

## 12. User Experience in the Professional and Technical Writing Major: Pedagogical Approaches and Student Perspectives

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**Abstract:** User experience can serve as a framework for introducing students to the field of professional and technical writing by having them engage in user experience research with current students and alumni of their academic program. Students not only learn to perform this research but also to analyze and assess user experience in light of the broader field's research agenda, as well as reflect on their own relationship to the research. We present a case study of an undergraduate research methods class that asked students to assess user experiences in our professional writing major. We present the pedagogical approach we took to user experience and show how students approached the projects, the challenges and successes of their approaches, what they learned about their major, and finally, how those insights changed the way they approached their education and future careers. A key takeaway is learning about a flexible pedagogical approach to user experience that combines program assessment, introduction of students to the major, development and donor relations, as well as critical reflection on students as users. Perhaps most importantly, this article includes the voices of undergraduates in the professional writing major, both in their roles as users and as user experience researchers.

**Keywords:** user experience, usability, students as users, curricular revision

### **Key Takeaways:**

- User experience can serve as a robust framework for understanding how programmatic experiences can facilitate student engagement with/in a field of study.
- Undergraduate student perspectives have much to teach us about user experience in professional and technical communication curricula and programs.
- Flexible pedagogical approaches to user experience that combine program assessment, introduction of students to the major, development and donor relations, as well as critical reflection on students as users, can help us assess programs successfully.

This chapter explores a central research question for educators of professional and technical writing majors: *How can a program best prepare students for future career*

*opportunities and the skills needed to succeed in those careers?* We argue for user experience as a pedagogical approach for educating students about one university's professional writing major. User experience is often conflated with "usability" in technical communication courses and textbooks; that is, undergraduate students are taught how to assess the usability of a document or project or how to conduct basic research on users or potential users of a product (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016). Much of this pedagogical work at the undergraduate level is accomplished through traditional textbook explanations of methodology or via academic assignments, and it is often presented more simplistically due to the nature of undergraduate education (Chong, 2016; Rose & Tenenberg, 2017).

As Claire Lauer and Eva Brumberger (2016) remind us, "*Usability* focuses on evaluating how well a user can navigate through a variety of tasks that an end product was designed to facilitate" (p. 249). This definition seems to mimic traditional assessment practices in education where students are evaluated on how well they perform a set of tasks which they have been taught how to do (McGovern, 2007). Missing from this model are the interactions and interplay between various factors across a student's experience with a program or major. Usability as a pedagogical application, then, is limited in its ability to capture the entire environment and its influences on student experiences. Likewise, considering usability as a pedagogical approach can seem utilitarian and consumer-driven; students and instructors, in such a model, value the classroom as a place where they can easily extract the appropriate information or skill set to demonstrate success, which translates into a job.

Instead, we argue that user experience (UX) can serve as a more robust framework for understanding how a programmatic experience can facilitate student engagement with/in a field of study. *User experience*, as a concept, attempts to capture all of the aspects embedded in one's experience with an outside entity or situation. As Lauer and Brumberger (2016) remind us, "UX suggests designing for interconnectedness, where tasks and texts no longer exist individually or in a silo, but instead connect across a broad and complex landscape of interfaces and environments" (p. 249). They point out that UX better allows for the possibility that users might react or use information processes and products in unanticipated ways. In this model, UX emphasizes the interactivity of experience across multiple levels, users, processes, and deliverables. UX also incorporates the notion of time, offering a model in which interactivity might happen across and be affected by temporality. Rather than user testing one experience with a product, service, or situation, UX allows for the more complex and dynamic interplay of multiple elements which shapes the user's experience across time and space.

In the model we present here, students engage in UX research with current students and alumni of their own program. Students not only learn to perform this research but also to analyze and assess user experience in light of the broader field's research agenda, as well as reflect on their own relationship to the research. As this article demonstrates, undergraduate student perspectives

have much to teach us about user experience in the professional and technical communication curriculum.

We present a case study of an undergraduate research methods class that asked students to assess user experiences in the professional and technical writing major at Purdue. In teams, we surveyed, interviewed, and visually mapped our large network of alumni, with particular attention to location and job position, as well as surveying current students in the major. We framed much of this work around data visualization methods (Wolfe, 2015), especially in mapping our program's alumni, in order to contextualize the ways in which user experience can also function as “big data” (McNely et al., 2015). We went into the project with the following research question: *How effective is our professional writing curriculum for alumni and students?* As we proceeded through the projects, we nuanced that question of “effectiveness” in terms of various factors, including preparation for jobs and internships, confidence, and connections between curricula and job skills. We produced research reports that assessed and evaluated the data, as well as posters based on our research, and presented them to major stakeholders of the program.

