

C-designation learning outcomes

Report & Proposal

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By: Humanities Department & Communication Across the Curriculum (CXC) program

1. Introduction

As part of increased efforts in assessment, as well as improvement of undergraduate curriculum, Illinois Tech is currently revising and approving standard learning outcomes for each of the letter designations (*C, H, N, S*, etc.). The CXC program wants to ensure the new C outcomes a) are based upon current research and best practices in the field of composition, and b) meet the needs and concerns of Illinois Tech faculty.

Thus, this report presents a summary of current research and best practices in postsecondary writing education (section 2) and findings from recent focus groups on teaching communication skills at Illinois Tech (section 3). Section 4 then synthesizes findings from sections 2 and 3 to propose an updated list of C learning outcomes.

2. Current research and best practices in postsecondary writing education

Postsecondary writing education is largely addressed in research and practice through the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), two professional organizations in the field. They provide a variety of resources to communication programs to aid in program development, planning, assessment, as well as practical guidance for teaching in the classroom, all of which are based upon leading research in writing practices, rhetorical and linguistic analysis, and pedagogy.

NCTE and WPA coordinated to produce a framework of the types of skills and experiences that students need to be successful in college- and professional-level writing.¹ In particular, they explain that postsecondary education should aim to develop students'

- **Rhetorical knowledge.** Students must be able to analyze a variety of contexts and situations, so as to understand the purpose and audience constraints that shape the type of writing they should produce. In disciplinary-specific writing especially, students often draw upon rhetorical and disciplinary knowledge in increasingly explicit ways when faced with higher-stakes writing tasks.²
- **Critical thinking.** Students need an ability to not only analyze a situation or text, but to think carefully and critically about it to make thoughtful decisions about how to respond next. Early psychological and writing process research demonstrated a strong link between writing and students' critical thinking and reflective strategies.³ Even the ancient five canons of rhetoric⁴ recognize invention, tied closely to critical thought, as a crucial part of writing instruction.

¹ Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National Writing Project. (2011). *Framework for success in postsecondary writing*. CWPA, NCTE, & NWP. https://wpacouncil.org/aws/cwpa/pt/sd/news_article/242845/_parent/layout_details/false.

² Tardy, C. M. (2005). "It's like a story": Rhetorical knowledge development in advanced academic literacy. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4(4), 325-338. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2005.07.005>.

³ Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365-387. <https://doi.org/10.2307/356600>.

⁴ Cicero, M. T. (1968). *De inventione: De optimo genere oratorum; Topica* (originally published 85 BCE). Harvard University Press.

- **Writing processes.** Students should develop a variety of strategies that help them to approach and undertake a writing or research project. Research and theory have demonstrated that the process of writing is quite complex, even more so than the standardly conceived phases of pre-writing, drafting, and revising.⁵ More experienced and successful writers have been shown to have a variety of flexible strategies and processes, especially in regards to revision, that they implement throughout the writing process and in response to feedback.⁶
- **Knowledge of conventions.** Students need an ability to both understand and assess the informal and formal guidelines about what is socially considered “correct” or “incorrect” in various types of writing. Research has found that students (especially underprivileged students) often have difficulty picking up disciplinary and professional writing norms on their own,⁷ and that teaching these norms explicitly can help students to succeed in their disciplines.⁸
- **Ability to compose in multiple environments.** Students need the skills to compose texts across a range of settings to be successful in a modern environment, ranging from pen and paper to using modern technologies. Especially in the age of generative AI, it is increasingly important to teach students how to flexibly navigate the writing process with all of the tools available to them.⁹

3. Focus groups on teaching communication skills at Illinois Tech

While research and best practices provide key principles by which to shape our communication curriculum, writing program assessment and design also inherently must be local to its particular context.¹⁰ As such, in November 2023, CXC director Hannah Ringler partnered with Lewis College to conduct focus groups with faculty on the communication curriculum on Illinois Tech’s campus. Overall, the findings indicate a historic lack of clarity and consistency in the university’s CXC program, while faculty’s major concerns and values about writing instruction align closely with those addressed by researched best practices and guidance.

