Leveraging Program-Level Transparency as a Communication Strategy for Sustainability through Recruitment and Retention

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Author's Notes

I am indebted to Dr. Stephanie Quinn's curriculum-building experience and her generosity in sharing her knowledge during the time we worked together.

Author Biography

Dr. Joy Santee is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Indiana where she teaches in the Professional Writing and Rhetoric program. She co-created the Writing Studies program at Utah Valley University and the Professional Writing and Rhetoric program at McKendree University, where she also served as Director of the Writing Center and Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum. Her current research focuses on visual literacy and curriculum development in Professional Writing.

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This article demonstrates how principles of Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) can be extended to academic programs to create a communication strategy that promotes recruitment and retention, particularly in liberal arts programs. Analysis of program-level transparency at two schools demonstrates how faculty can leverage TILT at that level to communicate program benefits to various stakeholders, supporting program sustainability through recruitment and retention.

Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) has gained attention in the scholarship of teaching and learning for its benefits to students, particularly in terms of reducing inequalities through providing support to vulnerable students as they enter the university (Winkelmes, 2014; Winkelmes, et al., 2016). Early research in TILT focused on assignments in general education courses (Musselman, Lock, Long, Loughran, & Saclolo 2016; Winkelmes et al., 2015), and successes in using transparency as a teaching tool in these courses, particularly those found in studies on its use in problem-based learning (Fisher, Kouyoumdjian, Roy, Talavera-Bustillos, & Willard 2016; Kang, Kelly, Murray, & Visbal, 2016) have led some faculty to examine how we can extend transparency into mid- and upper-level courses within our disciplines. Winkelmes et al. (2015) observed this "domino effect" as faculty members participating in the initial study of transparency in lower-level courses began applying its principles to upper-level coursework, and early observations by those faculty show promise in helping students succeed throughout their chosen academic program.

Building on these documented successes using TILT as an intervention, principles of the approach can be extended even further to provide the foundation for a program-level communication strategy to promote recruitment and retention. In TILT studies so far, we've mostly seen a bottom-up effect, starting from general education courses and moving into more advanced courses. Here, however, I'm advocating for a top-down application of the TILT approach that starts from program-level outcomes and documents, such as curriculum maps, that highlight curricular priorities, which can then be leveraged to promote recruitment and retention through

making the Purposes, Tasks, and Criteria of our programs clear and visible to a wider range of stakeholders who can positively influence students' decisions as they select their academic majors and minors.

This application of the TILT approach is particularly relevant for those of us who teach in programs, especially those in the liberal arts, that provide students with transferable skills but relatively few direct or obvious career paths. Rising student debt and a general shift toward career-focused majors, alongside demographic shifts resulting in decreasing numbers of incoming university students, has led to decreased enrollment in some of these majors, jeopardizing their long-term sustainability and, in some cases, viability. However, making our program's outcomes transparent to prospective students and other influential stakeholders can prove beneficial in recruiting students in our programs. Additionally, integrating that transparency throughout the curriculum can lead to higher retention.

Institution Contexts

Here, I discuss transparency as a program-level recruitment and retention tool at two institutions. The first is a small, private comprehensive university with a heritage in the liberal arts. At this institution, my colleague, Dr. Stephanie Quinn, and I built a new program in Professional Writing and Rhetoric and grew it into one of the largest Humanities programs on campus in just a few years by integrating program-level transparency into our communication strategy to inform prospective students and other stakeholders about the program and its benefits. While our program development work predates most published research in TILT, the strategies and curricular structures we developed can be mapped to TILT, providing useful information for development of recruitment and retention strategies moving forward.

The second institution is a mid-sized, regional-serving public institution that has an existing Professional Writing and Rhetoric program that is not currently meeting its potential due to a lack of program-level transparency and a resultant inability to clearly and easily communicate program benefits to prospective students and other stakeholders. For this institution, I will articulate our strategy for program enhancement, with a focus on employing TILT as our primary communication strategy to leverage newly-articulated curricular documents in recruitment efforts.