Our chapter outlines the pedagogical approach we took to user experience and then proceeds to show how students approached their projects, the challenges and successes of their approaches, what they learned about their major, and finally, how those insights changed the way they approached their education and future careers. We conclude with plans for how we can use the information for curricular (re) design, and suggest ways for how we might continue having students and faculty collaborate in classrooms on user experience research to continue to both educate students and develop curricula. A key takeaway for readers is learning about a flexible pedagogical approach to user experience that combines program assessment, introduction of students to the major, development and donor relations, as well as critical reflection on students as users. Perhaps most importantly, this article is co-written by undergraduates in the professional and technical writing major, demonstrating their roles as users and as user experience researchers.

## ■ User-Centered Research and the Undergraduate Major

As this volume and prior research illuminates, there is no one consensus on how we are to approach the concept of “user experience” in professional and technical writing (Lallemand et al., 2015). Building from traditional usability testing that seeks to make products usable and user-friendly (Nielsen, 1994), as well as user-centered design, which centralizes the user in a product development cycle (Still & Crane, 2017), user experience encompasses the entire exploration of motivations, experiences, needs, and affordances of users (Pucillo & Cascini, 2014). As Liza Potts (2015) has noted, UX can also extend to what she calls experience architecture:

an emerging practice, one that draws together issues of information design, information architecture, interaction design,

and usability studies to assess and build products, services, and processes. The outcomes of a well-architected system include systems, interfaces, and policies that support participation, growth, and sustainability—in other words, building experiences that are focused on human experience. (p. 256)

When we develop a major or concentration, we are creating an experience for students. We want students to proceed through a program and not only learn concepts, theories, and approaches, but also to develop a sense of themselves as future professionals entering a community of practice. These students will also be “products” of a program and its approaches, much like we see doctoral students as products of a particular program, with particular strengths and ways of seeing the world. They will be part of the larger community of practitioners, but also part of an alumni network. Thus, it is not just a matter of teaching students professional and technical writing theories, approaches, and genres, but constructing a program as experience is also about teaching students to inhabit an identity that distinguishes them as alumni of its program, as well as part of a larger community of practice that is the field.

Engineering an experience for students that cultivates membership in academic, alumni, and practitioner communities requires attention to students as users of and in the academic program. There has been extensive research on user-centered design, usability, and the user experience in professional and technical writing, but we have found less attention to how we are to understand students as “users” in an undergraduate major. Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann Powers (2007) argue for seeing students as users in order to develop strong online instruction. Other scholars have followed to consider the “student as user” perspective in online educational environments (Bartolotta et al., 2017; Blythe, 2001). Felicia Chong (2016) uses the lenses of usability and user-centered design to consider technical communication textbooks and syllabi. More recently, Joseph Bartolotta et al.’s (2018) special issue of *Computers & Composition* on user-centered design and usability in the composition classroom embraces and complicates the idea of seeing students as users in writing classrooms. Natasha Jones (2018) argues for seeing students as expert end users of pedagogical products such as syllabi, and that, as such, we need to consider their needs in composing classroom charter documents. Dawn Opel and Jacqueline Rhodes (2018), though, caution us in adopting the language of efficiency and expediency inherent to some UX work, which can posit education as an ecology of currency and exchange rather than one of learning. Perhaps as mediators between these two positions, Shivers-McNair et al. (2018) describe an instructor and students’ case study of how they used user-centered design in the classroom. Such a collaboration demonstrates how students are both learners and users simultaneously; as such, students can occupy multiple different positions and perspectives as they move throughout a program or curriculum.

One approach we might take is thinking about specific sites or courses as micro-testing grounds to gauge the experiences of a program's students and/or alumni. In a sense, this approach relies on what we might term "*programmatically UX*," or taking the temperature of users at a specific moment and in a particular context. Programmatic UX could be one way to iteratively research, test, and refine particular aspects of a program's user experience. In what follows, we present a case study of one attempt to test the user experience of an academic program as it is defined by the students in the major. Because students are both users and experts in a program, they occupy an important space in which they can reflect on how useful the program is currently to them, as well as be able to investigate its use by other stakeholders. At the same time, they are still learning and so need to learn methods of assessing usability and user experience. This case study demonstrates how students learned user experience research methods while they simultaneously functioned as users of a program, providing a unique snapshot of their reflections as user-learners in the program. In what follows, each co-author discusses contributions and experiences in the class as co-constructors and co-authors of the research. This project was approved as exempt by Purdue's Institutional Review Board under number IRB 2019-2011.