3.1. Focus group method. Participants represented faculty from all undergraduate-serving colleges and numerous departments. We asked the faculty four questions:

⁵ Warnock, J. (1983). The Writing Process. *Rhetoric Review*, 2(1), 4–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465633>.

⁶ Sommers, N. (1980). Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(4), 378–388. <https://doi.org/10.2307/356588>.

⁷ Williams, J. M., & Colomb, G. G. (1993). The Case for Explicit Teaching: Why What You Don’t Know Won’t Help You. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 27(3), 252–264. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171226>.

⁸ Wilder, L., & Wolfe, J. (2009). Sharing the Tacit Rhetorical Knowledge of the Literary Scholar: The Effects of Making Disciplinary Conventions Explicit in Undergraduate Writing about Literature Courses. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44(2), 170–209. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27784356>.

⁹ MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI. (2023). *MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI Working Paper: Overview of the Issues, Statement of Principles, and Recommendations*. Modern Language Association and Conference on College Composition and Communication.

¹⁰ Gallagher, C. W. (2014). All Writing Assessment Is Local [Review of *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Edward M. White; Race and Writing Assessment; Writing Assessment and the Revolution in Digital Texts and Technologies; Digital Writing: Assessment and Evaluation*, by N. Elliot, L. Perelman, A. B. Inoue, M. Poe, M. R. Neal, H. A. McKee, & D. N. DeVoss]. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(3), 486–505. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43491489>.

1. What communication skills are important for courses, programs, and careers in your discipline or field?

As a reminder, the four areas of communication are:

- written
 - oral
 - visual
 - data
2. What do you understand the existing C designation to be? What does this designation imply about the courses it is currently attached to?
 3. When you include communication in the classroom, do you explicitly teach those skills? How? Keep in mind there is a difference between teaching writing and writing to teach (both are valuable!).
 4. Standard best practice for Communication Across the Curriculum as approved by the Writing Program Administration Board includes:
 - Training for faculty for C courses
 - Training for TAs and graders for C courses
 - Syllabus and assignment review
 - In-class opportunities for revision
 - Explicit instruction in communication
 - Integration with a writing/communication center

With this in mind, what can we, as a campus, improve? What do you, as instructors and program leaders, need to succeed?

3.2. Key findings. From discussion on these questions, we present 4 key findings: *communication is broadly valued; the C designation is not clearly defined or understood; most faculty have not received training or clear guidance; and assessment has been scattershot and inconsistent.* More detail on each finding is presented below.

In sum, these findings reflect our faculty's value of communication skills as a key part of both secondary education broadly and in their particular disciplines; however, they also reflect faculty's struggle to teach these skills well given a lack of consistency and training over the past many years. The findings encourage us that the basic principles of postsecondary communication education as described by research and best practices in the field more broadly (section 2) will apply well and be a productive starting point in moving Illinois Tech forward.

1. *Communication is broadly valued.* Faculty recognize communication as critical for students' academic and professional experience. Common types of communication mentioned included:
 - lab reports
 - oral presentations
 - professional emails
 - professional memos and reports
 - slide decks

- research posters
 - diagraming
 - data visualization
 - graphic design
 - technical reports
 - post mortems
 - academic papers
2. *The C designation is not clearly defined or understood.* While faculty value communication, there is not a collectively understood definition of what a C course is or what role C courses play in the curriculum.
 - Faculty are not clear on what responsibilities or obligations instructors of C courses have
 - No faculty knew the learning objectives for C courses
 3. *Most faculty have not received training or clear guidance.* Historically, support and professional development opportunities related to the teaching of communication across the curriculum have been minimal and inconsistent. Not one faculty member reported receiving training or support in offering C courses while at Illinois Tech. Faculty want to do a good job teaching communication in their C-designated courses and take this seriously, but have not had the resources needed.
 4. *Assessment has been scattershot and inconsistent.* Lack of a clear structure for review and assessment of C designations has amplified issues and led to inconsistency.
 - Not all courses that are C designated should be; some courses have learning objectives that make it difficult or impossible to integrate instruction in communication
 - Sometimes, instructors aren't even aware that their courses are C courses
 - There has not been systemic, regular review of C courses to ensure they meet a clear standard

4. Proposed C learning outcomes and future plans

Based on the work presented above, we are confident that the following list of C learning outcomes reflects findings from research and best practices, as well as address the concerns of our particular faculty and context as a postsecondary technical institution. In particular, the concerns raised by our faculty about teaching and student writing are not unique: they align with the types of concerns seen in Writing Across the Curriculum research,¹¹ and which guiding principles like those listed in section 2 are intended to address.

