RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Story Versus Search: Writing Studies Graduate Recruitment Lessons Learned

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**Abstract** Recruitment is an increasingly important part of program and graduate directors' work and this paper combines a case study of one small, masters-only Writing studies program's work to thoughtfully and systematically craft digital content to help grow our program along with survey data from current graduate students and alums revealing what sorts of information, stories, and search terms prospective students seek and need to make decisions about applying and committing to graduate schools. Taking up a user experience approach, we sought to understand the ways digital recruitment tools (social media, emails, webpages, etc.) attract and inform prospective students with specific attention to ways social media story and online searches work together to engage prospective students. We found that students evaluate programs first based on funding/costs and curriculum, and if they think the program might meet their expectations, then they evaluate social media to see students and their experiences in the program. These findings suggest that social media stories build and sustain community, but these stories may not reach prospective students without an awareness of search terms and strategies used by those seeking a graduate program.

**Keywords** graduate student recruitment, writing studies and professional writing, content strategy, social media tools

## Introduction

In Jen Almjeld's six years as director of our professional writing master's program, she learned a great deal about university budgets and rules

regarding tuition rates, a little about visa applications for international students, about program assessment and, of course, about recruitment. Her training as a compositionist and writing teacher was clearly helpful in much of this, but the sales part of the job, the "pitch" needed to excite and entice prospective students, felt like something new and scholarship in the field provided little advice about how to "sell" our program to students we knew it would benefit.

Initially telling stories, a reflex for most writing studies faculty, felt like the ideal recruitment tool and this dovetailed with increasing pressure from our graduate school, particularly during the precarious Covid years, for all program directors to share digital stories of student successes, career opportunities, and alumni placements. Such stories generally highlight individual accomplishments of exceptional students as a way to inspire or prove the success of a program based on students' achievements. Creating and sharing these stories requires literacies for digital content strategy and so Almjeld quickly turned to Angela Crow, a fellow faculty member also serving as our program's social media manager.

Similar to Almjeld's experience as grad director, when Crow agreed to oversee the department's social media and parts of the website, she was and wasn't prepared for the role of social media manager nor the task of advertising programs. While Crow has familiarity with managing website content, her understanding of social media comes from studying rather than creating content. Crow focused her research on the rhetorical strategies different influencers use when advocating in online venues like Twitter and Instagram but assessing others' posts and creating content are two different realities. When the administrative assistant who had been designated the program's point person for social media took a different job and we couldn't quickly hire someone to replace our colleague, we began working together to figure out how to spread the word about our program in ways that were both glowing and honest. Together we learned about branding our graduate writing program, strategies for garnering clicks and views online, and about the limits of story in service of recruitment.

Ours is not an unfamiliar story, particularly for master's programs facing similar pressure to recruit and enroll ever-increasing graduate cohorts without the administrative resources of a Ph.D. program. Both of us juggled our teaching load, our research and other service obligations, and we tried to address the desire to increase our program in the midst of our own learning curve regarding social media and its role in recruitment. Recruitment pressure in the absence of resources and explicit training seems a common challenge for program administrators in our field. As we experimented and sought out the rather limited literature on this work, we became more curious about how or whether social media played a role in

recruitment. We created a pilot study, and the results, coupled with our own experiences, suggest that the stories we tell on social media about our program don't really help potential students to know about our program. Instead, our research suggests social media works best to celebrate and sustain our current students' sense of community.

## Our Graduate Program Story

Our graduate program began as the Institute for Technical and Scientific Communication in 1998 and then became part of the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication in 2008. After major curricular revisions in 2013, a version of our current program—housed in a stand-alone writing studies department—emerged. We offer two specializations, Public and Professional Writing and Health and Science Writing, with 33 required credit hours, six of those hours for either a thesis or internship project. The majority of our students receive assistantships that include tuition waiver and a stipend for working with faculty, teaching freshman composition or as writing or digital media specialists in other departments on campus. Up until the last three years or so, we have mainly attracted students from our state and others nearby in the northeast, but our most recent cohorts have included a greater number of out-of-state and international students leading us to new questions about how and where prospective students hear about our program. We presumed that we were reaching our target student audiences thanks to the Graduate School's recruiting assistance and because of our school's status from regional to R2 university, but we wanted to make sure our approaches were working for all students, particularly those from outside our region.

For Almjeld, student recruitment was an often invisible but always critical part of leading a graduate program. This recruitment took many forms including one-on-one meetings and phone calls with prospective students, scheduling campus visits, virtual and in-person info sessions, and direct emails. It also meant sustaining and revising the grad program's digital identity which included a website created and coded by the previous graduate director, two Facebook accounts, one for enrolled students and alums and a more public-facing page for prospective students and other stakeholders, a fledgling Instagram account and then-Twitter account. During Almjeld's tenure, the grad program's website, now nested in the school's main page along with pages for "Minor," "Major" and "First Year Writing" was streamlined and brought into compliance with the university's branding guidelines. It has since been revised by the current graduate director to include seven individual pages including sections on "Admissions," "Financial Support" and "Careers." Almjeld, working with the previous social media manager, also made a concerted effort to create content

for more frequent social media posts including announcements for upcoming recruitment events, reminders for graduation application deadlines, job leads for alums, and photos and short captions about everyday occurrences like classes meeting on our sunny main Quad or gathered for a fire pit at the director's house. In 2017, when Almjeld became director, social media seemed the key to marketing. Everything from clothing and restaurants to vacations and homebuying was moving from web-centric spaces to social media and our university urged programs to beef up our presence on all kinds of social media spaces.

