



Why major in writing? Hyperpragmatism and writing program websites

Christopher D.M. Andrews

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 6300 Ocean Drive, Unit 5813, Corpus Christi, TX 78412-5813

Abstract

This article describes how university writing programs are represented by their institutional web pages. Presenting a content analysis of “Why major in writing” web pages that explicitly appeal to students to join a writing major, the article describes the institutional and disciplinary values those pages articulated through the series of appeals they make to recruit students to the major. Much like professional and technical writing programs, writing studies program websites focus nearly exclusively on marketable skills and job preparation, but don’t give as clear a picture of other individual, cultural, and ethical goods created by the programs. The article argues that writing programs more generally must resist the same siren call of hyperpragmatism often described in scholarship in professional and technical writing. Finally, this study offers strategies for orienting institutional web presences to productively balance economic and pragmatic ideological components with civic, social, and individual rationales for the major.

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Introduction

Writing studies scholarship presents a rich account of the social goals of the discipline: a dynamic, stimulating picture of service learning, social justice, technological embodiment, ethics, reflexive practice, and critique. Our accounts of what we do span the arenas of personal identity, public discourse, civic education, work and professionalism, and exist in lines of thinking spanning composition and rhetoric, writing studies, professional and technical writing and communication, rhetoric, and many other sub- and quasi-disciplines. Though there is certainly no singular narrative to turn to in such a (sometimes jarring) array of positions, if we back far enough away from it all, I imagine that most would agree that we’re talking about the process and production of texts in ways that add to goodness in the world. The dichotomy between this broad understanding of ourselves as disciplines and programs and the wider world’s understanding of university writing programs as a skills-oriented series of courses is both well-documented in writing studies scholarship and commonly-cited as an exigence for attending to our programs’ public-facing narratives and philosophies. This attention has been framed both theoretically, as activism through counterdiscourse (Howard, 2007), and practically, as branding and public relations efforts (Rhodes, 2010). Despite these and other calls, the values

E-mail address: christopher.andrews@tamucc.edu

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of writing programs seem to remain at odds with the rhetoric of writing programs presented on institutional web pages—in particular to the pages designed to help attract students to majors. These sites frame writing programs in terms of hyperpragmatic or normative literacy ideologies that tie writing to skills and economic benefit, notions that frequently overshadow egalitarian literacy ideologies that make claims about the ethical, social, and civic impacts of writing.

This article provides an account of disciplinary self-talk in university writing programs primarily focused on how we market our programs to students. After a decade or more of calls to attend to our narratives, what sorts of discourses and branding do we rely on? How do we appeal to our audiences, and what assumptions underpin those appeals? In particular, I examine university program websites as a location where those appeals are displayed to a variety of audiences. Despite being rightly criticized as contradictory (Gordon, 2009) and “brochureware” (Spinuzzi, Bowie, Rodgers, & Li, 2003) program websites still do representative work, presenting a version of our programs, ourselves and our values (Howard, 2007; Knight, Rife, Alexander, Loncharich, and DeVoss, 2009), and are thus worthy not only of our critical attention but also our rhetorical re-envisioning.

The notion that the descriptions of our programs and the realities of our programs often run counter to one another is not new. Dominic Carpini (2007) reviewed catalog program descriptions to show how writing majors wrestle with orientations to both praxis and gnosis¹, with program descriptions often citing a foundation in the humanities “as a corrective or apologia to the impression that our programs are based in vulgar careerism” (p. 16). Jay L. Gordon (2009) criticized professional and technical writing programs in particular for speaking out of both sides of their mouths; while program websites and professional journals are necessarily different because of their different rhetorical situations, the views of the programmatic missions presented in the two should, at some level, be recognizable to one another. Though more generous to programs themselves, Aimée Knight et al. (2009) saw a similar dissonance in program websites: members of the field construct themselves as experts in digital writing and production, but program websites are designed poorly and fail to reflect that expertise. Reviewing the state of technical and professional communication (TPC) capstone courses, Lisa Melonçon and Joanna Schreiber (2018) suggested that the description and reality of undergraduate TPC capstone courses are sometimes at odds: courses that program administrators describe as flexible opportunities for students to reflect on professional work are presented in course descriptions as highly instrumental, often hyperpragmatic pre-professional courses “skewed to serve industry audiences more than academic” (p. 329). External views of our field are limited by this mismatch, Melonçon and Schreiber argued. TPC programs—and I would extend this to all kinds of writing programs—must do a better job of indicating our disciplinary emphases on “reflective practice, the humanistic perspective, and the broad knowledges of conceptual and practical skills” (p. 329), and we must also document this knowledge to build “a sustainable programmatic perspective” (p. 330).

This study builds upon previous arguments (Carpini, 2007; Gordon, 2009; Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018) that writing studies and professional and technical writing programs have a “value-mode” problem (Fulkerson, 2009). One limitation of Carpini’s and Gordon’s studies in particular is that though rich in discussion, their data collection and findings remain opaque; this article presents a content analysis of program websites as outward-facing program description that writing program faculty and administrators can use to evaluate and reenvision the appeals they are using to market their programs. Previous studies in this area (primarily Gordon and Knight et al) have focused primarily on professional and technical writing programs; this article opens up that attention to include writing studies programs more broadly. Although the opening framework and implications for this study are described broadly, in terms of a “big tent” approach to writing (Johnson et al., 2014), I have retained a division between the two groups to see points of similarity and departure between programs types which are often, but not always, housed together in their institutions. Ultimately this study shows that despite programmatic, curricular, and other differences, writing and rhetoric programs and professional and technical writing programs rely on the same kinds of appeals to students. Both disciplines have heard calls for attention to branding in their programmatic scholarship, and both disciplines, I argue, can benefit from heeding warnings about hyperpragmatism that have come out of technical communication scholarship.

