which was approved, and the degree was implemented in fall of 1990.

This new bachelor's degree retained the core component and interdisciplinary skills electives already in place for the minor and certificate. The core, however, was strengthened for majors by requiring an internship (rather than the culminating project that was still allowed as an option for the minor and certificate) and a completion-level course. In addition to the skills electives, the forty-five-unit major also required a subject matter

focus in a professionally related department or interdisciplinary theme. Additional electives now offered by the program were included as well.

The faculty group proposing the new bachelor's degree thought that they might encounter questions or resistance from California State University (CSU), which needed to approve new degrees offered by any of the universities within its system, including San Francisco State. Our degree was unprecedented for the CSU system: in fact, it continues to be the only freestanding technical and professional writing major in either the CSU or University of California system and, to our knowledge, at any four-year institution in California.

The proposal made its case, however, that the degree was an appropriate offering in the humanities (requiring much understanding of writing and communication theory and process, along with considerable research skills and practice), while also providing students with concrete professional skills and employment options. The location of the program in the San Francisco Bay Area, with its many high-technology employers, also strengthened the case.

Leadership

The bachelor's degree proposal specified that the program could be offered with two faculty positions, one of which needed to be tenure-track for the director (then called "coordinator"), who would also do all advising and who also would develop and supervise the internship requirement. The program would offer a bachelor's degree, a minor, and a certificate. The name for all three would now be Technical and Professional Writing (TPW).

The proposal also specified that the program, because it was quite interdisciplinary, must be freestanding (as the earlier program had been), that is, not a part of the English department or any other department. This stipulation resulted from recognizing that other technical and professional writing offerings and concentrations within the CSU system were usually offshoots of English, and so those programs were limited in their coursework and in their independence. However, the new TPW program aimed to provide a broad range of training for a number of different professional paths, most of them not even remotely connected to English. The discipline also had developed as a distinct scholarly field, with its own journals and areas of specialization, most not familiar to scholars in other areas of English. Moreover, as the computer industry had been growing exponentially in size, sophistication, and ubiquity,

employers of TPW graduates were demanding increasingly specialized training in types of writing, editing, and presentation that were beyond the interest and expertise of the English faculty.

The English department, for its part, had never had (and still does not have) any desire to own or even coordinate TPW. English at San Francisco State University is a department dominated by faculty devoted to literary studies. Creative writing is an entirely separate department. And, while the composition program (along with linguistics and ESL) is included within the English department, composition's undergraduate offerings are primarily designed for students to meet university reading and writing requirements and also for prospective K-12 teachers. Composition has never offered university service courses in technical writing or business writing, nor does it offer graduate degrees in rhetoric, professional communication, or related fields.

Therefore, the English department agreed that the programs should remain separate and that TPW would flourish best independently. Despite their joint stance, the university's provost insisted that the first TPW tenure-track hire should be through the English department. Because there was no other way to move forward, TPW and English agreed, although very reluctantly.

This first tenure-track faculty member intended to supervise TPW was hired in fall of 1990. As an English-TPW consensus hire, he needed to demonstrate dual qualifications. And, indeed, he had a publications record in literary studies (as well as creative writing) and also had workplace experience as a technical writer and editor. However, his lack of focus created difficulties right from the start, so he never was able to develop the TPW curriculum nor even to teach its existing courses effectively. Before the first year was out, it became clear that he was not fulfilling the program's needs or expectations. Unwilling to leave his position voluntarily when initially asked to do so, he was denied retention after his second year. His formal connection with the English department had not aided him in any way to become retainable, for he was not recognized there as a desirable colleague to teach literature courses. Nor did he have credentials or experience for teaching undergraduate composition requirements or teacher preparation courses.

The consequence of this initial consensus hire was negative fallout for the fledgling TPW degree program, which lost credibility both among university administrators and among disappointed students. TPW applied to

refill a tenure-track position for 1992–93; however, budget exigencies forced a hiring freeze across campus. As a result, the associate dean again filled in, serving as interim coordinator for one year. Meanwhile, the college dean's request for return of the TPW tenure-track position was refused for yet another year, so one of the part-time TPW core-course instructors was hired to serve as interim coordinator for 1993–1994.