## ■ A Case Study on Curricular User Experience

One of the key courses in our professional and technical writing major is English 203: Introduction to Research for Professional Writers. It is a methods course that introduces students to key approaches to conducting and analyzing research in the field, such as literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and usability testing, as well as newer approaches such as photovoice, data visualization, and storytelling methods. Jenny teaches this course regularly on a yearly basis and generally uses service-learning pedagogy to organize the course projects. However, she has observed that based on graduating senior perspectives in capstone courses, recent graduates of the major possess less knowledge of career trajectories and larger trends in the field. Part of this issue may result from institutional constraints that have affected course offerings and staffing. In recent years, full-time faculty positions have not been re-advertised when faculty have left, leaving the program down faculty. Likewise, many faculty are tasked with administrative appointments that leave less time for teaching in the major, resulting in more graduate students teaching major courses. Often those instructors will only teach a course once before turning it over to another graduate student to teach. While these graduate students are excellent teachers and scholars, they have little experience in or knowledge of the major and the needs of students. Most of their prior teaching experiences have been in business and technical writing service courses. And graduate students often do not have the institutional history or longevity to make a sustained impact on the program.

The turnover in instructors for our core courses, as well as the lack of faculty teaching the major, resulted in students who were not quite knowledgeable about their career possibilities, the affordances of the major, and the kinds of work they may want to pursue post-graduation. But also compounding this issue was a lack of institutional research on our alumni, such as where they are located, the kinds of positions they pursued, and the connection between degree and career. Unlike programs such as engineering or computer science, the professional and technical writing program at our university does not have dedicated staff to collect and maintain data on our alumni (in fact, as a humorous aside, when Jenny requested data on our professional writing alumni from the university development office, she received a list of alumni from the creative writing major instead). She realized that without understanding the prior experiences of alumni, it would be difficult to design a better experience for current students.

Based on these exigencies, Jenny decided to take a user-centered approach to the course and have students investigate the varied experiences of professional and technical writers, including those of alumni, current students, and even writers who did not graduate from the program. Students in the course would help design their own learning by conducting research based on their own questions, needs, and understandings. Taking this user-centered approach required that we also learn about core competencies in the broader field of professional and technical writing, how those competencies have evolved over time, and emerging competencies that alumni might be expected to learn. Jenny constructed a series of readings, assignments, and projects that allowed students in the course to see themselves as “users” of the major’s knowledge, courses, and professional development, but also to conduct research on alumni and peers as “users.” In short, the assignments and projects asked the students to analyze various user experiences of the major over time.

As the instructor and developer of this approach, Jenny wondered how well this would work since, in one sense, she was having users work with other users. That is, these various stakeholders, while all users in one sense, occupied different vantage points and perspectives. Jenny hoped that they would each learn from each other to answer questions such as the following: What would it mean to see students as “users” of the major? Were they users of knowledge learned from the major? Users of theories from courses? Or users of their degree from Purdue? What were the experiences of students in the major, both during their coursework and looking back as alumni? In short, what were the parameters of user experience as defined by students and alumni?

## ■ UX Research Projects

Jenny developed a scaffolded approach where assignments were integrated with and dependent on one another to enhance student learning. Students would have

a subject matter experts project that was ongoing throughout the semester, a few traditional secondary research projects that would provide them with background research and understandings, and larger, more complex projects that engaged with the user experience of the program at multiple levels.

## ■ Background Research Projects

Students read key articles that both enacted the research methods we would discuss and also reported on research outlining core competencies and emerging areas in professional and technical writing. Students would produce two different short reports: one highlighting a core competency in a specific career position or subfield and a second on an emerging area in professional and technical writing. These two assignments were very traditional in the sense that formal, researched reports would be a standard, expected genre in many research methods courses. The difference in this case is that the two areas—core competencies and emerging areas—would serve as background theories for the remaining work for the course.

## ■ Research Training

As part of their preparation for this project, students completed CITI training that would prepare them to interact with human participants and data in ethical ways. While none of the work students completed could be considered true research contributing to general knowledge, all survey instruments were anonymous, and in collecting data on alumni, students only relied on publicly available information online. Similarly, the information collected is being used programmatically and internally to help shape curricula and student user experiences. Thus, while we present some of the results here, we emphasize more of the process and learning about the various user experiences of our program.

## ■ Subject Matter Experts Project

An ongoing project for the course was the subject matter experts project. Throughout the semester, students conducted informational interviews with alumni from our program either in person or via Skype. The assumption behind this assignment is that one of the best ways to discover information about a profession, career, or field of study is via an informational interview with a subject matter expert in that field. An *informational interview* is an interview with a professional in order to discover information about their field of work or study (Decarie, 2010; Mulvaney, 2003) and is often conducted with an employee of a company, agency, or organization. The informational interviewer is not seeking a job but is seeking to discover more information about how that person became a professional in that field of work.



