

## CHAPTER 3

# **Mapping Institutional Values and the Technical Communication Curriculum: A Strategy for Grounding Assessment**

*Jo Allen, Widener University*

As we explore various elements of technical communication programs and assess student learning outcomes within those programs, one of the most difficult aspects may be trying to ground our curriculum in an appropriate context suitable for assessment. Without such grounding, attempts to assess learning may float among various competing contexts: other curricula at the institution, other technical communication curricula throughout the region or nation, or contexts provided in feedback from alumni or employers who describe their expectations for knowledge and ability from our graduates.

While any of these contexts may be valuable for at least the beginning stages of determining appropriate assessment strategies, I suspect that all program directors and faculty members have felt some frustration when trying to situate their programs in the context of, say, (other) nationally known programs. The disparity in resources, history, faculty strengths, institutional type, and other characteristics of these programs may well doom any attempt of a comparison to failure. For that and other reasons, most assessment experts caution against one-size-fits-all assessment (see, for instance, Anderson, 2004; Astin, 1993; Huba & Freed, 2000); in fact, the very foundation of any assessment should be directed toward a program's values, and if the values belong to someone else's program, the resulting disconnect is not only predictable, but potentially even paralyzing.

Thus, looking at other programs may be useful in trying to design programs or trying to assess particular elements of programs, but they are rarely useful in designing a full assessment strategy. Instead, one of the most illuminating

discussions may well be the intersections between the technical communication curriculum and the institution's own expressed values. Such a context—program within institution—may seem obvious, but from my years of experience in assessment and more recently as a provost, few assessment plans or strategies fully take on the institution's core values as a backdrop for their work. As a good example, many institutions that promote research as a defining aspect of their mission extend that sense only into expectations of faculty productivity, not into the individual curricula in any pervasive way, and especially not at the undergraduate level. It makes all kinds of sense that a technical communication program in a research intensive or extensive institution would reflect that value in its curriculum and thus, in its assessment; yet, only a few do so.

Often found in mission statements or statements of core values, educational characteristics, and even general education goals, institutional values reflect the defining characteristics of a particular institution's approach to education. As such, they are highly useful in our conversations and directions for assessment, especially in assessing connections between programs and the larger institutional context. In fact, these values can and should serve as a guide or template for the kinds of qualities that faculty should consider when developing and assessing their curriculum.

At this point, we need to distinguish between an institution's mission and its goals or core values, which should most certainly be linked but are not interchangeable. At its simplest, a mission reflects what the university is (research, doctoral, liberal arts), but just as importantly, what it does (leads, provides, engages, serves, promotes); institutional values suggest its desired outcomes (civic leaders, global learners, citizens of character, industry leaders). And it is in the curriculum and co-curriculum where the two should meet, with those elements being the repository of evidence of delivering on the values. While accrediting bodies (both regional and disciplinary) require mission statements, they do not necessarily require statements of institutional values. And while they require demonstrable links between the mission and any given program, they may not require links between the institutional values (if they exist) and the program. Moreover, they typically ask for description of links, rather than assessment. So, strengthening that connection through both description and assessment may be overlooked as a particularly valuable means of situating a program in its institutional culture, while also grounding the program's assessment strategy. (For more on the relationship between missions, goals, values, and other distinguishing features of an institution, see Nichols and Nichols, 2005).

In this chapter, using a series of templates and rubrics, I intend to demonstrate ways that an institution's values might shape the assessment of a technical communication program's curriculum and co-curriculum. In making connections between institutional values and the curriculum, I hope to argue for a critical review that will highlight program strengths and points of distinction, as well as weaknesses and points for improvement. In such a review, opportunities

for keeping programs dynamic, responsive, and relevant are significant and help clarify the elements of a robust educational experience that is attractive to faculty, students, administrators, alumni, donors, employers, parents, and other stakeholders.

