Data-Based Decisions: PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

2019-2020

Direct Measures

Problem A: Before Fall 2018, some dissertation committees requested significant changes to dissertations at the defense—more involved and significant revisions than are ideal at such a late point in the process. However, dissertation committee members also consistently declined to read the dissertation drafts chapter by chapter as students draft it. (Only the dissertation committee chair would provide iterative, repeated feedback chapter by chapter.)

Proposed Solution: students work with a "First Reader" to assess the dissertation in advance of final committee defense.

Evaluation of Problem A: As of October 2019, four students have worked with first readers on their dissertation draft. Based on our assessment of the student dissertation project, we evaluated the issue of the First Reader as resolved. We will continue the First Reader strategy as standard practice.

Problem B: Students requested a revision to the Comprehensive Exam. In Spring 2019, a student requested accommodation to be able to fairly and successfully take the Comprehensive Exam. Subsequent input from students suggested that the design of this degree milestone was potentially confusing and that some students and faculty had different understandings and expectations of the process. The request for accommodation and subsequent discussions revealed that the design of the Comprehensive Exam may place unnecessary pressure on students and could be redesigned to fulfill the same learning objectives while accommodating a wider range of abilities and learning styles.

Proposed Solution: The Technical Communication and Rhetoric Curriculum Committee discussed the purpose of the Comprehensive Exam as a degree milestone and redesigned the exam procedures, timing, and format to better support students in achieving the learning objectives of this milestone. We set two standing deadlines (one for spring semester; one for fall semester) by which students must take the written portion of the exam, and we standardized the exam questions as well. To provide an opportunity for students to clarify and expound upon their written responses, we also instituted an oral defense component to the exam. These new

procedures were posted on the TCR website in Summer 2019. We are happy to report that thew new design is successful in evaluating student work while accommodating student request for clearer directions.

Evaluation of Problem B: Since the Comprehensive Exam was redesigned in Summer 2019, as noted in last year's report, we monitored the quality of exams and continued soliciting feedback from students to evaluate the redesigned degree milestone. We will continue to monitor the success of this strategy.

Problem C: A common problem for graduate students—especially minoritized scholars—is finding paid work that does not interfere with their ability to progress in the program. Ph.D. student Jamal-Jared Alexander completed a research internship report which indicated that allowing grad students to pursue paid opportunities that support their research interests can be helpful in retention.

Proposed Solution: We are innovating opportunities for PhD students to work outside the department that maximize student research effort and professional development. One area that uniquely aligns with student work is supporting university inclusion efforts. For example, Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq adapted her student research to create an implicit bias training for the university. Samantha Clem and Jamal-Jared Alexander have both worked with grad recruiting and retention. We anticipate continuing and expanding on this strategy in the future.

2018-2019

Notes on Evaluation of Problem A: As of October 2019, four students have worked with first readers on their dissertation drafts. Two of these students successfully defended their dissertations in Spring 2019, one is on track to defend in Fall 2019 and one to defend in Spring 2020. Based on the significant level of feedback provided by first readers on these four dissertation drafts and the smooth dissertation defenses in Spring 2019, this strategy appears to be resolving the problem

Data indicating problem: Before Fall 2018, some dissertation committees requested significant changes to dissertations at the defense—more involved and significant revisions than are ideal at such a late point in the process. However, dissertation committee members also consistently declined to read the dissertation drafts chapter by chapter as students draft it. (Only the dissertation committee chair would provide iterative, repeated feedback chapter by chapter.)

Discussion: Within a problematically limited timeframe, students were required to make significant, involved dissertation revisions and dissertation committee members were required to review and approve these revisions.

Proposed solution: Last year, the Technical Communication and Rhetoric Curriculum Committee decided to create a new role on dissertation committees: First Reader. One dissertation committee member agreed to read each chapter after the chair has signed off on it and provide extensive feedback to help the student to improve the dissertation before it is sent to the committee to read before the defense. The expectation was that having an additional early reader providing extensive feedback would improve the quality of dissertations before the defense and reduce the likelihood of extensive revisions being required in the tight timeline between defense and approval.

