Undergraduate Writing Majors and the Rhetoric of Professionalism

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The authors draw on two surveys conducted in 2009-10 with graduates from the BA in Professional Writing at Penn State Berks, a branch campus of Penn State University. The surveys led the authors to understand a set of common attributes among our alumni (what they call a “rhetoric of professionalism”) while at the same time problematizing the notion of an emerging “profession of writing.” The authors hope the description and analysis of their two surveys will serve as a starting point for more detailed and comprehensive surveys nationwide, to learn more about the alumni of undergraduate writing majors.

[O]ur majors have afterlives. They leave us to become the major in action.

– Sidonie Smith (44)

Not long ago, undergraduate writing majors were a relatively unique phenomenon found at a handful of schools; today such programs thrive at large and small universities in every part of the United States. In fact, the past ten years might come to be defined as the “decade of the undergraduate writing major,” for no other curricular movement within writing studies has proliferated at so rapid a pace. The CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing has documented this growth through a list of writing majors and tracks that numbered 45 institutions in 2005, increasing to 68 institutions in 2009—more than a dozen of which were brand new majors within that four-year period, and several of which have been revised to focus more directly upon the discipline of writing. As the Committee website suggests, this data demonstrates that “the number of writing majors is increasing rapidly, and writing studies is becoming more central with each revision” (“Committee”).

This growth in the number of undergraduate writing majors has developed along with an increasing body of scholarship devoted to the subject. We see these conversations as part of a “first wave” of scholarship about the undergraduate writing major. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars began to theorize and discuss the implications of undergraduate coursework in professional writing, technical writing, rhetoric, and other related curricular developments, some of which are markedly distinct from the traditional “English” major. Linda Shamoon et al.’s 2000 edited collection Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum was among the first to call for an
undergraduate writing curriculum separate from the literature major. Two years later, *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*, edited by Peggy O’Neill, Angela Crowe, and Larry W. Burton, advocated for independent writing programs while acknowledging the complexities and potential disadvantages of stand-alone status. At the same time, a renewed focus upon courses and programs in civic rhetoric began to emerge. David Fleming, among others, argued that we need to reconnect rhetorical education to “a complex and rewarding course of study” that develops a person who is “engaged, articulate, resourceful, sympathetic, civil” (172; See also Miller; Cushman; and Miller and Jackson).

Many see Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 CCCC Chair’s Address as the impetus for more sustained and specific inquiries into the development of a discrete undergraduate major. Yancey’s call for more scholarly attention to the writing major as a means to “begin to secure our position in the academy” became a focal point for a range of scholarly discussions about how, where, and why we should develop the major (321). Yancey’s suggestion that we “have a moment” (297) in which we can develop an undergraduate major in the midst of the increasingly theory-grounded first-year, WAC, and graduate programs in rhetoric and composition has been heard, and an array of scholarly books and articles have appeared in the years following her address.

Many of the scholarly responses to this call focus upon the challenges and opportunities of curricular development, the emerging tensions between practice and theory, the expansion of civic rhetoric courses, and the politics of negotiating new academic territory. A special issue of *Composition Studies* in 2007 helped to further define the current development of writing majors and to “offer various cautionary tales, frames from which to consider developing majors, and possibilities for the future” (Estrem 12). Similarly, Greg Giberson and Thomas Moriarty’s edited collection *What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors*, and Deborah Balzhiser and Susan McLeod’s *CCC* article “The Undergraduate Writing Major: What Is It? What Should It Be?” extended the groundwork for the continued development of undergraduate writing majors. As Giberson and Moriarty write, this emerging body of work is important because it allows us to think about undergraduate writing programs in ways that “go beyond our particular circumstances, to theorize them in ways that secure their place on our campuses, and in our discipline, for years to come” (“Introduction” 7). Echoing this, Balzhiser and McLeod recognize that “our major is still defining itself” and that “a national conversation on this topic is in order” (416).

This essay begins the work of extending these first-wave scholarly conversations into the next phase. There are many important topics to be addressed as undergraduate writing majors proliferate and develop, including the ways such programs build interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary coalitions, the ways we define and name our programs, and the ways we might begin to assess and evaluate the effectiveness and quality of these programs. One important step toward the latter two goals is to examine the outcomes of
undergraduate writing programs by studying the professional lives of our graduates. As the undergraduate writing major continues to expand, the alumni of those programs will have an increasing impact on writing-related professions and graduate programs. To better understand the ways in which their undergraduate programs shaped and influenced those alumni and how those alumni might re-shape and influence our programs, it is important to speak with them directly, through interviews, surveys, and questionnaires.

In the pages to follow, we describe a series of such discussions we had in 2009-10 with graduates from the BA in Professional Writing at Penn State Berks, a branch campus of a large university in the mid-Atlantic. As we will explain, the feedback and responses we received through two related surveys have led us to understand a set of common and noteworthy attributes among our alumni: their ability to gauge their audience, to employ effective rhetorical techniques and strategies, and to convey a sense of professionalism, ethics, and adaptability in workplace situations and contexts. This “rhetoric of professionalism,” as we call it, is not exclusive to the alumni of our writing program (or to writing programs nationwide), yet we see a tangible connection between the rhetorically focused nature of our program and these alumni’s ability to successfully navigate workplace environments. At the same time, our survey results problematize the notion of what we call an emerging “profession of writing,” and we seek to understand and explain this trend by examining the disciplinary and professional contexts that shape (or fail to shape) our students’ professional identities after they complete undergraduate writing degrees. We offer this description and analysis of our two surveys as a starting point for more detailed and comprehensive surveys nationwide that will help us to learn more about the alumni of undergraduate writing majors.