The following C learning outcomes have been crafted to a) address Illinois Tech faculty concerns about student communication skills, b) align with research and guidance on appropriate postsecondary communication goals, c) make explicit the varied and nuanced writing skills that

¹¹ Thaiss, C. & Zawacki, T. M. (2006). *Engaged writers and dynamic disciplines: Research on the academic writing life*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers; Wilder, L. (2012). *Rhetorical strategies and genre conventions in literary studies: Teaching and writing in the disciplines*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press; Behrens, S., Johnson, A., Allard, M., & Caroli, A. (2016). I know it when I see it: Uncovering student and educator expectations about academic writing in higher education. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 8(2), 309-332; Bazerman, C. (1992). From cultural criticism to disciplinary participation: Living with powerful words. In A. Herrington, & C. Moran (Eds.), *Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines* (pp. 61-68). Modern Language Association.

courses should teach in order to best support students (research shows that making these skills explicit and discrete especially benefits underprivileged students¹²), and d) differentiate communication skills in a way that will allow proper assessment by the CXC program to identify places for improvement in the future. These outcomes have been approved by the Humanities department, CXC program, and we present them here for final approval:

1. Students can critically read and analyze a variety of texts (e.g., news articles, academic papers, data sets) in order to develop their own claims in writing.
2. Students can craft a text with attention to audience, purpose, context, and conventions.
3. Students can revise their text through participation in multiple phases of the writing process (e.g., pre-writing, drafting, revising, peer-review, editing).
4. Students can appropriately use evidence (e.g., data, cited sources) as part of their argument.
5. Students can present an effective argument in the appropriate medium of communication, which can include written visual, oral, or other emergent forms of communication.
6. Students can communicate specialized knowledge appropriately for an audience.

4.1. Future plans. For additional context about the utility of these outcomes and work in moving forward, we also present here the following plans of the CXC program to improve communication instruction on campus:

1. *Build on faculty values.* Faculty value communication skills. The CXC program has begun creating resources for faculty to teach communication and support student success (e.g., the new Distinguished Communicator Medal Program),¹³ and will continue to build up resources and programming in the future to sustain a robust infrastructure for communication pedagogy at Illinois Tech.
2. *Develop and define.* CXC director Hannah Ringler is actively working across units to revise the CXC program so that it is in line with research, best practices, and peer institutions. As part of this effort, we need to formalize and standardize definitions regarding the purpose and objectives of what defines a C course, so that this can be broadly circulated and assessed well.
3. *Train and support.* The CXC program has begun developing resources for faculty, including online and in-person trainings and pedagogical resources (e.g., “Faculty Resource Series”¹⁴), and will continue to build these up in the future. Faculty need opportunities to learn from each other and develop best practices that best serve our student population.
4. *Assess and refine.* C courses need to be regularly assessed in ways that are specific to C learning objectives. The Program Director is developing an annual review process to help standardize and optimize the student experience with the curriculum, and formally approving C learning outcomes will allow this process to move forward. Overseeing this campus-wide effort is a major component of the director’s

¹² Williams, J. M., & Colomb, G. G. (1993). The Case for Explicit Teaching: Why What You Don’t Know Won’t Help You. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 27(3), 252–264. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171226>; Williams, J. M. (2005). Bakhtin on Teaching Style. *Written Communication*, 22(3), 348-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088305278030>; Blasco, M. (2015). Making the tacit explicit: Rethinking culturally inclusive pedagogy in international student academic adaptation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 23(1), 85-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2014.922120>.

¹³ <https://www.iit.edu/cac/for-students/distinguished-communicator-medal-program>.

¹⁴ <https://www.iit.edu/cac/for-faculty/faculty-resource-series>.

role and obligation. This supports campus-wide assessment, and also ensures we're doing right by our students.