Engaging websites through the lens of complex representation issues and constraints on agency inherent to the genre, I examine the values program websites appeal to and invoke as we present ourselves to the public—in particular, as programs try to explain why students ought to consider our courses and major or minor in writing. Rather than a detailed

¹ In a flight of flourish, Carpini placed writing programs “between the Scylla of expendability faced by the liberal arts and the Charybdis of a vulgarized professional instrumentality” (2007, p. 16).

rhetorical analysis of a single website, this study looks at program materials collectively, sampling from websites for undergraduate programs in writing studies and professional and technical writing. Rather than attempting to describe the nature of programs themselves, this study explores program websites to see how institutional and disciplinary values are articulated and describes what consensus writing programs seem to share about their commitments and goals (Scott & Melonçon, 2017). Following Knight et al. (2009), after identifying the core values and commitments our programs invoke for audiences, this article offers strategies for orienting our institutional web presences to productively balance economic and pragmatic ideological components with socially- and ethically-oriented rationales for the major.

Stakeholders and contexts for program websites

The goal of this study was to describe how university writing studies programs are constructed for our various audiences via our program websites. What is the case we are making for majoring in writing, and how are we making that case? What combinations of values or ideas do program websites appeal to as they invite students to declare majors or take courses from those programs? These questions invite discussion about two issues: 1) how writing studies and professional and technical writing have wrestled with larger cultural narratives about the value of a higher education, and 2) whether we can consider institutionally-driven websites to be representative of writing programs.

A default value proposition for many college degree programs is economics and careers, and so we might expect a primary rationale for the major to focus on employability and ways students will *benefit* from their course of study (Howard, 2007); the findings in this study reflect that particular recruitment narrative. In the United States, one goes to university to earn a degree so that one may have better opportunities for economic self-improvement. Get a degree, get a better job. Such a pragmatic, professions-focused stance has long been noxious to academics in the humanities; in her 2005 edited collection *Market Matters*, Joyce Carter argues that by remaining in a solely critical or romantic attitude towards this stance, programs run the risk of missing opportunities or worse, being sidelined entirely. Writing and rhetoric programs ought to embrace rather than reject the world of “competitive, free-market mechanisms” (p. 4); rather than fearing “selling out,” programs should buy in, in particular because of “institutional and economic constraints.” (p. 17). In what must be a familiar portrait to many, Fred Kemp (2005) described the modern English department as a place suspicious to the “techniques of business, science, and institutional management” (p. 78). The near-religious literary essentialism (Kemp’s “Arnoldian values”) of traditional English departments resists and dissents from entrepreneurial values and practices that “seek adventurous accommodation with the forces of society in general” (p. 94). These sorts of departments deny their own nature as “state-run small business implicated in practically every aspect of small business management” (p. 80). Writing of the embrace of corporate web-design practices and standards on academic sites, or “corporatization,” Amy Kimme Hea (2002, p. 232) noted that even though many academics spurn business models and corporate references, interrelationships between the two settings are material and significant, and not necessarily negative.

At the same time, what J. Blake Scott (2004) and others have called hyperpragmatism (Bushnell, 1999; Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018; Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2006) is an issue that professional and technical writing programs and writing studies programs must ensure they are attending to as pressures to measure program success by job placement often overpower successes in civic engagement. Focusing on instrumental values rather than social and civic ones, Scott (2004) defined hyperpragmatism as “an ideology and set of practices [...] primarily concerned with helping students understand and successfully adapt to the writing processes, conventions, and values of disciplinary and workplace discourse communities” (p. 291). Often described in relationship to service and client-oriented pedagogies, hyperpragmatism and its orientation towards direct job preparation is a powerful logic that speaks to students concerned with rising costs in higher education. One of the attractions—and limitations—of this approach to pedagogy (and in the case of this study, to program marketing) is that as much as it speaks to students’ own “attitudes about and expectations of their education,” it also tends to “narrowly position students” and fails to encourage them to connect the skills and tools they learn to the civic and social problems they will live and interact with (p. 293). Those who promote programs and talk with future students must work hard to balance the competing values of our highest humanistic ideals and the practical demands of internships, jobs, and options after college.

Similarly, university program websites are a potentially fraught unit of analysis; how representative can these pages be of the fields of writing studies and professional and technical writing if the voice there is so powerfully driven by the organization’s perspective? Most often, official program websites are static spaces: repositories for prospective students which don’t go much beyond catalog information and phone numbers and have been held up as the epitome of difficult

navigation, outdated information, and inconsistent design in complex websites (Barrios, 2004; Breuch, 2018). Clay Spinuzzi et al. (2003) framed program websites as a form of brochureware: websites that provide unified, centralized, and easily controlled image—but do so at the expense of “democratic empowerment (169), as the means of production are closed and controlled by a small number of people—either persons in the department with design and technical skill and administrative access or persons outside the department entirely, regardless of skill or ability. These pages may in many cases not be administered by academic units at all, and instead are managed within a complex institutional and technological framework of stakeholders with differences of interest and varying perspectives on website discourses (Killoran, 2005; McCarthy, 2015). Knight et al (2009) note:

A university writing program’s web site can justifiably be considered a reflection of the writing professionals and writing teachers in that program, and those professionals are justified in claiming their program’s web site as their digital writing space. Ironically, and uncomfortably, professionals in the program may not determine the manner and extent to which students are represented on a writing program’s site. Writing programs may not have agency to amend and edit their own digital writing spaces. (p. 196)

Program administrators or faculty simply may not be the ones in charge, may not be responsible for the web copy, or may have difficulty getting the pages that represent them changed.

This article can’t, therefore, make claims about how writing programs represent themselves, as it’s not necessarily always writing programs themselves doing the representing. At worst, writing program pages can be synthetically institutionalized representations colonized by and conforming to university discourses (Killoran, 2002; Knight et al., 2009). At best, these pages are sites of constrained agency (Weber, 2013), the result of multiple agents including technical and content management staff, unit faculty and administrators, governance bodies, policies, and content management systems providing both opportunities for and strong limitations on writing program’s own versions of themselves. The “romantic notion of individual, autonomous agency” has little place on a university website, but we must also reject “cynical, overdeterministic views of agency that place individuals under the heel of power structures” (Winsor qtd in Weber, p. 293). Nor can program websites be expected to offer much data about programs themselves, as they could be inaccurate, out of date, or poorly maintained. Regardless of these constraints, program websites still do representative work (Hawisher & Sullivan, 1999; Knight et al., 2009), presenting a version of our programs, ourselves and our values, even if they sometimes blend together so many perspectives that some programs may feel that they do not.