### AN EXPLORATION OF "INSTITUTIONAL VALUES," INCLUDING THE POTENTIAL FOR PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Conversations about "institutional values" might refer to any number of influences and sources with varying degrees of formality, such as the examples that follow:

1. *the heritage* that inspires the institution's traditions (e.g., historically black colleges and universities; the founders' motivations and vision for the institution, women's colleges);
2. *the traditions* that shape the institution's spirit, reputation, and culture (e.g., a highly rated athletic program, a highly charged atmosphere of political activism, a "party school");
3. *the founding or subsequent mission* or charge of the institution (e.g., a military college that educates military officers, a religious college that educates clergy or religious employees, a trade school that educates a particular segment of workers);
4. *the founding or subsequent curriculum* that defines the character of the institution (e.g., fine arts, agriculture, engineering and technology, liberal arts).

Such contexts that may shape institutional values are typically embedded in and produce all sorts of manifestations throughout the college community, appearing as evidence in the curriculum, residence halls (or lack thereof), co-curricular programming, student activities, the population base, student demographics or profiles, and so on. At a curricular level, however, the institution's values, if articulated, may well shape the distinctive qualities of the education offered. Therefore, the values might reflect some singular quality or, just as likely, a combination of defining characteristics such as

- an emphasis on the arts;
- an emphasis on bench or applied research;
- an emphasis on civic engagement, community service, volunteerism, or nonprofit organizations;
- an emphasis on communication (writing and speaking across the curriculum);
- an emphasis on the needs of a particular group of students (adult learners, women, artists);



- an emphasis on technology/technical applications;
  - an emphasis on teaching/learning methodologies: active learning, experiential learning, distance learning, global learning;
- plus any number of other special focuses.

In articulating their values, the faculty and administration (and Board of Trustees) may create the kind of statement that reflects student characteristics (the kinds of student we educate: commuters, adult learners, first-generation college students, women), disciplinary specializations (in these disciplines: technology, liberal arts, engineering, religious studies), noting any special contexts (evening and weekend classes, online education, experiential learning, applied research), with an eye toward specific outcomes (to create lifelong learners engaged in community service, to create engineers with global perspectives, to graduate technical experts with artistic sensibilities). As these elements coalesce, the institutional values emerge as a clear indication of the context for any given curriculum. Using those values, therefore, to move from the institutional to the programmatic level of assessment is a key strategy for connecting a technical communication program to its institutional roots.

### **MAKING THE CONNECTION: INSTITUTIONAL VALUES AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS**

For the remainder of this discussion, several elements can demonstrate a set of core or institutional values that define the kind of education a college or university might offer. Building on the institution's core values, we can create templates and rubrics (discussed below) that highlight the characteristics of the institution's technical communication program within that particular institution's context, noting the degree to which the program addresses (and eventually assesses) those values. The following template, Table 1, provides several examples of possible institutional values along the y-axis. It is not intended to suggest that a single institution might hold all of these values, although such may be the case. What is intended to be of value here is the demonstration of connections (or maps) linking the institution's values and how they manifest themselves in technical communication program values, along with where lessons about those values appear in the technical communication curriculum.

Ironically, some institutions have programs whose values never reflect the institution's values or, when they do, cannot point to a place in the curriculum where those values are actually explored and taught. It is especially valuable at this point, therefore, to note where the value is implicitly versus explicitly taught. For instance, the difference between a course in writing and a course in which writing is required and thus, one means of assessing students' content knowledge, may well be two different animals. Assessing what students produce in a course,

separate from the context of what they are taught, can be sticky when we try to direct our questions about learning to specific points in the curriculum. The issue of primary versus secondary emphasis in content, accountability, and even faculty expertise is important here; for if students are expected to demonstrate, say, fluency in proposal writing but never take a course or have extended instruction in proposal writing—instead, have only courses that require proposals to be written during the semester—that may signal the kind of disconnect between expectations and actual instruction that is especially illuminating in the assessment context. What faculty decide to do to remedy that disconnect is one of the greatest demonstrations of the role assessment plays in promoting faculty ownership of program improvements.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL: THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION IMPRIMATUR**

