

## Debunking “You Want Fries with that?”: Designing Courses to Bridge the Gap between Degree and Career

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We are teased that liberal arts majors will have to learn to say, “Do you want fries with that?” after college, but as professionals and former liberal arts majors ourselves, we know the workplace holds much more promise than a future in fast food. However, with today’s economic crisis and stagnant job market, we need to offer our rhetoric majors career possibilities instead of simple assurances that, as Dorothy Z. Baker argues, “every business needs people with training in critical thinking and writing” (36). Baker continues, stating that “many professions value the skills that are developed in departments of English” and she insists that “if we cannot speak to the centrality of literary studies to the public and private concerns of the world at large, then we see ourselves as small indeed” (41, note 1). We agree.<sup>1</sup> Because we believe it is better to show our students than to tell them that they learn more from active experience, we have designed selected courses within our rhetoric and writing program to offer them guidance and to help them conceive of their major in the form of different careers, both academic and nonacademic, before they hit the job market, careers that exist in the local economy and that make use of their rhetorical and literary skills. These courses include our capstone course, the senior seminar, and two internship courses. In what follows, we present the design and benefits of these courses

which work to help students find careers that our rhetoric majors and minors may not envision otherwise.<sup>2</sup> These courses help them bridge the gap between being a student and a professional.

## **BACKGROUND**

Fort Smith is located on the Arkansas/Oklahoma border in the Arkansas River Valley between the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains. The city with its population of approximately 82,000 offers the charm and values of a small town, while its history of manufacturing as the largest employers with the attendant service industries and professional careers resting on that base make it a major industrial and technological attraction. Cultural opportunities abound. Ft. Smith is home to the oldest symphony in the state and the Ft. Smith Little Theater consistently produces award-winning productions. The annual Riverfront Blues Fest brings in national artists; the Old Fort Days Rodeo cowboys and cowgirls entertain us yearly. The remains of the original Ft. Smith, the old fort built in 1817 to protect settlers on their journey to the American West and existing today as the Ft. Smith Historic Site, reminds us of our beginnings while Fort Chaffee which replaced it and where Elvis was inducted into the Army, continues to be a base for the Arkansas National Guard and keeps us in the present (“About Us”). This is a city rich in history and a major crossroads in the state.

The University of Arkansas–Fort Smith, a land grant institution with a 75-year history, became a four-year university in January 2002. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds. The latest headcount showed nearly 7300 credit enrollment. The average age of our students is 26, although that is quickly decreasing as we grow and expand the number of

degrees we offer, and as more and more traditional students come to our university (“About Us”). Many of our students already have families and want to continue to live and work in the area once they graduate. However, we bleed many of our graduates into other regions of the country as they do not perceive that there are opportunities for them in the state. Part of our goal is to help them find those opportunities.

Dr. Luebke was hired in the fall of 2003 to help develop and teach in the rhetoric program we had in place; Dr. Rhodes came on board in the fall of 2004. Although the Senior Seminar was on our degree plan as a capstone, the course had not yet been developed and so had not yet been approved by our Curriculum Committee. Thus, it fell to the rhetoric faculty to design a capstone course that would meet the needs of both the students and the rhetoric program. The capstone course was approved by our Curriculum Committee in 2006. It was taught for the first time in Fall 2007 and then again in Fall 2008. It is currently offered each fall semester. The Internship course is new to our program. It was developed and approved in 2006, the field experience internship a year later. Field Experience has been offered one semester and writing internships are offered every semester, as our students request them.

These three courses work together as a capstone and stepping stones to guide our students in the transition between the undergraduate degree and what comes next, be that graduate school or a job in a nonacademic setting.

## **SENIOR SEMINAR—The Capstone**

Senior Seminar provides a capstone experience for rhetoric majors. In discussing their own capstone process in a master's teaching program, Brown and Benson invoke a metaphor of the capstone "as an architectural feature" that "diminishes erosion of mortar," which in educational settings refers to "a final course in [students'] education that 'protects what they have learned by integrating course work into a climactic experience'" (675). In our own field, M. Baker argues that a capstone course "should 'round out' the English student's program of study and enable him or her to 'integrate the skills and knowledge acquired throughout the four years of study' in the English major" (1). As Baker notes, however, the way capstone courses are supposed to work in actual practice is not so clear (1-2). In developing a capstone course in sociology, Dickinson raises the question, "Should a capstone course 'cap' the undergraduate experience, or should it function as a bridge to the world beyond college?" (215). We argue that a single, one-semester course is hard-pressed to serve both purposes; thus, we developed the Senior Seminar to work in conjunction with the Internships to provide both the capstone and stepping stones needed to bridge the gap between a degree and career.

