

**Professional Writing and English Studies, Undergraduate, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies**

OFFICE OF THE  
 VICE-PROVOST  
 ACADEMIC

**Cyclical Program Review – 2007 to 2014**

**Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan**

**Reported to Joint-Committee on Quality Assurance: April 28, 2017**

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**Program Description**

The Professional Writing Program focuses on theoretical and practical aspects of professional writing across a range of genres. The program seeks to facilitate development of analytic and critical skills in our students while simultaneously providing an introduction to writing in a variety of applied fields: publishing, government, journalism, community service, corporate communications and nonprofit institutions. This program is one of only a few in Canada.

The program proposal originated in 2002 in the English Department as a means of diversifying the curriculum through recognition of a growth in communication related areas having a need for professional writing skills. The initial partner with English and Seneca was the Centre for Academic Writing in the Faculty of Arts. In 2009 the Faculty of Arts and Atkinson College merged to become LA&PS, and the LA&PS Writing Department was established by integrating the writing centres from the two merging units.

The Professional Writing Program is administered by the Writing Department in the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies (LA&PS). The program is offered in collaboration with the Seneca College School of Media and the LA&PS Department of English.

The four Professional Writing degrees offered are:

- Honours BA in Professional Writing
- Specialized Honours BA in English and Professional Writing
- BA in Professional Writing (a delayed-entry program, first available 2015/16)
- Honours Minor BA in Professional Writing (first available 2015/16).

Program	Accepts 2015	Enrolment FTES 2015	Degrees Awarded 2015
English and Professional Writing	34	65	19



Professional Writing	30 (2015)	130	40
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**Reviewers appointed by the Vice-Provost Academic:**

Dr. Doug Brent, Professor, Department of Communication, Media and Film, University of Calgary  
 Dr. Karen Anderson, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology  
 York University

**Documentation Provided to the External Reviewers**

Prior to the site visit, the external reviewers are provided with the following:

- Self-Study Brief, which includes program structure, curriculum and learning outcomes, program reflection, enrolment and retention data, resources, student input and quality enhancement opportunities
- Faculty CVs
- Dean’s /Principal’s Agenda of Concerns
- University, Faculty and Program planning documents

**Site Visit:** Monday, March 7, 2016

The reviewers were provided with what they described as “a detailed and highly useful self-study that included a range of statistics on matters such as enrollment trends together with student survey data and other important information,” in addition to a Dean’s Letter of Concerns that helped direct their inquiry.

The reviewers had the opportunity to speak with a broad range of instructors and administrators associated with the program, including: Alice Pitt, Vice Provost Academic, J.J. McMurtry, LA&PS Associate Dean Programs, Ron Sheese, Writing Department Chair Kerry Doyle, Writing Undergraduate Program Director, Catherine Davidson and Scott McLaren, Library, Sharon Winstanley, Program Director, Seneca College, Kim Michasiw, English and Writing Departments, Stephanie Bell, Faculty Member and Director, Writing Centre, Writing Program faculty members: Geoffrey Huck, Paul McLaughlin, Dominique O’Neill, Marlene Bernholtz.

In addition the reviewers held extended discussions with approximately thirty PRWR students representing a wide cross-section of academic levels and professional interests.

**Outcome:**

The Joint-Committee on Quality Assurance concluded that the Decanal response adequately addressed the review recommendations. Progress on the

recommendations will be included in the Follow-up Report due November 2018. The next CPR will begin in the Fall of 2022.

### **Strengths:**

The Reviewers concluded the paragraph of their report with the following, “(the Professional Writing Program) positions York to distinguish itself as an institution that offers an unusually forward-looking program that has the potential to offer students an education particularly suited to the complex world of the second decade of the twenty-first century”.

In their report, the Reviewers stated the following: The “Curriculum mapping for Professional Writing course outcomes to York University undergraduate degree level expectations,” represents an impressive and convincing piece of evidence for the ability of the courses in the program to meet Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UDDLEs) on a course by course basis.

