

# The CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication: A Retrospective Analysis

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This article presents the history, purposes, outcomes, and significance of the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication during its first five years. It analyzes the topical areas and research methods of the 34 dissertations nominated for the award from 1999 to 2003, as well as the evaluations of the judges. Methods of the nominated dissertations are interpretive (41%) and empirical (59%), but many dissertations combine methods. In the empirical category, qualitative methods (17) outnumber quantitative methods (3). The most frequent topical areas are workplace practice (8), rhetoric of the disciplines (7), and information design (6). Topics that are not widely investigated include issues of race and class and international communication.

This article offers a retrospective analysis of the first five years of the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication (1999–2003). As with any research project, my perspective comes from a particular place that should be made clear from the start: I have not judged the award myself, but rather have served as its coordinator. In this role, I have worked closely with the CCCC Executive Committee, with the judges, and with the graduate-student submitters and their dissertation advisors. Although I have not read every page of every project entered, I have participated in all of the deliberative activities, which were captured in hundreds of e-mail messages. In addition, I have kept careful records, including copies of dissertation abstracts, nomination letters, and administrative documents (e.g., progress reports to the CCCC Executive Committee, the proposal for the award). As a whole, these texts provide a richly textured archive that can be interpreted on a macro-level. In other words, the archive suggests less about particular dissertation writers and judges and more about, for example, research patterns and collective wisdom and insight. The wide-angle snapshot taken here thus helps to

characterize, in at least partial ways, the priorities and values that have become associated with dissertation work in the field.

My interpretation of the archive, it should be noted, has been shaded by those who argue that dissertation work constitutes a site of disciplinary formation in rhetoric and composition (and thus in technical communication, a species of rhetoric). In their important volume on the dissertation and the discipline, Nancy Welch, Catherine Latterell, Cindy Moore, and Sheila Carter-Tod assemble a varied collection of dissertation writers and advisors to reflect critically on the processes and dynamics involved in dissertation projects. The book is replete with absorbing personal narratives of struggle, joy, failure, and success, but these narratives are stitched together by ideological and institutional threads that connect the participants to a larger social fabric. On one level, of course, the dissertation is very much an institutional requirement: A student must get it done in order to graduate. On another level, however, dissertation writers and advisors are inextricably bound up in disciplinary conventions and debates, local politics, interpersonal relationships, and other things that both enable and constrain activity. Thus, as with any genre, the dissertation has a complicated network of affiliations, a rhetorical context. No great surprise there. Yet, this context, as Welch, Latterell, Moore, and Carter-Tod point out, often goes unnoticed—even unquestioned. For the purposes of this essay, what is important is the idea that the dissertation is a site where the field tends to get reproduced as opposed to reinvented (although one can see seeds of reinvention in many dissertation projects). This reality helps to explain the nature of dissertation writing, advising, and judging in technical communication.

My discussion proceeds in three parts. The first part presents an overview of the origins and development of the dissertation award, outlining the major factors that contributed to its establishment. The second part offers some summary statistics for the award, including statistics related to the topical areas and research methods of the nominated projects. The third part considers the assumptions and activities of the judges, which are reflected to a certain extent in the projects that have won both overall awards and honorable mentions. The discussion in all three parts is analytic as well as descriptive in that it provides a narrative that attempts to make some social sense of the first five years of the award.

## ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AWARD

The dissertation award was the brainchild of the 1996–1998 CCCC Committee on Technical Communication: Debby Andrews, Deborah Bosley, Pamela Ecker, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Jimmie Killingsworth, Stuart Selber (chair), and Katherine Staples. This committee was interested in activities that could be developed and sustained by people with already overcommitted professional lives. We all agreed that it would be better to succeed in modest ways than to pursue ambitious

plans that had the potential to fall short of expectations or die out, especially given the history of the committee and its relation to the NCTE Committee on Technical and Scientific Communication and to the CCCC. For a variety of reasons discussed in this section, the *kairos* seemed right for a dissertation award.