For their capstone experience, students in Senior Seminar at UA Fort Smith complete the development of a portfolio of writing that best represents the work they have done while in the rhetoric program. From this portfolio, students select one or two pieces of writing to further revise, polish, and submit for publication or for use as writing samples when applying for graduate school or employment. In addition to researching potential graduate programs, students

research selected career fields in order to identify specific areas or positions in which writing is a significant component of the work being done in that field.

## **Course Design**

In designing a course to protect what students have learned, round out their education in rhetoric, and integrate skills and knowledge in a climactic experience, we focused on three major course components: a rhetoric program portfolio, a personal statement on rhetoric, and career field research.

## **Rhetoric Program Portfolio**

While many capstone courses are built around an in-depth project on a specific topic of interest to the student (M. Baker; Brown and Benson), we take Dickinson's position that to achieve the goal of integrating the different parts of a student's educational experiences, "the capstone cannot be a highly specialized, individually oriented, or voluntary course tacked onto the end of an existing curriculum" (215). Thus, instead of building our course around a single, in-depth project, we focus on a program portfolio that includes nine pieces of writing, most chosen from the work completed in previous courses within the rhetoric program. For this portfolio, we ask students to select two pieces from each of the three program areas: nonfiction writing, persuasive writing, and technical writing plus one piece from outside the program. We also ask students to include their personal statement on rhetoric, as well as a reflective essay to articulate how the

portfolio demonstrates that students have met our program goals and objectives and what students have learned about their writing during their time in the program.

## **Defining Rhetoric: Personal Statement on Rhetoric**

In a capstone course for the English major, M. Baker asks students to “reflect back upon their educational experiences in an attempt to [. . .] develop a critical understanding of the discipline” (5). In our Senior Seminar course, we hope to help our students develop just such an understanding of the discipline of rhetoric. Although there are a number of institutions across the nation that award undergraduate degrees in rhetoric, these degrees are not the norm. In addition, the term *rhetoric* is often used in negative ways and has negative connotations for many people—both inside and outside of the academy. We want our students to be able to respond intelligently to questions about their major, “participate in the theoretical debates surrounding the study of [rhetoric]” (M. Baker 6), and counter any negative attitudes they might run across. Thus, we ask our students to develop a personal statement on rhetoric that defines rhetoric as a field, discusses its scope and value as a discipline, and articulates how students see their major applying to their future career plans. To this end, students read classical and contemporary texts with both positive and negative takes on rhetoric, sometimes revisiting texts they encountered in previous courses; they keep response journals on the readings; and we discuss these readings on a regular basis in class. From the readings, journals, and class discussions, students develop their personal statements and include them in their program portfolios.

## **Translating the Rhetoric Major into a Career: Career Field Research**

In her discussion on preparing English majors for future careers, D. Baker notes, “a fair number of these students simply have no concrete vision of the way in which they will earn their livelihood” (36). We argue that the same is true of our rhetoric majors. If our students were in cities like Little Rock, Oklahoma City, or Dallas, our majors would find many job listings for technical writers or professional writers. However, in Fort Smith, this is not the case. It isn’t that the jobs aren’t there—it’s just that they are called something else. The purpose of the career field research component of the course is to give students the opportunity to identify positions in which writing is a significant component of the work being done in specific career fields. To this end, students conduct traditional job searches—compiling lists of jobs and job titles for which their rhetoric degree qualifies them. In addition, students interview local business owners and human resources personnel, explaining to them what they know and can do as rhetoric majors and asking about jobs for which they qualify. Students in the class share their research and develop an extensive list of job titles and actual job listings for which their degree qualifies them. In addition, each student includes his or her own contribution to the career field research component of the course in the program portfolio.

## **Benefits of the Capstone**

From the perspective of students, there are a number of benefits from a capstone course like Senior Seminar. First, the course gives students the time, place, and guidance they need to assemble portfolios of their best work and to reflect upon the processes they use to select,

reconsider and revise, and polish the pieces they include. The course helps to protect what students have learned by integrating their rhetorical skills and knowledge because it requires them to return to earlier pieces, bringing to those pieces more sophisticated perspectives on rhetorical issues and more practiced abilities with regard to revising and editing. As an artifact, the portfolio represents the tangible results of the work students have done while in the program and serves as a body of work from which to draw to demonstrate to employers or graduate schools what students are able to do as rhetoric majors. In the two semesters the course has been taught, a number of students have expressed the pride they felt in seeing their work presented in the portfolio format. One student said, “I didn’t realize I had written so many different kinds of documents. Now that I see it all together in one place, I feel more confident as a writer.”