Next, the template calls for a general description of the objectives and potential outcomes of each institutional value as it manifests itself in the technical communication curriculum—in short, what will this institutional value look like in the context of our technical communication program? While a separate format such as that laid out in Figure 1, next section, can be constructed to outline the objectives/outcomes/measures and other particulars of the actual assessment plan, we can at least gather a sense of those expectations from this original template. Next, and as a critical reminder to us all, it is imperative that we plot sites of learning into this template. While we may articulate our expectations of program outcomes in measurable ways, we must also document where in the curriculum we are actually teaching the content, processes, and products that will surface those outcomes. In fact, some of the most valuable realizations in assessment work have come when faculty have discovered that some of their grandest expectations about student learning do not actually have a site in the curriculum; the assumption that somebody else was teaching a concept or even that everybody else was teaching it is finally jettisoned in the realization that, actually, nobody is teaching that content. Such gaps are further evidence of the ways that assessment can improve programming.

Next, the column for “co-curricular contact” is designed to acknowledge ways that student learning is promoted outside the classroom. Many institutions' student services, student affairs, or other co-curricular divisions are directly engaged in promoting programming to enhance learning opportunities that clearly adopt the institution's values. Residential learning communities, for instance, are one of the most prominent features of the co-curricular emphasis on learning outcomes in support of the curriculum and the institution's values. Other opportunities for student engagement and service are also good examples of such sites of learning and, thus, deserve incorporation to both the plan for learning and the assessment.

Table 1. Template for Connecting Institutional Values to Individual Programs

Institutional value	General outcomes	T.C. program outcomes	Curricular contact	Co-curricular contact	Degree of proficiency
Communication skills [written]	Can explain common disciplinary issues, approaches, themes, methods, etc. to expert and lay audiences; adapt the info. to the primary genres of the major discipline, make editing decisions that strengthen a document; correct major errors in standard English; identify places in text where graphic elements would enhance the clarity or impact of the message.	Can translate any subject to any group of readers, ranging from expert, to managers, to special interest audiences, to lay readers; use any document format; make full stylistic, rhetorical, design, and other document edits; identify and correct grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors; incorporate graphic elements using current technology to enhance clarity, impact, etc.	ALL courses, TC 101, 102, ETC.	Internship, service learning and community work/documentation	Mastery
Communication skills [oral]	Can explain common disciplinary issues, approaches, themes, methods, etc. in formal presentations; adapt information for informal presentations, including small to large groups that may or may not have any decision-making authority; adapt information for various audiences and for exploratory, explanatory, or	Can explain any subject to any group of listeners, ranging from expert to managers to special-interest audiences to lay readers; readily ascertain the appropriate level of formality in the group and adapt information accordingly; facilitate group discussions based on information presented; manage the details and specifics, as well	ENG 101, 102 TC 211-222 TC 423 TC 599	Presentations for internships; community work, student organizations (STC Student Chapter)	Mastery
Regional Understandings of Disciplinary Impact	persuasive presentations; present ideas in a well-organized, articulate fashion; incorporate appropriate examples, details, graphics, and other elements that help clarify the oral presentation; handle basic Question & Answer sessions.	as the overall scheme and impact of the topic at hand; accommodate hostile audiences; provide appropriately documented and referenced works to establish credibility and authority; easily use graphic and presentation technology to enliven and clarify information; handle Question & Answer sessions with felicity.			
	Can explain the relevance of their discipline on the economic, social, political, historical, environmental, cultural or other critical venues of the region; articulate current events that have a direct impact on the practice of their discipline in the region and, conversely, articulate their discipline's current impact on at least one current issue in the region.	Can explain the relevance of technical communication on the economic, social, political, historical, environmental, cultural, or other critical venues of the region; articulate current events that have a direct impact on the practice of technical communication in the region, and, conversely, articulate technical communication's impact on at least one current issue in the region.	TC 399 TC 499	STC student chapter; community service; internships/cooperative education; other student organizations; guest speakers in classes; field trips to area businesses; interactions with alumni; career fairs; information exchange fairs	Mastery

Table 1. (Cont'd.)