The Reviewers noted that “students were ready with both praise and blame for the curriculum, often seeming to praise and blame exactly the same elements.” Meeting with a mix of students from the old and the newly revised curriculum may be the reason for this. Amongst the commentary on individual course requirements, the reviewers said they, “nearly fainted when we heard students heap praise on courses such as Grammar and Editing. Possibly the practical orientation of this group has helped them see the point of courses that most students would deride as dull and irrelevant.”

As a recent addition to the program options for York students, the unit has already undertaken substantive curriculum review and is poised to develop as theoretically-informed specialization that provides practical skills in an emerging area of demand across academic and professional programs.

### **Opportunities for Enhancement:**

The Review Report provided fifteen recommendations for consideration by the program and the Faculty. The Program Response to the report reflects on each of these and notes the instances where aspects of the recommendations have already been taken up. The Reviewers recommended no radical changes in curriculum until the current curriculum changes have been rolled out and tested. The report provided a lively engagement with the program’s efforts and offered some suggestions for consideration. There were two recommendations that focused on the relationships with the English program and the ESL program; the department acknowledged both recommendations with appreciation of the distinctions between the two program’s roles. In addition, the joint work with Seneca was acknowledged, and the program expects to bring forward concrete proposals in the near future to clarify joint offerings in relation to the program’s articulated learning outcomes.

The Reviewers made particular note in their report of the need for additional faculty members to replace retirements. They also noted the need for robust program-level advising. The Program Response document notes that they have submitted a hiring priority document for tenure stream appointments, and that the program assistant now has advising responsibilities incorporated into the job description.

The recommendations made by the Reviewers are appended to the end of this Final Assessment Report.

### **Dean's Implementation Plan (selected)**

The Dean's Implementation Plan document focuses on building the strength of the program and notes that "[I]t would seem that indeed the Program is "at a crossroads," requiring both a renewal of the faculty complement and a re-visioning of the role that it plays within LA&PS and the university more broadly, but the opportunities for the program... are significant." The Plan also acknowledges the relationship with the Writing Centre, a student service unit that involves faculty from Professional Writing, and notes that this strength will be kept in mind as the program moves forward.

The Dean's Implementation Plan acknowledges the recommendations included in the reviewer's report, as well as the unit's response, and has used them as a guide to the broader action items in the plan without reproducing them verbatim. In addition, the Dean's Plan acknowledges both the need and the urgency of replacing full-time faculty for the program and the normal processes will be followed to address this.

The Dean commends the Professional Writing program for its recent and thorough curriculum restructuring, which included the overhaul of course proposals and program changes. However the plan notes that "there is still work to be done to create more clarity in the curriculum – from reviewing the designation of courses, to rewriting course descriptions and perhaps creating more focus (removing Editing Shakespeare for example) and "rigour" as the reviewers put it, to rethinking of some courses, to focusing on improving the curriculum in the Digital Authorship and Institutional Writing streams, to creating co-op opportunities for students."

There is a need to clarify the relationships between Professional Writing and other programs, faculties and Seneca College. There is an opportunity to provide professional skills through a minor and other "course packages" for liberal arts students and there is "also significant appetite across the University for collections of courses in Professional Writing," including the Lassonde School of Engineering. The Dean's Office will actively support the development of these ideas and views them as indicative of a program that, while emerging as a 'discipline' in academic terms, holds great potential to enhance the essential skills of students in professional and academic programs.

The Dean's Plan acknowledges that work has been done to ensure advising for students is of the highest quality and indicates that the efforts of the Program, the Dean's Office, through the Associate Dean of Students, on this front should continue.

