To: Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, Acting Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Education

From: Donald Ross, Professor and DGS for MA and PhD in Rhetoric & Scientific and Technical Communication, Writing Studies Department

Subject: Pilot Program on Graduate Student Learning Outcomes

cc: Laura Gurak, Professor and Chair, Writing Studies Department

The Department of Writing Studies decided in 2011 to review its Ph.D. curriculum (Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication, or RSTC) in the light of changes in the composition of the faculty and the interests of our students. The Department of Writing Studies was created in 2007, the result of the University’s then strategic planning process. The department combined faculty, students, staff, and programs from three formerly separate collegiate and departmental units. However, the program core of the new department consisted of the degree-granting programs from the former Department of Rhetoric. The MA and PhD were from Rhetoric and moved intact into the new department.

In the light of this, the Graduate Committee revised the RSTC PhD curriculum though a series of bi-weekly meetings in spring semester of 2011. Rather than just moving courses around and renaming the core areas, the Committee began by defining our goals for each stage of the requirements—course work, examinations, and dissertation. In order to capture the complexity of our doctoral degree we also defined the goals of the teaching we require of our students, as well as professional development we support and offer. With the goals outlined, we added ideas of best practices and linked all of that to the professional fields to which the faculty are affiliated with. Finally we used our report to outline proposals for a revised curriculum to the full faculty. The proposals was refined and approved during a half-day retreat in October 2011.

The Graduate Committee is comprised of the Chair, Director of Graduate Studies, four other faculty, and one elected student representative. The student actively participated in the discussions and contributed significantly to the report. In addition to informal consultation with other students, she circulated the draft to them for comments and suggestions.

In fall 2013 in response to our participation as a Learning Outcomes (Intellectual Principles, Goals) pilot, the 2011 draft was circulated to the faculty and student for additional suggestions. The results are incorporated in the current document (see below).

For the foreseeable future, we anticipate that reviewing this Report every few years will be an important exercise, especially in the light of changes in the many subfields that inform our collective work—rhetoric, scientific and technical communication, writing pedagogy, and writing studies. This will be especially important because of the evolving role of digital, new media, and electronic communication.
Also during fall 2013 the Director of Graduate Studies interviewed faculty colleagues about the relation between the SCEP Outcomes to the goals and practices embedded in the Report. The student consultative committee circulated the outcomes to all other students for their comments. A summary of those discussions and communication is below.

Comments on the process. Conducting interviews in 2013 with faculty and students, or having meetings about the Outcomes draft can be valuable. Even though each faculty member had a copy of the Outcomes list, they tended to focus on key and familiar phrases, rather than reading the whole bullet point carefully. However, these interviews alone did not lead to a clear and comprehensive description of what the department and faculty expect of its students. In our experience, that took a considerable amount of thought and time, but that was motivated by our perceived need to scrutinize our curriculum, requirements, and how we support our students outside the classroom, preliminary examinations, and dissertation.
Results of interviews with RSTC faculty and survey of graduate students

1. Scholarly formation – the faculty tended to focus on phrases from the bullet points

“core competencies” The core is partly defined by fixed items in the field reading lists for preliminary examinations. The most important is rhetoric, although technical communication (another specific field) was mentioned. Many students have some of this background when they arrive, so the goal is to fill that out. A more general view is that the core is the humanities’ emphasis on close analysis: the ability to read, write, and do research at a doctoral level.

“basic or applied” Almost everyone translated those terms into “theory” and “practice,” which are more familiar in the humanities and social sciences. In some cases, practice is an emphasis in seminars, while theory is presented in the required two-course methods sequence. Several people emphasized that students can’t do either alone; the mixture helps round out their “equipment.”

“conserving the key ideas” Conserving is embedded in the field reading lists, especially for the long tradition of rhetoric. More generally those ideas are conveyed by definitions, the technical role of language and scholarly argument. Another element is exploring, critiquing, and formulating relevant research questions.

