

In Pursuit of Professional Writing: A Survey of Professional Writers at York College of Pennsylvania

Introduction

Successful writers often feel as though they have spent years qualifying their pursuit of becoming a writer. Those who enroll in college in a professional writing program are asked with curiosity what they plan to do with a degree in writing as it seems too generic when compared to other degrees in such areas as engineering or criminal justice. The reality is a Professional Writing degree opens doors to graduates because it covers more than just one career base, allowing for more opportunities for graduates. When a Professional Writing major is asked what they're going to do with that degree, the list is nearly endless.

How does the curriculum at colleges prepare Professional Writing majors to enter the workforce following graduation? Have the courses successfully taught all the students need to know in order to have a career in writing? And what are those careers the graduates pursue? These questions are the focus of my research paper which touches on the lives of each participant in my study and me personally as we are all writing majors. Before exploring my participant's responses, I want to focus on data I collected from past studies and interviews that examine the curriculum and career paths of Professional Writing majors and the steps a writer takes when leaving an academic setting and moving into the professional culture. In an academic setting one may have felt comfortable, sure of their ability to write solid papers for professors and earn high grade point averages, but what happens when those days are over

and one answers not to a professor but a supervisor? No longer are grades involved but instead a paycheck.

Review of Literature

The leap from writing essays and research papers to writing at a corporate level may be great. “While certain surface-level writing skills are “portable” across diverse contexts, such skills are less important to making a successful transaction as a writer than coping with the unfamiliar epistemological, social, and organizational characteristic of a new context” (Anson 201). Surface learning skills are those that are acquired passively without actively making the effort to absorb new information. How do the intern students of this study by Anson fare when taken from the academic setting to the business world only prepared with surfaced-level writing skills? The initial reaction is disorientation which leads to frustration and a sense of failure. “Some interns undergo a period of *alienated independence*, a sense of having to do things all on their own and being expected to know already how to execute tasks” (Anson 208). This alienated independence sounds like an experience all writing majors will most likely encounter in their future careers. No matter how well we scored in our academia, the reality of work in a corporate setting will take us out of our comfort zone and force us to think and write beyond what we learned in college. The real world is not as neat and easy to fulfill with a simple four paragraph essay or a ten page paper, properly formatted and cited. What I discovered both in the secondary and primary research is the need to be diverse in writing skills to create a well-rounded student capable of adapting and delivering the types of writing required in the business setting. In her journal article “Redesigning Professional Writing Courses to Meet the

Communication Needs of Writers in Business and Industry” Tebeaux states, “...in reality, [Professional Writing is] a blend of both types [business and technical writing] as they are now defined academically” (422). Her findings draw the conclusion that there does need to be an attempt to offer students specialized courses that are not necessarily justified in the professional writing curriculum. Tebeaux also points out that technology will “...increasingly affect what we teach and how communications are generated” (426). I found in my artifact review of the Worksheet for Professional Writing, B.A. a 200 level Writing in Professional Cultures and Interdisciplinary Writing course and a 300 level Writing for the Web are required courses supporting the theory that this genre has been found to be important for a student’s career.

In the Anson paper, one intern, Rachael, was quoted acknowledging the shift from academia to the work environment: “I was thrust into an environment [for which] I was less prepared than I thought...I was so used to professors basically telling you exactly what they want” (211). I was unable to determine if Rachael had been required to take courses similar to those offered at York College to prepare her for business environment. The entire senior body of Professional Writing majors is experiencing a similar reaction to creating and writing our Senior Seminar research papers. We have been given permission to explore and write with little “rules or guidance” from our professors. This is a new situation for many of us, an alienated independence that can be overwhelming and even intimidating as acknowledged in our in-class discussions. Uncharted territory in writing while in college may be just what is needed in preparation for careers following graduation.

In her book *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, Katherine Adams notes that after 1870 many vocational educators sought to eliminate the humanities aspect of writing and focus on technical studies only in order to prepare students to write for businesses rather than for creativity. The results of this change led to pamphlets, journals, letters and simple reports that consisted of poor writing and a need to refocus the writing curriculum (28-29) in the early 1900's. Rhetorical Theory, no longer considered an important course for college student had been dropped from the curriculum. A renewed interest in this subject arose in the beginning of the 1960's to focus on the importance of the writing process, literary research, advanced composition, and critical thinking making the course more challenging for students (150). By the 1980's there were over 200 courses offered at some schools that focused on journalism, magazine writing and mass communication, that no longer focused on just business or technical writing (121). This data is also supported in a second journal article where creative writing was re-established in the 1970's with huge growth in the 1980's and continuing into the 1990's (Cunningham 130). This welcomed change to those who wish to pursue careers not focused on writing in professional cultures but rather a creative outlet where we can seek newspapers, magazines and journals for our written publications.