Capturing a snapshot of writing program websites

The first research problem to be solved was compiling a meaningful list of university writing programs. While rigorous lists of programs in professional and technical writing or communication exist², lists of writing or rhetoric programs can be more difficult to come by. I collected websites combining and refining the following lists:

1. Council of Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication list
2. Council of Writing Program Administrators list of program websites
3. 2009 Conference of College Composition and Communication unofficial list of writing majors
4. Membership from Association of Rhetoric and Writing Programs

I also completed an internet search following the same method as Lisa Melonçon and Sally Henschel (2013), ultimately building a list of 216 programs with Bachelor’s degrees, minors, tracks, or certificates in writing studies, professional and technical writing, or technical communication.³ To ensure I was focusing on writing rather than

² The collection and analysis phases of this study were completed before Lisa Melonçon published maps of TPC programs as part of her TechComm Programmatic Central project in 2018.

³ Tracks and concentrations within English BAs are difficult to define and quantify without catalog information; because this study is about defining a rhetoric of writing program and not defining the curricular makeup of writing programs, I took major tracks or concentrations as defined by program websites claiming a qualitatively different and specifically writing-oriented path through the program. This study originated as a project presented at the Association of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, previously a special interest group (SIG) of CCCCs, which takes undergraduate writing programs as its focus. Thus, the primary focus on undergraduate rather than graduate programs.

generalist degrees, I excluded tracks or concentrations that included more than 6 hours of literature beyond core coursework for English BA/BS programs, and also excluded creative writing-only programs.

From the 216 programs, I downloaded web page information for the 93 BA or BS degrees, capturing web material describing the program, pages explicitly describing why students should major in writing, or catalog information if neither of the two were available. After reviewing the materials, I selected pages explicitly detailing why students should major in writing as the unit of analysis. Jeffrey Grabill and Stacey Pigg (2012) described the lack of published guidance on determining sampling and “arriving at a coding corpus in situations where a power analysis is not relevant.” The discussion of sample size in qualitative research as they summarize it is “not too big; not too small” (p. 106). They go on to describe 10–20% as being a good range for achieving saturation and informational redundancy. Following Stuart Blythe’s (2007) advice about mixing criterion and random sampling, I stratified the sample into Bachelor’s degrees in writing and rhetoric and Bachelor’s degrees in professional and technical writing or communication, analyzing a randomly selected set of web pages specifically detailing “why students should major in writing.” Ultimately, I examined 26 web pages, 12% of the full list of and 27.9% of the listed BA/BS programs in writing. Half of these were rhetoric and writing programs, and half were professional and technical writing or communication programs; retaining this distinction in part allowed me to describe the extent to which writing studies programs share stated values with professional and technical writing programs.

There is no one correct way to go about analyzing qualitative data for content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). Researchers must read data repeatedly, word by word, working emically and rhetorically to analyze latent content (Andrews, 2018; Blythe, 2007; Thayer, Evans, McBride, Queen, & Spyridakis, 2007), extensively reflecting on any emergent coding process that moves from first impressions to code labels derived from the text to categories and coding schemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I coded at the level of individual paragraphs, which on these pages tended to be 1–3 sentences, looking for latent content appeals or value-based reasons for students to join the program. Ordered and unordered lists were treated differently based on their complexity and purpose. Simple bullet lists, such as a list of nonprofits where students have completed internships, were treated as single units; more complex lists, such as a bullet list describing different career opportunities, were coded by list item, treating each item as an individual paragraph. Coding at the level of the paragraph rather than just at the sentence level allowed me to view appeals as they appeared in combinations. Table 1 presents the final set of codes and definitions for appeals as well as a set of representative statements.

Early in the project, especially after reviewing Knight et al.’s (2009) methods and discussion, I had planned to incorporate multimodal elements of pages and particularly expected to catalog a variety of photographs and videos. After designing a coding scheme to see which subjects appeared on these pages (i.e. campus buildings, university logos, students working at a computer alone, students collaborating, people lecturing, gender and person-of-color status of subjects) it turned out that on the sampled pages, only one program made use of video and most other multimedia elements were generic university imagery of logos, buildings, landscapes. As in Knight et al.’s previous study, there was often “little to differentiate the identity, personality, or feel of the first from the second or from the third, beyond the use of specific university colors and logos” (p. 197). Audio clips promoting a program or major were absent, and the most common photograph on any of these pages were university promotional images of students, most frequently white and female, walking or sitting in small groups.

Analysis of appeals on writing program websites

The “Why major in writing” pages reviewed in this study mix a variety of tasks and content: they explain to students (and other stakeholders) how majoring in the program will benefit them, describe special features of the program, such as internships, relationships with off-campus organizations and regional job markets, and showcase student publications or other special student opportunities. These sites also commonly spend time defining the program and the discipline. On many of these pages, course listings and other catalog-like information such as degree plans or overviews of particular tracks are also provided. Less frequently, these pages may list specific major or minor pairings, list career paths or employers of recent graduates, or provide Bureau of Labor statistics, faculty spotlights, student testimonials, and discussions of the university’s geographic location. These pages are diverse enough in content and form that I would hesitate to call them a genre of themselves, but share characteristics and purposes—most importantly, main titles or headlines that include some version of “Why study writing at ____ University?” and a set of reasons for joining the major—that make them identifiable and more-or-less coherent.

Table 1
Values writing program websites appeal to.