For Crow, who was new to figuring out social media for a department presence, the recruitment and social media piece felt like an intergenerational challenge (May, 2021) demanding focus on ways people in their twenties now search for grad programs. While Laura Palmer's (2012) article on Facebook ads revealed the complications of shifting advertising strategies over time, Crow hadn't anticipated how much she might need to learn in order to do this work, both in terms of content, but also in terms of re/learning content management systems, and programs/resources that facilitate social media content creation and data analysis of reach. Together Crow and Almjeld drew on university recommendations including the advice to limit the numbers of social media accounts. Instead of accounts for undergraduate and graduate content, we were encouraged to have one account for Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. We were slow to adopt TikTok because of the need to create video, and then our governor banned TikTok in 2022, so we relied on Instagram to reach prospective students. We agreed with our university social media brand guidelines, suggesting that the Facebook platform is "the best place to reach older demographics" and decided to approach Facebook as a platform to communicate with alums and faculty even as we kept in mind that "younger audiences are still consuming content" here (JMU Brand Guide, Social Media Platforms 2025). LinkedIn also became an important social media space for us in an attempt to connect prospective, current and graduated students for networking opportunities and also to model this digital writerly identity performance for current students. Finally, we saw X-Twitter as a venue for announcements relevant to faculty and graduate students at other universities. We often posted similar content across multiple platforms due to resource constraints and when pressed for time we privileged the creation of content on Instagram as it seemed the obvious place to connect with prospective and current students and younger alums.

Our challenges, when it comes not only to choosing the best channels for recruitment but also to find the time and energy needed to maintain these channels, seem common to other program directors in writing studies. In 2021, while serving as co-chair of the Master's Degree Consortium of Writing Studies

Specialists (MDCWSS), Almjeld and colleagues from the MDCWSS presented a virtual workshop at the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) about program profiles as recruitment tools. In a packed virtual session, it was clear that many writing studies leaders face recruitment pressures and that few of us had the time or training to really know where to start. As part of this project, we reviewed about a decade's worth of CPTSC conference programs, and although we found that recruitment has been discussed numerous times at the conference, there remains little in the literature in the field about best practices for program administrators to take up this work. The skillset needed for this sort of sales work is further complicated by the ethical implications of telling the best story you can about a program while also sharing information that will help students—particularly those from underrepresented populations—decide whether or not your program and community are really a good fit.

This paper offers a case study of one program's work to thoughtfully and systematically craft digital content to help grow our program and offers survey data from current graduate students and alums revealing what sorts of information, stories, and search terms prospective students seek and need to make decisions about applying and committing to graduate schools. Specifically, our study considers what messages prospective students need and want and how we might best create a vibrant program brand that invites others to join us. The study combines data analysis of our program website with survey data from 19 current students and alums from our graduate program. The survey asked participants to consider their own graduate program search processes and strategies, keywords used in such searches, and the importance of types of information (employment rates of graduates, housing availability and health and wellness resources, for example) shared on webpages and social media accounts by graduate programs. Combined with our own experiences with recruitment and program branding, this paper shares challenges and lessons learned about the tensions between story and search as well as resources for those taking up recruitment work.

# Graduate Student Recruitment

A review of CPTSC annual conference programs from the last 10 years or so, 2010-2022, sheds light on both conference and scholarly trends in our field regarding recruitment strategies. Although the topic has been the focus of some conference talks and panels over the years, recruitment issues, limited resources and training for such work, and best practices for the field have not remained at the forefront of professional conferences or journals for tech comm and writing studies program administrators. In 2010, a session by Bill Williamson and Jodi Radloff focused on departmental identity and in 2012 we see things like "Student Perceptions of

Disciplinary Identity Within an English Department's Technical/Professional Writing Emphasis" by Jamie McDaniel and 2013's "Like This if you Agree: Developing a Professional Writing Program's Identity for the Social Media Era" by Jeffrey A. Rice. These early attempts to brand programs seem tied to the growth of tech comm programs in general. In 2014, there were two sessions on online and hybrid programs, two on program naming and several on surviving times of austerity. This concern about sustaining and growing programs resulted in some interesting panels in 2014 including "Redefining and Rebranding an Effective Program" by Nick Carrington. The abstract for the presentation explains

> Our program has been fighting the numbers game for many years. We are constantly looking for new ways to recruit and help prospective students, their parents, and our administration understand what we teach and why it is worthwhile. Attendees will take away some recruiting and marketing strategies to implement in their own programs. (Carrington, 2014)

In the same panel, Rick Mott presented "Social Media's Role in Program Administration" explaining "how Technical Communication (TC) program administrators can exploit social media networks to connect to and communicate with the four primary TC stakeholders: current students and instructors in the major, potential students, and alumni." These panels presented a decade ago suggest the pairing of social media for recruitment and branding work and Carrington's work, in particular, demonstrates the plight of program administrators "constantly looking for new ways to recruit." Our study of literature on the subject suggests that a) program administrators are still looking and b) there's not much help to be found in literature in the field.