The journal article titled "Undergraduate Writing Majors and the Rhetoric of Professionalism" delved into the careers of alumni Professional Writing majors and was insightful in shedding light on what writing skill are most often used following graduation. Often the genres used are not reflected in the graduate's job title but is central in their professional life and the ability to communicate effectively in their workplace. The most common form of communication is email with nearly 86% of the alumni indicating that is the

most common document they need to create (Weisser 49). This would seem to be an easy task but if a student did not take a document design or interdisciplinary writing course, the proper way to write an email may have never been learned possibly causing problems or at least embarrassment for them in the future. Jessie, a respondent in this journal article sums it up best, “There are SO many different types of writing jobs out there...being able to write in itself is a highly marketable asset” (Weisser 50). Because of this importance, it is noted that composition and rhetoric is viewed as the “umbrella” of a writing program and it is unlikely that courses teaching the pair core will ever be removed from the curriculum (Cunningham 133). Realistically, all employers are interested in employees who are able to express themselves well orally and in written documents building the ethos of their company thus making composition and rhetoric a necessary part of the writing curriculum.

Study Participants

To become better acquainted with my fellow Professional Writing majors, I conducted an IRB approved survey to learn many key points of information from my peers. The survey was emailed to all York College of Pennsylvania students enrolled in the major as well as students currently enrolled in Senior Seminar. I had 34 responses to the Google Documents survey, 25 females and 9 males. Those respondents were from the following undergraduate levels: Seniors-13, Juniors-12, Sophomores-7, and Freshman-2. From this group of respondents I emailed interview questions to 10 female and two male students. Nine of the female students and zero male students responded to the follow up interview. Of those nine female students responding by email, five were seniors, two were juniors, and one sophomore and freshman.

Methodology

I conducted the surveys through Google Documents sent by Dr. Zerbe to the 88 students enrolled as Professional Writing majors. Of the enrolled student, 34 responded for a 39% response rate. A full copy of the survey can be found in appendix A of this paper. I first wanted to know what required and elective courses students had completed and what electives they expected to take in the future. The purpose of this was to determine how many ADR's they have completed in the writing major and what elective courses they have completed or expect to complete. I also asked what, if any, minor had been declared and the career goals they had in mind following graduation. In addition to those base questions, I inquired if they had interest in freelance writing in the future and if they had done any publishing at this point as undergraduates. Using a Likert Scale, I asked them to rate how well the Professional Writing curriculum would prepare them for their intended career, how likely they believed they would find employment related to their major/minor and finally to rate the curriculum usefulness of securing employment following graduation.

The scales ranged from least likely to most likely and was only to gain insight of each student's opinion as they have not graduated or sought employment at this time. Lastly, I inquired which required courses the students expected to be least helpful following graduation. My general purpose for this line of questioning was to get a strong understand of what students felt would be most helpful in finding work that would earn them a paycheck be if full time or part time. The most insightful answers came from the follow-up email in which well-thought

out statement were given revealing students true love of writing and the financial stakes they have placed through student loans to receive a degree in Professional Writing.

Results & Analysis

I was able to draw meaningful conclusions from the fundamental questions asked in my survey. To make understanding my results easier tables have been prepared to offer visuals supported by text. Tables not included in the body of this paper can be found in Appendix B at the end of the report. I would like to note that while I was able to gather meaningful data, it is still based on the responses of 34 students. Had there been more time to re-request those in the Professional Writing major to respond or visit the writing classes in person with a written rather than electronic document, I may have been able to achieve a higher response rate. Overall though, I am pleased as getting responses to surveys from students is not an easy task.

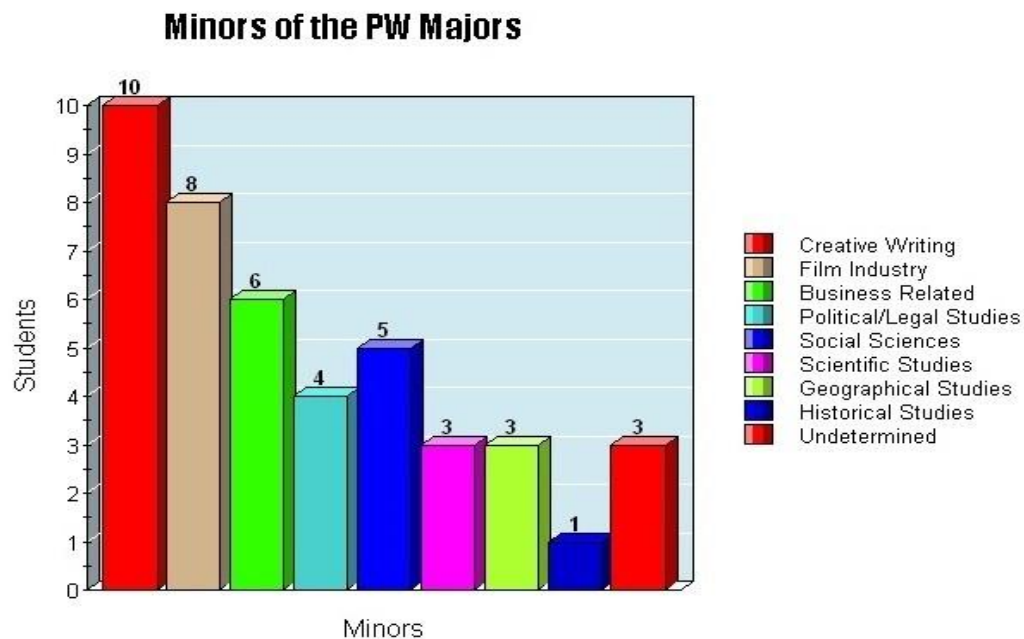


Table 1.
The Professional Writing minors at York College of Pennsylvania

The minors of the Professional Writing majors included ten in Creative Writing, eight in Film Industry, six in business related minors, five in social sciences, four in political/legal studies, 3 each in scientific studies, geographical studies and undetermined and one in historical studies. I was not surprised to find there was a high number of creative writing and film industry minors as the writing major supports the interest in independent writing based on creative thinking.