Jenny approached this project from a user-centered perspective: rather than pre-selecting alumni for the students to interview, students were allowed to vote on five alumni from the program's LinkedIn alumni group. Students in the course joined the LinkedIn alumni group, which brought them into a community of practice and situated them along with other alumni as users in the program; they then reviewed member profiles to find professionals with interesting profiles or backgrounds. Jenny asked students to select one of those alumni to serve as a subject matter expert who would be interviewed by the class. Students had to consider the potential speaker's background, career trajectory, experiences, field of study, positions held, educational background, etc. Students also provided possible questions which were used to collaboratively develop a list of questions to ask each speaker. After choosing alumni, Jenny created a Google survey to allow students to vote on their choice of subject matter experts to invite to class, and Jenny invited the top five alumni.

One programmatic illumination from this project was that the LinkedIn alumni group is a self-selected group, meaning that members were not necessarily alumni of our specific professional writing program. Almost all of the members were alumni from Purdue, but they may have earned different degrees and were working as professional or technical writers. Thus, some of these users were not necessarily users of the program but were users in the field, which provided a rich set of perspectives. For instance, one subject matter expert (SME) was an alumnus of a graduate program in the College of Agriculture but worked as a technical writer in Silicon Valley to support his family. He had no knowledge of technical writing before taking the job, so his user experience was in the field. What the diversity of group members showed was that members identified themselves in terms of their careers first and their majors/education second. They saw professional and technical writing less as a field of study and more as a career trajectory that was not necessarily connected to an academic program. In thinking of program assessment, then, career preparation as a category of assessment might need to be more nuanced.

Also of note is that the instructor, Jenny, did not vote on the subject matter experts, which allowed students in the class to really pursue their own interests, agendas, and backgrounds. These choices provided the instructor with interesting perspectives on student user interests. At times, Jenny was unsure whether these alumni were really the "best" choices, but what became apparent is that taking a user-centered approach requires respecting those user choices and decisions as valid ones. As Lauer and Brumberger (2016) note, UX allows for unexpected understandings and uses of information products. It may be that students in the course wanted a more well-rounded approach to the major than just a specific educational or academic path. After each interview, students were asked to write up a short report on the interview and their thoughts and observations. Margaret noted, for instance, that the importance of being a



lifelong learner seemed to be a theme throughout the SME speakers, as they all touched on it at some level in their talks. The idea of continuous learning is probably one of the biggest take-aways she had because it has been brought up again and again. After hearing one of the speakers who did freelance work, Brendan wondered how many technical writers are freelancers and if this is a viable career option for someone who has worked in the industry for about ten years. Emily also observed that most of the speakers had taken time to work or gain another experience before going back to graduate school. She had never met anyone who had done this before the interviews with the speakers for this class, and is considering this option for herself.

As students reflected, they recognized that college students often have difficulty identifying exactly what career they want to have. In fact, this is a source of stress for many during their entire college careers. The subject matter experts who came to talk to our class were more than helpful, setting students' minds at ease. The experts may have had different careers, but they each assured students that they would have a multitude of options for when they graduate from college. The main advice that each expert gave was clear: no employer expects a new employee to be perfect. The speakers reiterated that it is not necessary to know exactly what to do the first day on the job, and no employer should expect that from them. Asking questions and actively looking for information is encouraged in order to show an employer how eager new employees are to learn. New experiences and opportunities are daunting; however, being open to these experiences will be beneficial at a new job. The experts assured students that a new job should not be something that frightens them. No matter what career they would end up pursuing, the environment and work should never be something that scares students. The variety of careers the speakers discussed led students to feel that they could be open and versatile in the current job market.

Another important takeaway from the subject matter experts' experiences was that it is crucial to form connections. Many speakers discussed the processes that they had undergone while applying for their jobs and how the connections they had formed led them to their current position. Finally, Margaret noted specifically that by allowing students to choose the alumni they wanted to hear from, our professor was encouraging the class to take an active role in the formation of the course outcomes. Margaret noted that she gained more from the course due to this active involvement in comparison to courses where the course outcomes were prescribed.

As you can see, students were able to use these interviews to enhance and nuance their alumni projects by better understanding perspectives they had not previously considered and incorporating that data into their other projects in the course. Moreover, they developed more confidence in how they might be able to approach the larger projects, as well as their work in the major. Assessment in this context might take into account more than the ability to get a job in the field and consider lifelong skills of learning and adaptation as what allows individuals to achieve success.

