

February 13, 2007

To: Suzanne T. Ortega, Vice Provost and Dean  
Melissa A. Austin, Associate Dean for Academic Programs  
University of Washington Graduate School  
Box 353770

From: Judy Ramey, Chair, Department of Technical Communication

Re: Response, Ten-Year Departmental Review Report

Dear Dean Ortega and Associate Dean Austin:

Speaking for the Department of Technical Communication as a whole, I would like to thank you for the thorough and thoughtful review of our department conducted for the Graduate School by Prof. Gaetano Borriello, Computer Science and Engineering, committee chair; Prof. Bob Mason, Information School; Prof. Rick Gustafson, Forest Resources; Prof. Sam Dragga, Chair, Dept. of English, Texas Tech University; and Dr. Suzanne Sowinska, Senior Content Publishing Manager/Engineering Excellence, Microsoft Corporation. We have shared the committee's report with the faculty, staff, and students in the department and would like to offer the following comments on the report and its recommendations.

We thank the review committee for its enthusiastic endorsement of the quality of our programs at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels and for its recommendation that all current programs be approved for continuation. We were especially gratified by the committee's confirmation of our standing as "the leading program" at the "future of its discipline." In an emerging field like ours, not yet included among the disciplines ranked by such organizations as *U.S. News & World Report*, it can be difficult to document the standing of any one department in the broader intellectual landscape. Thus we are extremely appreciative of the committee's recognition of the department as a "hidden gem" operating at an "entrepreneurial level unmatched by other TC programs," with "high morale at all levels," and for its characterization of the department as "a major player in a field of exceptional promise." We welcome the committee's recognition of our special strength and national leadership in empirical research and our commitment to the involvement of students at all levels in our research programs. We also welcome the committee's recognition of the importance and quality of our award-winning service program in engineering communication.

### **The Committee's Issues of Concern**

Turning to the committee's issues of concern, we acknowledge that our progress has been hampered by severe resource limits; like other small departments, we have suffered over a number of biennia from a series of progressive budget cuts (UIF, state budget cuts, etc.) and other constraints. However, we note that several improvements are already under way. Most importantly, thanks to an initiative launched by Matt O'Donnell, the new dean of the College of Engineering, we are moving to consolidated space in Sieg Hall. For the

first time, all members of the department will share contiguous space; the improvement to our group identity and cohesiveness will be dramatic. We are also working with the College on improved computing support and other technical improvements.

The committee's second issue of concern is that TC, rather than being the undisputed leader in the field, could be eclipsed by the growth and investment in other programs currently under way nationally. In support of this position, the committee cites a number of shortcomings in our physical facilities. We recognize that facilities can be important but we are at least as concerned, if not more so, with enlarging our intellectual capital. The committee has recognized that TC will be "an important partner in any initiatives UW is likely to make in the HCI [human-computer interaction] field." We are in fact playing a leadership role in a UW-wide initiative to build an HCI center, and toward that goal, we played a pivotal role just this quarter in securing one of only four slots UW-wide for submitting an NSF IGERT pre-proposal focused on HCI interdisciplinary education and research. What we need most urgently is a commitment of faculty lines to help us enlarge our contribution to this campus-wide initiative. We are working with Dean O'Donnell toward this goal.

The review committee expressed a third concern that our doctoral students were teaching courses to peers. This practice was a short-lived experiment that we have now discontinued. It originated from a desire to provide these students with significant teaching experience under faculty guidance (rather than from a need to cover courses, as suggested in the report); we have now systematized our doctoral teaching pathway into Doctoral Teaching Fellowships that offer these students a well-rationalized progression of teaching experiences in undergraduate and evening master's courses.

The committee was also concerned that TC's intellectual domain needs to be better distinguished and that the discipline's image at UW needs to be improved. We expect that our expanding range of collaborations with the I-School, CSE, Industrial Engineering, Industrial Design, the School of Medicine and others will illuminate the special contributions of communication design as practiced in our field. This is an ongoing educational process (even something of a public-relations process) that we will continue to address over the next review period. We also mention that the university is becoming a more interdisciplinary institution than it has historically been, and point out that overlap at the boundaries of fields is actually officially recognized by mechanisms such as adjunct faculty appointments. Also, with the discontinuation of university-level curriculum review, there is no longer an institutional mechanism for monitoring disciplinary boundaries and overlaps between departments and colleges, so that any momentary clarity in this regard can quickly be overtaken by shifting intellectual currents. Having recognized this complexity, we will continue to work to articulate the special contributions that our field and our department can make. With respect to improving the image of the discipline at UW, we hope that our strategic commitment to actively publicizing the many accomplishments of our faculty, staff, and students will achieve this goal. We have excellent new personnel at the college level to help us with this effort, and have already seen the effort bear fruit in news coverage of our first doctoral graduate and her thesis on the impact of mobile technologies on personal

relationships in developing-world countries (“Mobile phones facilitate romance in modern India,” February UW home page, picked up by *Newsweek* and other outlets internationally). We have also made a strategic commitment to enlarge our recruitment efforts at the undergraduate and master’s levels, especially with regard to under-represented groups. At the undergraduate level, this effort will be aided by a new endowed diversity scholarship that will be awarded for the first time to one or more students entering the department in Autumn 2007.