The Major in Professional Writing at Penn State Berks

The development of the Professional Writing Program at Penn State Berks is examined in “Why We Chose Rhetoric,” published by Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman in the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* in 2006. As Spigelman and Grobman suggest, our institution did not (and to date, does not) offer a BA in English, so the program and its curriculum do not internally compete with an English major for students, faculty, or resources, as is often the case with writing majors. However, this new curricular ground meant that there was little to build upon; nearly every aspect of the program needed to be framed, developed, and negotiated for the first time, often among faculty, administrators, and advisors who saw distinct ideological differences in what the program should be. Much of the tension revolved around the amount of theory to be implemented into the program’s structure, course offerings, and course content. The article addresses the ways in which theory and practice were melded together in that program’s initial curriculum, and it highlights the need for adaptability and flexibility in the continued growth of an undergraduate writing major.
Similar debates pervade the recent scholarship about undergraduate writing majors. In their analysis of 68 writing majors in 65 different institutions, Balzhiser and McLeod classify the majors into “two rough groups”: the “liberal arts” and “professional/rhetorical” writing majors (418). Balzhiser and McLeod include in the “professional/rhetorical” category both technical writing and a “rather new sort of major, one that we have arbitrarily called ‘rhetorical’ in that the focus is certainly writing, but not technical writing,” and that might more accurately be called “writing studies” majors (431). As the authors define the two groups, “Liberal Arts” majors have a predominance of courses in creative writing and literature, while writing theory and praxis dominate the “professional/rhetorical” majors (418). Dominic DelliCarpini offers a different method for classifying undergraduate writing majors, placing them on a continuum from praxis to gnosis. He suggests that programs range from practical and career-oriented, to liberal arts-focused, while some programs find a middle-ground and “explicitly keep one foot in each world” (16). Thus the program at Penn State Berks is what Balzhiser and McLeod call a “writing studies” major, and it is a mix of both gnosis and praxis, moving along the continuum DelliCarpini describes as we adapt to changing contexts, student populations, and scholarship.

These changing perspectives in the scholarship about undergraduate writing majors are to be expected; they are indicative of the development and growth of an emerging subject. Similarly, our Professional Writing major—like many of the undergraduate writing majors that have emerged in the past decade—has undergone continued reassessment, reevaluation, and transformation of its programmatic goals and objectives. In our program, we continue to strive for the proper balance of coursework in liberal arts, rhetorical theory, practical application, and other key areas. The initial challenges in determining the program’s focus have not vanished; they continue to permeate all aspects of what we and other faculty have done as we have reshaped the program in both large and small ways. Thus the concept we call a “rhetoric of professionalism” that emerged from our survey is key to our understanding of how we have wedded the rhetorical and professional in our program.

The Professional Writing Major at Penn State Berks contains many of the features that are common among writing majors; therefore we believe that the findings of our surveys may be of interest to others who are creating or administer undergraduate writing majors. In addition to general education and other university requirements, our BA in Professional Writing consists of 39 credit hours. Similar to most undergraduate writing majors, our program’s primary goal is to enable students to communicate effectively and ethically in a wide range of workplace and academic situations. The coursework is designed to combine “a strong liberal arts foundation with practical writing experience” in an effort to “give students a broad foundation in effective language use” (“BA in Professional Writing”). Students fulfill those 39 credit hours by completing five required courses in the major and
by completing eight other courses in seven different categories—a total of thirteen courses in the major.

**Prescribed Courses (15 credits)**

- Engl 211W  Introduction to Writing Studies
- Engl 417  The Editorial Process
- Engl 491  The Capstone in Professional Writing
- Engl 495  Internship in Professional Writing
- Engl 471  Rhetorical Traditions

**Rhetorical Theory—Select 3 credits**

- Engl 472  Current Theories of Reading and Writing
- Engl 473  Rhetorical Approaches to Discourse
- Engl 474  Issues in Rhetoric and Composition

**Writing for Publication—Select 3 credits**

- Comm 260W  News Writing and Reporting
- Engl 215  Introduction to Article Writing

**Workplace Writing—Select 3 credits**

- Engl 418  Advanced Technical Writing
- Engl 419  Advanced Business Writing

**Visual Design—Select 3 credits**

- Engl 420  Writing for the Web
- Engl 480  Communication Design for Writers

**Advertising and Public Relations—Select 3 credits**

- Comm 320  Introduction to Advertising
- Comm 370  Public Relations

**Creative Writing—Select 3 credits**

- Engl 212  Introduction to Fiction Writing
- Engl 213  Introduction to Poetry Writing
- Engl 415  Advanced Nonfiction