Students found this topic to be well developed and presented in the program. One student wondered if pedagogy should be added to this category because it is part of scholarly formation in the field.

2. Communication

“written and oral communication skills” are central to writing studies. Writing practice occurs throughout the curriculum. The study of writing in various settings and forms is a major theme in most courses and seminars. When students apply for fellowships or write articles for publication, their adviser critiques their work.

“teach in a formal educational setting” – Students are required to teach first-year writing and technical communication (upper-division). Their teaching is supported by the department with professional development that includes workshops before the fall semester, teacher groups for first-year students led by experienced teachers, and in-house pedagogy conferences. Faculty not directly involved support that program; many visit the classes that their advisees teach. Teaching is also a feature of many seminars through formal presentations.

“broad audiences” Several faculty interpreted this as writing for academic settings, giving conference presentations, for example. A couple of faculty have students write for non-academic audiences, such as research participants. On the other hand, several faculty do not emphasize this.
“communicated in teams” When this happens it most often as presentations in seminars. A couple of faculty have team presentation in their seminars. Others do not, partly because the discipline does not work this way.

3. Leadership and collaborative skills

“team-approach” A few seminars have two or three students work together to discuss readings. In other cases, advisers work with students to plan panels for academic conferences. Some professors set examples of working with others in their classes or co-authoring papers.

“cross-disciplinary” Most faculty noted that the fields represented in our department already cross disciplines both in the problems they address and the research methods they involve.

“social networking” We interpreted this as meaning the use of computer-mediated media. When this does occur it is in traditional settings, such as email or discussion boards. Some faculty do not use this at all.

“intercultural” Few faculty focus on intercultural knowledge or topics.

“leadership” as a general goal. The department values and encourages a couple of students in each cohort to be leaders, and that prepares them to be leaders in a their future department or their scholarly field. The department sponsors monthly “current research in writing studies” events where students present their conference papers and dissertation topics at various stages of development. Faculty and other students comment on this work-in-progress.

“collaborative skills” Students meet with their doctoral committee to plan preliminary examinations and formally to present the dissertation prospectus. Those events complement what happens during the formal, preliminary oral examination.

4. Global context

The department has not offered graduate courses or seminars that deal with a global context for several years. It will offer one this year. Students asked why this is not a goal of the department.

5. Professional responsibility

“civic responsibilities” For those who find this important, it involves connections outside the profession, for example with K-12 teachers, and the public responsibilities of academics.

“ethical and responsible” Several professors cited Institutional Review Board (IRB) training and approval for specific research projects as being important. Issues of ethics are presented in the methods courses.
“professional perspective and identity” For many this is the heart of the program: to explain what a professor is, what she or he does, and the questions she or he asks. This is modeled and discussed in seminars and in advising. Students are encouraged to participate in the current-research sessions, and the department provides travel money for students to give papers at conferences and to attend national workshops.

6. Management skills

For all of the items under this goal, the faculty agreed that issues such as minimum supervision, dealing with uncertainty, and achieving long-term goals depend on the individual student and his or her relation with the adviser. Advisers encourage, set priorities, and respond dynamically to student work; the department prides itself in having a supportive environment for its students. A couple of faculty noted that students are in our program for a short time (they get five years of support and almost all finish by that time); few arrive with a dissertation project already thought out.
The Rhetoric & Scientific and Technical Communication (Writing Studies) PhD degree from the M.A./Ph.D. committee, Spring, 2011 – revised Fall 2013

The curriculum

We make a distinction between core areas and the individual student’s area of concentration. Knowledge of the core areas is demonstrated by course grades and preliminary exams in two of the three areas.

Research core

The courses in the research core—which should normally be taken in students’ first and second years—hone students’ skills in close reading, annotation, and systematic analysis through a shared corpus of recent, cutting-edge, and award-winning research in rhetoric, writing, and scientific and technical communication. Students also learn and practice principles of problem formulation; research design; ethical inquiry; data collection; modes of analysis; and rhetorically savvy reporting. Together, these skills and principles allow students to take what they have learned in the research core to their seminars and dissertation projects.