Institutional value	General outcomes	T.C. program outcomes	Curricular contact	Co-curricular contact	Degree of proficiency
Global Understandings of Disciplinary Impact	Can explain the relevance of their discipline on the economic, social, political, historical, environmental, cultural or other critical venues of the world; articulate current events that have a direct impact on the practice of their discipline in various countries and conversely articulate their discipline's current impact on at least one current issue in a specific area of the world; document the source and authority for that understanding and articulate at least some of the impact for the discipline and for the U.S. and its relations with that country or region.	Can explain the relevance of technical communication on the economic, social, political, historical, environmental, cultural, or other critical venues of the world; articulate current events that would have a direct impact on the practice of tech. communication in that region, and, conversely, articulate technical communication's impact on at least one current issue in the region; document the source and the authority for that understanding and articulate at least some of the impact for the discipline and for the U.S. and its relations with that country or region.	TC 299 TC 499	Study Abroad; STC student chapter; community service; internships/cooperative education; other student organizations; guest speakers in classes/interactions with alumni	Mastery of all areas for at least one international arena
Technology	Can use the common technological tools of the discipline, understanding the appropriate situations in which to use each tool and the best means of application; articulate the reasons for using the tool as well as reasons not to use the tool.	Can use a broad array of technology for various tasks in the technical communication arena, including word processing, graphics, Web-creation, citation, spreadsheets, project scheduling, presentation, and other software packages; research topics in technical communication through standard and Web-based search processes.	ALL TC courses	Community service/service learning as needed with student organizations.	Mastery in word processing; high proficiency in graphics & Web-creation; moderate proficiency in project scheduling and spreadsheets unless project/career choices warrant greater proficiency.
Entrepreneurial Thinking	Can articulate clear applications of disciplinary contributions to frontier and otherwise unexplored areas of development; explain the needed resources for the development, along with the elements of attractiveness and potential downfalls or complications.	Can articulate clear applications of technical communication to frontier and otherwise unexplored areas of development from the sciences, business, and/or technology arenas; see the elements of viability and danger for those ideas; identify particular instances of people and places that might benefit from the idea; describe partners, or at least the characteristics of partners, likely to be interested in funding the idea.	TC 399 TC 499	Internships/cooperative education; community-service partners, service-learning partners; collaborative learning opportunities throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum.	Moderate to high capacity for recognizing sound entrepreneurial thinking; some moderate to high degree of proficiency in crafting at least one substantive entrepreneurial idea.



### SAMPLE ASSESSMENT PATTERN

**Institutional Value:** Communication skills [Written]

**Program:** Technical and Professional Communication

**Objective 1:** Students can translate any subject to any group of readers, ranging from expert to managers, to special interest audiences, to lay readers.

**Outcomes:**

1. Students make, and can defend, good choices about the amount of detail an audience expects (on the advanced side) or can process (on the general or lay side) of any topic.
2. Students make, and can defend, good choices for appropriate vocabulary that is suitable for the comprehension level of the audience.
3. Students make, and can defend, good choices for organization of information that is suitable for the comprehension level of the audience.

**Objective 2:** Students can make full stylistic, rhetorical, design, and other document edits.

**Outcomes:**

1. Students can articulate the rationale for their edits as they move between versions of documents.
2. Students can make well-reasoned edits in tone, organization, evidence, persuasive strategy, format and other elements as needed.
3. Students can accommodate the intricacies of these edits according to the document's purpose, audience, and urgency and can articulate the rationale for their decisions.
4. Students can move fluidly between editing and proofreading to address any modifications that need to be made.