**Additional Writing Courses—Select 6 credits (Courses can only count in one category)**

In addition to all courses above, this category also includes the following courses:

- Engl 110  Newspaper Practicum
- Engl 250  Peer Tutoring
- Engl 416  Science Writing
- CAS 214W  Speech Writing
- Engl 421  Advanced Expository Writing
Balzhiser and McLeod describe several features that are vital to a successful writing program, and which we identify as significant contributors to a rhetoric of professionalism through their balance of theory and practice, their emphasis on ethics, and their focus on preparing students for a wide range of discursive situations. The first of these is a required introductory or “gateway” course, which Balzhiser and McLeod suggest is offered in just a few majors (418), though the trend toward such courses is increasing nationwide. Students in our English 211W: Introduction to Writing Studies examine writing not only as a skill one must master, but also as a complex object of study. The course exposes students to many of the central theories and subjects of writing studies, introduces them to key conversations in rhetoric and composition, and asks them to consider how these issues manifest in various professional contexts. These include, but are not limited to: authorship and ownership; writing processes; writing and ethics; writing history; writing and technology; and writing, race, class, and gender.

Just a handful of the undergraduate writing programs examined in Balzhiser and McLeod’s study require coursework in rhetorical theory. Students in our program are required to complete at least two courses in rhetorical theory. One course is English 471: Rhetorical Traditions, which exposes students to the major traditions of rhetorical inquiry and their relevance to contemporary communication. Students also choose one other course that focuses upon rhetorical theory, such as English 474: Issues in Rhetoric and Composition. This course addresses contemporary rhetorical issues and subjects, and the theme varies from semester to semester.

As Balzhiser and McLeod point out, many undergraduate writing majors require an internship or a portfolio in a capstone course (428); our program goes one step further to offer these as two separate, required courses. English 495: Internship in Professional Writing and English 491: The Capstone in Professional Writing help to develop students’ hands-on, practical abilities in written communication. Our internship course echoes Jennifer Bay’s “applied course in rhetoric” (137), in that it combines regular class meetings, discussions, and reading assignments with internship fieldwork and contextualizes the internship through classroom discussion and rhetorical analysis. In similar fashion, our capstone course in the program focuses upon the application of students’ rhetorical knowledge; its overall purpose is to provide students with the opportunity to reflect upon and integrate academic coursework, co-curricular activities, and internship experiences through the design and development of print and electronic professional portfolios.

Our program also has a rich extracurriculum, something Balzhiser and McLeod and other first-wave researchers have not yet discussed, but which we think is vital. The undergraduate writing major should provide students with opportunities to interact with writers outside of the academic setting and to apply their writerly knowledge in tangible ways. Many of our alumni have had the opportunity to serve as peer reviewers and proofreaders for
Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric, an international undergraduate research journal. Some participated in our Writing Fellows program, in which they assisted faculty across disciplines with writing in their courses through workshops, peer-tutoring, and mini-lessons on writing related topics; writing fellows have also presented their research at scholarly conferences. Other students worked for our campus newspaper, earning credit hours while they wrote about important campus-wide issues and topics. The program’s extracurriculum also exposed students to a range of other examples of public or “real-world” literacy, such as guest speakers who hold writing-related jobs, and bus trips to various literacy events. Most recently, students and faculty presented literacy-themed public displays and presentations together in support of NCTE’s National Day on Writing.

**Survey Findings**

From its inception, the Professional Writing major at Penn State Berks has sought feedback from a wide range of constituents, including current and former students, faculty, administrators, and the public. To obtain this feedback, we have used assessment tools such as exit questionnaires, face-to-face group discussions, course evaluations, one-on-one discussions, and portfolio evaluations by community members. While some of this research was driven by our desire to improve our program, it was also shaped by our institution’s assessment protocols. According to the Assessment Guidelines from the Penn State Berks Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment, “Each program is expected to implement at least one assessment measure annually and to produce a brief assessment report” (“Office of Planning”). Consequently, we were familiar with various data-collection strategies, and we drew upon our previous experience with assessment and upon the guidance of our institution’s research programs as we began to develop a survey of our alumni in early 2009. We began our planning with a series of discussions with our campus’ Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment (PRA), which helped us to design the survey questions and sequencing, consider methods to administer the survey, and later, discussed how to interpret the results. We were particularly interested in learning about the connections between our curriculum and our alumni’s professional lives, and the PRA helped us to create a survey that would answer those questions. In fact, a portion of the research we conducted through this study was funded through an assessment grant from our PRA. At the same time, we worked with our university’s Institutional Review Board to obtain human-subjects approval, ensuring that our survey would be ethical, unbiased, and responsible. We also relied upon our campus’ Alumni Relations office to find contact information from those alumni with whom we’d lost contact. One of the things that we learned through this process was to use the resources available at our institution. We are not statisticians, and neither of us had extensive prior experience in administering surveys; the help of trained professionals in these fields was valuable to our research.
In summer 2009, having received Institutional Review Board approval, our alumni relations office gave us a list of the 67 graduates of the professional writing program. Because the first class of alumni completed the BA in Professional Writing in Spring 2003, we had six years’ worth of alumni in our potential survey pool. We sent email invitations to this group through SurveyMonkey, a survey-hosting website. In the invitation, we explained the two-fold purpose of the survey: to learn more about our program’s alumni and their professional employment and/or graduate school experiences for both internal program assessment and for research to be shared discipline-wide through conference presentations and publications.