## ■ Alumni Project

Halfway through the semester, students were tasked with creating a proposal for a research project that asked students to discover more about alumni who had graduated from the undergraduate program. The outcome of this project was multifold: to discover career pathways and possible life trajectories, to learn more about how alumni specifically used their degrees or the knowledge they gained from the program, and to develop a stronger alumni network that students could leverage and learn from as they progressed in the program. Moreover, Jenny hoped to use this information to redesign or adjust the program, if needed. Students were asked to make multiple decisions for this project: to propose who to survey and why; to identify how to contact them or find their data; to choose and design the format of the survey; to determine what questions to ask, how to encourage responses, how to collect and analyze the data, and how to display the data; and, finally, to decide what conclusions to draw. Each team submitted a proposal on what or who should be surveyed, why that population, how to access the population, what questions would be asked, what roles and responsibilities students would have on the team, and what timeline would be followed to complete the work. Later, each team submitted a data collection instrument that would be used, along with any other documentation needed. Finally, students completed a final report on the results of their research.

Students brainstormed possible projects in class and divided into groups based on different research interests. Three groups were formed, each with a different focus relating to the program itself. One group decided to create a database of alumni with information such as email addresses, current locations, job titles, and current employers. A second group wanted to create and distribute a survey to current students in the program since they were key stakeholders in the program. The third group authored a survey sent out to recent alumni on the LinkedIn alumni group. Of interest was the second group's work with current students, which was a bit outside of the boundaries of the project; they saw the need to start collecting information and networking with current students *before* they become alumni. This approach clearly came from the user experiences of the students themselves, who may have wanted to feel more connected to the program earlier in the major.

After students worked on their research and analysis, they had a chance to present their results to faculty members within the major. Students prepared posters that outlined their research methods and results, and presented them to members of the professional writing program, as well as other stakeholders such as alumni relations. The key outcome of this project was for students to discover innovative ways to present data visually to non-users of the program.

The following sections contain more details from students on how they conceived, executed, and learned from these projects. Results from two of the three projects are represented here, as the authors were directly involved in

them. What we hope comes through is how these students learned by researching the user experience of their own major rather than just traditional pedagogies of research methods.

## ■ Understanding the User Experience of Current Students

The work students did as a team to interpret feedback from current professional writing students was eye-opening. Brendan, Emily, Korbyn, and Ashlie's project was focused on obtaining more information about current students in the major and using the feedback provided in order to understand how to make the program more functional and worthwhile for students. The research these students performed was also beneficial to them as students of the program since the information they collected increased the awareness of the students around them. They felt that it was strange that there was no prior research into the students in the professional writing program because they assumed that the program would know everything about the students and alumni. The team decided to send out a survey in order to obtain the answers to their questions. That process in itself was something with which the group had little previous experience. The time and planning that went into creating the survey was something that they hadn't considered to be difficult, but turned out to be quite demanding. To understand how to create an effective survey, the team researched and spent time attempting to gather as much data as possible. They needed to create a survey which was unbiased, yet still asked specific questions to collect the desired feedback. The trouble was related to leading questions, as the team did not want to affect the responses they received with the framing of the prompts. Part of this issue might have been because the students themselves belonged to the population being studied. Appendix A shows the final survey questions the team developed, some of which were prompted by the articles read for class and the SME interviews. Appendix B outlines some of the results of the survey that the team articulated in their final report.

The team presented the results of their survey to the program faculty, both orally and visually (see Figure 12.1). The presentation occurred during an interactive poster session with stakeholders of the program, including faculty, development officers, and undergraduate and graduate students. It allowed the team to provide information about current students and their expectations for the program from students themselves. It also enabled staff and faculty to consider what it was that current students wanted to receive from courses related to professional writing. Since no other data had been collected about student wants and needs, it was not hard to identify where the program could improve in the eyes of the students. Most notably from the presentation, students did not feel as prepared for after graduation as they would have liked, which reinforces what emerged from the SME project: students may need a more explicit focus on self-efficacy and adaptation.