In 2015, the CPTSC conference seemed to be paying particular attention to Twitter with numerous panels discussing ways to conduct programmatic research (Lam), bolster program identity (Hannah) and attract prospective students (Freiss). The three authors developed this talk into the article, "Connecting Programmatic Research with Social Media" (2016). In 2016, Marj Rush Hovde offered a talk on UX-informed grad program website revision for recruitment and Felicia Chong's session abstract noted, "we have frequently discussed recruitment strategies at CPTSC conferences … but there is surprisingly little literature in our scholarship that specifically focuses on our recruitment strategies and their effectiveness." We believe this remains the case eight years later. In 2017, Lisa Melonçon and Bob Johnson offered a workshop on "How to brand technical and professional communication programs" explaining, "the purpose of branding is to identify and to express the truth or value of an organization." Like us, Melonçon and Johnson seem focused on both the ethical and effective components of program marketing. That

same year, Julie Watts presented "Using a social media strategy to recruit master's students in technical and professional communication." Like Watts, we came to our work believing in the power of social media to recruit perspective students, but our study suggests that spaces like Facebook and Instagram are afterthoughts for modern students who seem to rely most heavily on keyword search and websites to make decisions about where to study. In 2019, we see a turn to social justice work in TPC and this shifts the conference recruitment discussions to ways to recruit and retain more diverse students to our programs (DeNora, Oswal, and Zdenek). From 2020-2022, the conference remained understandably focused on Covid-era changes and challenges with little mention of branding or recruitment strategies. Our overview of conference presentations suggests to us that while CPTSC and other writing studies programs have seemingly been worried about and talking about recruitment for more than a decade, relatively little has made it to the literature in the field. Also, while social media has been embraced in our curriculum and internships, it seems we have yet to figure out exactly how to harness its power for attracting new students to our graduate programs, despite the promise of social media as the silver bullet for all kinds of marketing.

Academic recruitment resources, in our experience, are sort of hard to come by. Despite the immense time commitment required for recruitment and the increasing pressure to constantly grow programs felt by faculty, maybe particularly graduate faculty leading smallish, masters-only graduate programs like ours, research in graduate studies recruitment is fairly thin. Past higher education recruitment research has focused on specific disciplines like STEM (Shadding, et al., 2016; Wall Bortz, et al., 2020), doctoral programs (Griffin and Muñiz, 2011) and specific underrepresented populations like international students (Amirali and Bakken, 2015). In 1987, doctoral student Patricia Baron conducted a survey reaching 250 members of the Council of Graduate Schools about marketing techniques used to attract prospective students to address the idea that "recruitment of graduate students is still of great concern to graduate deans" (p. 8). Although "developing and distributing promotional materials" (p. 8) was a common strategy, the most effective recruitment at the time was "considered to be personal contact." Twenty years later, in 2007, Michael Poock surveyed members of the National Association of Graduate Admission Professionals to better understand the shift in admissions' focus on "racial diversity" to courting "underrepresented graduate students" (p. 169). At the time he noted that "much of this research on recruiting and retaining a diverse student population has focused on undergraduate students" (p. 169), and so his survey of 93 grad school admissions officers filled an important gap in graduate education recruitment strategies. The survey found that only four of 93 surveyed schools had full-time recruitment staff, and "two-thirds of the participants

collaborated with others on campus" (p. 174) with the same number of schools allocating no funds for recruitment. While useful information, only 8% of Poock's participants were from R2 institutions with master's only offerings like our own campus. One important finding suggests that "doctoral institutions with a greater graduate student enrollment have admission professionals who view many of their activities as effective relative to their counterparts at small, master's level institutions" (p. 178). How then do smaller departments like our own make recruitment initiatives more effective and sustainable with fewer resources?

As recently as 2020, Wall Bortz, et al., noted that "doctoral student recruitment is a dynamic, complex, and under-researched phenomenon" (p. 927). Their project, focusing on recruiting strategies in STEM doctoral programs, discovered that the math, science, technology and engineering programs "commonly utilize financial resources as their main recruitment tool" (p. 928). Such findings are especially important for small writing studies graduate programs with limited budgets and often lacking grant-funded assistantships and stipends. Another STEM-focused study by Jared Russell (2020) considers ways student diversity recruitment and retention may be impacted by "undergraduate research experiences" (p. 343) coupled with faculty mentoring in structed bridge programs. Such on-campus intensive summer programs are impressive ways to grow future scholars but require both time and huge financial commitments (to cover housing, food, stipends for participants, stipends for faculty, etc.) and seem to focus on transitioning an institution's undergrads to grad students rather than attracting those from other schools. Other recruitment research focuses not on disciplines, but on student populations. Tomika Greer, Olivia Johnson and Desmond Delk's 2021 case study of a two-day recruitment program responds to the "dearth of research on factors that increase the likelihood of underrepresented minority (URM) college students' enrollment and completion of graduate studies in the social sciences" (p. 371). The authors argue specifically that

> to successfully recruit URM students to graduate programs, student development professionals in higher education must consider the barriers to graduate education and devise strategies to help students overcome those barriers by increasing their cultural capital and social capital related to graduate school participation. (p. 375)

While we lack the infrastructure and funding of recruiting programs like the one profiled by Greer et al., we try to include an awareness and acknowledgement in our digital marketing materials of the social, financial, and cultural obstacles for international, first-generation, and other underrepresented students considering our master's program. Regardless of exactly who we are trying to recruit to our

programs, the question is what resources and stories are needed to invite new student populations into our discipline.