A group of 29 alumni, including 17 males and 12 females, completed the survey, for a response rate of 43%. This response rate is considered sound for surveys solicited through e-mail (see Schuldt and Totten). However, due to the limited size of our potential pool of alumni and the overall number of respondents, our primary goal in this essay is to summarize and describe the information we gathered from our alumni, rather than to make inferences about a larger population. While we do draw conclusions based upon the responses we received, we do not suggest that our descriptions or analyses apply to all undergraduate writing program graduates, or even to those alumni of our program who did not complete the survey. As one reviewer of this essay suggests, it may be the case that “successful” alumni were more likely to respond, and that this may have influenced our findings. With that in mind, we acknowledge the limited basis of our study.

This first survey consisted of 42 questions divided into three categories. The first category in the survey requested background and employment information, including questions about their current job or graduate school status, how they sought and found employment or a graduate program after completing their BA, and whether or not they were employed in a “writing-related” job. The second category asked further questions about the role of writing and rhetoric in their current profession or graduate program, focusing on the genres and types of writing required of them, their own strengths and weaknesses in these genres and types, and the degree to which our program prepared them for this professional or academic work. The final category solicited more specific feedback about their undergraduate experiences in our program. This category of questions was intended as a mechanism to help us assess strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of our curriculum, from the perspective of those who experienced it firsthand. The section also asked for feedback on how and why alumni chose the major, which courses and subjects have been most and least useful in their current professions, and what they learned through specific curricular and extracurricular activities. While many of the questions allowed for written comments, the survey was, on the whole, quantitatively based; most questions asked respondents to select a checkbox or radio button to provide feedback, giving them the option of adding additional written information with each question.
After carefully reviewing the statistical and numerical data, we were intrigued by our graduates’ rhetorical savvy as they carved out their career paths, and we realized they had a great deal to teach us about their professional identities, their professions, their professionalization, and their rhetorical proficiency. As a result, we conducted a follow-up survey in the summer of 2010. This survey, which also received IRB approval, consisted of questions that elicited longer, more descriptive responses. We asked sixteen questions on the follow-up survey, each of which stemmed from areas of inquiry we felt were broached in the first survey, yet were not explored in sufficient detail. For example, the follow-up survey asked questions about job searches and advancement, the alumni’s use of rhetoric in the workplace, their perspectives on professionalism and ethics, and their future career plans involving the profession of writing. There were twelve respondents to these follow-up questions (out of our original group of twenty-nine), and the written responses from this group were quite detailed, giving us greater insight into these alumni’s proficiency with rhetorical techniques and the ways in which they have employed a rhetoric of professionalism to advance and achieve their professional aspirations.

It is from our surveys that we have come to see this concept of a rhetoric of professionalism as common among these alumni of our undergraduate writing major. Their responses indicate a sophisticated understanding of what it takes to succeed in the professional world, and we see them collectively as part of an emerging profession of writing they and their counterparts across the nation are beginning to shape and define. Thus the rhetoric of professionalism involves both the emergent qualities in alumni of an undergraduate writing major, and also the ways in which these graduates may begin to construct a developing community of professional writers. As our survey suggests, these former students are effective communicators, rhetorically savvy, professionally focused, and ethically grounded. We identify several key features as part of this rhetoric of professionalism. First and most obvious, we see writing as a central focus of our alumnus’ careers. Second, we note their ability to recognize and make effective rhetorical choices in the workplace. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we see them operating with a clear sense of professionalism, combining expertise, responsibility, and ethics in their workplaces, yet without a clear sense of membership in a particular community of professional writers.

**Writing as Central to Their Careers**

It should come as no surprise that writing, communication, and related activities are central features of a rhetoric of professionalism. In our survey, 92.9% of our respondents suggested that writing was “extremely, very, or somewhat important” in their current professions—just 7.1% suggested that writing was “not very important” in their workplace. Despite the variations in majors that Balzhiser and McLeod describe, the basic commonality in these majors is a focus on writing, which understandably translates to a
similar focus in the post-graduation workplace. However, what we did find surprising in our survey was the wide range of writing-related jobs, duties, and activities in which these alumni participate in those professions. Our respondents’ job descriptions and duties did not fit into neat, preconceived categories, but were instead much more varied and wide-ranging than we had imagined. As the list below indicates, many of our alumni hold job titles that do not directly or indirectly mention writing or communication.

