

## Program Proposal

### Master of Arts in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

#### Department of English, Iowa State University

#### Background Information

1. *Name of the proposed curriculum, major, minor, or interdisciplinary program.*

Master of Arts in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

2. *Name of the degree.*

Master of Arts in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

3. *Name of the department involved.*

Department of English

4. *Need for the proposed program.*

There has been an M.A. in English with a specialization in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication since 1982. The curriculum has evolved over the years to keep pace with advances in the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of the field. Now, with the ever-increasing interface between technology and professional communication as well as the need to be adept at computer-assisted instruction in the teaching of writing, students getting advanced degrees in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication need a program of study that focuses more intensely on their increasingly specialized needs. Indeed, new developments in the nation, in the workplace, and at the university have invited, even demanded, an expansion in the goals of graduate education in the English department to include a separate degree in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication at the M.A. level.

#### **Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication Programs Meet National Demand**

Nationwide, rhetoric, composition, and professional communication has been recognized as a crucially important course of study. This importance is reflected in the number of graduate programs in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication that have emerged across the nation. The Department of English at Iowa State established its own Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Professional Communication in 1991. At its mandated 5-year program review, this Ph.D. was ranked among the top programs in the nation offering this degree (Report to the Board of Regents, April 1996). The program was cited as a “national leader, an experimental program breaking new ground.”

In 2001, the Iowa Board of Regents approved a B.S. in Technical Communication in the Department of English. This move to establish an undergraduate major in

technical communication echoed the establishment of bachelor programs in technical communication at such respected institutions as Carnegie Mellon, Miami University (Ohio), Michigan Tech, Purdue, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, University of Washington, and the University of Minnesota.

These undergraduate programs as well as their graduate counterparts address, in part, the dramatic changes in computer technology that have required writing specialists to be adept at hypertext, hypermedia, networking, and animation software as educational, informational, and even recreational industries move to computer networks. In fact, moves to establish undergraduate and graduate programs in the field correspond with significant needs in the workplace and in the schools.

The need for such programs from the workplace perspective is supported by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics:

Through the year 2006, the outlook for most writing and editing jobs is expected to continue to be competitive. . . and is expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2006. . . . Demand for technical writers is expected to increase because of the continuing expansion of scientific and technical information, and the continued need to communicate it. <<http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos089.htm>>

Graduate programs in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication also address the significant changes in the way writing instruction is now being delivered and in the content of that instruction itself. As such, they promise to address the emerging problem of teacher shortages in the areas of writing and professional communication instruction, in schools, the academy, and the workplace.

### **Program Helps to Achieve University Mission**

Establishing an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication at Iowa State dovetails with the university mission in several ways. Iowa State's mission embraces synergy between science/technology and the liberal arts and social sciences. As a field of study, rhetoric, composition, and professional communication addresses the natural relationship between science/technology and communication.

With its emphasis on communication, an M.A. in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication also helps prepare students "to be productive and responsible citizens of the world," and to contribute to the effectiveness of the "interchange and understanding" among Iowans and other members of the world community" (see University Mission Statement).

Furthermore, an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication meets university goals by enhancing the students' skills in communication, analysis, and attention to ethical action. This degree meets the

university goal of providing curricula that prepare students “for successful and rewarding lives in a rapidly changing world—with emphasis on developing critical thinking and team learning abilities” (University Mission Statement).

### **Departmental Committee Recommends Major in Technical Communication**

The Graduate Studies Committee of the Department of English has recently recommended that faculty in Rhetoric and Professional Communication propose an M.A. in the field to address students needs. Currently, the Department offers an M.A. in English with a specialization in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication. This proposal for an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication represents an upgrade in the curriculum from an emphasis in the M.A. program in English to its representing a separate M.A. This upgrade has an immediate precedent. In 2001, the Iowa Board of Regents approved an M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language and Applied Linguistics in recognition of the fact that the curriculum and its objectives were more specific to TESL/Applied Linguistics than to English. Similar arguments drive the need for an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication.