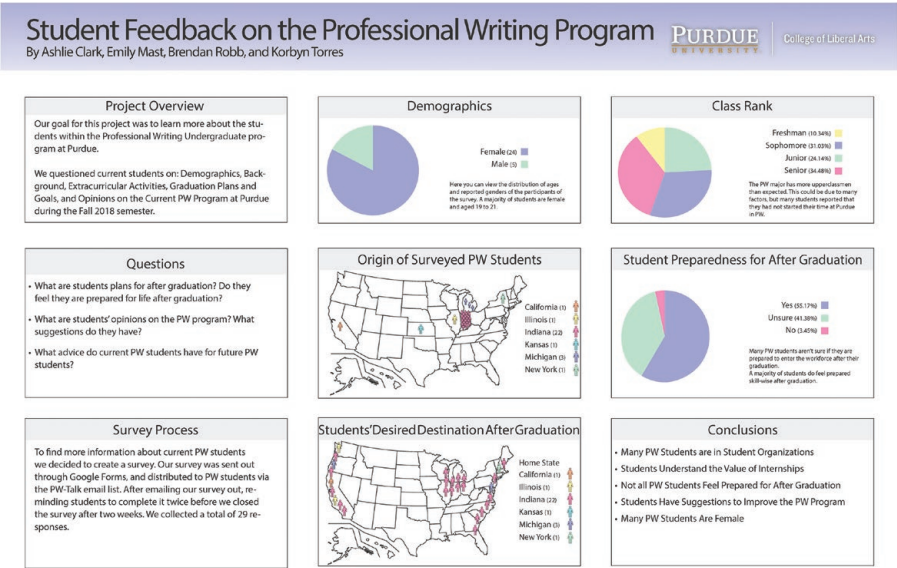


Figure 12.1. Current student research project poster.

## ■ Alumni Data Visualization Project

For this project, Margaret's team compiled existing data points on the program's alumni into a single database. The purpose of the project was to create a database that could be updated periodically to produce graphs and charts on professional writing program students and alumni. For example, one of the graphics that was produced from this database is a map of the geographical locations of our alumni which shows the diversity of their job locations (see Figure 12.2).

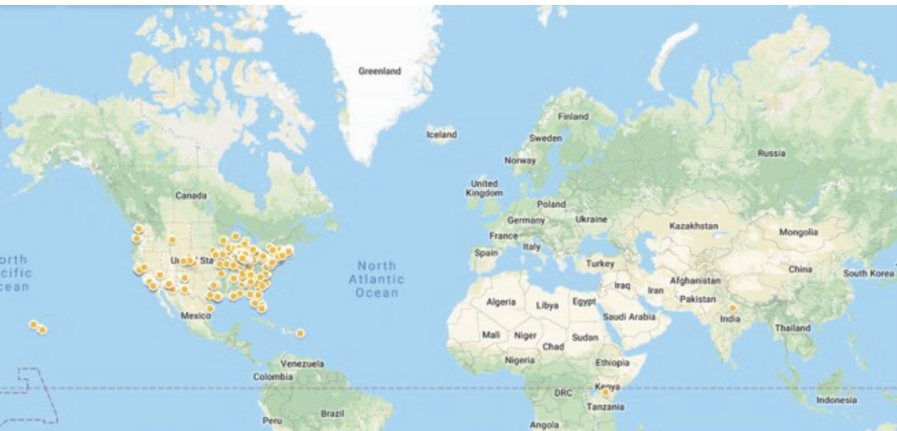


Figure 12.2. Google map of professional writing alumni locations.

The method used to collect this data unfolded as the team worked on the project since it was difficult to collect data from scratch. Data on alumni of the professional writing program was collected through multiple outlets and was stored in a Google Sheets file. First, data was gathered from the Purdue Professional Writing Group on LinkedIn by sorting through the group members for graduates of the program. Many members of the group were not professional writing alumni and thus were not added to the database. The team looked at connections to our faculty in the program, as well as other alumni for more names to add to the database. A final data source was the PW-Talk email list, which is a listserv for current students and alumni of the program. In all, students collected data for over 300 program alumni.

For each alum added to the database, the following information was obtained: name, job title, location, graduation year, and whether or not they attended graduate school. The team decided on these categories based on some of the SME speakers and the fact that some alumni had continued on in the graduate program at Purdue. If any of the information was not available, the field was marked with “n/a.” In order to discover some of this information, the team had to do the difficult work of googling the names of these alumni to see who they could find. One challenge was finding information for alumni who graduated before 2000, as many of these alumni had no online presence or had changed career trajectories, making them difficult to find.

The resulting data set was used to create visual graphics, including a word cloud graphic of job titles (see Figure 12.3), as well as pie charts and graphs displayed in a poster for the final presentation to stakeholders. The most valuable aspect of this project for Margaret was creating something that would be used for purposes beyond turning it in for a grade. Beyond creating the poster displaying the results of the project to members of the English department, the team was able to share the database with the administration of the professional writing program for them to use for their own purposes. For Margaret, this type of “service learning” is the most beneficial because it combines the learning process with applications outside of the classroom. Throughout the project development, Margaret reported more enthusiasm for this project in comparison to others completed in the past because the end product would be used to inform others rather than simply to be turned in for a final grade.