Professional Writing Majors: Career Goals

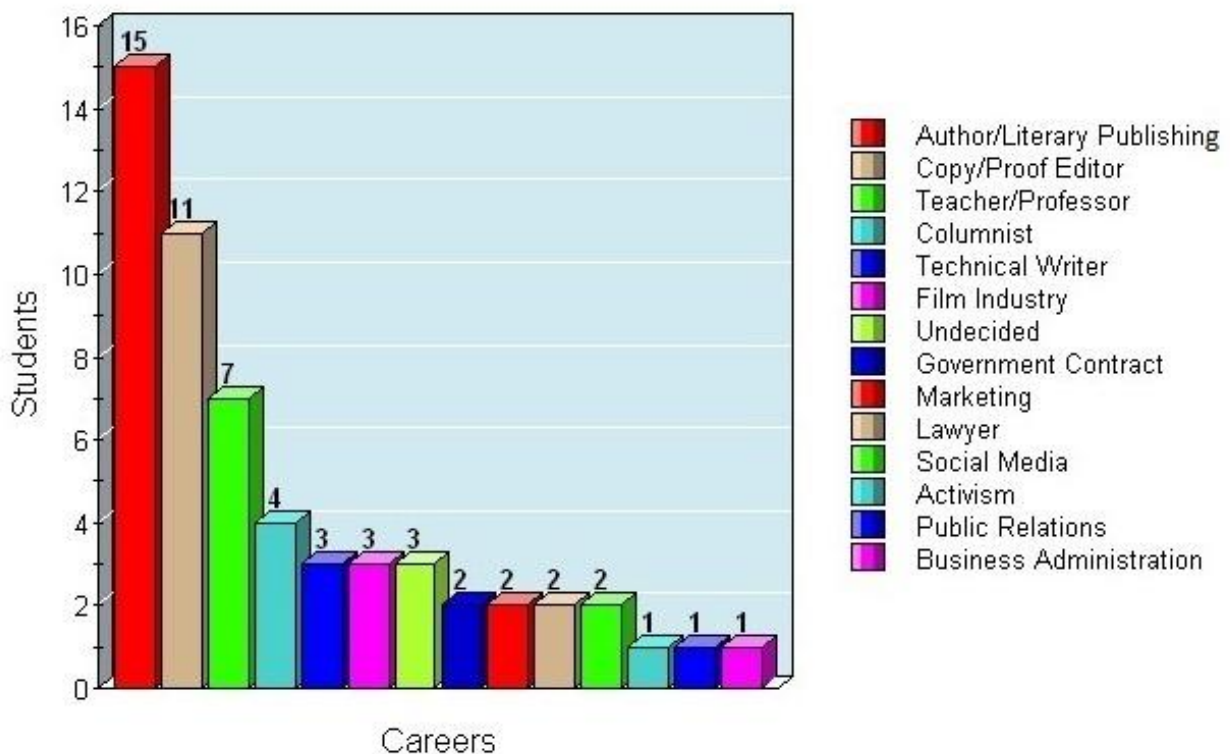


Table 2.

The career goals of the Professional Writing majors at York College of Pennsylvania

The first table presents the minors of the Professional Writing majors (table 1) followed by their career goals (table 2). The most popular minor was Creative Writing which correlates with the most popular career goal of author or literary publishing. I also see the second most popular minors, those involving the film industry, in direct correlation with titling their future

career as an author. The third most popular was business related minors which is rather general and could cover many of the intended career goals. Social Science minors and Political Science minors support many of the career goals such as lawyers, government contracts, activism, public relations and social media. I found the students seemed able to understand the link between declaring their minor and seeing it related to their future work goal.

The high number of students enrolled in Creative Writing indicated there should be a variety of students interested in freelance writing and a considerable number of students that have already begun freelance writing. I was not disappointed as 86% of the student respondents had an interest in freelancing as a full time, part time, or to supplement their income (table 3). There were 24 students who have already published in some format prior to graduation (table 4). Popular places students were published were *The York Review* and York's local newspapers.