Future Evaluation of solution: We have now evaluated the solution by monitoring the quality of two dissertations at the defense and the level, amount, and significance of revisions requested by dissertation committees requested at those defenses. The solution is proving effective. We will continue with the First Reader strategy.

Notes on Evaluation of Problem B: Since the Comprehensive Exam was redesigned in Summer 2019, no students have yet taken the exam. We will monitor the quality of exams and continue soliciting feedback from students to evaluate the redesigned degree milestone.

Data indicating problem: In Spring 2019, a student requested accommodation to be able to fairly and successfully take the Comprehensive Exam. Subsequent input from students suggested that the design of this degree milestone was potentially confusing and that some students and faculty had different understandings and expectations of the process.

Discussion: The request for accommodation and subsequent discussions revealed that the design of the Comprehensive Exam may place unnecessary pressure on students and could be redesigned to fulfill the same learning objectives while accommodating a wider range of abilities and learning styles.

Proposed solution: The Technical Communication and Rhetoric Curriculum Committee discussed the purpose of the Comprehensive Exam as a degree milestone and redesigned the exam procedures, timing, and format to better support students in achieving the learning objectives of this milestone. We set two standing deadlines (one for spring semester; one for fall semester) by which students must take the written portion of the exam, and we standardized the exam questions as well. To provide an opportunity for students to clarify and expound upon their written responses, we also instituted an oral defense component to the exam. These new procedures were posted on the TCR website in Summer 2019.

Future Evaluation of solution: We will monitor the quality of Comprehensive Exam responses and continue to invite feedback from students regarding the exam format and their own learning styles. We will be particularly attuned to evaluating whether the new format enables students to do their best work in 1) situating their own scholarship within the broader field, 2) articulating

how their scholarship can inform their pedagogy in a sample course design, and 3) respond to queries about their work in real time to clarify their scholarly arguments.

2017-2018

Notes on Evaluation of Problem A: As of March 2019, three students have worked with first readers on their dissertation drafts, and two of these students will defend their dissertations in Spring 2019. We look forward to evaluating the effectiveness of the first-reader strategy after their April defenses. Currently, early data suggest the strategy is helpful, as first readers have provided in-depth feedback to all three students well before their dissertations go to defense.

A. Data indicating problem: Some dissertation committees have requested significant changes to dissertations at the defense—more involved and significant revisions than are ideal at this late point in the process. However, dissertation committee members also decline to read the dissertation drafts chapter by chapter as students draft it. (Only the dissertation committee chair currently provides iterative, repeated feedback chapter by chapter.)

Discussion: Within a problematically limited timeframe, students are required to make significant, involved dissertation revisions and dissertation committee members are required to review and approve these revisions

Proposed solution: The Technical Communication and Rhetoric Curriculum Committee decided to create a new role on dissertation committees: First Reader. One dissertation committee member agrees to read each chapter after the chair has signed off on it and provide extensive feedback to help the student to improve the dissertation before it is sent to the committee to read before the defense. The expectation is that having an additional early reader providing extensive feedback will improve the quality of dissertations before the defense and reduce the likelihood of extensive revisions being required in the tight timeline between defense and approval.

Future Evaluation of solution: We will evaluate the solution by annually monitoring the quality of dissertations at the defense and the level, amount, and significance of revisions requested by dissertation committees at the defense.

2016-17

Notes on Evaluation of Problem A (Nov. 2017): Of the three students eligible to take their comprehensive exams during Fall 2017 semester, two have already taken them, and the third is preparing to do so. All have completed their comprehensive exam paragraphs and readings lists. We are very pleased with these results believe they are a result of the proposed solutions.

A. Data indicating problem: Some students' timeline to graduation was delayed as they repeatedly revised their comprehensive exam descriptive paragraphs to satisfactorily describe their approach as a scholar to the four areas of the comprehensive exam.

Discussion: This delayed timeline results in students taking longer to graduate.