## ■ Conclusions

Several common threads of the user experience emerge from these project reflections, which we didn’t realize until writing this chapter. The first is that user experience in the professional writing major includes more than just academic or career preparation; rather, it also includes life preparation. As Ashlie notes, the UX approach of the class led her to become more aware and understanding of other human beings with whom she interacts. Likewise, there was a consen-



sus that the subject matter experts reinforced that everyone is human; we all make mistakes and are still learning while on the job. There was an awareness of work-life balance and that one's career may take them to unexpected places, both geographically and careerwise, which is reflected in the mapping of our alumni.

Another interesting learning moment on the part of students was that large institutions do not always practice good data collection and management. That is, in contrast to companies, universities do not always track their “users” or assess their user experiences in holistic ways. Some of this is due to privacy concerns and educational rights, but it might also be due to the lack of a culture of user experience assessment throughout a degree program or major. Thus, the UX approach of the class meant compiling information not only for student projects and grades, but for the program as a whole. Students believed that the program administrators could use the information gleaned from the survey to help structure the program and its curriculum to something that the students could be proud of by the time they graduate.

A final conclusion is that this particular UX approach treats users as value co-creators of the program. Keshab Acharya (2017) notes that to understand how value is created, we need to “look at the interactive relationships between the product, the designer, and the end-user” (p. 30). *User value*, then, is a result of a dialogue or interaction between multiple elements. In this sense, the UX approach of the class engaged students as value co-creators of the program. By better understanding the program, its stakeholders, and its position in the larger field of work and study, students, as users, helped create value in the program, for themselves, as well as the stakeholders engaging in their projects.



Figure 12.3. Word cloud of alumni job titles.

These conclusions led us to see how programmatic assessment does not necessarily need to occur from the outside looking in; rather, perhaps students can be the most lucid assessors of our programs. Students, as users, can provide rich reflections on the value of a program and where that program can be strengthened. What we learned from this experience was that assessing a program needs to take into consideration the metrics and voices of those most impacted: students and alumni.

## ■ Future Directions

Based on the results of this approach, it's clear that the user experience research conducted by these students will create better ways to assess student experiences of the major as well as track alumni. One of the first steps is meeting individually with all of the students in the major to get a better sense of their experiences, needs, and career plans. While university academic advisors can meet with students, these advisors are not in the program and do not have backgrounds in professional writing. Using a modified version of the survey will also provide consistency across the program. Meeting individually with students will help build the foundations for networking needed to sustain strong programmatic user experiences.

After completing these meetings with students, some sort of method for assessing the program when students graduate will be developed, along with a follow-up for students after graduation. Jenny plans to engage current students and classes to continue participating in this evaluation of user experience so there can be a reciprocal and iterative process for understanding the user experiences of the program, as well as continue to teach students how to research and respond to user experience as a methodological approach. We also plan to collect information from students in our capstone courses and encourage them to connect to faculty and other students via social networking tools like LinkedIn. Finally, the program just updated its plan of study for the major to make the requirements more explicit to students. What we realized from this holistic assessment of understanding user experience is that current students and alumni did not always understand the program and its possible trajectories. Updating the plan of study allows us to make the possible tracks in the major more explicit in the hopes that it can guide students toward possible futures. We hope that such pedagogical approaches to researching user experience in the major can continue to strengthen our network of alumni, the program, and its plan of study, as well as the learning capacity and humanity of our students.

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## Appendix A: Survey to Current Professional Writing Students

Hello! Purdue undergraduate students in English 203, Introduction to Research for Professional Writers, are conducting an informal survey of the current

Professional Writing students to learn more about the backgrounds and career goals of students in the major and minor. This survey will take between 5-10 minutes. You are not required to complete this survey. If you have any questions feel free to contact us. Thank you for participating in this survey.

\* Required

1. What is/are you major(s)? \*
2. What is/are your minor(s)? \*
3. What is your class rank (by credits)? \*
  - ☐ Freshman
  - ☐ Sophomore
  - ☐ Junior
  - ☐ Senior
  - ☐ Other:
4. Please enter your expected year and semester of graduation \*
5. Are you a transfer student? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
6. Did you start Purdue as a Professional Writing major? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
7. Why did you choose Professional Writing at Purdue?
8. Are you involved in any student organizations? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
9. If so, what are they?
10. Do you currently have an internship? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
11. Do you plan on applying for any internships? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ Maybe
12. If you have participated in an internship, what advice would you to give someone pursuing internships?
13. What is your goal for after graduation?
14. Do you feel your degree is preparing you for the path you want to pursue? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ Unsure
15. List three skills you think are going to be the most valuable to you after graduation.