Appeals	Code definition	Example
Appeal to abstract benefits to self	Appeals to benefits or self-interest in abstract, usually non-economic or non-social terms, such as general sense of satisfaction or doing things “because you love to”	“I thought it would be interesting, but it’s been life-changing. Really, truly.” “You’re learning. . .how to get paid doing what you love.”
Appeal to challenge	Appeals to a sense of difficulty, complexity, or challenge, and claims that dealing with challenges or solving difficult problems is something the major is particularly well-suited to.	“We can’t promise that it will be easy, in fact, we know our program is quite challenging, but we can promise to provide the coursework, mentoring, and related support you need to succeed.”
Appeal to creativity	Mentions creative skills or abilities; may mention creative writing, emphasis on marriage of creative and other skills or domains.	“In addition to a wide range of creative options, the Professional Writing program offers workplace-ready courses such as publishing, grant writing, copy-editing, and technical writing.”
Appeal to economics or careers	Describes benefits in terms of career readiness or opportunities, and financial considerations such as salaries	“We pride ourselves on being a professionally-oriented program and provide various supports beyond the classroom to enhance your professional development.”
Appeal to ethics	Appeals to goodness, justice, ethics, moral codes, civic-mindedness, service to others, or benefits to society rather than just the self in abstract.	“Students learn to exercise their linguistic skills critically and charitably”
Appeal to excellence	Extols superlative or unique qualities of the program (awards won) or faculty, or claims the program is unique in one or more ways: unique to the campus, to the state, to the nation, to the discipline, etc.	“Our professional writing program draws on the expertise of our nationally-recognized faculty in Rhetoric and this long tradition of excellence in technical and professional communication.”
Appeal to flexibility or variety	Argues that the program readies students for a variety of pursuits, or that the program allows students the flexibility to study or pursue a variety of interests	“Earning an undergraduate or graduate English degree from (UNI) will serve you in any art form, any discipline, any profession.”
Appeal to graduate/professional study	Argues that the program readies students for further graduate study.	“Rhetoric prepares you to pursue graduate school and professional degrees.”
Appeal to practicality	Mentions the practical or useful nature of coursework, often in opposition to just theory. General appeals to applicability.	“The major balances instruction and practical experience, ensuring that you graduate with a substantial portfolio of original work. . .”
Appeal to statistics	Uses numerical or statistical data, such as employment figures from the BLS or university placement.	“96% of writing majors from the classes of 2009-2014 were able to start a degree-required career or were accepted to graduate school within 6 months of graduation”
Appeal to student opportunity	Describes opportunities for students during their tenure at the institution, such as publication in student journals, leadership in student organizations, internships, and scholarships.	“Professional writing students have studied in Tibet, Nepal, New Zealand, Israel, Italy, France, England, Spain, Australia, Portugal, Bosnia, and India.”
Appeal to technocentric values	Appeals to interest in science or technology, preparation for technical work. A specific emphasis on digital or technical skills, being cutting edge or up-to-date, or listing particular digital tools.	“The [rhetoric major] prepares students to thrive in, and contribute to, our information-rich world.”

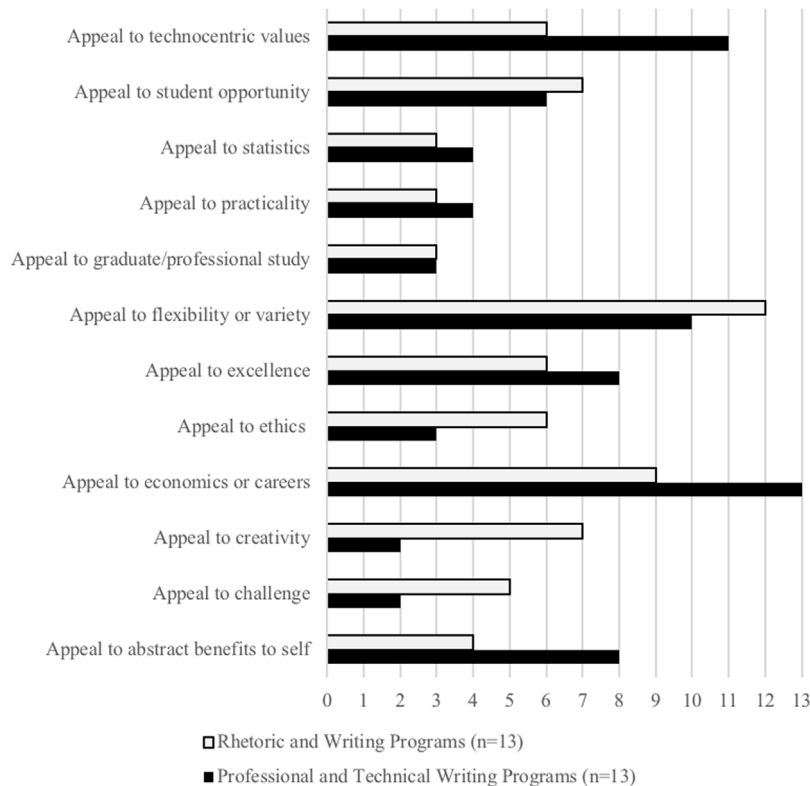


Fig. 1. Appeals on program websites by program type.

These web pages describe an array of values, benefits, or opportunities for students (Table 1). Students are told that the course of study, skills, and experiences in their writing majors will prepare them for a variety of career paths, that their degrees will prepare them to work with technology and compose with digital media to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace. These “Why major in writing” pages also appeal to students’ desire for success and a sense of satisfaction or purpose, their desire to publish, and their interest in social responsibility and serving others with their skills.