**Measures:**

1. A portfolio of student work is submitted at the end of the junior and senior years.
2. An extensive final project is part of the senior capstone experience. A defense of that project before the faculty assures that the student can articulate the rationale for choices.

### Criteria for Evaluation

**Portfolio:**

- The selection of work demonstrates developing sophistication of the writing in terms of fluency with style, rhetorical strategies, design, and other features.
- The selection of work demonstrates fluency with genres.
- The selection of work demonstrates thorough understanding of how to bring together the content, context, audience, purpose, and other features to create useful documents.
- The selection of work demonstrates a thorough understanding of the conventions of standard English or the equivalent language.

**Final Project:**

- The final project offers an extended example (at least 10 pages or the equivalent in a web-based document) of the student's capabilities for managing a sustained work.
- The final project demonstrates the student's ability to
  - clarify a subject and its context
  - identify and accommodate the relevant characteristic features of the audience
  - select the appropriate genre for the project, incorporating all its standard features
  - select the appropriate design features that support the genre, topic, audience, and other critical features
  - defend the selection of critical stylistic, rhetorical, design, and other features of the document

Figure 1. Articulation of objectives, outcomes, and measures in the context of institutional values.

At the far right of the template is a notation of the expectation of competence for each value. In some cases, for some curricula, we might reasonably expect higher levels of competence than in others. We should surely, for instance, expect more critical elements of mastery of written communication skills in a degree program in technical communication than we might expect in other nonwriting majors; similarly, we might be a bit more forgiving in some of our expectations of students' other skills and learnings, determining that "moderate" or even "beginning" knowledge is acceptable—in other words, that we are looking, in some cases, for awareness, rather than mastery.

### ARTICULATING THE CONNECTION IN A WELL-DEVELOPED ASSESSMENT PLAN

Following the template with its links between institutional values and their manifestation in the technical communication's values and curriculum is the actual assessment plan, shown here in Figure 1 as an outline of objectives, outcomes, measures, instruments, and other particulars. At this point, there is nothing new, as dozens of experts in assessment have drawn any number of formats for articulating objectives and outcomes. What is new, for some, may be that we are now documenting the specifics of our expectations as they reflect those institutional values of learning: What are the grand visions—the objectives—for technical communication students' knowledge and performance abilities in the context of our institutional values? How do they manifest themselves as particular outcomes? What kind of artifact might we require as the evidence (either singular or collective) of that learning? On what criteria might we establish our evaluation of the students' work?

What this figure ultimately shows is a schema for moving from the articulation of a desired learning objective to the specific outcome(s), the measures providing evidence of learning, the artifact and criteria for evaluation, and elements of accountability (timelines and reporting responsibilities), simply demonstrated as the familiar assessment cycle in Figure 2.

The seamlessness of the connection as demonstrated here, of course, should not be misconstrued to trivialize the work of assessment or the students' learning processes. Both processes are highly complex and depend on any number of variables. For assessment, matters of faculty buy-in and expertise, resources and support, and education in assessment affect the work. For determining the impact of the curriculum on student learning processes, measurement is equally complex, focusing on issues as broad and pervasive as the students' socioeconomic and educational background, all sorts of "exposures" to individual interest and learning styles, motivation, and so on. At a programmatic level, however, where both student and faculty circumstances are tempered by the larger perspective on student learning and student needs, those individual characteristics may easily,