The Professional Writing program in concert with the Dean's Office specifies the following actions, along with corresponding timelines:

<b>Action</b>	<b>First Responsibility</b>	<b>Final Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Curricular Review Report (addressing the reviewers concerns in detail – building on the program's response – as well as an assessment of the changes made)	Program	Dean's Office in conversation with the Program	May 2017
Discussions with English (about ENPR), ESL (about administrative collaboration), and Seneca (about the nature of the relationship between the two programs)	Program in consultation with the Dean's Office	Dean's Office working with the program and other units	Ongoing in the spring and summer of 2017
Development of a Professional Writing minor	Program	Program	June 2017
Ensure student advising is of the highest quality through a report on advising issues	Program	Dean's Office through Associate Dean Students	June 2017

Progress on the specific elements of the Dean's plan outlined in the chart above will be the subject of the Follow-up Report due in November 2018.

Alice J. Pitt  
Vice-Provost Academic  
York University

*Appendix A*

*Recommendations, External Review Report for Professional Writing, April 2016*

*Recommendation 1:*

Although we recommend no radical changes in curriculum until the present curriculum changes have been thoroughly rolled out and tested, we suggest:

- reconsidering the optional nature of some courses that are foundational to the practical aspects of the program,
- reconsidering the separate designations for WRIT and PRWR courses,
- taking credentialing requirements at least partly into consideration,
- rewriting some course descriptions to better reflect their content, and
- investigating how at least some courses could be rethought to include more portfolio-ready assignments.

*Recommendation 2:*

Consider rethinking some of the more purely theoretical courses in the program to make their relevance to practice clearer, without sacrificing their intellectual rigour on the altar of making them more palatable to students. (The reviewers are well aware that this is more easily said than done.)

*Recommendation 3:*

Foreground the Digital Authorship and Institutional Writing streams in future hires, course creation and departmental promotional materials.

*Recommendation 4:*

(This recommendation is directed more at LA&PS itself than to the Writing Department.) Explore with the English Department the possibility of making the EN portion of the ENPR degree at least somewhat more structured without making it restrictive.

*Recommendation 5:*

Exercise extreme caution in considering bringing the ESL program into Writing. In particular, do not expect the sorts of students who take ESL to be very interested in pursuing a career in Professional Writing.

*Recommendation 6:*

Work out the structure and relative merits of the various possibilities for joint work with Seneca, and make sure that everyone knows as much as possible about how these academic pathways work.

*Recommendation 7:*

Continue the present practice of having no separate enrollment restriction unless the supply/demand ratio shifts radically in future. 3

*Recommendation 8:*

LA&PS must decide whether or not it wishes to make a serious commitment to this highly valuable program, and if so, to squeeze from its meagre resources at least two new positions in the professoriate as well as replacing retirements. Such appointments should be made with the primary goal of increasing the deep expertise of the professoriate in the theoretical and practical aspects of Writing Studies, even if outside advice needs to be brought in to advise future hiring committees.

*Recommendation 9:*

Monitor closely possible areas where the program's resources may be being unreasonably diffused, and take steps to rectify any such excessive demands.

*Recommendation 10:*

Seek more information on where students end up after graduation, and on the expectations of potential employers. However, treat such information as advisory rather than restrictive.

*Recommendation 11:*

Investigate setting up a Co-op or Internship program for Professional Writing students. Our bias is for the former, as it offers more opportunities for students' workplace experience to influence their understanding of their academic experience as well as the reverse, but we have no strong opinion on this matter.

*Recommendation 12:*

Although it is important to take declining enrollments as a heads-up to make sure that the department's curriculum, and its publicity efforts, are the best they can be, our best advice here is not to panic. The program's numbers remain reasonably healthy.

*Recommendation 13:*

Insure that proper training in responding helpfully to student writing is provided to graduate teaching assistants who may have no prior background in the area.

*Recommendation 14:*

The University and the Faculty must recognize the need for robust program-level advising in addition to centralized advising, and help students understand where to go for what types of advice. To be blunt, the various levels of advising need to stop kicking sand in each others' faces.

*Recommendation 15:*

Investigate ways of using senior students as mentors (as opposed to program advisors) for junior students.