As Fig. 1 shows, for the most part, rhetoric and writing programs and professional and technical writing programs rely on similar kinds of appeals to encourage students to join their programs. Appeals to economics or jobs are both common and frequent, with 22 of 26 programs making direct connections to potential student careers, job placement, or preparation for prospective employers (13 PTW programs, 9 RW programs). Statements using this appeal describe benefits to students in terms of career readiness, professional development opportunities, and financial considerations such as salaries. Emphases on being prepared for career and “real world” issues were common themes in first-person testimonials from students and alumni. Eight of the twelve times these pages referred to statistics cooccurred with appeals to economics or jobs, referring either to particular job placements (“93% of Professional Writing graduates in the Class of 2016 are employed within six months of graduating, and of them, 86% are in positions relevant to their career goals”) or to The Bureau of Labor Statistics’ *Occupational Outlook Handbook’s* salary data and expected job growth outlooks. (Only professional and technical writing programs cited *OOH* data). Lists of employers, career paths, and internship organizations appeared with similar frequency on both groups of pages.

Also common is an appeal to flexibility and variety: 22 of 26 programs rely on this appeal (9 PTW programs, 11 RW programs). These statements claim that the program readies students for a variety of pursuits in “nearly any job or industry” or that the program allows students the flexibility to study or pursue a variety of interests “no matter what your professional goals are.” Programs offer students “skills that can take them anywhere” or are prepared for “any art form, any discipline, any profession,” often extolling multiple pathways through the degree, either through specified tracks and certificates or as a result of a great deal of choice in courses, topics, media, internships, or projects. The “flexible,

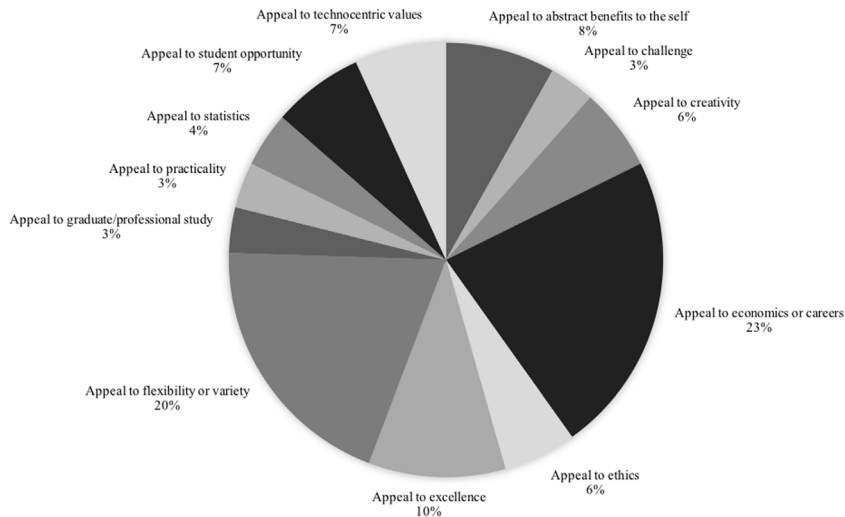


Fig. 2. Relative frequency of appeals for rhetoric and writing studies program pages.

adaptable writers” trope is central to this claim. This appeal often coincides with short discussions of fundamental analytical, writing, or problem-solving skills appropriate for complex, undefined, or developing situations, stressing writing skill as an important *techne* for uncertain or unknown futures. This appeal might be supported with lists of faculty specialties, subdisciplines represented in the program, or lists of courses, noting that students are able to choose the courses, projects, genres, or topics that appeal to them.

While less frequent in rhetoric and writing programs than in professional and technical writing programs, appeals centered around technology are also common, with 17 of 26 programs describing the technologized or mediated nature of the work their students would be prepared to do (11 PTW programs, 6 RW programs). These statements make the case that the writing degree equips students particularly well for information-rich and technology-driven environments: “Technology continues to permeate all aspects of the 21st century work environment; because of this, employers are demanding college graduates who excel at professional communication in digital environments.” These statements might also appeal to student interest or desire to work in science or technology-related fields: “Be that unique person who understands technical or scientific information and can clearly explain it!” Program of both kinds emphasize digital or technical skills, working with graphics and multi- or new media, and being up-to-date for a global information economy.

Appeals citing student’s ability to do creative work, prepare for further graduate or professional training, or promote ethical agendas are much less common in both groups. One page describes the goals of the program as “educating citizens who can think, read, write, and act in robust and significant ways to meet new challenges”, while another says students will “learn to exercise their linguistic skills critically and charitably.” Students may learn about “ethical practice and [. . .] human connection” or desire to “make a difference” in the world, but these descriptions are frequently shorter and less rich in detail than appeals to economics (which may be supported with lists of internships or ideal professions). The adjective “creative” appears 35 times in the entire set of pages, sometimes noting creativity as a problem-solving characteristic students can leverage or describing the nature of problems they might confront as professionals, but more often describing that students might take optional creative writing courses in rhetoric and writing programs. Other, but less-frequently cited reasons to join writing programs include more abstract benefits such as doing what you love or enjoy, or accomplishments such as presenting in undergraduate conferences or publishing and preparedness for future graduate study.

The charts in Figs. 2 and 3 show the relative frequency of appeals within each group. Again, by far the most frequent reasons these program sites say students should major in writing are practical: career preparation and the flexible nature of the program. Professional and technical writing program pages appeal to technology slightly more frequently than rhetoric and writing studies pages, while rhetoric and writing program pages appeal to excellence in the program or faculty more frequently than professional writing pages. Otherwise, the two types of programs are markedly similar in how pages appeal largely to careers and flexibility, and how infrequently other appeals are made.

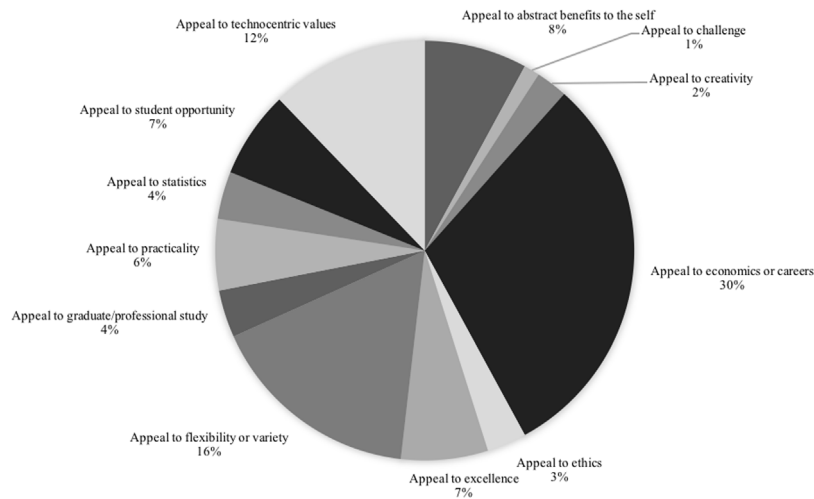


Fig. 3. Relative frequency of appeals for professional and technical writing program pages.