Professional Writing Majors: Interest in Freelance Writing

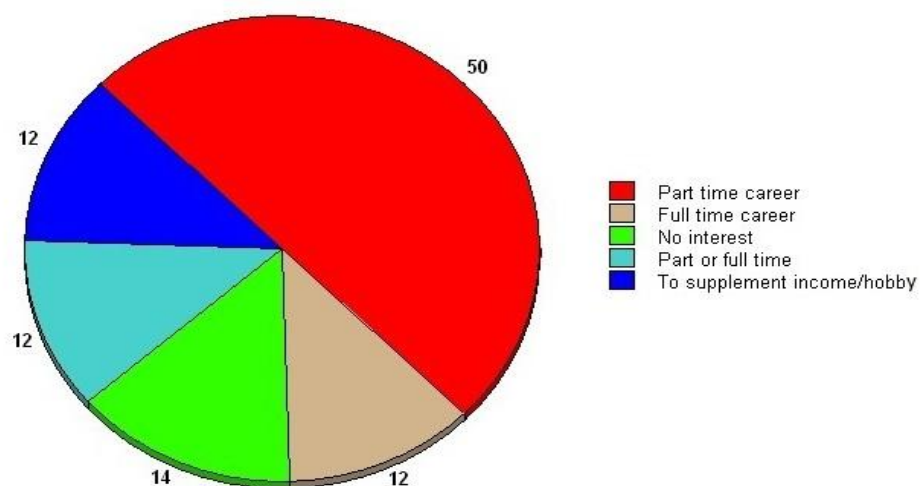


Table 3.
Interest in freelance writing by Professional Writing majors at York College of Pennsylvania

Types of Publications by PW Majors

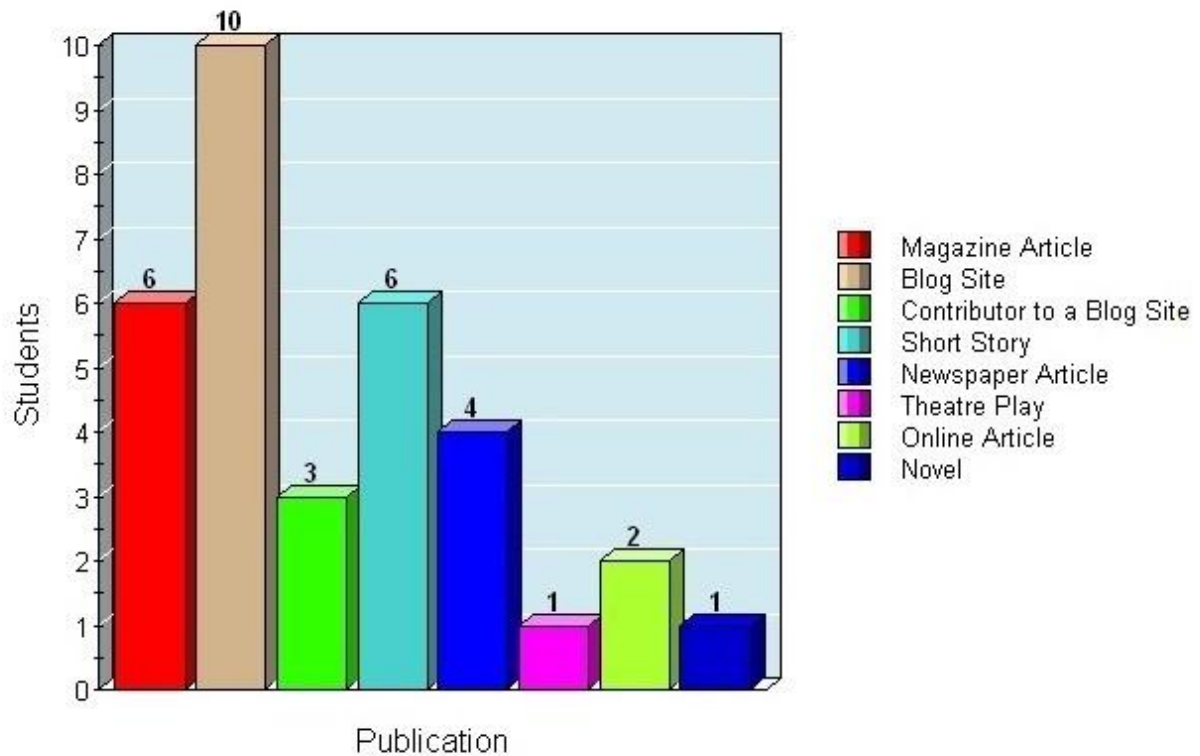


Table 4.

Achieved publications by Professional Writing majors at York College of Pennsylvania

I calculated the answers to the three Likert scale questions as percentages and to find the mean for each. My first question asked the students to rate how well the Professional Writing curriculum would prepare them for their intended career (table 5-Appendix B). The mean for this question was 4.18 with 83% responding as likely or very likely to be prepared. The students responded with 32% strongly agreeing, 56% agreeing and 12% neutral. This tells me the students believe they are learning the necessary skills in the required courses of the Professional Writing major that will lead to successfully be employed.

The second question asked them to rate the likeliness of finding employment in their major/minor following graduation. The mean to this question was 3.82 with 76% responding with likely or very likely to find employment (table 6-Appendix B). The students responded with 21% strongly agreeing, 44% agreeing and 35% remaining neutral. This tells me the students are confident in securing work based on their major and minor academic choice. The third Likert question asked students to rate if the required courses of the Professional Writing would be useful in securing employment following graduation. The mean for this question was 4 with 85% responding likely or very likely (table 7-Appendix B). The students responded with 24% strongly agreeing, 56% agreeing, 18% neutral and 2% disagreeing. This data tells me the students have confidence in the advanced directive courses for the writing major for securing a job in their chosen field.