Transparency as a Communication Strategy for Recruitment and Retention

Using Program Outcomes to Communicate Purpose

At the course level, TILT first asks faculty to make the purpose of any given assignment clear to students. At the program level, I map this aspect of TILT onto the Program Outcomes (or Student Learning Outcomes) that articulate the overarching purposes of our programs. When my colleague and I developed the Professional

Writing and Rhetoric program, we wrote clearly defined outcomes and used them in our communication to make the purposes of the program clear to prospective students and other stakeholders such as parents, advisors, faculty in other programs, and prospective community partners.

When possible, we also created course titles that aligned with program outcomes so we could help students understand the program's purposes at a glance. For example, one of our outcomes was that students would "Design documents for print and digital environments using principles of visual rhetoric," which directly connected to our course Visual Rhetoric and Document Design. While not every outcome connected to a single class so clearly, this kind of repetition, along with course outcomes included on syllabi and signature assignments, promoted transparency and helped us communicate core aspects of the program to prospective students and parents looking at course lists online or in the university catalog.

Beyond communicating with students, we also used our program outcomes to communicate the value of our program with advisors and faculty in other disciplines, since these campus stakeholders were positioned to encourage students to consider adding professional writing courses to their schedules. We first focused on partnering with these stakeholders to recruit current students into the minor, highlighting how a minor in Professional Writing could strengthen their communication skills and enhance their job prospects in their intended professions, particularly in uncertain economic times. Our greatest successes in this area came from students in the social sciences, including sociology majors attracted to nonprofit work and history majors interested in pursuing work in Public History, and we worked directly with faculty in these fields to educate them about the benefits of this minor to their students while generating ideas for cross-disciplinary projects that students could pursue because of our flexible activity-based learning approaches (see Curricular Priorities below). Additionally, we were able to use our program outcomes to educate the campus Career Services office about our program. Their staff provided numerous students with information about our program as they advised students about professional preparation, and they proved to be among our most valuable recruiting tools for getting students into our minor.

Once the program became more established, we were able to begin recruiting incoming students, and we worked with admissions counselors to develop a document they could share with prospective students, parents, and high school counselors that promoted the value of this program through transparent communication of our outcomes and likely benefits to students.

Using Curricular Priorities to Communicate Tasks

To map the Task aspect from TILT onto our program's transparency-based communication strategy, I use our statement of curricular priorities, which emphasizes the

ways that students will gain knowledge and experience through activity-based assignments. In conversations and other forms of communication with stakeholders, we also highlighted problem-based learning and client-based projects (including service-learning projects) as subsets of the activity-based learning that permeated our curriculum.

A second curricular priority was development of student portfolios, through which students tracked their progress toward meeting program outcomes. Students were required to submit a portfolio of work at three points during their program, and to be successful in the portfolios at the sophomore and junior levels, they had to make explicit connections to course and program outcomes, so they understood and could demonstrate purposeful engagement with these concepts. At the senior level, they revised materials for a professional portfolio. Because transparency of program and course outcomes became a hallmark of signature assignments in core classes in the program, seniors could clearly articulate their skills and potential contributions to prospective employers in interviews. Facilitating students' self-tracking of progress toward program outcomes was a way to help students see their progress, thereby increasing their academic confidence, which Winkelmes (2014) highlighted as a key aspect of student retention (see also Winkelmes et al., 2016).

Our third curricular priority, development of responsibility for the public good, came about because my colleague and I see Professional Writing as a way to involve students in activism and charitable work, and this priority aligned with our university's stated commitment to community service. Students interested in nonprofit or other types of social service work regularly pointed to our hands-on work with community partners as a key feature that attracted them to coursework in Professional Writing.

We also included potential community partners for service learning projects and as internships sites through our communication strategy. When searching out these community partners, we used our curricular priorities to explain the skills that our students could bring to their organizations. As the program grew, we supplemented our program's communications with sample documents that students had created in classes to provide examples of their work, echoing the practice within TILT of providing students with examples of prior successful work, but in this case, addressed to a different set of stakeholders.

