Comments of External Reviewer
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Overall, the English Graduate Program at Texas Tech University is a strong and effective program, one that is generally meeting the needs of its graduate students by providing them with a strong academic curriculum that prepares them well for their professional lives. It is an effectively designed, effectively directed, and effectively implemented graduate program. The technical communication graduate program—both the MA component (MATC) and the PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR)—is a nationally prominent program, clearly an excellent program that enhances the reputation of Texas Tech University as a leading research university. It has long been recognized as one of the premier programs of its type in the USA; its faculty are nationally known as leading researchers; its students enjoy strong placements in both industry and academia. The online MATC/TCR online program has also emerged as an important, cutting-edge program, but even before the online program came into being the technical communication program at Texas Tech University had an excellent reputation in the field of rhetoric and technical communication. The English MA/PhD program is doing a good job of serving a regional mission, with its particular identity being the preparation of students for employment in teaching positions in smaller colleges, universities, and community colleges within the State of Texas. All elements of the program seem to be serving their constituencies well, given their respective missions. Clearly the faculty as a whole take their graduate stewardship responsibilities very seriously and are committed to the welfare of graduate students in the Department.

Below I offer my comments, criticisms, observations, and suggestions about the graduate program overall. These remarks should be understood as offered within the framework of an overall positive evaluation. My findings indicate that this is an effective graduate program whose faculty are deeply committed to graduate education and whose students appreciate the value and contribution of the program to their professional formation. As with any English graduate program, there are tensions—between faculty in different specializations, between competing program priorities, between different degree programs, and between established and emergent views of the discipline—and there are always deep resource issues. Most English graduate programs across the country are experiencing tensions between “literature” and “composition”—and have been for some time. (Note: Within the English Department at Texas Tech, “literature” can be taken as shorthand for English and Creative Writing degree programs and faculty specializing in those areas, while “composition” refers to rhetoric/composition faculty, to technical communication faculty, and to the MATC and TCR graduate programs.) The disciplinary tensions evident within the Texas Tech University English Graduate Program are not unusual; however, they may be slightly more discordant than is typical. The ICON/TOPIC approach to first-year composition has clearly increased tension within the Department and created a public (national) controversy. I do not intend to comment on the validity or effectiveness of the ICON/TOPIC approach to composition, as it is not within the purview of my review to do
so. However, this tension does manifest itself in the graduate program, as GPTIs teach within the FY composition program. The tension is not likely to go away anytime soon, and it cannot be ignored. These tensions within the Department overall, and as circulating around the ICON/TOPIC controversy, do affect graduate education and do need to be addressed if the graduate program is to continue to thrive.

FACULTY
The single greatest intellectual asset of the Department is its younger faculty—its untenured assistant professors. The Department has done an excellent job in its recent hiring and has built an impressive cadre of younger faculty across all areas of the Department. This cohort already has an impressive publication record. However, I see two problems in regards to this cohort: (a) Several excellent untenured faculty have already come and gone in recent years. The Department seems to have difficulty keeping the excellent hires that it makes—particularly in technical communication and technorhetoric, where job opportunities (and 2-2 teaching loads) are widely available nationwide. (b) The ratio of untenured assistant professors to senior faculty is unusually high—and this will put considerable burden on the senior faculty to provide mentoring, to serve on tenure/promotion review committees, and so on. The positive side of this development is the tremendous intellectual energy that this group of younger faculty is likely to generate. I would encourage the Department to do everything it can to support these faculty, particularly in terms of reducing their teaching loads, allowing them to contribute to curriculum development, and encouraging their participation in the governance of the Department. Their areas of expertise represent the future of the Department—and it could be a very promising future.