Discussion & Analysis

Contradictions

As with any research there are always contradictions that arise in the gathered data that adds a confusing layer to the research when it is studied for results. The overwhelming response of 85% of students interested in freelance writing led me to expect a high number of these students would have already taken the Literary Publishing course. This course would offer instruction on how to get one's work published. Instead of a high number having taken this course or expecting to take this course it was split with 12 having interest in freelancing but not taking Literary Publishing, 17 interested and having taken or will take the course, four with no interest in freelancing and one who took the course but had no interest in freelance writing which is perhaps the most confusing answer of them all.

Also contradictory was the responses to the courses the students believed to be least helpful post graduation. There are now 10 required courses in the Professional Writing curriculum: Language & Linguistics, Writing in Professional Cultures, Interdisciplinary Writing, Rhetorical Theory, Advanced Composition, Digital Writing, Document Design, Professional Editing, Experiential Learning (internship) and Senior Seminar. The most common answer to being the least beneficial course was Language & Linguistic with 19 mentions followed by Rhetorical Theory with 13. This was surprising to me because the Language and Linguistics course teaches understanding how language is used worldwide, something that I personally think is important but clearly the other writing majors do not.

The high number of responses to Rhetorical Theory did not surprise me because it is commonly known how much this course is disliked among students and historically had been dropped from writing curriculums only to gain popularity again in the 1960's (Adams 150). While this course may not be popular with the student body, I personally believe it to be beneficial in understanding how speech writing was and still is used to influence and cause an emotional response to those who read the documents. Now that personal writing can be read by others anywhere in the world, the use of rhetoric is alive and well, causing people to respond to what is written on the Internet. With this establishment, there is no turning back to relying on only those most schooled in the art of speech as even the "poor-man speaking" is permitted to have a say on the world-wide web. There is no monitoring on the Internet allowing for all personal opinion to flow freely.

Student Interviews

I interviewed nine students to gain further insight on their personal thoughts toward the professional writing major and give them the “room” to expand on any ideas they would like to share. Several student’s responses were minimal and did not offer any new information, one chose Professional Writing with the intention of becoming a copy-editor and the remaining were helpful in understanding the interest in the Professional Writing major. The common factor between the seven interviewees is the reason they chose to pursue a degree in writing: their love of writing and always being able to tell a good story. Student A, a first term senior, fell in love with the writing program at York when she was transferring from another college. She wishes she had listened to her heart when she originally started her college career and learned her chosen major was not going to fulfill her desires. She left Penn State York as an Education major and transferred to York College as a Bio-Respiratory Therapy major, completing her Associate degree but still feeling the need to earn her Bachelor’s degree. Due to family medical problems she found herself against a wall in continuing that degree and this time went with her heart, enrolling in the Professional Writing major. She was surprised by the enrollment process this time. “Before I was in two majors where I needed to be ‘accepted’ into the program. In Professional Writing we don’t need to do that, so in a way, I almost thought I wouldn’t be challenged, but I absolutely have and both sides of my brain are equally stimulated.” Student A believes the guidance she received from her advisor was crucial in realizing her goal to be a writer.

Student B, a junior at York College, made the point that the rhetorical theory class required in the Professional Writing major could be applied to marketing, advertising, public relations, social media management, etc as it forces students to learn how to synthesize and analyze data, which she argues are critical skills to have in any line of work. In direct opposition to Student B's opinion is Student C's where she stated, "Rhetorical theory had absolutely nothing to do with my future and I do not feel I should have had to take it. Not all students have the same career goals." Student C is a sophomore and it could be said she may not realize the learning potential of the rhetorical class. Student D, a senior, offered that from her experience in an office setting that one of the main things professionals struggle with is wording information correctly, a skill that Professional Writing teaches. In her opinion, there needs to be more focus on digital writing because web-based writing has really taken off in the past few years and the program needs to adapt to this reality. Student E, a senior, believes the major should have marketing electives included because there are so many businesses that offer copy writing jobs and ask for people with writing degrees. Student E who minored in Photography now wishes she had a Marketing minor instead as this would be more beneficial to her in searching for a career.

Student F, a junior, believes the Professional Writing curriculum "provides a broad, holistic view of writing, particularly classes like Interdisciplinary Writing and Document Design." She is pleased the courses do not focus on just academic writing but on types of writing that will be valued in many fields as she searches for a career. Student A believes Document Design and Digital Writing could be combined into one course for those desiring positions creating documents on a computer for Internet viewing. Student C and freshman, Student F, felt

strongly that customizing their courses with the assistance of an advisor would be a great leap ahead for the college in making the career goals of the students a priority. The students written input in the email interviews were insightful in understanding what they believe to be working well in the program and what areas may need improvement or change to the curriculum.

Conclusion

I have gathered significant information in the process of writing this paper regarding Professional Writing curriculums and the debate if the courses are satisfactory in preparing students for working careers. There have been some surprises, such as the determination at one point that creative writing was not found to be important in college curriculums and that rhetoric had been dropped as a preparatory course. What I was most interested in was if students felt they were being prepared for the work force and particularly if they were receiving adequate instruction if they desired to have a freelance career. While the number of students interested in freelance work was high, few were interested in pursuing it as a career but rather to supplement their full time employment. This came as a disappointment to me perhaps because I look forward to writing a memoir and nonfiction books in the future and had expected other Professional Writing majors to have similar goals. I don't think this allowed for bias to overtake my paper but instead opened my eyes to what other students plan to pursue as careers.