As some of the examples I've mentioned already make clear, few of these appeals occur in isolation; coding by paragraphs enabled me to examine which appeals occurred in combination: a single statement might mix a deeply practical appeal to “learn. . .how to get paid” alongside an appeal to “doing what you love.” The matrix in [Table 2](#) shows how frequently particular pairs of appeals appear in the same paragraph. The most frequent combinations are appeals to career preparation, appeals to flexibility, and appeals invoking technology. The following examples show a familiar combination of appeals to jobs, digital media or technical professions, and flexibility or variety as a virtue:

Studying writing arts increases understanding of the multiple facets of written communication. Through a variety of courses and learning experiences in creative, academic, new media and applied writing, students learn to become flexible, adaptable writers, ready to bring advanced writing, reading and critical thinking skills to the workplace.

Technical writing and communication involves communicating complex information to specific audiences with clarity and accuracy. Technical communicators write, organize, and design information for a variety of workplace settings in business, health, technology, science, environment, and law. Turn your love of writing into a professional career with a technical writing & communication major.

Much less frequent (and often much briefer) are combinations of creativity and other intangible values with career or technology-oriented statements. Phrases like “Turn your love of writing into a professional career with a technical writing & communication major” appear eight times in the entire sample, while nearly every page combines versatility and marketability as values-added for the major. [Table 2](#) also identifies which appeals didn't appear together frequently or at all in the sample. For example, statements mixing appeals to students' sense of creativity appeared with appeals to jobs or economics only appear three times in the entire set of pages; appeals to ethics and morals never appeared alongside appeals to more abstract benefits to the self.

Overall, these “Why major in writing” program website pages encourage students to major in or take courses in their programs using a closely shared set of practical appeals. Though not identical, institutional pages for rhetoric and writing programs and professional and technical writing programs rely on similar kinds of appeals to encourage students to join their programs. Appeals to jobs or economic opportunity, the inherent flexibility of the major, and opportunities to learn and practice technological skills are both common and frequent, and often appear in combination with one another. On the other hand, appeals to students' desires to do creative work, the ethical or social implications of that work, and other abstract self-interested values are less frequent.

Table 2
Co-occurrence matrix of appeals on writing program websites.

	appeal to abstract benefits to self, (Gr = 25)	appeal to challenge (Gr = 7)	appeal to creativity (Gr = 13)	appeal to economics or jobs (Gr = 83)	appeal to ethics or morals (Gr = 13)	appeal to excellence (Gr = 26)	appeal to flexibility or variety (Gr = 56)	appeal to grad/prof school (Gr = 11)	appeal to practicality (Gr = 14)	appeal to statistics (Gr = 12)	appeal to student opportunity (Gr = 21)	appeal to technocentric values (Gr = 30)
appeal to abstract benefits to self (Gr = 25)	–	2	0	8	0	4	3	0	2	1	1	2
appeal to challenge (Gr = 7)	2	–	2	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	1
appeal to creativity (Gr = 13)	0	2	–	3	1	1	8	0	0	0	3	2
appeal to economics or jobs (Gr = 83)	8	1	3	–	1	5	24	6	8	8	6	18
appeal to ethics or morals (Gr = 13)	0	1	1	1	–	0	4	0	0	0	1	2
appeal to excellence (Gr = 26)	4	0	1	5	0	–	5	0	0	2	3	1
appeal to flexibility or variety (Gr = 56)	3	2	8	24	4	5	–	1	2	1	3	9
appeal to grad/prof study (Gr = 11)	0	0	0	6	0	0	1	–	0	2	2	0
appeal to practicality (Gr = 14)	2	1	0	8	0	0	2	0	–	0	1	3
appeal to statistics (Gr = 12)	1	0	0	8	0	2	1	2	0	–	0	1
appeal to student opportunity (Gr = 21)	1	0	3	6	1	3	3	2	1	0	–	1
appeal to technocentric values (Gr = 30)	2	1	2	18	2	1	9	0	3	1	1	–

Hyperpragmatism and dominant narratives on writing program websites

Whether we write them ourselves or not, writing program websites are public digital representations of our programs and the identities and ideologies we are affiliated with. These sites “present a sense of what we value theoretically, pedagogically, and technologically; and, importantly, they are part of how we are assessed in terms of our implementation of these values” (Knight et al., 2009, p. 190). In her 2007 discussion of writing majors as public rhetoric, Rebecca Moore Howard showed how promotional and recruitment materials on university websites relied on rationales “focused almost exclusively on the ways in which students will benefit” (p. 43), in particular arguing that writing majors pair well with other fields and result in economically-satisfying employment. This content analysis shows that the rhetoric of recruitment websites more than ten years later is much the same—if not intensified. The web pages analyzed in this study make their case largely by describing economic benefits, preparation for careers, and the variety of pursuits in which a student might apply their newfound rhetorical skills. These pages also take care to paint writing majors as richly technological courses of study, invoking a variety of media and applications or citing writing studies’ general applicability to digitally-rich 21st century information environments. When appealing to students to join the ranks of undergraduate writing programs, their web pages take a markedly practical, “here’s how it benefits you,” approach.