The students who reported being employed in writing-related positions hold these job titles (in their words, listed alphabetically):

- Administrative Assistant and Freelance Editor
- Assistant Manager - Business Development and Marketing
- Associate Editor
- Communications Director
- Community Habilitation Specialist
- Freelance Writer/SEO and Marketing Consultant
- Independent Correspondent for Hamburg Item
- Literacy Coordinator
- Marketing and Events Coordinator
- Material Systems Coordinator
- Project Leader
- Public Relations Department Marketing Assistant/Copywriter
- Reporter/Designer
- Senior Technical Writer/Editor
- Sports Correspondent
- Teacher
- Technical Engineer Writer
- Voice-over Production Specialist

This variety in job titles, coupled with the large percentage of respondents who listed writing as important in their careers, leads us to surmise that our undergraduate writing majors utilize their training in ways that we might not have imagined or anticipated. One strength of an undergraduate writing major is the adaptability of the skills and techniques that students learn through the curriculum, and we found that our respondents became adept at applying their training and expertise in writing and communication in a range of professions. We see a correlation between the diversity of our course offerings and the wide range of professions common among our graduates. This flexibility in the curriculum encourages students to think ahead about their future careers and likely accounts for some of the diversity in their professions.

Interestingly, we discovered an equally diverse range of job duties in our survey data. One intriguing aspect of our data was the verbs our alumni used to describe what they do: few respondents used the verb “write” to describe their primary duties; instead, many described a more interactive and authoritative type of communication as central to their professions.
Survey participants used verbs such as “organize,” “develop,” “monitor,” “coordinate,” “establish,” “create,” “synthesize,” and “determine” to describe the types of writing-related activities in which they participate. While most respondents used these terms to describe some form of writing or communication, the word choices themselves indicate an emphasis on collaboration and responsibility as central to those duties. When seen in this light, communicative ability becomes a powerful tool in workplace success. At the same time, as we discuss later, the multiplicity of verbs complicates the idea of a “profession of writers.”

We also found that our alumni respondents used a wide range of genres and techniques—often those not normally associated with their job titles or professions. We discovered that these alumni find writing to be central to their professional lives and employ a wide range of writing genres in their workplaces, though there is a clear shift away from traditional and print-based forms and toward electronic, new-media, and promotional forms of communication. Not surprisingly, email was the most common form of communication, with 85.7% of our respondents indicating that they wrote “frequent” emails. Online documents (such as websites, blogs, etc.) were the second most common, and 46.4% indicated that they wrote “frequent” online documents. The next most frequently-used genre selected in our survey was advertisements and promotional materials, at 28.6%. The fact that nearly one-third of our alumni write frequently in this genre might indicate the need for further curricular attention.

Our survey also found that other genres that are typically seen as staples of workplace communication and still included in many technical and business writing textbooks—such as memos and letters—were selected less frequently than we might have expected. We found that 57.2% of our alumni respondents write memos “rarely” or “not at all,” while 46.4% said that they write letters “rarely” or “not at all.” We believe that this indicates a shift away from traditional “printed” memos and letters and toward the use of email to communicate shorter messages. In other words, it is likely that these recent graduates use the electronic format (email) as their primary method for concise communication, and that they associate memos and letters with an outmoded print format.

We also discovered a low frequency with which these alumni indicated more traditional forms of writing. Just 10.7% of our respondents write essays with frequency, and 71.4% noted that they never use the essay genre. In a similar question, only 29.6% of respondents described the writing that they do in their profession as “thesis driven: focused on evidencing one or more key argument(s).” In short, we discovered that these alumni find writing to be central to their professional lives and employ a wide range of writing genres in their workplaces, though there is a clear shift away from traditional and print-based forms and toward electronic, new-media, and promotional forms of communication.
Our respondents’ qualitative responses in the follow-up survey confirmed many of the statistical details from the first survey. These alumni were particularly adept at recognizing, contextualizing, and analyzing the role of writing, rhetoric, and communication in their professional lives. Several respondents described the wide range of positions available to trained writers. Angela, an early graduate from our program who has held a variety of writing-related positions, suggests that “There are SO many different types of writing jobs out there. But knowing how to write can get anyone a decent job, even in different fields.” Jessie, who has held different promotions and advertising jobs, points out that writing is a “really broad field that has a lot of facets to explore.” She goes on to suggest that “being able to write in itself is a highly marketable asset.” Other respondents point to the relevance and applicability of a writing major in today’s economic climate. Ben, a writer and editor with the Federal Register, states that “writing’s focus on communication with different audiences enables me to understand and communicate extremely efficiently, a skill that is essential in many fields and careers.” In similar fashion, Stephanie, a marketing assistant and copywriter for a regional hospital, indicates that “strong writing skills are an asset to any organization.” While space prohibits us from including all of the comments here, many of these alumni made specific mention of the ways in which their communicative abilities have opened up diverse career paths and have enabled them to become successful professionals. As faculty and administrators develop and redesign undergraduate writing programs, they should consider the ways in which their curricular decisions will help to shape the professional choices of their graduates.

Rhetorical Awareness and Savvy

Among the most important traits of our alumni respondents is their rhetorical proficiency. As expected, most of these graduates state the importance of understanding audience and purpose in creating documents and in marketing themselves. As Mary, a marketing and events coordinator puts it, “You MUST know who your audience is to find the right rhetoric.” Jason, a public relations specialist with an educational agency, tells us he uses rhetoric every day in his position “to advance the agendas of my organization and its programs.” He is “mindful of the rhetorical implications” of the material he writes, especially given the diversity of the organization’s constituencies.