This requirement is met by taking Research Methods in Writing Studies and Technical Communication (WRIT 8011) and Applied Research Methods in Writing Studies and Technical Communication (WRIT 8012). Taught in fall semester in alternate years.

Core Areas

| Rhetoric Theory and History | Writing Studies and Pedagogy | Technical Communication; Technology and Culture |

Goals of the core areas requirements—

Students who are competent in their core areas should be able to

- master (some) seminal works in at least two scholarly fields to the extent that they can justifiably represent the ideas of other scholars (for example, to advise undergraduate independent-study projects)
- synthesize and analyze concepts across works
- know how to read (critically) current and future research articles and monographs in a range of topics that are involved in writing studies (for example, to read Written Communication, Journal of Business and Technical Communication Quarterly, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Quarterly Journal of Speech, or College Composition and Communication on a regular basis)
- be familiar with the important theoretical and applied limbs of our discipline(s) as they have developed over time and to recognize important changes in the future

Knowledge of the core areas is demonstrated by course grades and preliminary exams in two of the three areas.

Implementation of the core areas requirements:
Students will take one course or seminar in each of the three areas and two others in one of the areas.

Students will take written competency examinations in rhetoric and one of the other two areas. As is currently the practice, a student’s reading list for each exam will include the set lists (about 15 items). In addition the examiner and student will add about ten texts. The exams will be in the current 24-hour format.

**Specialty Area or area of concentration, research, and dissertation**

Goals of the specialty area—

In order to be recognized as an expert in a specialty area a student should be able to

- know how to conduct excellent research, where that knowledge includes
  - understanding the theoretical and empirical foundations of the area
  - selecting a topic for sustained (dissertation) research that fills a gap in the area’s knowledge or understanding
  - crafting a substantial project that is amiable to being completed in one or two years

- demonstrate an ability to conduct independent, original, ethical research, including:
  - formulating researchable (and research worthy) questions
  - expertly executing and justifying methods appropriate to those questions,
  - conducting systematic analyses
  - articulating both conclusions specific to the analyses and implications for the advancement of theory

*Implementation of the area of concentration:*

The student’s area of concentration will be developed chiefly through seminars in Writing Studies. The advisor and other members of the student’s committee will help to shape and focus the area. The list of seminal works for the area will be the basis for the written preliminary examination, and the examination topic(s) will be developed in such a way that the student is prepared to ask important questions. If the student’s area of concentration is about the same as one of the core areas (rhetoric, for example), the examiner(s) will set questions that recognize the difference between the goals of each type of examination. The written examination will be in the current 24-hour format.

The preliminary oral examination will usually focus on those questions and possible ways for the student to begin to answer them.

**Supporting Field or formal minor**

Goals—

- to take courses from other departments to provide additional perspectives on courses in Writing Studies
- especially to do that to complement understanding of the Specialty Area

*Implementation of the supporting field or minor requirement:*
The student is required to take 12 credits of course outside the department. This can either be a coherent area of work or a formal doctoral minor, for example, Feminist Studies or Linguistics.

**Teaching**

All students will teach first-year writing and upper-division technical communication before they complete their degree.

In so much as possible, students should teach other advanced courses, and teach with other delivery modes (online, hybrid/blended, blogs, course management systems, etc.).

Such assignments might include professional writing and other high-demand courses, rhetoric courses for B.S. majors, and courses related to a student’s specialty, such as visual rhetoric and writing with digital technologies. Occasionally, advanced students might teach courses for our applied M.S. in scientific and technical communication.

To be prepared for the job market, graduating students should have a teaching philosophy statement and a teaching portfolio. These should document a distinguished teaching record, and the department’s confidence in the student’s teaching skills, independence, and creativity.