Students also recognized how their skills had progressed. Another student said, “When I turned in that paper for a previous class, I thought it was pretty good. But when first I brought it to Senior Seminar to work on for my portfolio, I realized it was kind of lame, and I could see lots of ways to revise it and make it better. That shows me I’ve become a better writer.”

Second, in developing their personal statement of rhetoric, students gained an understanding of the origins of the negative connotations associated with the term rhetoric and practiced how to rebut those connotations in talking about the meaning and value of their major. As one student said in the evaluation of the course, “No one has ever asked me to develop a definition of rhetoric. Now I know what to say when people ask me, and I don’t have to dodge the question. I know I’ll be more confident now when I go on job interviews.”



Third, in completing the career field research, students were able to see that the skills and knowledge they attained while working in the rhetoric program are highly valued in the world beyond the academy. Although we want to believe—and we do—that there is value in education far beyond the job opportunities it provides, our students are, of course, heavily investing in translating their major into a career. We believe that including this component in our capstone course is an important step in helping students to do that. One student said, “I didn’t realize there were so many different jobs in so many different industries open to me. I thought I had to look for jobs with ‘writer’ in the title.” For example, Tim spoke with the human resources manager at Arkansas Best Freight, one of the largest trucking firms in Arkansas. He discovered that his degree qualifies him for the job of Research Analyst, a position that pays well, is in demand, and sounded very interesting to him.

At a certain point, sometime during the senior year, students get a case of senioritis. During this time, they often ask themselves: Have I learned anything? Do I really know what I’m doing? Students in Senior Seminar can be confident in their answer to these questions. The work represented in their program portfolios provide direct evidence of what students have learned and can do.

## **INTERNSHIPS—The Stepping Stones**

Internships are the subject of much discussion in technical and professional writing but less in the English major itself, as Jennifer Bay notes (134-35). Although not everyone agrees on how internships should be structured, the guiding concept is that internships allow students the benefit

of learning about the world of work with the safety net of still being a student. At the core, internships permit students a safe transition period while showing them they have skills that the economy values.

At UA-Ft. Smith, we have two internship classes students can take. One, “Writing Internship,” is a traditional internship; it involves individual field experience with a writing related business, organization, or nonprofit agency. Students work under the supervision of an individual at the internship business/agency and a member of the rhetoric faculty. The other, “Field Experience in Writing,” is a directed internship in which all the students have the same experience—this internship is more structured, involving in-class group work and field experience in using rhetorical skills to pursue pre-determined writing related tasks. Students meet in class one day per week and in supervised placement settings. Class meetings emphasize theory of workplace writing; field experience puts theory into practice.

## **Course Design**

A key ingredient to success with internships is to combine thoughtful design with flexibility. The Writing Internship is designed to allow students to work independently with the sponsoring field agency, while the Field Experience course is designed to provide more structure.

## **Writing Internship**

Our internships are open to Rhetoric and English majors and minors with junior and senior standing; they may repeat the course up to 6 credit hours. We introduced flexibility by making

the internship course a variable credit course to meet student (and provider) need (standard being 9 hours worked per week times 15 weeks for 3 credit hours). The internship is set up much as Bay described as an independent study internship: the student requests an internship by completing an Internship Request Form, letting us know what kind of internship is requested; either the student has a predetermined place to intern or a business/organization/nonprofit is determined with the excellent help of career services, the place on our campus out of which all internships are coordinated; the student, work supervisor and faculty member discuss internship parameters; the student commences work; the student keeps a journal over the semester, checks in with faculty member at scheduled times, and at end of semester writes a reflective essay on the internship experience. Students are encouraged to keep examples of their work for their professional portfolio. We elected to go with this model instead of a practicum approach like that described by Bay so that writing internships could be offered every semester. With the practicum approach, enough students would have to take the practicum to make a class; with our approach, if one student wants to take an internship, that can be accommodated. Bay's point that "while universities speak loud and long about the value of internships, they rarely provide the institutional support needed to actually undertake the endeavor seriously" (135) is well made; however, giving a faculty member a course release to supervise a few students every semester is simply not practical at this time. And in our case, we wanted the flexibility that the independent study model gives that the scheduled practicum once an academic year does not.