The enhanced curriculum and its objectives in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication are more specific to an M.A. in the field than to an M.A. in English. In addition, employers of teachers of rhetoric and composition and of professional communicators for business and industry seek candidates with degrees in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication. Having a degree dedicated to the concentrated study of rhetoric, composition, and professional communication promises to attract additional, highly qualified graduate students to our M.A. program and to provide students with the degree they need.

In terms of curriculum, having an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication would fill the gap that currently exists between our B.S. in Technical Communication and our Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication.

In short, an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication complements the current rhetoric and professional communication graduate and undergraduate programs in the Department of English. The M.A. curriculum would be taught by the same nationally acclaimed faculty that has already brought prestige to the department and the university.

The proposed M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication meets the needs of its students, the university, and the community at large in four main ways:

- ◆ providing students with skills in communication and technology that will serve them well in a world that is becoming ever more technologically sophisticated

- ◆ helping students become effective citizens through communication and analytical skills that are valued in workplace and academic communities alike
- ◆ preparing students for successful and rewarding lives in a rapidly changing world—with emphasis on developing critical thinking and team learning abilities
- ◆ expanding the outreach of the university to include all those professionals who depend upon communication skills for the effective practice of their professions

5. *Objectives of the proposed program.*

The primary objective of the proposed M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication is to meet the needs listed above and, pragmatically speaking, to enhance the opportunities of graduate students within the Department of English to acquire knowledge and skills leading to a marketable professional degree. More specific objectives include preparing graduate students 1) to enter professional careers in technical writing and business communication; 2) to teach composition and professional communication in a variety of organizational contexts, including academic institutions and business and industry, and 3) to pursue doctoral studies in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication.

The proposed major will meet these objectives by: (1) giving students a core curriculum in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication, and (2) providing students with additional background in a selected area of concentration in their thesis work.

For those students seeking careers in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, the proposed program focuses on achieving five educational objectives. Specifically, with a masters degree in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, our students will be able to:

- ◆ understand the field of rhetoric, composition, and technical communication as it has emerged in the latter twentieth century, in the United States and internationally
- ◆ understand, analyze, and act upon humane and ethical issues, especially as they entail decisions facing professional communicators in business and in the academy situated in an increasingly complex, technological society
- ◆ apply the historical and theoretical understanding necessary to the discipline to assess the impact of specific technologies upon communication within complex organizations and institutions
- ◆ synthesize their strategies for problem-solving and their skills in rhetorical analysis in designing, composing, and evaluating professional documents, including those for electronic, networked environments

- ◆ integrate oral, written, and visual skills to produce effective professional communication in the contemporary workplace

Means of measuring whether students have met these objectives include: achievement on course papers and tests, familiarity with technology as shown in networked classrooms and on oral and written and visual assignments, submission of portfolios, performance during internships, and successful completion of a thesis or creative component.

Having an M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication will enable ISU students to be more competitive on the job market.

#### 6. *General description of the program*

The program of study (POS) for the proposed M.A. in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication consists of three types of requirements:

- ◆ **required** specified coursework in theory and research in professional communication, in teaching composition or writing and analyzing professional documents, and in the history of rhetorical theory
- ◆ **electives** that can be chosen from a particular area of concentration to strengthen students' understanding of one area, including teaching business and technical writing; technology in business, technical, and professional communication; writing proposals and grants; editing principles and practices; visual communication; and special topics
- ◆ **a thesis or creative component**

Appendix A shows the program of study in detail. This program of study is currently taught as an emphasis in the Department of English and the program of study shown in the appendix is taken directly from the current department program manual (page 2-1).

Although space precludes exploring each area in detail, the three examples below illustrate the flexibility that students will have in selecting a career:

- ◆ Students concentrating in professional communication might hold positions such as technical writers in organizations and/or write for publications in which they have to adapt highly technical information for non-technical readers.
- ◆ Students concentrating in rhetoric and composition might hold positions in the community or the academy where writing and analysis are primary tasks or might enter law school or other advanced degree programs.
- ◆ Students concentrating in the open option might hold teaching positions in rhetoric, composition, and professional communication at the secondary, junior college, or university level.

Students earning a *graduate minor* in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication would take 9 credit hours of specified coursework (as listed in the program of study description in Appendix A) and 6 credits in RPC electives, for a total of 15 credit hours.