Lack of racial diversity—in both faculty and graduate students—is a critical issue facing this program. I was glad to see that the Department’s Strategic Plan offers a plan for encouraging diversity in the Department overall. However, the plan does not go quite far enough to address the the problem. In my experience, it is difficult for a program to recruit a racially diverse student population unless (a) the faculty is racially diverse, and (b) the curriculum makes racial and ethnic identity a priority in the curriculum. The problem in the field of technical communication generally (and also in the field of computers and composition, or technorhetoric) is that racial identity has never been viewed as a key topic in the field—and until the field understands how race does matter as a key topic, and how cultural rhetoric plays a critical role in technical communication, it is unlikely that the field will attract faculty or students from underrepresented groups. My key recommendations to the program are these: (a) Hire faculty from underrepresented groups in the area of rhetoric and technical communication, but also, in conjunction with this, (b) develop courses in the curriculum that makes it clear that racial/ethnic identity, cultural rhetoric, and cultural studies are key topics for this field. (An example of such a course might be one on literacy and technology access that merges technorhetoric with the study of how underrepresented groups view and use technology.) Given its location in West Texas, this program should focus on recruiting Latino/a faculty and graduate students. The opportunity exists for developing a distinctive concentration in this area, if the faculty are willing to commit to it.
If the MATC/TCR program plans to increase enrollments, it will need more faculty to do so—or risk putting an undue burden on untenured assistant professors. I would encourage the program to approach this question of increasing enrollment cautiously, particularly with an eye toward faculty workloads and also toward the very real problem of overproduction of PhDs for the academic job market.

The English MA/PhD program should, similarly, be careful about expanding its mission and enrollments. My recommendation to this program would be to identify selected areas of strength, decide what it is this program and faculty do particularly well, and concentrate resources strategically in that specific area. Building all areas of the English curriculum at once—linguistics, creative writing, and literature across a number of periods/topics—is likely to result in diffusion of resources and a loss of strength, with no particular improvement overall. The key to the future success of English graduate programs is, I believe, selected strategic development. In marketing lingo, the program needs to locate its market niche. Creative writing seems like a particularly promising area for development.

**GRADUATE STUDENTS**

Overall, the graduate students like the graduate program and feel generally well supported by the program. They generally like the faculty, feel that the curriculum is strong, and that the program overall meets their needs as students and their trajectories as professionals. Numerous students cited the flexibility of the curriculum and the quality of the faculty as particularly strong facets of the program.

The graduate students in the MATC program and the TCR PhD program are especially pleased with their graduate experience. Their survey responses and face-to-face commentary were strongly positive across most categories.

The graduate students would like better preparation for their professional careers—and the English PhD students in particular would like better guidance for nonacademic career paths. The Department already has a professional development program in place, and is planning to make it mandatory. I think this is an excellent plan.

Some graduate students raised concerns about the "mysteriousness" of certain program procedures and practices and hoped for more guidance and transparency and clearer communication about graduate program matters. For example, students were not sure about the procedures for determining who gets to teach upper-level courses; they don't quite understand how the "99 credit hour rule" is applied or enforced (unevenly and inconsistently, they think); information about summer dissertation fellowships seems to have been unevenly distributed to graduate students.

The graduate students have two chief complaints about their experience:

1. Many students in linguistics, creative writing, and literature complain about the ICON/TOPIC approach to first-year composition, feeling that it does not provide them with adequate classroom preparation for future college teaching. Other students definitely see advantages to this program, particularly in terms of how it enhances
teachers’ ability to assess documents. (One student commented that her “assessment skills have improved drastically.”) The faculty echoed this concern. My views about this response are twofold: (a) The purpose of first-year composition is not to enhance employment opportunities for graduate students. Its primary purpose is to provide TTU undergraduates with experience, guidance, and practice in writing so that they will be adequately prepared for professional writing in their fields of study. I feel strongly that the first-year composition curriculum should be designed with this primary purpose in mind, and that the composition experts on the faculty should take the lead on designing the curriculum with this aim in mind. (b) This said, I also believe that the graduate students and faculty in creative writing and literature do have a valid point. The GPTI experience of students in the English program is not preparing them adequately for the kind of teaching they are likely to be doing in their careers. (I think this point applies moreso to the PhD/English students, less so to MA/English students.) What the Department needs to do is find alternative teaching and non-teaching appointments for these students—perhaps sophomore-level literature courses or RAships associated with journals? A compromise position might be one that was suggested in the faculty forum: Allow selected advanced students the option of developing their own versions of first-year composition, with guidance provided by a faculty mentor. However, I go back to point (a) above: The integrity and consistency of the composition curriculum, and the needs of first-year students, should be the primary engine driving curricular design—not the needs of graduate students.

2. Students across all programs complain about the heavy work load. For most of them it amounts to three graduate courses (9 credits) plus two instructional assignments per semester. In my experience with graduate education in rhetoric/composition, this is indeed a heavier-than-average workload. The norm I’m familiar with is more like 2-3 graduate courses per semester, with a 1-1 or 2-1 teaching load. It is a sign of the excellence of the TRC PhD program that it has recruited competitively in spite of the graduate student workload—but that may not hold true in the future unless workload issues are addressed.