16. Do you have any job prospects/graduate school admission offers lined up? \*
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ N/A
17. What area of the country/world are you hoping to live/work in after graduation?
18. Do you have any recommendations for students to be successful in the program?
19. If you could make any suggestions for the Purdue Professional Writing program, what would they be?
20. Age
21. Gender
22. What is/are your racial/ethnic background(s)?
23. Where are you from? (State/Country)

## ■ Appendix B: Survey Results

We asked a total of 23 questions in our survey on current students within the undergraduate major and received 29 responses. Within our questions, 11 were required, while 12 were voluntary-response. We began by having participants provide their major(s) and minor(s). All respondents were professional writing majors, except for one student who was an aeronautical engineering technology major with a professional writing minor. Seven of the 29 respondents had double majors. Students minored in a variety of topics, and in total, there were 24 different minors reported. Of the 29 respondents 16 had more than one minor. Overall, there were limited amounts of like minors between students. Communication minors were the most frequently reported as there were six students with this minor. There were three students minoring in Spanish, film/video studies, history, or creative writing. There were two students who were professional writing minors.

Next, participants selected their class rank. The majority of respondents were seniors, with sophomores being the next most populated group. The dominance of seniors and sophomores in the major was reflected when participants provided their expected semester of graduation. The majority of participants were expecting to graduate in either Spring 2019 or Spring 2021.

Participants reported whether they were transfer students and whether they began their time at Purdue as a professional writing major. Three of the respondents indicated that they were transfer students, and more than half of participants responded that they did not start at Purdue as a professional writing major.

The first non-required fill-in-the-blank question, "Why did you choose Professional Writing at Purdue?" resulted in 27 responses. Overall, participants explained that professional writing was a practical degree for their future plans. Many participants expressed their interest in English and writing, believing that

professional writing is a major that allows them to continue on their career path while still being marketable.

Overall, 21 of the respondents were involved in student organizations. Everyone who answered “yes” to being involved in a student organization provided the organization(s) they were a part of in the following question. Many of the organizations did not overlap, but five students reported their involvement with the PWA, a student organization specific to professional writing majors.

Out of all the respondents, 23 did not currently have internships, but when asked if they planned on applying, 18 responded positively. Although only six participants had an internship at the time, we received 13 responses when asked what advice they’d give to someone pursuing an internship. Overall, participants advised to apply to both a large variety of different internships as well as looking broadly. One notable response was:

Apply early. Give yourself grace. It is okay to be frustrated—sometimes people and organizations take on interns that they don’t really know what to do with. It’s frustrating but embrace it and try to continue making content.

Each person who provided their goal after graduation had their own unique plan. Of all the respondents, 23 hope to obtain a job and six intend to go on to graduate school. For those that hope to enter the job market, some notable careers include publishing, editing, technical writing, or something purely technical. Still others simply hope to obtain a job after graduation.

Only one participant did not believe that their degree was preparing them for their future career. Overall, participants were confident that they were being successfully trained for their goals, but 12 respondents were unsure if their schooling would actually provide the tools they need for their future careers. Every participant except one provided three skills they perceived to be most valuable after graduation. Skills in writing and communication were the most frequently reported skills with 12 and 11 responses respectively. Design skills was said seven times, editing and research both six times, and teamwork five.

Although many participants were seniors, only four of ten had job prospects lined up for after they graduate. All 28 respondents to this question were drawn to working somewhere in the United States. Most responses were either places on the east or west coasts. However, five respondents wish to stay in the Midwest.

Twenty-one participants gave recommendations to their fellow professional writing majors. One student urged others to

Participate. This is an English degree, and nothing is harder than trying to have a conversation about a reading and no one wants to participate. You’ll learn so much more from a discussion than the professor telling you what something means. Your ideas are valid.

Some explained that hard work is beneficial, while others urged others to pursue classes outside the English department.

When asked if they had any suggestions for the program, 19 participants responded with some advice. Many suggested a change to the curriculum to teach what they called “hard skills.” They feared the degree focused more on abstracts than technical skills. Others wanted to see the department advertised more.

Lastly, we asked for age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and origin. Of the respondents, females dominated the major. Only five males in total responded to the survey. A vast majority of respondents identify as Caucasian, four reported they identified as Hispanic and two identified as Native American. The age of professional writing majors ranges from 16 to 23. Ten participants were 19. When prompted with their home state, 22 respondents said they were from Indiana.