Yet, we were also struck by these graduates’ insights into the role of rhetoric in their careers. Stephanie, who works as a publications manager with a regional hospital, emphasized the importance of rhetoric in interviewing, asserting that being rhetorical is an “art” that includes written language and body language. Stephanie uses the term “diplomatic” to describe how she views herself as rhetorical: “I would go as far to say that diplomacy is a form of rhetoric. I use certain language when writing to entice community members to seek our health care services over the competition. I must be
diplomatic in my actions while standing by my convictions.” Jessie revealed that although she didn’t have experience with fundraising, she knew how to learn: through reading, research, and asking questions. Matthew, a marketing and online content specialist, spoke about the need to “develop an angle,” what he called “build[ing] a self-brand that makes you a desirable commodity.” And several of our alumni, including Matthew, noted the need to go online: “Opportunities are there online, you just have to know how to seize them.” Stephanie, in fact, has built on her full-time work with the hospital to write freelance articles on healthcare issues.

Our alumni’s responses also revealed their adaptability to a difficult job market and their creativity in carving out career paths. We see them as acting rhetorically: working part-time or as volunteers until full-time positions opened up, taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities, marketing themselves on online sites such as LinkedIn.com, and creating their own opportunities for professional development. Mary volunteered for a non-profit Our Town Foundation in 2006 while still in college, and was hired there as a full-time Special Projects and Events Coordinator, where she stayed for almost four years. On LinkedIn.com, Mary stated, “The greatest lesson I learned in nearly ten years of consistent employment—through office management, peer tutoring, and now marketing coordination—is the need to be flexible.”

Ben did freelance reporting for a regional newspaper while searching for permanent employment. He has been with the Federal Register for more than three years. It does not surprise us that Ben, a veteran of the Iraq War, “tried to step up as a leader” in the various units of the Federal Register.

Laura, a communications director and creative writer who has been published in a number of different creative writing and literary journals, advises her peers to “Be prepared to look for work and to work in places where you never thought you would.” Cortney, a technical writer for an engineering firm, pointed out that her job as a writer in the company is not secure, so she advises her fellow professional writers to always seek out opportunities and let others know the expertise you possess: “Be out looking for more work or projects to keep yourself busy and get to know more people in the company you’re at,” and “Don’t become stationary and accept what they give you.” Elizabeth responded that, “To advance professionally, I always interviewed a lot to find out what I wanted and what I didn’t want. I also wasn’t afraid to take risks and try things that may have been viewed as ‘unconventional.’” Elizabeth markets herself on LinkedIn.com as an “energetic and driven marketing professional and talented writer who seeks to utilize her creative mind in a marketing, communications, or writing role. ... Success in winning business and producing high quality copy and collateral is attributed to Elizabeth’s attention to detail, multitasking, and time management skills.”

We also see a common denominator in these alumni’s attention to technology. Several point to the ever-changing nature of communication technologies and the need to keep up with technological innovations, even
if they are unable to seek formal training or education. Lynn created a website to teach herself website analytics and writing business and marketing plans. As she states, “I’m creating opportunities for myself and keeping my writing skills fresh while I do it.” This ingenuity and drive is also displayed by Matthew, who, through various employment positions and self-motivated professional development strategies, has invented himself as a Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Marketing, and Online Content Specialist. His martial arts website, Ikigaiway.com, provides information but also “serves as a personal project in SEO and Online Content Development.”

A Profession of Writers

Randy Brooks, Peiling Zhao, and Carmella Braniger assert that “writing is a profession, and ... students can gain entry into the profession as undergraduate students” (36, emphasis added). Our survey results both affirm and problematize this claim. The terms “profession” and “professional” may be defined in a variety of ways. A growing body of scholarship suggests that professionalism requires more than simple proficiency or skill, but also includes a sense of responsibility to the individuals and communities with whom the professional interacts. In their book Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet, authors Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon suggest that ethical and responsible conduct are vital to many professions:

People who do good work, in our sense of the term, are clearly skilled in one or more professional realms. At the same time, rather than merely following the money or fame alone, or choosing the path of least resistance when in conflict, they are thoughtful about their responsibilities and the implications of their work. (3)

Thus professionalism requires more than simple proficiency or skill, but also includes a sense of responsibility to the individuals and communities with whom the professional interacts. The authors go on to suggest that professionals “are concerned to act in a responsible fashion with respect toward their personal goals; their family, friends, peers and colleagues; their mission or sense of calling; the institutions with which they are affiliated; and lastly, the wider world” (3).

We see an important link between a rhetorically-focused undergraduate writing major and this emerging definition of a professional who embodies both expertise and ethical responsibility. In fact, this definition of professionalism reflects the curricular and programmatic debates that many undergraduate writing programs (our own included) have wrestled with as they’ve attempted to balance instruction in skills-based courses with ethically and rhetorically-grounded perspectives. This is part of a larger debate on the currency of our programs within English as a field, and even within the Liberal Arts in general. We find it fruitful for undergraduate writing majors to aim for alumni who do the type of “good work” implied by Gardner,
Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon, work which combines expertise, ethics, and responsibility. This rhetorical professionalism, as we see it, is not only the ability to make effective rhetorical choices in the job search and as an employee, and being verbally sophisticated and careful in written communication, but also, and significantly, being ethical, broad-minded, and considerate of other perspectives—all of those things we associate with both professionalism and with rhetoric. Like other majors that see ethics and professionalism as foundational, we hope that the undergraduate writing major will continue to develop these attributes as central to the curriculum.