The majority of students at York College are pleased with the writing program, the professors and their futures following graduation. There was some discussion concerning classes based on digital writing not necessarily applying to all student's career goals and two

required classes, Language & Linguistics and Rhetorical Theory as “useless” for their future. Also a concern was the lack of marketing electives as part of the Professional Writing curriculum. Based on the students responses and comments concerning these points, I would suggest further study to making additional classes available in marketing and/or business as part of the electives and also consider whether all the required courses are necessary based on the career goals of a student. The suggestion of allowing a customization of the major is worthy of investigating in my opinion, but I would have concerns with students not being required to take the Writing for the Web or Document Design and Interdisciplinary Writing because these focus on creating documents correctly for different genres and formats. No one should graduate college without learning the proper way to create an email, standard letter or memo and no matter what career path a student pursues, there will always be reports required that are expected to be professionally written for their supervisors.

Appendix A

What is your major(s) at York College of PA? *

What is your minor(s) at York College of PA? *

If no minor has been chosen please write undetermined.

What required courses have you completed or are currently enrolled in for the Professional Writing Major?*

Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Language & Linguistics
- ☐ Writing in Professional Cultures
- ☐ Interdisciplinary Writing
- ☐ Rhetorical Theory
- ☐ Digital Writing
- ☐ Document Design
- ☐ Advanced Composition
- ☐ Professional Editing
- ☐ Experiential Learning Seminar (Internship)
- ☐ Senior Seminar

What writing electives have you completed or are currently enrolled for the Professional Writing Major? *

Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Intro to Creative Writing
- ☐ Playwriting
- ☐ Teaching/Tutoring
- ☐ Advanced Creative Writing
- ☐ Poetry Writing
- ☐ Creative Nonfiction
- ☐ Writing Children's Literature

- ☐ Screenwriting
- ☐ Literary Publishing
- ☐ Fiction Writing
- ☐ Experiential Learning Seminar
- ☐ Teaching/Tutoring Writing II
- ☐ Independent Study
- ☐ Special Topics/Professional Writing
- ☐ Other:

What Professional Writing electives do you plan to take in the future? *

Choose all that apply.

- ☐ None, I am graduating in the spring.
- ☐ Intro to Creative Writing
- ☐ Playwriting
- ☐ Teaching/Tutoring of Writing
- ☐ Advanced Creative Writing
- ☐ Poetry Writing
- ☐ Creative Nonfiction
- ☐ Writing Children's Literature
- ☐ Screenwriting
- ☐ Literary Publishing
- ☐ Fiction Writing
- ☐ Experiential Learning Seminar
- ☐ Teaching/Tutoring II
- ☐ Independent Study
- ☐ Special Topics/Professional Writing
- ☐ Other:

What career do you plan to pursue following graduation? *

Name the type(s) of work you hope to be employed in after earning your degree.



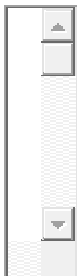
Have you done any writing that has been published?

If you have not published any work, please skip this question.

- ☐ Personal blogsite
- ☐ Contributor to a blogsite
- ☐ Magazine article(s)
- ☐ Academic journal(s)
- ☐ Textbook(s)
- ☐ Novel(s)
- ☐ Newspaper(s)
- ☐ Other:

Are you interested in freelance writing as a part-time or full-time career? *

Please elaborate what your interest is or may be in the future including where you would like to submit manuscripts or articles for publication.



The Professional Writing course curriculum at York College of PA will prepare me for my intended career. *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ *Strongly agree*

I will find employment related to my major/minor following graduation. *

Based on the college courses you have completed at this point.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

The required courses offered in the Professional Writing program will be useful in securing employment. *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

What required course(s) do you feel will be least helpful following graduation? *

Choose all that apply.

- ☐ Language & Linguistics
- ☐ Writing in Professional Cultures
- ☐ Interdisciplinary Writing
- ☐ Rhetorical Theory
- ☐ Advanced Composition
- ☐ Digital Writing
- ☐ Document Design
- ☐ Professional Editing
- ☐ Experiential Learning (Internship)
- ☐ Senior Seminar

Would you be willing to be interviewed based on your answers to this survey? *

All interviewees' names will be kept private. Please give your name, school email and contact number.

What is your sex?

What year student are you at York College of PA?