## Recruiting and Branding with Social Media

A review of recruitment talks and papers suggests the need to consider the role of social media in recruiting for both graduate and undergraduate programs. The time commitment and cost of creating social media content is practically challenging, as Jennifer Roth Miller, Brandy Dieterle, Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie (2020) indicate in an extensive review of programs who have a social media presence for their technical communication degrees. Miller et al. offer a vibrant heuristic that applies beyond social media to other content channels, and while their focus is specifically on technical communication programs, their heuristic helped us explore and develop approaches even though our graduate program's content needed to land in social media channels alongside our undergraduate program's content. They reminded us that an organization's social media content requires a plan, including who will play point person, who will oversee social media management and what will happen when a point person or managers resign (p. 27). They also raise significant concerns about turning social media content creation over to students, and what kinds of roles are feasible for students to take up in the creation of social media content, from creation to posting to encouraging engagement (p. 27). Miller et al., similarly to Laura Palmer (2012), suggest that management needs to be stable and consistent, and they also point to the potential legal as well as training considerations in working with students to generate social media content (p. 27). Because this content shifts so much more frequently than website content, the tension is always about time and resources to create and encourage engagement.

In addition to considering available branding and recruiting resources that would assist us by providing a helpful heuristic (pp. 28–29), we needed to determine viable tools in the midst of a university that was also beginning to create its infrastructure for social media. As Elise Versosa Hurley and Amy C. Kimme Hea (2020) suggest, content strategy includes understanding how to leverage social media tools (p. 126), and when we took up this social media agenda, we were learning about the possible interfaces at the same time that the social media manager for our university was securing tools that would help us to better assess our social media reach. To give some context, our department didn't create an Instagram account until 2019; at the same time, our university's infrastructural commitment to social media management has been slowly evolving. About a year into our collaborative project, our university's social media manager was able to secure some of the tools for us and other university departments including a platform that facilitated scheduling, digital asset management, data analytics, and

security assistance. In addition, we were able to participate in a better functioning collaborative space for people across campus who were doing this kind of labor through Teams. These kinds of tools facilitate our ability to plan more effectively for university-wide social media campaigns, to control when and where we post, create succinct data reports, and offer added capabilities to mute unwanted viral responses. In other words, in the midst of calls for increased attention to social media as a recruitment tool, we experienced the challenge of creating while also participating in an expanding infrastructure build out, with the social media manager increasingly cultivating a network of people who create content across the university. As we progressed with our social media knowledge, and as our university's social media manager increased networked developmental strategies, we were able to learn from and rely on her expertise with security and legal considerations.

This local building of social media resources, together with the framings offered in Miller et al.'s (2020) heuristics were augmented by our growing understanding of research in content strategy. Part of our local approach to social media creation included hiring entry-level graduate assistants who could work in the position for a year or two at most, so Crow found it useful to draw on best practices in content strategy (Casey, 2023; Halvorson and Rach, 2012) and ask the new GA to conduct and update content audits of specific accounts. This first work assignment would best be described by Liza Potts and Laura Gonzales (2020) in their content management/strategy course as a "landscape analysis" (60), a process of comparing our approaches to social media content with other departments at our own and at other institutions. This kind of first assignment helps a new person to become familiar with the levels of branding typical in a university along with various media policies while helping us to notice new patterns or changes in others' social media approaches.

While much of the scholarship on social media focuses on its use for program identity and general branding, less is available on the effectiveness of social media as a recruitment tool. Initially, we created content for recruitment based on our assumptions about how and when students might encounter our social media content. In our first year we developed (with the help of the graduate students in an editing course) week-by-week promotional social media recruitment content. However, after attending to metrics including likes, shares and views, we wanted to check the assumption that students would find our social media and consider the program because of the content created there. In Kate Crane's (2022) text, she suggests that "TPC program designers ought to demonstrate UX thinking while designing and assessing their programs and courses" (p. 5). When we consider ways of promoting material, we both have the habit of checking informally with

students to understand how they use social media, but we realized our assumptions about students' uses needed a more formal study. As Verzosa Hurley and Hea (2020) suggest, "although students might be frequent users of social media, they likely have less experience considering social media in the classroom or even in their future lives as professionals," and in the research for this project, we wanted to see how and when our students visited our online content, and whether they considered it as part of their professional and academic decisions.