Consequently, we were interested in whether or not these disciplinary definitions of the terms “profession” and “professionalism” were similar to our respondents’ own definitions of the terms. Because these definitions are foundational to our program and curriculum, we sought to determine if these definitions had shaped or been redefined by them in their own professional realms. In our follow-up survey, we asked five open-ended questions to elicit their feedback about their definitions of “profession” and “professionalism.” Most of the alumni who completed our survey identified personal integrity and responsibility as fundamental aspects of professionalism. When asked “How do you define professionalism?” our alumnus’ responses varied according to their own duties and experiences in the workplace, yet many addressed the ethical dimensions of their work. Several respondents used the term “respect” as an integral part of professionalism. According to Angela, “Professionalism is maturity. Professionalism can earn one respect.” Jason, a voice-over production specialist, points out that “to be professional, one must be respectful to everyone, regardless of position or stature. It means putting forth the effort to do the best job possible every time.” Mary, a revitalization coordinator at a regional chamber of commerce, suggests that “professionalism is knowing that you have to maintain a respectful image to the right people. The image of professionalism must be adaptable to different groups of people: it’s the ability to gain respect from everyone in whatever way necessary.” And Elizabeth, a freelancer in marketing and public relations, states that “Professionalism is simply doing your job, as asked, in a timely manner and treating people with respect.” Stephanie is able to “uphold the mission and values of [her] organization” while “truly believ[ing] in contributing to a healthier tomorrow through [her] work in health care.” The responses clearly indicate that these alumni define professionalism as more than just proficiency and expertise in a subject area, but also as involving responsible behavior and personal integrity. Professionalism, for our alumni, requires a balance of expertise and ethical decision making.

Many of our respondents described specific instances in which their ethics were challenged in the workplace, and our survey reveals a group of individuals who apply their personal sense of ethics in their professional identities. In fact, these alumni had much to say about the ways in which their ethics influence the choices they make on the job; the questions we asked about ethics and professionalism drew lengthy, detailed responses
from nearly every participant. Mary states that her current job often requires her to balance her “personal value system” and what is “right” with what she has been told to do and the need to “keep [her] job.” Ben left one unit at the Federal Register because he felt his supervisor “continued to act unethically” by demanding more from her employees than she was willing to give and by precluding their professional development and promotions even when deserved. Jessie revealed that after two years in the development department of a local museum, she “did not really admire either of [her] bosses and some of their moral/ethical codes. And I thought if I had to become like them to succeed, it was unlikely that I would.” She left her job as a result. Lynn is committed to a sense of right and wrong: “If I’m not comfortable with something ethically, I’m not going to do it and I’m going to explain my reasons for not doing it.” She told us that she was fired from a job after confronting the owner of the company about ethical violations. She states further, “I have no regrets about confronting him and reporting him to the State Department.” Angela, too, had to weigh her values with those of her supervisor at a small publishing/editing company. As Angela explains the situation, the supervisor insisted that the ending of a memoir be altered to improve the book: “That’s HIGHLY inappropriate in my opinion, and while we debated over this dilemma, I had to leave my position in the end,” since the book would have been marketed as a memoir even with a fictionalized ending. We were pleased to see this close connection between ethics and professionalism, as we believe this to be a central component of our undergraduate writing program.

However, while most respondents described themselves as professionals, fewer indicated that they felt themselves part of a “profession of writers.” Some, like Lynn and Mary, give a mixed reply about whether they are part of a profession of writers. Lynn responds: “I’m not sure. Have I done extensive writing at all of my jobs out of college? Yes. Has that been the sole purpose of any of those jobs? No.” Lynn is still “looking for fulfillment with [her] work, and it’s taken a lot of swings and misses to get closer to that goal.” Mary writes: “Yes and no. In [my current] job—writing plays a key role … My goal in life is to find a profession, however, where I can ‘feel’ more like a writer.” Other alumni seemed to apply a restricted definition of a “profession of writers,” suggesting that membership in a profession of writers is dependent upon a writing-related job title or organizational focus. Stephanie, for instance, notes that she works with a lot of people “in Public Relations who don’t exhibit strong writing skills,” and that consequently, she is not part of a profession of writers. On the other hand, after several positions in marketing, Elizabeth is a freelance marketing/writing consultant, who states “I have never been happier with my career.” Jason, who in his first job “was constantly asked to compromise my beliefs about quality and equity, and it made me miserable,” is now in a position that involves “content creation, whether it takes the form of reportage, creative copy, conceptualization,
or layout and design work.” He tells us, “More than anything, I think I am viewed as a writer at work.”

These mixed responses about membership in a profession of writers may result from several sources, including the belief that one must be called “a writer” to be part of the profession, and the diversity and variation of jobs that writing majors go on to take after graduation. Unlike other, more clearly-defined and delineated professions (such as “Speech Therapist” or “Civil Engineer”), job titles for writers often do not contain the word “writing” in them. Further, the types of jobs available to degreed writers can be more diverse and varied than those in other professions. These two combined aspects of the profession do not lend themselves toward a focused definition of what it means to be part of a profession of writers, despite the collective emergence of writing-related careers.