Finally, the program was given its position back, and I was hired to serve as TPW's director, beginning in 1994–1995. In this position, and for serving as program advisor, I earned one credit of course release time from the expected four-course load of my academic year appointment. (I also coordinated the internship program and taught two classroom-based courses.) Technically, although I was appointed to TPW, because the program was too small to have department status, I was classified as an assistant professor within the College of Humanities, but was not formally part of any department. All parties had learned the unfortunate lesson of the previous appointment, so the university approved this unusual arrangement. And, indeed, my background fit me particularly for a position in TPW. Although I had earned my doctorate in English with a focus in literary studies, I had since developed a specialization in technical and professional writing through several positions in industry and through college appointments in which I taught composition, business and professional communication, and technical writing service courses. I also had published scholarly research in technical writing journals.

It was someone with this type of background that the program needed to develop its interdisciplinary offerings independently of English or any other department. Nevertheless, I found that my background put me somewhat at a disadvantage when I applied for tenure. Although I received early promotion to associate professor, my initial tenure bid (which at San Francisco State occurs when the faculty chooses to apply) was denied by the university provost, despite strong recommendations by my interdisciplinary Hiring, Retention, Tenure, and Promotion Committee and my college dean, based on my documented teaching, scholarship, and service record. The critical grounds for denial, apparently, were my number of years of tenure-track teaching experience, because my years as a college lecturer and, more importantly, my relevant workplace experience were discounted. The unique requirements of the program made my qualifications too unconventional to fit the expected mold for a humanities professor. Although I did receive tenure

when I reapplied the following year, the initial negative decision suggests a concern for future tenure-track hires in the TPW Program.

CURRENT PROGRAM: DESCRIPTION AND ISSUES

The technical and professional writing program that I direct has maintained its overall design and position within the university structure since it began, but it has matured in other ways that I believe are consistent with the original vision of its founders and that also reflect changes in the discipline and in circumstances outside the program itself.

Curriculum

In my first year in TPW, I researched ways to strengthen the program, not only by reviewing scholarship in the discipline, but also through conversations with students, with TPW faculty, with faculty and chairs of departments in which TPW listed skills electives, with San Francisco Bay Area technical and professional writing practitioners and/or supervisors of TPW student interns, and with professors and administrators of technical or professional writing programs at other institutions nationwide. I then proposed revised course descriptions, a new scheduling plan, and revisions to degree and certificate requirements. The university approved these changes in 1995, and the new program has continued (with minor modifications) since that time.

The approved revisions retained the overall structure of the major, minor, and certificate programs. The most significant changes were

- updating and deepening TPW course content, refining its professional emphasis, while also minimizing both gaps and overlaps in coverage;
- offering required TPW core courses every semester and offering TPW electives alternate semesters on a predictable schedule;
- redesigning the core course segment to include only TPW courses and adding an additional TPW elective to that core;
- modifying the list of interdisciplinary skills electives to include more courses oriented to technology and professional applications, to add electives covering oral communication, and to eliminate lower-division and survey courses;
- clarifying the subject matter focus selections and requiring skills electives in disciplines outside the focus.

These revisions were designed to make the program both more coherent and more relevant to current professional expectations for career writers. The revisions also reflected national trends for academic programs in technical and professional writing by focusing the curriculum, making it both more rigorous and more responsive to workplace trends.

Staffing

In addition to revising the TPW curriculum, I also reviewed its policies for recruiting, hiring, training, and reviewing adjunct faculty. Each year four to six lecturers teach the several TPW course offerings not assigned to me, its sole tenure-track faculty member. The preference always had been for these faculty to have combined experience with both workplace writing experience and teaching (or corporate) training, as well as to hold a master's degree. I tightened these criteria somewhat (requiring, for example, a minimum of five years of relevant workplace experience) and also made them requirements, rather than preferences.