# Our Study

When we first undertook online digital content work, we enlisted graduate students in a professional editing course, asking them to revise course descriptions and prune social media recruitment posts. We hoped that directly engaging students would make our posts more user friendly and focused. We started with clear goals for recruitment: growing the program, celebrating our new niche of medical rhetoric, sharing compelling stories, and making recruitment more manageable and systematic. After integrating the revised posts and descriptions into our social media for the annual recruitment period, we put together a research project to formally gather information about how students found our program and what made them choose us. In particular, this study asks, what messages should we be sharing with prospective students and in what modes? And how do we best sell a vibrant graduate program amidst the vague pressure to increase numbers that seem predicated on a model of scarcity and competition for students' attention?

In the summer of 2023, we created a questionnaire for alumni and current students asking a set of questions about content strategy in three channels: websites/web searches, email/informational sessions, and social media. In Fall 2023, drawing on a list of alums from 2011 to 2023 that we retain email addresses for as well as our current students, we sent out our survey to 73 people. We received 19 completed surveys, or a 26 percent response rate. Despite reaching back to our contacts from 2011, the earliest alumni information available in our relatively young school, our responses are understandably current student heavy. In order to protect the anonymity of both the current students and alumni we surveyed, we were reluctant to ask for graduation dates as this information seemed important identifiers in a small pool of less than 100. We knew, from open-ended responses that some participants were from earlier decades; for example, one alum's recollection that they "found a flier in 2008" about the graduate program suggests our results included at least a few older alums. Other responses, like one student sharing "I work at JMU," point to local part-time students currently enrolled in the program. While we were curious about ways recruitment might have evolved over the previous decade or so, we were most interested in understanding search strategies

of students now inundated with social media channels and so the response pool felt appropriate to our goals. We also acknowledge that there's a better chance of more recent students being able to better recall their academic search process from a year or two ago than those who studied with us in 2011. Despite the emphasis on more current students, our results do contain responses from many alums in the last five years as well as a couple from farther back.

Our decision to do a survey rather than interviews or focus groups was partly due to the desire to potentially reach more alums and also for the convenience of our participants as online surveys are much more flexible than in-person or even synchronous digital research settings. We designed an IRB-approved study that included 14 open-ended, multiple choice, and short answer questions in order to discover what search strategies and content prospective students used and looked for when evaluating whether they would keep a program on their list. Specifically, we asked what kinds of materials and artifacts helped them make decisions, what they expected in terms of web design and content, recruitment emails and informational sessions, and in social media. We concluded the survey with two groups of questions about a broader range of criteria impacting their decisions including cost, employment rates of graduates, and cost of living of the community alongside the importance of things like job preparation, caring and rigor in the prospective program. See the appendix for the full survey.

In this pilot study, we acknowledge some limitations, including a small number of respondents and a lack of geographic diversity. Ours is a pilot study with a focus on one program, and in a further study, we could imagine reaching out to multiple masters' program alumni to determine the role social media played in their choices, what search strategies were most common, and what rhetorical strategies seemed most effective and important to prospective students. We were also trying to understand why more international students had found us. Another possible limitation is our own researcher bias as we first approached the project in an effort to better understand ways to attract more diverse student populations to our program. Our university's recent shift from R3 to R2 status may have created a greater marketing reach, but this was outside the scope of this survey. Our exciting increase in international students led us to first focus on telling stories that might attract marginalized student populations, while also depicting the challenges that our smallish, southern, mostly white community might present such populations. But we might also have asked directly about the role social media played in the increase in international students in relation to other modalities like website content, direct emails, and online information meetings.

# Survey Findings

## Our regional demographics

We began with a question that quickly gave us important information about who was participating in our study. We anticipated that several chose our program because they heard about it as an undergraduate while at our institution. We know we connect with local students, and our reach includes nearby universities (within 20 miles of our campus). With the skyrocketing costs of housing, relocation becomes an increasingly important financial consideration. In addition to local undergraduates, we also know that some of our potential graduate students participate in the university's tuition waiver program available to all faculty and staff. In our survey responses, nine respondents indicated that they attended JMU for undergraduate education, were staff members at JMU, or were from nearby institutions. In recent years, our student population has included people who are typically on the East Coast, and increasingly we have international students who find our program via online resources, our graduate school's recruitment reach, or because their mentors suggest our program. In this survey, 10 respondents indicated that they found our program using online searches (eight) or through recommendations from mentors at other institutions (two). In a follow up question, we asked specifically whether they used resources like the online Petersen Guide (https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx), or other similar search services. None did. During actual searching, 11 of 19 reported first asking mentors for recommendations and more than half (10 of 19 respondents) reported creating their own list of specific universities they intended to learn more about.

## Reasons for choosing a program

When searching, participants reported that finding a program that aligned with their professional writing goals was most important (10 of 19) followed by seven respondents who desired to stay in our region; six wanted to find a writing studies program that would prepare them to teach. Our survey offered seven options we anticipated might be important to prospective students, and perhaps unsurprisingly half of our respondents suggested criteria we had not thought to list including searching for "a more practical degree." Cost was a significant concern for several, with one responder reporting, "I wanted a program that was open and honest about funding opportunities." In addition, several were looking for careers "that didn't only prepare [them] for a career in academia."