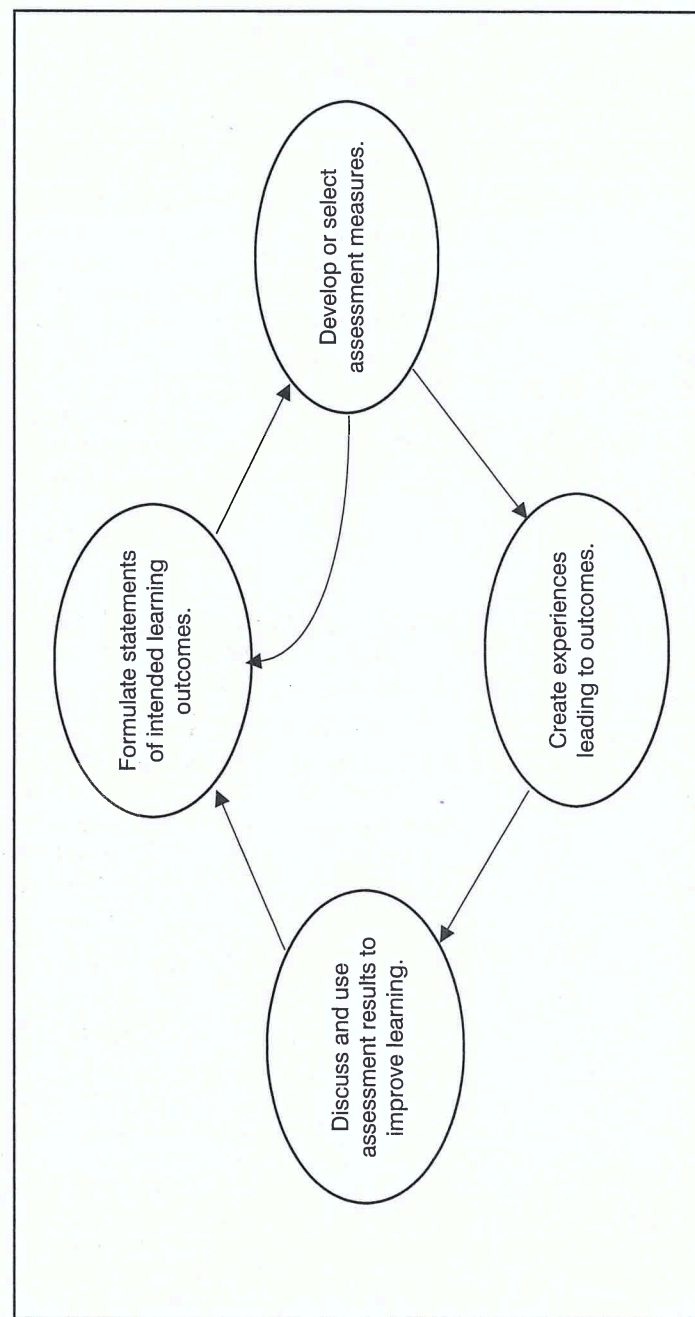


Figure 2. Assessment cycle by Mary Huba and Jann C. Freed.  
(Adapted from Huba & Freed, *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*)



and valuably, be morphed into a larger perspective on student abilities and program renderings.

### MOVING FROM EXPECTATION TO EVALUATION

At the end of any assessment strategy should be answers to the question, "How are we doing?" In programmatic assessment, we are looking for answers that match the extension of institutional values through programmatic values into objectives and outcomes and result, ultimately, in the determination of learning. Thus, Figure 3 articulates the distinctions between the expected levels of mastery, typically ranging from "novice" or "beginning" to "expert" or "mastery," with any number of levels in between.

This rubric again points to the critical nature of faculty ownership of the assessment process in setting expectations for students' learning and performance. The understanding that students are consistently performing at the "beginning" level when we are urging "mastery" tells us where to start the conversation about our curriculum, co-curriculum, and other points of influence that should be the focus of review and revision.

### THE POWER OF CONNECTING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT TO INSTITUTIONAL VALUES

Of course, the connection between institutional values and the technical communication program is just the first step in a valid map of the curriculum and the technical communication faculty's expectations. More discipline-based learning regarding genres, processes, and products would certainly be articulated in the remainder of their assessment work. But it is nonetheless valuable to add this "mile-high" view of the connection to the institutional values in our thinking about our programs and assessing their impact on our students, especially as we work to articulate how their degree from our institution differs from a technical communication degree from another institution.