## **Field Experience in Writing**

With this class, we have added an internship practicum, in order to have the best of both worlds. Rather than have students complete internships with individual agencies as Bay describes, we have conceived of this practicum as a single internship with each student having a part of the whole. So far we have only had a chance to teach the class one time and the internship's focus was on technical editing. The students edited the admissions package for the university, a collection of ten documents, for the director of admissions, offering him and his staff valuable input for improving these documents. As noted earlier, this is a time of tremendous growth and change in focus for our university, so these documents were scheduled to receive a major facelift. The Director of Admissions and Registrar were interested in what students, particularly students trained in rhetorical analysis, would think of the package of documents and how they worked together. Future classes will have both academic and nonacademic focus.

## **Benefits of the Internship Program**

The internship classes are new to our program. They extend the bridge built in senior seminar, offering stepping stones beyond our capstone class. We are already seeing the benefits in helping our students to bridge this gap between getting the degree and beginning the career.

First, in working on their internship, students build connections they have previously not made, or at least have not yet articulated. In the academy, we tend to compartmentalize knowledge: persuasive writing, technical writing, nonfiction writing. Our students have learned this compartmentalizing only too well. What they have trouble with is making connections

between what they are learning in one class with what they learned in another class, with what goes on beyond the walls of the classroom. The internships made it easier for our students to make those connections. For example, in senior seminar, as students build their portfolios, they make connections between what they learned in their various courses. During their internships, students make connections between their coursework and what they are doing in the field.

Becca interned with the Morgan Nick Foundation, a local nonprofit. She made connections between lessons learned in technical writing and persuasive writing courses and used her creativity to edit and revamp the nonprofit's existing brochure to create a more effective tri-fold brochure. When she finished, she used elements of her document to design a bookmark as well. Mark mentioned pulling together lessons from several classes, including technical editing and writing for the workplace as he completed the work in the field experience class, reviewing the documents, deciding what needed revision, rephrasing, or a complete redesign and page layout.

A marked increase in student confidence was the second benefit of the internships. The main way that students measure their skills is through grades. If they make an A on an assignment, they feel successful. Senior seminar builds on this with the gathering of the portfolio—the students have the tangible results of all the work they've done. With an internship, students add another measure of success; their success this time is determined by how well their product meets expectations of their audience—an experience that too few of our students have in an academic setting. Taylor said that she thought she knew she was a good writer; she has a 3.9 GPA and always had received high praise on her writing. She has also

published two of her essays on gaming. However her internship at the Van Buren township gave her new confidence in herself: “They really liked the work I did, the documents I wrote and that I edited. I only have a minor in rhetoric, but it has really polished my writing skills.” Satisfying her audience made her feel a stronger sense of success.

Tim felt the same sense of achievement. He interned for a local dentist who was interested in starting a monthly newsletter. He spent several weeks setting up the page layout for the newsletter and kept running into problems with the office manager. She wanted the staff members to appear in large bubbles with little bubbles leading to blurbs about each one. Tim tried it and not only was it unflattering to several staff members, it was too busy on the page, in addition to the extra use of color being more costly. Tim felt confident in using his rhetorical knowledge to persuade her to go for a more clean design. She was impressed with the confidence of his manner and Tim’s design is the one they ultimately chose.

The students involved in the field experience class had similar gains. By looking at the documents, finding simple errors, places where text and pictures didn’t match, places where numbers weren’t consistent between documents, problems in page layout and design—and then having a team consisting of someone from marketing, someone from the design team and the head of admissions listen carefully to their suggestions made them realize that their skills were sound and valuable. Knowing that they were working with documents that had been published, had been used by the university for the past year, and that they were making suggestions that would be taken into account in the current revision cycle gave these students a huge boost in confidence.

These students learned something more. Not all their suggestions were accepted by the Director of Admissions and his team. As Kirk St. Amant demonstrates in his article, “Expanding Internships to Enhance Academic Industry Relations: a Perspective in Stakeholder Education,” while technical writing students learn how to prepare documents for “final” users—customers—they often fail to learn or to even know about the “organizational reading culture until they become a part of their organization”(232). In fact, it is often learned through failure to understand it. For our students, that was the case. The organizational reading culture of the university was brought home to the students in the meeting with the Director of Admissions and his staff and our field experience interns. Some things had to be done a certain way—the UAFS way. As the end of our session, the students were picking up on this way of “reading” documents and had modified their suggestions accordingly as they incorporated this new knowledge.