## Key word searches

We wanted to know what keywords prospective students used when searching. We offered several terms and found that in addition to state-specific searches (nine), and the basic type of education—a graduate program (or master's program) (14), searches were split between technical communication (nine), professional writing (11), writing studies (eight), and rhetoric and composition (eight). A few used business writing (four), science writing (two), or teaching writing (three) to search for schools. One respondent explained that search terms may differ based on translation. In our current cohort, we have five students from other countries who speak multiple languages and sometimes terms shift across continents, and so, as we consider future cohorts, we may want to expand key word considerations (St. Amant, 2020; Dayley and Walton, 2018). When we asked respondents to indicate the top five types of information needed to evaluate a program, they wanted to know about the place they would study (the department), about the students in the program, about the surrounding community, about internships, cost of living, housing availability, and about faculty. All 19 respondents placed cost within their top three considerations. Scholarships and assistantships (15) and explicit career path information (10) were two other popular categories of information sought by then-prospective students.

## Web design/email marketing

Once our participants settled on a list of potential programs, we were interested in what they looked for on websites. They reported seeking information about degree completion (13), the sequence of courses and the curriculum (13), and a sense of whether they were prepared to do well in the curriculum (nine), or whether they had the background needed (eight). In their own words, they sought a connection between the curriculum and future career concerns – whether the curriculum would prepare them for the kinds of jobs they desired. One respondent explained, "I was looking for options that would be affordable and provide practical skills within my field of work." Another reported, "I'd start with looking at a place I wanted to work/job I wanted to do and [then] plan my way backwards based on the profiles of people who currently work in that place/job." When they offered opinions about web design, they wanted to quickly search for content (12), to see important keywords within the content (13), and ease in site navigation (15). They ranked the most helpful artifacts and texts for prospective students would be the program website (17) and direct email content (15). Social media was a distant third (3). We also asked what they remembered about materials and direct contact they had

received during their searches. Respondents reported remembering emails, in person conversations, talking on the phone, and informational meetings, but none recalled memorable social media stories or posts.

## Social media

When asked how likely they were to link to a program's social media, only four respondents, or 21 percent, said they were likely to follow a program's social media, while more than half (10 of 19) reported being unlikely or very unlikely to follow a prospective program's social media. The remaining five of 19 (26 percent) were only marginally likely to follow a prospective program's socials, suggesting to us that nearly 80 percent of prospective students in our survey are unlikely to become a program's social media follower. The minority that had or would attend to social media report looking at Instagram (seven) or LinkedIn (four), or a combination of either Facebook and Instagram (one), or Instagram and LinkedIn (one). Of the 10 who weighed in on how they used social media when looking for a graduate program, they reported mainly looking in order to gather a sense of the students. In one person's words: "Pictures and other content that gives me a sense of what it is like to study there. I especially look for pictures and testimonials from students." Two people were interested in design considerations: "the quality of the content," "what type of content," and "cohesiveness." Two of the 10 specifically referenced seeking information on faculty on social media, and one indicated an interest in alumni success stories. While they didn't imagine following a program's social media account, they indicated with these responses that they would browse the social media accounts to see students' stories in the program.

# Discussion

These survey results are helping us to shape both our efforts on searches and the kinds of stories we create. It's also helping us to shape content strategies across several channels (Gonzales et al., 2016; Potts and Gonzales, 2020). One major consideration we've noted is how to tailor recruitment efforts differently for local versus non-local populations. People already living here or in neighboring towns seem to rely on a kind of local word of mouth, rather than on traditional digital recruitment content, finding out about our program because they see something on our university system of screens designed for announcements and advertisements, because they're taking an upper division course in our major, or because they see a friend's homework and find it intriguing (as one of our respondents reported). Given the local approach, we are considering how we might gather more information and develop a more cohesive plan to reach out to potential local students.

For those who find us through online searches, this study gives us a better understanding of how they search and find our program. Once they've added our program to their list of potential places to study, their information needs are similar to that of the local group with a focus on curriculum and funding. But non-local students also need help gathering a sense of the students in the program, alongside costs of living and how it will feel to live in our community. We anticipated, when constructing the survey, that people drew on a range of venues to gather information, and we weren't surprised to see the continued importance of the website content and the email communications compared to the ways people reported checking social media. What felt more surprising or perhaps merely nebulous is the complex role that story plays in recruitment. If the website search gives a student a sense of funding, curriculum viability, and faculty expertise, the social media venue seems to be the place students land for stories that help them determine whether they will fit with the student population. Search appears to bring us prospective students' attention, but social media stories might sustain that attention and help students truly imagine themselves in a place. As a result of these findings, we're trying different approaches to our social media content strategy to better assist these potential students as they gather information and decide whether they might feel a sense of belonging from browsing our social media content.

## What We've Learned

While our survey results and our own successful—and failed—experiments with recruitment in multiple modes and using myriad digital tools have taught us important lessons about our own program in this specific moment, we don't claim to have identified best practices for other masters-only writing studies programs. We initially assumed that our social media stories/advertisements might reach prospective students, but we now realize that they must find us through the endless "noise" online before being able to hear such stories. In other words, we now think that both search and story are necessary for graduate recruitment and how you balance the two has much to do with specific goals, available resources and skillsets, and target audiences.