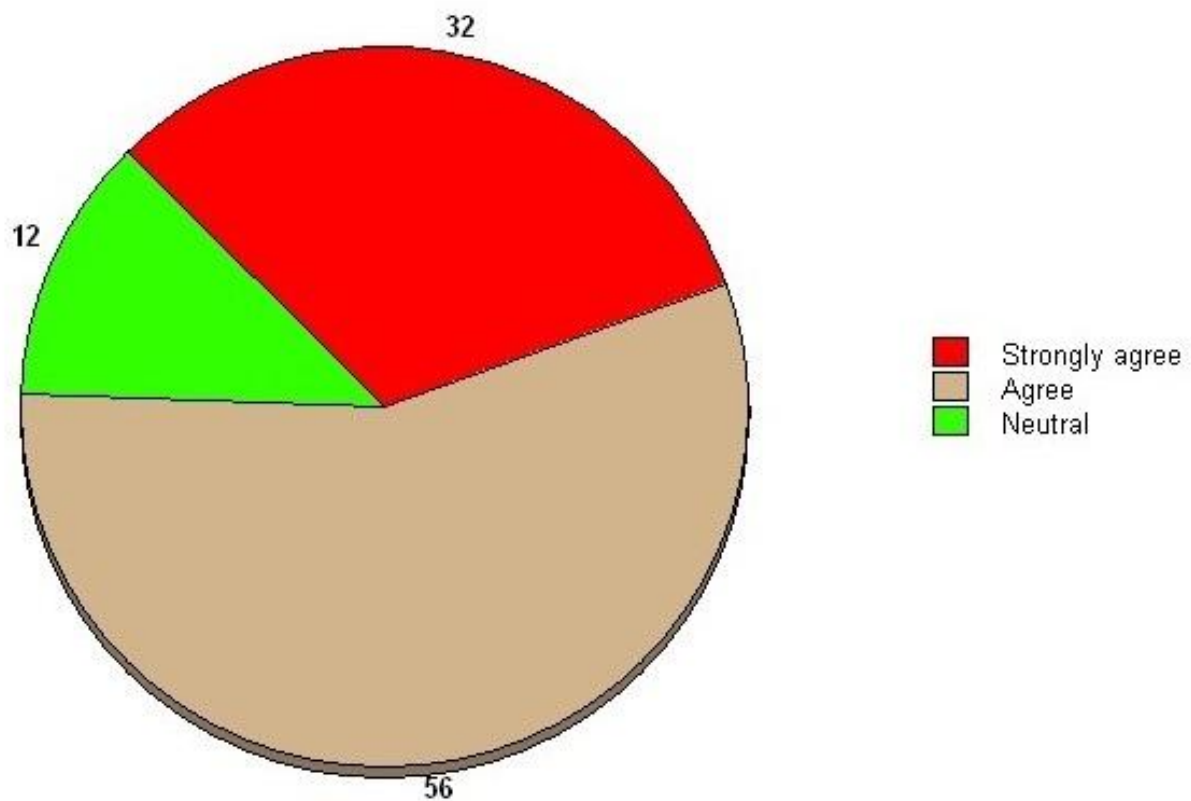
Appendix B**The PW curriculum will prepare me for my career**

Table 5.

Response of likeliness that the Professional Writing curriculum will prepare students for their careers following graduation