In addition to providing a grounding framework for assessing the technical communication curriculum, the use of institutional values as a context for such assessment offers other advantages. Foremost may be the evidence that the curriculum is a key provider of the institution's stated values. Few disciplines, in fact, can lend themselves to institutional values and contexts more readily than communication, since it necessarily exists in every context, every curriculum, and, in some fashion I would even argue, in every desirable outcome.

Second, because every institution faces the realities and consequences of scarce resources, every curriculum's faculty and directors seek evidence of the contributions or even the centrality of their programs to the institution's core

values. That evidence is a powerful mechanism for bringing attention and resources to the technical communication program from a number of sources, including standard internal [re]allocations. Quite simply, while new ideas and programs appeal to the entrepreneurs and visionaries among us, senior administrators do not get to enjoy that privilege if they have not first protected and strengthened existing core programs.

Just as important, however, is the attention and resources that can come to successful programs from donors and granting foundations. To put it a bit crassly, donors like to back winners: they prefer to give their money (or other resources) to successful programs or, at the very least, to programs that can not only articulate a vision but demonstrate a strategic plan for increasing the likelihood of success. And granting agencies and foundations assume greater strength in academic programs that are clearly tied to the core values of the institution. The kind of visibility that evidence of success can provide is invaluable in moving the technical communication curriculum into the spotlight and, thus, into the line of funding.

Finally, but hardly least important, is the clarity that such a context can provide for faculty and students. Competing urgencies bombard curricular planners at every turn: Should we incorporate more technology into the curriculum? Should we focus on better or higher-paying internships? Should we expand our program? Narrow it? Make it more or less exclusive? Should we try to attract a different kind of student? Or a different kind of faculty?

Knowing the values of the institution and the role of the technical communication program within those values may do one of two things: (1) help articulate or stabilize the priorities of the program or, alternately, (2) help move the institution's values in a new direction. As faculty members are increasingly aware of the need to articulate or question institutional priorities that distinguish their institution from its competitors, they should be more effectively engaged in conversations that shape the institution's future, such as a change in mission (e.g., social justice, civic engagement, experiential learning), curricular or pedagogical focus (e.g., technology-based, service-learning, inquiry-guided learning), or student population (e.g., adult learners, distance learners, learning disabled, multi-ethnic). While any change in mission or values is highly complicated and, in some circles, practically impossible, the opportunity to understand what our institutional values communicate about our understandings of the world our graduates will enter—and the specific role that our own institution can play in preparing students for that world—is one of the most important conversations we can have in higher education. For technical communication faculty to be prepared for that conversation, whether leading it or not, is critical to the advancement of our discipline as a primary site for learning in general and for learning the particulars of knowledge needed for success (however we may define it) in the 21st century.