This change—while popular with students even as it also added to the rigor of the program—complicated hiring, especially because the San Francisco Bay Area market for technical and professional writers has become more competitive with each passing year. Local expert practitioners of technical and professional writing now are extremely well paid; jobs in the field often are demanding, requiring long hours of work; and for those practitioners who want to moonlight, contract writing and production jobs are readily available. Meanwhile, the college standard pay rate for part-time and short-term lecturer faculty is shockingly low. And I have had no success in convincing college or university administrators to adjust that rate based on market factors. Therefore, I have had to sell our part-time teaching positions as a form of pro bono service and professional development. This has required me to maintain particularly active contacts with professional associations of practitioners (while still keeping up scholarly affiliations in the field of college composition and in business, professional, and technical communication).

Having individuals whose primary job is not teaching also can lead to problems in the classroom. While most TPW instructors have done an exemplary job, bringing their skills as communicators to bear and drawing on their prior teaching and training experience, as well as their educations, others have led me to rework the old “those who can, do . . .” adage to conclude “but those who do sometimes can't teach.” I have maintained an early TPW requirement that all new instructors in the program get both midsemester teaching evaluations and a peer teaching evaluation, then discuss those with me. I also have learned that an up-front commitment to helping new lecturers to choose textbooks and to plan their syllabi, class activities, homework assignments, grading schemas, and so on pays off down the road in the form of more confident, appropriate methods and better organized classes. However, this,

too, demands significant time beyond that required for the administrative and advising roles of the director.

This type of work, along with a heavy advising role, professional association involvement, and other program development duties, make my assigned release time inadequate for the job. In addition, not having another tenure-track faculty member to call upon has made it difficult for me to have backup for my roles as director, advisor, and internship coordinator. Currently, after six years in the position, I am attempting a leave of absence with a part-time acting director taking over some of those responsibilities, but that has been difficult to arrange and the outcome is still uncertain.

Students

Because TPW is such a small program and because technical and professional writing is relatively new, both as an academic discipline and as a well-recognized profession, TPW does not have high visibility on campus. Students in advising sessions frequently comment that they learned of our program by happenstance (and often too late to change their majors). When we surveyed our alumni a few years back, less than half of them said that they heard about TPW from faculty or advisors. So TPW cannot rely on those traditional channels for recruiting students. The program has, however, promoted itself through its bulletin board, website, and biannual career events. The growth of career opportunities in the field has also attracted students, although many of these are graduate students who enter our certificate program. Undergraduate students, who are less likely to have professional workplace experience, often remain unaware of career opportunities in this field until they begin researching employment options during their last year of college. Nevertheless, given that TPW offers only a limited number of entry-level courses and sections, enrollments have generally been sufficient to meet course limits, and sometimes the program experiences excess demand.

Structural and financial support

While departments throughout the university have budget allocations (based on faculty teaching units) that they manage, program budgets must be separately funded. For other university programs, such funding comes from special university support, foundation grants, corporate donations, or other external sources. However, TPW has had to rely exclusively on allocations determined and administered by the dean of the College of Humanities.

TPW does not have any budget of its own (except for a few hundred dollars annually designated for purchase of instructional support and typically used for guest speaker honoraria, office assistance, books, and supplies). TPW also relies on the college to fulfill its requests for relevant software and equipment, computer classroom assignments, lab aides, and other materials and services essential for its somewhat technology-driven curriculum.

Even when class enrollments and excess demand have warranted it, requests for additional sections and for new courses have routinely been denied; we are stuck in a no-growth holding pattern. In fact, I have sometimes had to fight to retain our schedule of current offerings, which are arguably the minimum required to offer our bachelor's degree, minor, and certificate.

TPW's small size and lack of financial resources also has limited us in terms of administrative resources. For example, while department chairs throughout the university are awarded part-time pay to oversee their departments' administration and advising during the summer break, as the director of a small program, I have not been deemed eligible for such pay. As a result, my only choices have been to volunteer my services in the summer or to discontinue the advising and internship support so critical for program students. Also, only this year, after many years of requests, has the program been approved for a half-time office staff position. Previously, TPW has had only a few hours a week of student work-study clerical support, further burdening the director with duties typically handled by support staff. This also exacerbated the problem of maintaining a summer presence, because work-study funding typically has not extended outside the academic year.