The Graduate School should work with the Department (a) to determine ways to reduce/alleviate the GPTI workload; (b) to provide more teaching experiences outside of the ICON/TOPIC program, particularly for linguistics, creative writing, and literature students; (c) to provide more non-teaching RAships for graduate students (which will enhance their marketability and, thus, the reputation of the graduate program); and (d) to figure out ways to support graduate students for a full twelve months. This is perhaps the #1 resource issue for the graduate program overall—I see this point as the #1 priority for resource allocation, and the principal way that the University and Graduate School could help the graduate program in English.

**CURRICULUM**

Overall, the graduate course curriculum seems dated to me. I admit that my reaction is based on limited data: course titles and descriptions from the academic program catalog (p. 163), which of course does not necessarily reflect what actually happens in the classroom. My guess is that the classes themselves are more cutting edge than the titles/descriptions suggest. But the titles/descriptions are the same ones I might have
seen from an early 1990s program catalog, particularly in the MATC and TCR programs. I noticed that several special topics courses had been offered in recent years, in areas such as new media design and intercultural communication. Those special topics titles represent the curriculum of the future—and so the Department might consider updating the curriculum, or at least the catalog representation of the curriculum. The program needs more emphasis on digital rhetoric, visual rhetoric, HCI, multimedia composing, new media design, intercultural/international communication, and the like. I’m guessing that the existing courses already do that work—because the faculty research is cutting edge in these areas—but it is difficult to tell that from the catalog descriptions.

The online program for MATC and TCR is certainly an important, cutting-edge component of the graduate program. My one worry about the program is this: What assessment mechanisms are in place for testing the effectiveness of the online MA and PhD programs? Are there assessment outcomes for the online courses? What data exist to demonstrate that this program does an adequate job of educating MA and PhD students? It seems vital that the program implement an assessment protocol to determine whether the program is indeed working as intended/hoped. My principal worry is about the online PhD program: Can you have a responsible online doctoral program that adequately prepares its students for academic positions? What about the professional socialization process necessary for doctoral students on an academic trajectory—can an online program provide that? The program should be collecting assessment data to answer such questions, which are hugely important for the field of technical communication. Texas Tech is definitely in a position to provide leadership in this area to the rest of the field—but without adequate assessment data, the validity of the program is likely to be questioned.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE
The Department needs to have a serious conversation about whether a major structural change would be an advantage or a disadvantage overall for all components of the program. By “major structural change,” I am referring either to a departmental split (i.e., creating separate departments for literature/creative writing and composition/technical communication) or moving programs out of the department (e.g., making first-year composition a University program rather than a departmental one; moving graduate programs from the departmental level to the college level).

A key criterion guiding this discussion ought to be this: Is there a curricular common ground, a common identity, and a set of shared intellectual foundations and values that is worth keeping together and building? In my experience in English departments, there do exist such points of connection: e.g., between film studies and multimedia design; between creative writing (particularly creative nonfiction) and professional writing; between cultural/ethnic studies and rhetoric theory; between linguistics and rhetoric. But the faculty has to see the value of those connections and want to work together to develop them. The negative form of this question is: What gets lost if the two groups split? From my very brief observations and discussions, it seems that there is very little common ground among faculty or programs: The graduate programs have no common courses; there seems to be very little intellectual rapport between the two main groups of faculty (literature, composition). This lack of connectedness is not per se a problem if
both groups have their distinctive roles to play and curricula to oversee. However, the problem is the current inequity between the two groups—the program with fewer faculty needs additional hires to continue to compete on a national level, the program with more faculty doesn't need additional hires to maintain its mission. This inequity is a significant source of tension within the Department, and not one that is likely to go away, particularly if faculty teaching loads and opportunities for contributing to graduate education become more inequitable over time, as seems likely to happen.

I believe that the MATC/TCR program and faculty would thrive as an independent department, particularly if the program and faculty develop stronger curricular and research connections with communication studies. In fact, to continue to maintain its national prominence, the program probably needs to develop such connections. I believe, too, that the English MA/PhD program would do better as a standalone department/program, but only if the program is given sufficient support and encouraged to develop its distinctive and important missions—both the regional mission of its graduate program and the curricular mission of its undergraduate teaching (i.e., the undergraduate English major, general literature courses in the core undergraduate curriculum).

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