Using Employable Skills and Intellectual Engagement to Communication Criteria

For mapping the criteria portion of TILT to program transparency, I highlight the criteria by which our program and students would be evaluated. Our university would evaluate the success of this program in large part by whether our graduates attained gainful employment. With most of our students going into debt at this costly private school, we also felt an ethical responsibility to create a program that foregrounded

development of employable skills. In many liberal arts majors, in particular, there's an assumption that students will learn skills like communication and collaboration, but throughout the curriculum-building process, we foregrounded opportunities that would enable students to clearly demonstrate evidence of the transferable skills employers would be looking for. Most commonly, these opportunities came through service-learning projects and signature assignments designed to be used in student portfolios. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019) became a resource for students researching what employers would expect of them, and parents were reassured by statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) showing solid growth in fields like technical writing, as well as content from that organization about growth in grant writing and online content development.

The focus on employable skills, however, didn't mean exclusion of intellectual engagement or diminishment of more traditional liberal arts values within the program. However, rhetorical theory and discussions of academic research weren't as likely to attract students to the program, so looking back, there isn't as much transparency in our public program-level documents regarding this criteria, but we did include them in curriculum maps and specific course outcomes, and we successfully assessed them using institutional assessment tools.

Transparency in Program Revision

I am now teaching at a regional public university with an existing program in Professional Writing and Rhetoric; however, none of the types of transparency my colleague and I built into the program at my previous institution and then subsequently leveraged for recruitment and retention are in place here. The number of students in the program is one metric that shows this problem. My previous institution had approximately 1500 on-campus undergraduates, while my current one has approximately 9000 on-campus undergraduates, yet the number of students in the respective Professional Writing and Rhetoric programs is nearly the same.

Currently, the program at this institution does not have program-specific outcomes, curriculum maps, or other documents to facilitate a transparency-based recruitment and retention strategy, limiting our ability to clearly communicate the benefits of the program to prospective students and other stakeholders who can influence student recruitment and retention. I strongly believe that there is room for growth in this program on this campus and am leading a process to improve transparency to facilitate a communication strategy that clearly articulates the value of the program.

I am currently facilitating a working group of faculty who teach in the program to address this lack of transparency through development of program outcomes, a curriculum map to find and fix gaps and misalignments in the program, and revised to course outcomes and descriptions so they reflect current practice. Through this working group, we plan to create transparent documents that show the program's

value to prospective students, parents, campus advisors, faculty in other disciplines, and potential community partners, much as I did at my previous institution.

Additionally, I've adapted an approach to curricular revision forwarded by Schreiber and Melonçon (2019), which is intended to facilitate sustainable, flexible, and ongoing curricular revision. While their primary focus is technical communication program revision, their GRAM method is inspired by workplace practices and could be adapted to fit the needs of most academic fields. This method advocates for consideration of local conditions and constraints in curricular analysis and revision, and combined with a focus on TILT, faculty can use the model to assess where our programs are already transparent and where they're lacking transparency. In short, Schreiber and Melonçon's method asks faculty to **gather** existing program documents, **read** the local landscape to identify opportunities for sustainable growth, **analyze** the results of the first two steps, and then **make** changes to the program.

Winkelmes et al. (2015) noted that courses evolve over time through small changes, and that those small changes lead to larger shifts in the logic behind any given assignment or course. Those shifts observed by Winkelmes and her colleagues point to a need to periodically revisit and clarify the purposes of each course assignment to promote transparency. I've observed that similar shifts occur at the program level as incremental curricular modifications accumulate due to changes in staffing and influences from discipline-specific research, academic or economic trends, technology, and other factors. This accumulation of changes should motivate us to periodically evaluate curricular documents like program outcomes, curriculum maps, and course descriptions, particularly if we want to be accurate in our transparent communication about our programs' values.

While Schreiber and Melonçon's (2019) heuristic is focused on comprehensive program revision, supported by extensive lists of questions and considerations in support of that type of revision, we can adapt the method to specifically consider transparency in our programs, with the goal of incorporating transparency at every level of our programs so we can leverage that transparency to create a communication strategy to recruit and retain students. In particular, an inventory of the transparency of existing curricular documents, including program outcomes and curriculum maps, can help faculty see how the documents can be revised to improve transparency but also how they could be adapted, modified, or repurposed to more clearly communicate a program's value to stakeholders.

In programs with stable enrollment, the process of incorporating and leveraging transparency at the program level can be done incrementally, reducing the initial investment of time spent on this process, but for programs facing institutional pressures due to declining enrollment, the process may be pursued more urgently, particularly if the payoff results in improved recruitment and retention.

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