Employment related to major /minor

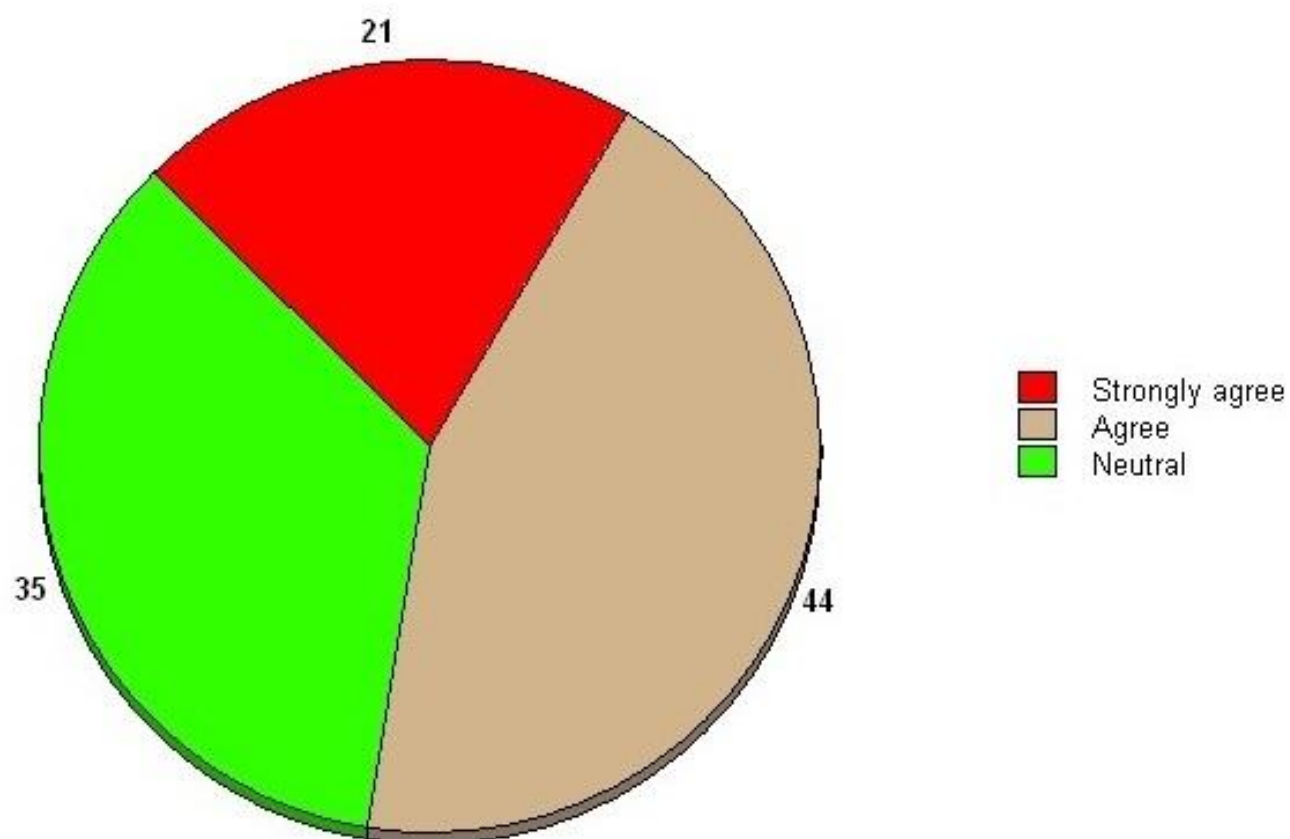


Table 6.
Response of likeliness that students will find employment post graduation to their major and minor.

PW courses are useful for employment

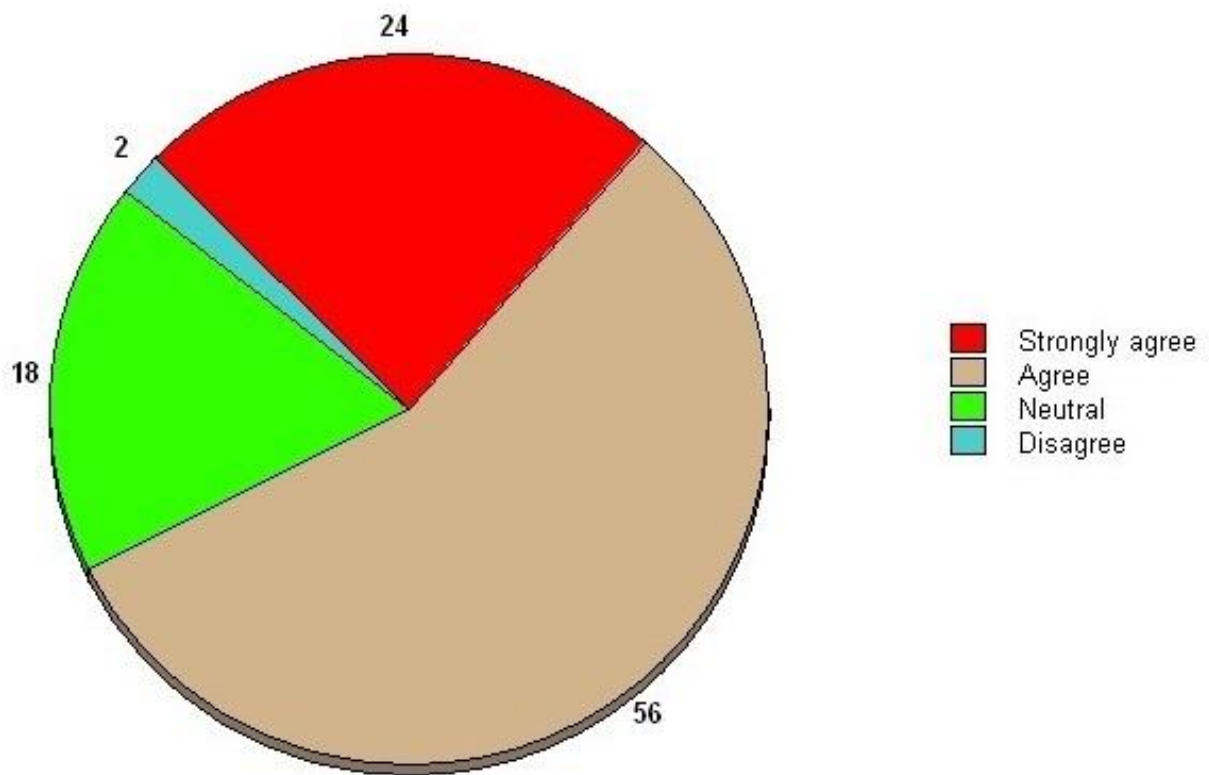


Figure 7.

Response to the likeliness that the Professional Writing courses will be useful to students in finding employment post graduation

Works Cited

- Adams, Katherine H. *A History of Professional Writing in American Colleges*. Texas: Southern Methodist University Press. 1993. Print.
- Anson, Chris M. "Moving beyond the Academic Community: Transitional Stages in Professional Writing." *Written Communication*. Vol. 7. Issue 2. University of Minnesota. (1990) 200-231. Web Accessed 23/1/2014
- Cunningham, Donald H. and Jeanette G. Harris. "Undergraduate and Professional Writing Programs: A Question of Status". *J. Technical Writing and Communication*. Vol. 24 (1994) 127-137. Print.
- Tebeaux, Elizabeth. "Redesigning Professional Writing Courses to Meet the Communication Needs of Writers in Business and Industry". *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 36, No. 4. (Dec. 1985) 419-428. Print. Accessed 18/2/2014
- Weisser, Christian and Laurie Grogman. "Undergraduate Writing Majors and the Rhetoric of Professionalism." *Composition Studies*. 40.1 (2012) 39-59. Print.