Third, students realize their skills are marketable. Students find job possibilities they weren’t aware of in senior seminar. Then by working in these internships, students realize that their skills are marketable—that people in the workplace need employees with the skills they now possess. Many of our majors and minors go on to graduate school. But others are out in the workplace. Tim has a job with the Veterans Administration in Little Rock. Faith is an administrative assistant for a local doctor. Vicki is working with the Oklahoma Department of Health Services. Diedre is working for the city of Ft. Smith. These are jobs they learned about directly or indirectly through their internships. As Janice Tovey notes, internships provide students with experiences that cannot be duplicated in the classroom, no matter how well constructed the classroom experience: “The environmental, social and cultural conditions of the

workplace can help students identify their own strengths and interests and abilities. It can aid the students in making decisions about their education as well as their career” (225). Putting together their portfolios and going through the job search in senior seminar, working as student interns helped these students when it came time to transition and find that career after graduation.

## CONCLUSIONS

We began our course design with an eye toward helping our students bridge the gap between classroom and career. The capstone class pushes them to make connections and find opportunities. The internships give the chance to try out those opportunities. Although the previous discussion of benefits focuses on students, both our program and our university benefit from the courses we designed as we worked to “establish new ways to support our many [rhetoric] majors” in their pursuit of careers both inside and outside of the academy (D. Baker 36).

From the perspective of our program, one of the greatest benefits from a capstone course like the Senior Seminar is the opportunity for authentic assessment. We knew we needed to assess our rhetoric program—in fact, we were required to do so by our Committee on the Assessment of Learning Outcomes (CALO)—and we knew we wanted to do it using portfolios that showcase the students’ best writing. However, before the Senior Seminar, we did not have a place in our program for students to develop such portfolios. We could have simply required our rhetoric majors to turn in portfolios of their writing as a graduation requirement so that we could assess our program, but without some tangible return to them—and without some guidance from



us—we wondered about the quality of the portfolios they would produce and the value to our program of an assessment based on such portfolios. In addition, there are ethical considerations in requiring students to complete such a task merely for our purposes. Assessment scholar Brian Huot has argued that assessment is something we do to students and that if we are going to do it to them, we should be sure there is value in what we do and that students recognize and share in that value. We believe that assembling portfolios of their best work as part of a capstone course gives our students a unique opportunity to develop their mastery of our program objectives and goals, while it gives us the opportunity to assess their achievement with an assessment tool that is an integral part of the curriculum rather than an added testing requirement.

These classes build strong relationships, within the academic community and between the university and the surrounding community. Faculty members in the program extend their working relationship outside their usual circle to staff and faculty members in the wider university community and in the surrounding nonacademic environment. Not only can this result in better understanding and improved research agendas, it can make one a more informed faculty member. As Tovey illustrates, “Understanding various corporate environments, the social and economic conditions of writing positions, and the expectations of the companies who hire their students will help faculty counsel and advise them on decisions about their classes and careers” (225-226). As we have grown in our knowledge of the local community, we can speak more confidently about what is waiting for our students in the workplace.

The program itself—and the university—benefits. As our students go into the community to do their research for the senior seminar, and as they complete their internships, our

rhetoric program becomes visible to the community at large. As our students display their skills on the job, the community realizes that not only is there a rhetoric program at UA-Ft. Smith, it graduates students with very marketable skills. We have one local Chamber of Commerce who has been so satisfied with past interns they will take a Rhetoric intern any time we have one available—which leads to the benefits to the community—as they too have gained from our courses. The immediate gain is the labor and products produced by the student interns. But just as valuable is the relationship with the university and the department.

If someone made the “Do you want fries with that?” comment to one of our rhetoric majors, they would get a full dissertation on exactly what he or she could do with a rhetoric major. We started out with a desire to flesh out our rhetoric course program so that we could help students bridge that gap between student and professional, between college and career. The capstone class and the internship classes provide the necessary stepping stones to help the motivated student accomplish that goal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We have developed a Rhetoric and Writing major at the University of Arkansas—Ft. Smith. Students can pursue a specialty in technical rhetoric, persuasive rhetoric, or creative nonfiction. Our university is one of the few who offer this opportunity to undergraduates.

<sup>2</sup> The courses we are discussing are in our Rhetoric program. However, many English majors and minors take advantage of our courses, the internships in particular.

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