Criterion	Beginning	Moderate	Mastery
Developing sophistication of the writing in terms of fluency with style, rhetorical strategies, design, and other features.	Student demonstrates little to no understanding of alternative ways to express ideas or ways that those alternatives affect the message; student demonstrates little to no understanding of the differences between various rhetorical strategies and has limited capacity to recognize or alter prominent rhetorical features of a document; student can recognize the visual features of a document but lacks the background to understand defensible (i.e., well-researched) selections of one feature versus another; student is likely to seriously over- or under-use design elements in documents.	Student shows ability to recognize stylistic, rhetorical, design, and other features in the works of others and is capable of articulating the impact of those features on the document itself and on the audience's likely understanding of the work. Student is increasingly able to transfer that knowledge and ability to his/her own writing at either the invention or editing stages of the work. The student can create alternative versions of a document to demonstrate his/her fluency with choices. Student can reasonably articulate the likely impact of the alternative versions and make an appropriate selection for the final version of the document. Student has at least some understanding of the evidence that research and informed theory provide for those decisions.	Student can readily analyze the key features of a writing situation and weigh alternative stylistic, rhetorical, design, and other communicative elements. Student can move easily between alternative versions of a document and make appropriate edits and decisions that culminate in a superb final document. The student can articulate not only the rationale for his/her choices, but also the theoretical and/or research-based underpinnings that justify that selection.
Fluency with genres	Student makes little to no distinction between various genres of writing, either in understanding the purpose or use of the genre or its characteristic features. He/she has little to no recognition of the decisions that culminate in the selection of a particular genre and, then, its concomitant features.	Student recognizes the variety of genres available for the fluent writer. He/she is able to recognize and describe the key features of most genres. He/she is able to work within a genre's expectations to create a fluent document that reflects at least the critical features that define a genre. Student has at least some understanding of the research and informed theory that supports the identification and creation of a genre.	Student is highly capable of articulating the key features of various genres and using those features as a valuable scaffold for building his/her own document. Student can make substantive decisions about the appropriateness of modifying that scaffolding for the particular content, context, audience, or purpose of the document. Student has a well-researched understanding of the history, key features, and theoretical underpinnings of genres.
Connectivity between content, context, audience, purpose, and other features	Student demonstrates modest understandings of the critical connectivity between multiple facets of the writing situation. Student focuses on only one or two elements in a document's creation. Student may begin to show signs of making individual considerations of each element but cannot weave together their fluidity in a sense of connectivity.	Student recognizes the full impact of the connectivity between content, context, audience, purpose, and other features. Student manages at least the major features in documents, according to the individual writing situation, with some appropriate level of consistency. Student can make and defend choices, based on considerations for creating a well-connected document, with some level of consistency.	Student easily recognizes the critical interplay between content, context, audience, purpose, and other features. Student can readily identify the critical complexities of that interplay, especially where one or more of the elements conflict or complicate the assignment. Student has a highly developed repertoire of strategies for overcoming the complexities, resulting in the creation of a well-connected document.
Conventions of standard written English (or equivalent language)	Student has little to no consistent ability to apply the conventions of standard written English. His/her work is riddled with grammar and punctuation errors that he/she is unable to explain or correct.	Student writes relatively flawless English, with only modest and then, most likely, minor errors. Student is typically able to understand and articulate the conventions as he/she corrects the document.	Student can readily apply the conventions of standard written English to any document or project. Student can easily explain the convention and demonstrate its value in promoting clarity of the work and respect for the reader.

Figure 3. Rubric of portfolio evaluation criteria for level of competency.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. (2004). An institutional commitment to assessment and accountability. In P. Hernon & R. E. Dugan (Eds.), *Outcomes assessment in higher education: Views and perspectives* (pp. 17–28). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Huba, M., & Freed J. E. (2000). *Learner-centered assessment on college campuses: Shifting the focus from teaching to learning*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Nichols, J. O., & Nichols, K. W. (2005). *A road map for improvement of student learning and support services through assessment*. New York: Agathon Press.

## CHAPTER 4

# **The Benefits and Challenges of Adopting a New Standpoint While Assessing Technical Communication Programs: A Response to Jo Allen**

**Paul V. Anderson, Miami University (Ohio)**

In “Mapping Institutional Values and the Technical Communication Curriculum” (see Chapter 3 in this volume), Jo Allen has created the best kind of assessment discussion, one that tells us how to use assessment to strengthen our academic programs through thoughtful, well-designed, evidence-based action. Furthermore, by looking at the assessment of technical communication programs in a novel way, she identifies a new assessment-related strategy for faculty and program directors.

## A FOCUS ON OBJECTIVES

In higher education, activities called *program assessment* are used for two distinguishable purposes. Both involve gathering data or other evidence to determine how well a program is succeeding at achieving its objectives. The first purpose is to judge whether the program measures up to a predetermined level of achievement. A program that measures up may be praised and, perhaps, rewarded. One that doesn’t may experience many fates, including mandates for change, reduction in support, or dissolution.

In her chapter, Allen focuses on program assessment conducted for the second purpose: to identify areas in which the program can be improved. In this type of assessment, improvement (rather than judgment) remains the goal even for programs that more than measure up to whatever standards apply. Its final step