What we've gained and what follows is a better understanding of what questions we need to be asking, what sorts of resources we need to be seeking, and how to know what we don't know. While Almjeld, as director, was officially tasked with recruitment for the graduate program both by the university and the department, it was clear Crow, a partner in her own department, was needed to make the work both manageable and more effective. Having a recruitment partner to run things by, share ideas with, and share the workload lessens the time commitment and

doubles the skillset needed to take on this complex work. Beyond your own department, consider seeking resources and partners with specific knowledge in search engine optimization (SEO). Because algorithms change often, and because university offices pay attention to those changes daily, it can help to reach out to local experts. Below are lessons we've learned about how to marry search and story and how to seek help doing both.

## Grow CMS (Content Management Systems) Expertise and Attend to CRM (Customer Relationship Management) Resources

It's crucial to know who the local experts are in content management and search strategies on your campus and to reach out to collaborate with them, particularly on metadata and keyword choices. Neither Crow nor Almjeld is an expert on the always changing algorithms, but our Office of Digital Marketing helps us with the back-end work on a sophisticated CMS. Our university relies on two CMS experts to keep track of contemporary data analytics, and they can help us set up and test different webpages so that we could assess the best approaches for our unit. These are the same people who can help with SEO. It matters to know what appears when people search for our program, and to ensure that our program is one that appears. We recommend collaborating with local experts at least once a year to see what program information appears from keyword searches students typically use. In addition to the university's CMS, our university has slowly been transitioning to a CRM resource. Through that resource, especially in the Graduate School, which has more reach and access to more functions within the platform, we've had success contacting national organizations and other places potential students search. The relationship is synergistic as they have access to more infrastructure and funding, and we provide them with content and stories about our program.

## Understand Local Social Media Support

Knowing about local infrastructure build outs and making the effort to know the local experts can save time and improve brand consistency. Unlike university infrastructure for websites, where templates are chosen by the communications office, social media is far less structured, leaving design considerations to local departments. We found it helpful to collaborate with the office that provides photography and promotional videos for our university because images and videos feature prominently in the stories we craft but are time-intensive to capture and create. If we know, for example, that students make decisions based on funding, we can work with university photographers to visually highlight our ability to connect students with GA positions. We can draw on photos of our GAs at work in

various campus offices to help us tell that story. In addition, the university offers a video service, where we can propose a video, and if approved, we then participate in crafting a story that lands on our website as a YouTube video, promoting our program.

## Take Advantage of Video

Neither of us are experts at video, but we've learned to create simple videos to take advantage of current algorithms. We're not so much advocating for video, as for video's ability to increase reach in shifting social media algorithms. At the moment, video stories do seem better able to stand out than other storytelling models and modes. We had access to the university posting resource Brandwatch for just under a year and this offered us a clearer understanding of analytics. In that time, we've realized that our reach is limited by the static use of photographs. As a result, we choose to create a few more Reels and Stories that feature students, capitalizing on Instagram's and Facebook's current algorithms and tapping into the popularity of TikTok without actually posting there. We learned the least labor-intensive ways to create videos, and the kinds of content that result in community engagement and greater reach. Such video content celebrates our students and also offers a glimpse of the community future students might join. We've also collaborated with faculty to figure out ways to, for example, feature videos of Zoomed-in guest speakers, capitalizing on great work already happening in our department. While video work is time consuming to learn and enact, using video from already happening events reduces time on task.

## Create Easy "Asks" to Engage Faculty and Students in Celebrating Their Successes

To create viable and timely announcements, or to advertise amazing courses that might need a boost for enrollment in social media, we've learned how to get help from faculty and students by connecting with Miller et al.'s heuristic in terms of training. We created forms for faculty and students to fill out that are designed to be the equivalent of a press release template announcing a course, or a publication or conference presentation accomplishment. We ask them for an image, or their preferences from a group of images from the university's image bank. This allows us to seek and structure content that fits with the local university, college, and department requirements for brand and social media posts while also relying on our community to help in the effort.

## Be On the Lookout for Change

We are cognizant that our advice will change as systems change; our key takeaway right now centers on the fact that despite the tremendous promise and importance of social media for branding and selling our graduate programs, it is not a magic bullet. Social media certainly has the ability to build and sustain community, but it's not super effective as an initial invitation to join that community. This might change in the future; right now we need to not only tell good, updated stories and useful, honest information for prospective students, but we need also to concentrate on the spaces where people conduct their searches and continue to predict their evaluative criteria through consistent surveys, checking in with new cohorts and under-graduates searching for programs. Our content strategy should continue to include viable information on our website and via email marketing, and our social media presence can be more focused on the content that helps potential students gather a sense of belonging and fit. Doing such work is neither fast nor possible in isolation. We've found that collaboration with the local community is key to telling our stories about our programs.

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# Appendix

## Graduate Recruitment Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Jen Almjeld and Dr. Angela Crow in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to examine digital communications with prospective students for recruitment purposes. We are exploring textual and visual strategies intended to accurately and responsibly attract and educate prospective writing studies graduate students.

This study will contribute to our graduate program's success and may also benefit other writing studies graduate and undergraduate programs at other universities.

This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol #24-4284.

The short survey should require no more than 20 minutes of your time.

By clicking the arrow below and completing the survey, you are giving your consent to participate.