Another factor related to the ambiguity of a “profession of writing” is the variation in the names of undergraduate writing majors. Writing majors have developed under local conditions and exigencies, shaped by institutional types, institutional missions, the presence or absence of an English major, existing faculty specializations, and other material factors (see, among many others, Giberson et al.; Peeples, Rosinski, and Strickland; Scott). The names of those programs have developed with equal variation and diversity. This issue was a main topic of discussion at the CCCC 2011 Special Interest Group (SIG) and in the CCCC 2011 meeting of the Committee on the Undergraduate Major in Writing and Rhetoric. The consensus in both groups was that naming should remain as diverse as the programs themselves. Perhaps this conversation warrants further discussion about how naming impacts student and alumnus’ professional identities, both within our programs and after they enter the professional world.

Future Directions

We have described and problematized three of the key features of a rhetoric of professionalism: the centrality of writing, rhetorical proficiency, and professionalism and integrity. Yet these are just a sampling of the attributes of our alumni respondents that were revealed through our surveys. The data we gathered through them is too voluminous to cover in greater detail here, and much of this is due to the contributions of these alumni. We have found this survey to be useful for our program, our faculty, and our former students. It has helped us to make important changes to our curriculum; to our gateway, internship, and capstone courses; to our extracurricular programs; to our understanding and continued questioning of writing as a profession; and perhaps most importantly, to how we communicate with and about the graduates of our major.

We believe our survey also suggests fruitful areas for further research. Perhaps a larger survey of the alumni of undergraduate writing majors nationwide might contribute to the development of the writing major as an established part of the academic curriculum, and we invite others to use our
survey as a stepping stone to further studies. We identify several important areas for further alumni research:

- As we discovered, these alumni find writing to be central to their professional lives and employ a wide range of writing genres in their workplaces, but they are writing in electronic, new-media, and promotional forms of communication far more than traditional and print-based forms. If further research supports this finding, then curricula in writing programs may need to be reconsidered.

- As one of the reviewers of our original draft noted, the “meta-awareness” of these alumni may have implications for studies about the transfer of classroom writing skills to other contexts (see Downs and Wardle; Beaufort). Alumni surveys could provide more evidence about how writing instruction transfers to careers and contexts beyond the university, and we encourage researchers working in transfer studies to draw upon the voices and perspectives of alumni in their scholarship.

- A third area ripe for research has to do with ethics and undergraduate writing majors. According to William Sullivan, “To become a professional is to assume a civic as well as an economic identity. … Professionals must be seen to contribute to the public value for which the profession stands” (17-18). Our study precludes comparisons or contrasts to the development of ethics in other liberal arts majors, but perhaps further empirical and qualitative research may shed light on these issues.

- Finally, our survey and others like it suggest that we might want to reconsider the inconsistent naming of undergraduate writing majors. Jason Carabelli, an undergraduate in the Writing and Rhetoric major at Oakland University, spoke on this subject at CCCC 2011. Carabelli described a wide range of student perceptions in how student majors understand the discipline, attributing this in part to “the field’s own contention in what it calls itself.” Internally, consistent naming may ultimately draw more students to a writing major and continue to validate its legitimacy in higher education (see Howard, whose discussion is about undergraduate writing majors as public relations for writing). Doing so may also contribute to a greater sense of legitimacy and identity among graduates, as well as more consistency and recognition of those programs in the eyes of employers and graduate programs.

**Acknowledgements**

Though acknowledgements are generally listed in a footnote or endnote, we must mention our respondents’ efforts here, since this article would not have been written without them. We were particularly struck by their
enthusiasm and attentiveness in participating in this survey. Many of them expressed their appreciation at being invited to participate, others contributed important ideas that led to our follow-up survey, and some have followed our survey findings and the creation of this article with keen interest.

Near the conclusion of their article, Balzhiser and McLeod ask the question, “What do we want the outcomes of our writing major to be?” (430). Perhaps this survey, and others like it, may help to answer that question. The alumni of our various undergraduate writing majors have much to contribute to this emerging conversation, and drawing upon their direct experiences and expertise can be an important aspect of the next wave of research and scholarship about undergraduate writing majors and the emerging profession of writing. This survey might serve as a model for others who wish to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their writing majors through direct correspondence with their alumni. The undergraduate writing major may develop further by including students and graduates in the conversation, and the voices of our alumni and those of undergraduate researchers should play a direct role in that development.

Notes
1. The alumni relations office informed us that their records are very accurate although they might be missing one or two graduates.
2. Approximately 3,400 undergraduate students attend Penn State Berks. Since 1997 it has offered baccalaureate degrees independently from Penn State’s campus, and it currently offers 15 undergraduate majors. The BA in Professional Writing is one of the mid-sized programs at Penn State Berks, averaging approximately 30-40 enrolled student majors per year over the past five years.

Works Cited

Carabelli, Jason. ”Undergraduate Writing Majors: Creating Space for New Voices.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. Atlanta Marriott Marquis Hotel, Atlanta. 8 April 2011. Reading.