Furthermore, as the comparative parts of this study make clear, it’s not only professional and technical writing programs that have this focus; programs across the “big tent” of writing studies lean heavily on hyperpragmatism to make a case for the major. One specific conclusion to be drawn from the relative frequency of values and appeals on these web pages is that writing studies programs’ value propositions are put in the same terms as professional and technical writing programs’; a similar argument ought to be made for rhetoric and writing studies programs. While discourse in our scholarly journals presents a “dynamic, stimulating image of the field,” public discourse on our program websites presents a field oriented primarily and seemingly uncritically around pre-professional training (Gordon, 2009, p. 113). And despite an arguably *more* humanist, critical theoretical background than technical communication programs, this data about how majors and programs are promoted to students suggests that writing studies wrestles with being viewed through the same utilitarian perspective. The dominant narrative in both kinds of programs is learn to write well and get a good job.

The careers and technology-focused narrative is not incorrect; neither is it immoral, improper, or simply distasteful—in fact, these arguments are possibly an opportunity to draw in students who might not otherwise choose to study writing. Furthermore, we must certainly make clear that our students will be well-suited to work and live in a competitive and fast-changing digital world. However, in order to make an honest, ethical case for the study and practice of writing we must strike a balance between practical and humanistic cases for our majors. Scholarship in technical communication has documented the tension between developing vocational skills for “professional assimilation and success” and practicing “sustained reflection, critique, or ethical action” according to civic and human goals (Scott et al., 2006, p. 9). Melonçon and Schreiber (2018) noted that programs are obligated to critically engage with corporate interests rather than “pandering” to them (p. 330), arguing that we must view professionalism not simply as a workplace skill but as a practice engaging with ethical and civic goals.

Our institutional web pages go into great detail about the kinds of work students will be prepared to do and the skill sets that will make them effective rhetorical agents in unknown and often-changing situations. Such arguments are useful and can be supported by plenty of evidence, as faculty and administrators who have spent any time trying to market their major to students and parents well know. Students want to know that their course of study will meet their expectations for a college degree, especially in a cultural context where the value of liberal arts and “soft” degrees are regularly debated in reporting on higher education. If the classic “Johnny can’t write” article has provided exigence (however hyperbolic) for many a writing requirement, the contemporary perception that “English majors can’t get jobs” means that we must and should spend time showing that they can and do. But it’s not the only case our programs must make. Despite calls for storytelling and counternarratives that take seriously the multifaceted nature of our disciplines and our programs, the web pages reviewed have a difficult time balancing hyperpragmatic values with a need to make clear to students and other stakeholders that writing programs are homes for “virtuous citizens who ask critical questions for a sustainable democracy” (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018). This is a challenge and rhetorical opportunity we must continue to take up.

Productively balancing rationales

Having described the hyperpragmatic rhetoric of writing studies programs' recruitment websites, and having argued that programs must make a case for the major balancing pragmatic and egalitarian literacy ideologies, in this section I offer four recommendations for productively balancing our rationales as faculty and program administrators think about how to market the major:

- Describe civic and humanistic goals alongside professional and economic benefits
- See university websites, templates, and governance as opportunities, not limitations
- Engage students on their own terms and in direct language
- Present our programs multimodally

Programs should use describe professional benefits alongside civic and humanistic goals. University writing programs must come to terms with themselves and their institutional values. We must both engage with and resist the pragmatics of why students come or are sent to school, why schools have writing programs, how writing programs of their diverse kinds come to be, and what people think they should get out of an education. Placed alongside calls for programs to share counternarratives and describe students not simply as employable cogs in professional wheels, the data presented in this study makes clear that programs must take on work to make ethical, creative, and civic virtues more specific and connect with "higher needs" (Rhodes, 2010). The co-occurrence matrix in [Table 2](#) offers programs with a heuristic for inventing appeals and lines of argument that combine pragmatic values with other virtues. The gaps and low points in the matrix are opportunities for creation: what would a combined appeal to practicality and creativity look like? How might we combine appeals to abstractions like "doing what you love" with ethical and moral imperatives? Can we go beyond simply claiming excellence and show how our students are performing excellently as they graduate from our programs and move into professional or graduate training? None of these appeals appear in combination on the matrix, but each represents a story these websites might tell that places information about employability alongside representations of the discipline being and doing good.

Some of the richest and most vivid descriptions of writing work in this set of pages included statements that encapsulate both pragmatic and cultural values in specific ways. Narratives or lists of ideal professional paths (not just names of internships and careers students have been placed in) can connect social goods, rhetorical skills, exciting technologies, and economic benefits and can help students and other audiences imagine both individual and public benefits more vividly. For example, one compelling web page includes a series of rich descriptions of professional writing careers. Going beyond simply naming potential careers in a bullet list, the program connects social and civic goods (working for non-profits to design social policy) with direct, second-person appeals to creativity ("imagine yourself") and specific, non-jargon sets of skills:

Imagine yourself working for an NGO or other non-profit, drawing on argumentative, research, and social media skills you learned in order to lobby government officials or design social policy.

The following description of the variety of flexible skills and professional situations combines a direct, second-person appeal with plain terminology for concepts like "intercultural communication" or "collaboration" and a focus on helping and working with people.

'You will learn skills that transfer to nearly any job or industry where you might find opportunity knocking. Those skills include:

- o Helping people solve problems by explaining things to them clearly and effectively
- o Communicating with people from all walks of life and from across the world
- o Working in teams
- o Using technology to build understanding'

Through student testimonials, descriptive lists of internships and employers, narratives about the variety of skills, fields, and experiences students will have, and even data about employment, placement, and post-university life for graduates, writing program websites can encourage students to major in writing in specific ways.

Programs should see university websites, templates, and governance as opportunities rather than limitations. Knight et al (2009) read websites as interfaces for programs, the people and institutions that make them up, and the values that underpin them all. Ultimately they asked what writing faculty can do to assert agency in how our sites operate and what they reveal about us in our institutions. Both the institutional cultures in which university websites are developed and delivered and our students' self-perception as consumers of professional training" (Scott, 2004, p. 293) complicate the narratives we would like to tell about ourselves, but in order to ensure that the program's web presence accurately and vividly reflects the ethical and social commitments of the program alongside professional outcomes and practical skills, program administrators and faculty must work *with* rather *than* against university marketing, information technology, and other groups.