**Departmental support**

The department offers seminars and courses in writing pedagogy; most students should take one, since many job postings assume that as part of a doctoral program. The department also offers extensive guidance through handbooks and regular staff meetings that explore best practices and relevant theories in the teaching of written communication.

The Department’s scheduling committee will continue the process of alerting students to all opportunities and explaining how teaching assignments are made. That committee should take into account each student’s previous teaching and the objectives noted above about diversifying her or his teaching experience.

**Professional development**

As appropriate to the area of concentration, students should begin a program of professional development that could include presenting papers at scholarly conferences and revising and expanding one or two of those papers for publication (or for dissertation chapters).

With the support of faculty members, students should

- identify seminar papers whose topic would be suitable for a conference or which could be revised for publication. One benchmark could be having an article circulating or accepted for publication by the end of the fourth year. Publishing a book review is encouraged.
- present papers at conferences in a professional manner and have presentation skills that reflect comfort with contemporary technology tools OR a style that obviates the need for such tools.
- write at least one proposal for funding or support, either within the department or university (such as for a dissertation fellowship) or to an outside source.
- have identified and begun to enter into a scholarly community supportive of their research and teaching (typically, a scholarly organization—CCCC, RSA, ATTW, etc.). This could include being on and participating in a listserv, blog, etc., and subscribing to a journal. This leads to networking with colleagues and professionals outside the University of Minnesota.
Departmental support

The Current Research series (Parlor) provides a forum for students to present work in progress and try out conference presentations; it includes the opportunity to receive detailed feedback from faculty and peers.

Conference travel and research support funds. Current travel policy pays for giving papers at one conference a year. Students are also invited to request support for well-defined research expenses, especially when those are clearly related to the dissertation topic. Activities could include research at a library or other archive, paying to transcribe interviews or honoraria for research subjects (with IRB approval), purchase of rare reference books. Requests are reviewed by the MA/PhD committee, and require a supporting letter from the student’s advisor.

Academic service

As appropriate, students should be involved in academic service by being on committees (such as first-year writing and the graduate committee) and working groups, mentoring new teachers, and college and university committees. Writing Studies encourages service outside the department, including being involved in learned-society governance.

Professional ethics

Students should be aware of ethical concerns with regard to research and other professional responsibilities. This awareness should be included in the curriculum (for example in WRIT 8011 and 8012). Taking the basic Institutional Research Board (IRB) course is an excellent introduction to these concerns.

Preparation for a job

Students should be able to articulate themselves, their training, their expertise, and their research trajectory in multiple venues (formal and informal speaking, 100 word and 1000 word documents, etc.).

This includes:
• understanding how strategically to enter the job market
• preparing and updating a curriculum vita
• being aware of academic positions that focus on teaching, student advising, and university service, as well as those at a R1 university, and career options other than being a professor
• having a professional web page on a University server
• turning to faculty for help with the transition to becoming a faculty member

Departmental support:

The DGS and the Committee will provide general information, workshops, and other advice to Ph.D. students that complement the work of the advisor and the student’s other faculty mentors.

The DGS Assistant maintains a dossier service.
Support might include asking the DSG to critique job application letters and curriculum vita, conducting mock interviews (phone and face-to-face), deciding on writing sample(s).

Note: students should begin this process and consultation in the spring before they anticipate seeking academic positions.

**Support and community**

With the active support of the faculty, students are expected/encouraged to participate in the department’s extracurricular activities on a regular basis. These are important sites for developing relationships with peers and faculty, and for creating a coherent and vibrant academic community.

Students should develop informal, professional relationships with students and faculty in other University departments, and, if possible, with people from other universities.

*Departmental Support*

The MA/PhD committee sponsors a regular schedule of Current Research events.

*General comments*

Students are able to do all of this with faculty support, indeed *because of* faculty support.

When they graduate we hope students will be proud of their experience and education from our department and continue to benefit from the important ways in which our program supports graduate students.