If you have any questions about the study, please reach out to Dr. Almjeld at almjeljm@jmu.edu or Dr. Crow at crowad@jmu.edu.

To consent to participate in this study and to continue the survey, please click the arrow below.

**1. How did you begin your search for a master's program? If you can't remember, how might you expect to search for a graduate program?**

**2. Check the criteria that were most relevant to you when beginning your search for a graduate program:**

a. Location: I wanted to stay in this region of Virginia.

b. Location: I wanted to stay within a five-hour driving trip from my family home.

c. Location: I wanted to move to this region of the country because I hoped to find employment within one or two hours of JMU.

d. Program: I wanted to find a program that was focused on technical communication because I want to be a writer for specific industries: health, government, science, technology, etc.

e. Program: I wanted to find a program that was focused on writing studies because I hope to teach in either public schools or at a university.

f. Program: I wanted to find a master's program that would be my first graduate experience with a smaller number of students before pursuing a PhD in rhetoric and composition, technical communication or a similar field.

g. Size: I wanted to gain a master's degree at an institution that didn't offer an in-field PhD because I might receive more individual attention than at a larger PhD-granting university.

h. Other criteria. Please explain.

**3. When starting your search, do you remember the strategies you used? (Check all that apply)**

a. Looked for guides (Peterson's Guide or US News and World Report)

b. Signed up with online platforms that help prospective students find information

c. Developed a list of specific universities and explored their programs

d. Asked friends for their graduate program recommendations

e. Asked mentors for their graduate program recommendations

f. Sought graduate programs at JMU because I want to stay at the same school as my BA

g. Other. Please explain:

**4. What keywords did or would you expect to use when seeking information about graduate education in writing studies? (Check all that apply)**

a. State or region

b. Graduate program

c. Technical communication

d. Professional writing

e. Science writing

f. Teaching writing

g. Writing studies

h. Rhetoric and composition

i. Business writing

j. Other. Please explain:

**5. When you applied for programs, did you request information about a program?**

a. Yes

b. No

**6. If yes, what kind of information did you receive from the program?**

a. A series of direct emails

b. One email from X person, offering to meet with me

c. Information about informational meeting

d. Received no information from the program

e. Other. Please explain:

**7. When you went to the web page to look at information about the specific courses in the program, what were you searching for? (Check all that apply)**

a. Requirements for degree completion

b. Explanation of the sequence of courses and the curriculum

c. A sense of whether I was prepared to do well in the curriculum

d. A sense of how much of a background I would need in the discipline to enter and succeed

e. Other. Please explain:

**8. When visiting web pages for potential graduate programs, what design features are most important to you? Please rank the top 3 from the list below by moving your top three answers to the top of the list.**

a. Ease of navigation

b. Alignment with keywords from my search

c. Visual attractiveness of the space (more white space, less clutter, fewer colors, limited typefaces)

d. Layout that facilitated ease to find searched for content

e. Availability of accessible content (closed caption videos, ability to change font size, etc.)

f. Appropriate amount of information

g. Direct address to me as a user/consumer

h. Other. Please explain:

**9. What sorts of artifacts / texts were useful to you or would you expect to be useful for prospective graduate students? (Check all that apply)**

a. Program website

b. Direct email

c. Social media posts

d. Print brochures

e. Print direct correspondence

f. Other. Please explain:

**10. How likely were you to link to social media accounts from a program's website or to search out that program's social media accounts? (rank from 0 or "Not at all likely" to 10 or "Extremely likely")**

**11. If you did link to a program's social media accounts, which platforms did you look at?**

a. Facebook

b. Instagram

c. TikTok

d. LinkedIn

e. Other. Please explain:

**12. If you did browse social media accounts, what were you looking to see?**

**13. Please rank the importance of information below for those considering graduate school. Rank up to 5 types of information in order by moving your top answers to the top of the list.**

a. Cost / financial aid

b. Health and wellness resources

c. Mentoring support

d. Student groups

e. Opportunity for scholarships / assistantships

f. Employment rates of graduates

g. Length of program

h. Housing availability

i. Cost of living in the community

j. Information on surrounding community

k. Information on faculty (faculty research interest, access to faculty, etc.)

l. General information about students

m. Internship opportunities

n. Quality of research facilities

o. Career paths of program graduates

p. Other. Please explain:

**14. Please rank how important (on a scale of 0-5) it was to you that a graduate program demonstrated the following aspects:**

a. Rigor

b. Caring

c. Cost effectiveness

d. Diverse student population

e. Diverse faculty population

f. Diverse surrounding community

g. Job preparation

h. Information on alumni and their career paths

i. Other. Please explain:

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

# Author Information

**Angela Crow** is an Associate Professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. Her research is focused on freedom of movement in transportation infrastructure design decisions. She explores the role of influencers as they work to advocate for better transportation infrastructure/design in shifting social media venues. She teaches courses in web and app design, usability testing, content strategy for online venues, genre theory, and visual rhetoric.

**Jen Almjeld** is a Professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. She served as director of the department's graduate program for six years and now serves as the program internship coordinator. Her research includes gender studies and girlhood, social media and community engagement. She teaches courses in feminist rhetorics, professional editing, research methods and writing in the community.