One solution to the question of who controls our narrative has been for programs to embrace social media, blogs, and external websites as central components of their web presence. Programs are able to tell their stories in their own way and according to their own expertise, but this practice is not without cost: some programs may not have faculty with the requisite skills or inclination to develop and maintain a web presence, and even in programs that do, web development and content creation is time- and resource-consuming labor that generally does not count towards tenure or promotion. Embracing social media makes even more sense for programs at universities who have moved away from individual department and program pages, using the website primarily to share easily-managed catalog and marketing content, but it may be just those programs that don't have the requisite labor and skill affordances to spend, even if supported through student labor via internships and course projects. Even with so many opportunities via social media, the program website still matters—it still remains as representations of the program in which we can participate. Throwing up one's hands and ignoring the program's web page as an impossible task cedes our institutional digital presence, allowing our discourse to be coopted; working within institutions rather than around them is a much more sustainable future for this kind of work. I strongly reiterate Knight et al's suggestion for programs to engage in dialogue with their institutions about necessary changes and to have "compelling, specific examples of suggested changes" (p. 200). I have constantly been surprised by the flexibility of my own university's template (and staff), and even when a template is inflexible, the content within it can still tell our best stories; the expertise of our universities' technical staff and administrators can help us to do so.

Programs should engage students on their own terms and in direct language. Alongside considering which values we want to promote, writing studies programs and the rhetoricians that work in them must work to break out of insider language and make clearer what we mean by passwords such as "rhetorical skills" and "critical thinking." Mentioning the words ethics and civics and using discipline-specific terms like "rhetoric" or "intercultural communication," isn't enough. "Critical thinkers" is an academic incantation, not a descriptive term. Student testimonials and profiles (whether current students or graduates) can be particularly persuasive and a possible space to make these abstractions more concrete. By including our students' experiences in their own words, programs also ensure students have "a voice in how they are represented" (Knight et al p. 199)

We should also write our content in direct, audience-oriented language using personal pronouns and conversational tone. Personal pronouns, in particular "you," have been found to have strong effects on readers' perceptions of how formal and welcoming web content is (Thayer, Evans, McBride, Queen, & Spyridakis, 2010). Second person pronoun statements such as "You'll be prepared for success in a variety of fields" or "A major or minor in professional writing may be for you if you are interested in writing and editing in the workplace" appeal to students more directly than "Studying writing arts increases understanding of the multiple facets of written communication" or "In addition to the extensive career-focused programs and support offered College-wide, each of [university's] majors feature skill-building hands-on learning opportunities and other major programs that help our students create highly marketable resumes." Appeals putting ethical or humanistic rationales into the second person (such as "You like working with people and helping to make their lives better" or "Imagine yourself. . .") were rare in these web pages, but would allow students to see themselves in these other positions.

Finally, programs should present themselves multimodally. Nearly everything on the pages analyzed in this sample was text. These sites made little use of multimedia to tell specific stories about writing or writing programs; there was a dearth of video, sound, or even much imagery beyond standard university visual messaging like logos and photographs of buildings and landscaping. This goal could be met by something as simple as inviting photographers from the marketing or media arms of the university into our classrooms; there they might meet our goal of showcasing media of our students at their work and representing the institutional space of our program while meeting institutional

goals like consistent brand identity and governance. These can still be a place to showcase student work, podcasts, videos, and other rich content. While social media and easy access to digital publication has enhanced our programs' agency as storytellers in valuable ways, we can still negotiate and contribute to the multimodal aesthetics of the websites that represent us.

Knowing our stories

At my current university, the dean over the liberal arts unit asked for short descriptions of what a “successful student” from departments and programs looked like. These would be more or less elevator pitch-style statements; something the dean could keep in his pocket to talk up programs. At an end-of-year faculty meeting, he revealed (to guffaws in the room) that one program turned in over two pages for their “elevator pitch.” We often don't do a great job of marketing ourselves, often getting uncomfortable with the very language of it—“selling oneself” would seem to be the ultimate shame, much like a music group that becomes too successful and “sells out.” At a recent faculty meeting, some English faculty visibly bristled at an administrative call to describe the major in terms of “marketable skills.” Keith Rhodes argued that writing studies far too often trivializes and misunderstands the marketing activity of “branding” writing with a long-built resistance to thinking of products and markets and selling ourselves (2010). This failure to market is in part a *labor* problem: this kind of often invisible labor takes time and effort but doesn't count towards tenure or promotion. It is furthermore a *rhetorical* problem: breaking out of the theoretical language of the academy is difficult, and making a case for programs we know apply in so many situations is a tough task.

This study has focused on stories told by and about writing programs for students via static web pages on institutional websites; social media plays a larger and more direct role for some programs that wish to promote their programs and share their narratives (or counternarratives, as the case may be). Programs have embraced wikis, blogs, video sharing and social networking sites as places to share their identity and goals with their constituents, their students, and the public. The information collected in this study could be fruitfully replicated with social media, inviting the same questions about what stories we tell, what identifications we create, what audiences we see as most important, and how effectively we engage with them. This study also should raise questions about the labor involved, which student subjectivities are presented and how, and how a program's social media activity relates to other institutional presences, policies, and authorities. We continue to tell our stories, but documenting and improving on the processes and practices we use can help develop a programmatic perspective (Melonçon & Schreiber, 2018) so valuable to sustaining and promoting our varied writing programs.

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None.

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Christopher Andrews is an assistant professor of technical and professional writing in the English program at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. His research explores how technological ideologies and rhetorics inform teaching and programmatic decision-making in writing studies and technical communication, as well as the changing role of digital social networks in online learning. His work has appeared in *Open Words*, *Kairos*, and the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*. He serves as a managing editor at *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*.

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