The committee also raised a concern about student funding. Looking at the national disciplinary landscape, the TC field does not have a strong tradition of seeking external research funding; many TC programs support their doctoral students entirely with teaching assistantships. UWTC, however, is committed to continuing to build its externally funded research programs to the point that these programs support all doctoral students for several years of their educational program. This effort is an integral part of our continuing development of our new doctoral program (now in just its fifth year). We agree with the committee about the importance of this effort and expect that our evolution over the next review period will address this issue.

Finally, the committee felt that a strategy for the chair’s succession must be developed. The faculty has discussed this issue and has concluded that we have several people on our faculty with excellent administrative potential who can cover this role for the next review period, if not beyond.

## **Opportunities**

The committee also identified a number of opportunities that TC can pursue. The first is the further development of the Technical Japanese Program (described by the committee as “a hidden gem within a hidden gem” but currently “very fragile”). We agree that UW should make a serious effort to strengthen professional language/culture training across disciplines. Such an effort might begin by identifying advocates or strong supporters of the idea in the major schools/colleges, who would be invited to propose curriculum reform ideas or more complex plans (e.g. additional degree programs). For the most promising of these proposals, the UW Development Office could be enlisted to raise funds to establish endowed professorships for the new programs along the lines of the Petersen Endowment that supports Technical Japanese. UW could then create a center that houses those programs across colleges and schools. Obviously, pursuing this opportunity requires a commitment at the institutional level.

The committee also identified several thematic areas that offer opportunities to TC: global public health, humanitarian relief, and human-computer interaction. We absolutely agree, and in fact we have a number of initiatives, grant proposals, and funded research projects under way in these areas (projects studying the information ecology of Mercy Corps; the detailed workflow in a public health agency; comprehension of health information presented over the Web; study of the roles of technology in organizational communicative processes; and others). We are very enthusiastic about these opportunities and are actively pursuing funding in these areas.

The committee also felt that TC could be better linked to other units in the COE and at UW than it currently is. Again, we certainly agree, although we also want to point out that we do currently have numerous linkages (adjunct appointments, cross-listed courses, joint research, and joint proposal development). We especially embrace the suggestion that the offerings in our engineering-communication service program could be more closely coordinated with other engineering courses, and we are planning to expand our current offerings in this area. Given the complexity of the program (over 50 sections of our undergraduate service courses a year, taught primarily by TC graduate students under close guidance and supervision; an extensive Engineering/I-School Writing Center supported by peer tutors and research assistants; ABET support and other organizational components; faculty support workshops; departmental portfolio-based writing assessments; and other components), we must proceed cautiously with pilot offerings and assessments of success. We also agree that we should increase the general faculty involvement in the service program; we have created faculty supervisory committees for each course, are discussing a plan to have regular faculty involved in designing, supervising, and teaching the program, and are exploring other means of greater faculty involvement.

Finally, the committee identified several operational opportunities for TC. We have commented already on our plans for more extensive recruitment of high-quality students, especially at the undergraduate level (our greatest challenge, since our field is not well-recognized by undergraduates). The committee also encouraged us to consider distance programs, even if still regional; we are proposing to start this effort by offering sections of several of our evening master's courses in the UW Extension facility on the East Side. Given our small size and the number of opportunities we have, we must prioritize carefully, but this is an easy and obvious way to start. The committee also felt that professional exchanges should be encouraged; we agree, and in fact Prof. Beth Kolko will be spending a major part of her time this spring quarter in the Microsoft Research Community Technologies Laboratory. We are enthusiastic about expanding such exchanges to include concurrent sabbaticals and the other mechanisms mentioned by the committee. We also look forward to working more intensively with the CoE development efforts to gain greater visibility and donor support for TC.

### **Next Steps**

TC expects to work with Dean O'Donnell and others in Spring Quarter 2007 to prepare an action-oriented strategic plan that focuses on a small set of critical opportunities. This effort will yield a roadmap for our activities for the next five years, with proposed metrics for assessing our progress and justifying additional investment in us.

We would like to conclude with reiterated thanks to the Graduate School and our superb review committee for its careful, thorough, conscientious work. We very much appreciate this input and will use it to guide our activities over the next review period.