Proposed solution: In the March 2, 2016 meeting, the Technical Communication Curriculum Committee decided to match each of our classes to one of four learning objectives of the program (which map to the four areas of the comprehensive exam). In each class, students will draft or revise two comprehensive exam descriptive paragraphs: the one that corresponds to the learning objective category of that class and one other.

Future Evaluation of solution: We will evaluate the solution by annually monitoring the progress of students in year 3, noting whether they take their comprehensive exam during the fall semester. In brief, we are evaluating whether students are prepared to present satisfactory paragraphs on schedule.

Notes on Evaluation of Problem B (Nov. 2017): In the most recent annual review, we saw improvement from multiple students when comparing their performance to their qualifying exams.

B. Data indicating problem: The original qualifying exam asked students to prepare a portfolio of their best work from courses in their first year. Since the inception of the doctoral program, every student has passed the qualifying exam, including those who proved unable to successfully complete the program.

Discussion: In other words, the qualifying exam was not indicative of students' future success in the program, nor did it identify problems early on in a student's trajectory when those problems could be remediated.

Proposed solution: In Fall 2014, the Technical Communication Curriculum Committee redesigned the qualifying exam to include a wider variety of measures: e.g, biographical statement, CV, teaching evaluations, and a form in which they reflect on their accomplishments and project their plans for the coming academic year. The measures also include feedback from faculty who've taught and/or mentored the student.

Future Evaluation of solution: We will evaluate the solution by comparing student performance on the qualifying exam with subsequent performance on the other programmatic milestones such as annual reviews and the comprehensive exam.

Notes on Evaluation of Problem C (Nov. 2017): We are seeing productivity in more PhD students than ever (see IV.G.).

C. Data indicating problem: Students in the earlier years of the program had a low productivity rate in terms of scholarly activity (presentations and publications).

Discussion: Scholarly production by doctoral students prepares them not only to be competitive on the job market but also for an academic career. In addition, it builds the reputation of the program.

Proposed solution: In Fall 2014, the Technical Communication Curriculum Committee decided to address this problem with a number of measures, including actively helping students turn seminar papers into presentations or publications; meeting with PhD students to workshop their proposals for national conferences and journal special issues; and implementing a monthly critical theory reading group to help professionalize students as scholars.

Future Evaluation of solution: We have seen evidence of the success of these measures in the increased productivity of our current students, which we monitor in annual reviews (see IV.G.).

D. Data indicating problem: When surveying competing PhD programs and our current PhD students, we found that none of the competing programs had the same name as we did (Theory and Practice of Professional Communication).

Discussion: PhD applicant numbers have not been as high as we would like. Most had names with the terms "Technical/Professional Communication," but they also included "Rhetoric." The unrecognizable PhD program name hurt recruitment, as potential applicants did not always associate us with our competitors.

Proposed solution: In a March 29, 2016 meeting, the Technical Communication Curriculum Committee discussed changing the PhD program name to "Technical Communication and Rhetoric." In the summer of 2017, the name was officially changed to "Technical Communication and Rhetoric."

Future Evaluation of solution: We will evaluate the solution by monitoring any change in the number of PhD applicants as well as requests to clarify the purpose of the PhD program

(a request that continually occurred under the previous name).

E. Data indicating problem: Our feedback from qualifying exams and annual reviews included that our PhD students were not getting enough national conference experience each year. Also, we were not getting enough applicants to our Master of Technical Communication program.

Discussion: The PhD students wanted to participate in more national conferences but found them to be too expensive. We have an allotted amount of recruiting money.

Proposed Solution: In a November 1, 2017 meeting, the Technical Communication Curriculum Committee decided to use some of the allotted recruiting money to create travel grants for qualifying PhD students who have been accepted into high profile national conferences. When accepting the grant, each student will commit to recruiting. The TCR faculty will hold a recruiting session before each conference.

Future Evaluation of the solution: We will monitor our PhD students' participation in national conferences (see IV.G.), as well as ask for a recruiting efforts report following each conference from each student who has received the grant.