I do feel that TPW has been fortunate in having a college dean who has generally been supportive of at least maintaining the TPW Program. However, a change in the leadership of the college could change that circumstance as well. Being small and independent puts TPW in a precarious position in an institution largely organized around larger departments.

Evaluation

For its first program review, completed in 1998, the Technical and Professional Writing Program at San Francisco State University conducted a self-study (with contributions by all of its faculty and the dean of the College of Humanities), surveyed its alumni, and invited external reviewers to make an independent assessment. The results of this process were uniformly and highly positive. TPW continues to experience strong

enrollments, despite its low profile on campus; and its graduates report both their own exceptional successes in the job market and the growing reputation of the program among businesses and nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. The TPW alumni group is active, and TPW receives many employers' internship postings and job leads. As an independent program, TPW has flourished.

Of course, TPW's independence is not the norm for programs of its type. Despite their interdisciplinary concerns and increasingly separate identities, most technical and professional writing programs are located within established departments of English (or, less frequently, within rhetoric, writing, composition, communication, or journalism). Although this positioning can be successful, it often has led to limitations and misunderstandings affecting curriculum, students, resources, recognition, and, especially, the recruitment, retention, and promotion of qualified faculty.

In response to the documentation and discussion of such problems in recent years, the issue of program home currently is much debated in the field. Meanwhile, the discipline of technical and professional writing continues to develop and to establish itself separately, creating a rationale for the independent program alternative.

Individual contexts matter enormously, of course, in justifying the decision to establish an independent program. For example, TPW can be a dedicated career-oriented program because, at San Francisco State, the English department is not responsible for teaching service courses in technical or business writing and does not have doctoral students for whom it must find teaching positions. And the university's mission includes a respect for professional preparation programs and interdisciplinary courses, in addition to more traditional liberal arts majors.

Even with that context, TPW obviously experiences some drawbacks from its independence. As noted above, small size is associated with limited budgets and resources. Also, an independent program can be isolated and its faculty marginalized or its work poorly understood. Bearing those problems and TPW's unique context in mind, I can nevertheless identify important benefits that TPW has experienced from having an independent program home.

Curricular Benefits

Independence allows the TPW Program to focus on career writing exclusively, establishing a coherent and rigorous sequence of core

course work. The program does not need to prioritize offerings from a larger home department.

This control allows TPW to define a program with more interdisciplinary breadth and carefully selected elective options. TPW also can balance theory and practice in the manner most appropriate to its specialization. Finally, being independent, TPW can be more nimble about adjusting course syllabi and can more readily value teaching technologies in light of workplace practice.

Faculty benefits

Being an independent program means that TPW makes its own staffing decisions and can prioritize workplace experience or specialized competencies over more traditional academic preparation. This leads to more internal harmony among faculty, because all choose to teach what they teach and feel qualified to do so. Faculty independence also allows TPW to encourage fieldwork, collaboration, service learning, and other nontraditional teaching methods that seem especially appropriate for technical and professional writing instruction.

Identity benefits

Independence gives me, as TPW's director, a chair's seat on some committee tables. Small size also allows for centralized advising and close networking among students. TPW also is more clearly recognized by writing practitioners and their employers outside the academy. Finally, TPW's independence contributes to the profession by affirming the status of career writers.

CONCLUSION

A specialized program for a specialized field, the independent Technical and Professional Writing Program at San Francisco State University may be small, but it is a good program in terms of achieving its core objectives. For others considering an independent writing program, it may provide a model of at least some hoped-for virtues.

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Technical and Professional Writing Program's first required self-study report for academic program review, then further revised that material for this chapter. In addition, for my analysis of program benefits and drawbacks here, I drew on a paper of mine, "The Virtues of Program Independence," previously published in *Proceedings of the Society for Technical Communication*, in 1998.