After I became chair of the committee, I learned about its history from Elizabeth Tebeaux, Katherine Staples, Nell Ann Pickett, and others. Their stories revealed an uncertain relationship between the CCCC and NCTE committees. The stories also alluded to the fact that technical communication has not always been a valued area. This observation still resonates with many of us. As Carolyn Rude has pointed out in various committee meetings, the membership renewal form for NCTE does not list technical communication as an interest area for members. In terms of the uncertain relationship between the CCCC and NCTE committees, my view is that work overlap has complicated matters. The CCCC committee does indeed have a formal charge:

to prepare, collect, and distribute instructional materials illustrating exemplary courses, programs, and pedagogical methods in scientific and technical communication at colleges and universities; to inform the profession of current research—via workshops, panel sessions, seminars, tabletop displays, proceedings of working papers, and bibliographic essays—in technical communication; and to report to the Officers of the CCCC on committee actions.

And the NCTE committee has also had its own clearly articulated agenda, one that involves supporting book projects and administering the awards for best article, collection, and book in technical communication. Not surprisingly, however, there has been overlap in other organized activities, and for one reason or another the committees have not always coordinated their efforts in the most effective fashion. This situation encouraged the CCCC committee to be sensitive to the need for a distinctive mission. A dissertation award, we reasoned, would provide such a mission—and it would be consistent with our charge to serve postsecondary educators and complement the established awards work of the NCTE committee.

Work overlap was also an issue as ATTW expanded its reach and influence. Over the years, the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication had consistently sponsored workshops at the CCCC Convention. These workshops were usually half-day workshops held on either the first or last day of the convention. The focus changed from year to year, but the more memorable workshops were geared toward colleagues new to the field and covered developing, administering, and assessing courses and programs in technical communication. There was also a very successful workshop that was more theoretical in makeup that addressed technological, international, and ethical topics. These workshops were extremely informative, in large part because the committee was able to recruit so many expert leaders, including Paul Anderson, Steve Bernhardt, Lee Brasseur, Rebecca Bur-

nett, Mary Coney, Sam Dragga, Sam Geonetta, David Hailey, Nancy Hoft, Bill Karis, Jimmie Killingsworth, Sherry Little, Kenneth Rainey, Dan Riordan, Carolyn Rude, Scott Sanders, and Billie Wahlstrom. In spite of the success of these workshops, they became redundant when ATTW created its annual conference. Although a Saturday workshop was still possible, the committee felt that by then most people (leaders included) would have had enough conference activity. So we stopped proposing workshops, which was perfectly fine with us, and started proposing a dissertation award.

We began by drafting a proposal to the CCCC Executive Committee. Our first task was to invent appeals that would speak to this audience. Fortunately, we discovered that the award could be aligned squarely with three of the five objectives outlined in Article 1, Section 2, of the CCCC Constitution: “to support a wide range of studies in the field; to enhance the professional development of all members; and to act to improve English education nationally and internationally.” That was the easy part. The hard part was making the case for a second dissertation award (students in technical communication could already put in for the James Berlin Memorial Outstanding Dissertation Award) and defining the parameters. As far as the first challenge was concerned, the main argument we employed was that technical communication had reached a watershed period in its academic history. To be sure, many in English studies saw (and still see) technical communication as synonymous with the service course. On the other hand, there was a growing cadre of scholars who had become involved in graduate programs that were either directly or indirectly related to technical communication. And some of these scholars were in leadership positions. In fact, when our proposal came before the CCCC Executive Committee, Cynthia Selfe of Michigan Technological University was chair of the CCCC (more good kairos). So we had supporters in high places with a stake in efforts to further professionalize the academic side of the field.

Defining the parameters was complicated because we had to grapple with definitions of the field and develop evaluation criteria for its emergent work. What counts as a dissertation in technical communication? Are there certain areas that should be considered out of bounds? On what basis should the dissertations be judged? We needed answers in the short run that would be concrete enough for the CCCC Executive Committee and first set of judges. At the same time, we wanted to avoid overly rigid prescriptions that might not accommodate less-traditional projects or future research directions, whatever those might be. Put in different terms, we wanted the parameters to be defined by heuristics rather than taxonomies, relatively loose frameworks that could provide direction and clarification while avoiding hard-and-fast rules about what counts and why. We found one such useful framework in the literature review on doctoral research in technical communication by Kenneth Rainey and Rebecca Kelly. Rainey and Kelly developed 11 categories in which to organize 170 dissertations written between 1965 and 1990:

Teaching, Writing in Specific Fields, Rhetorical Elements, Organizational and Management Communication, Graphics and Visual Media, History of Technical Communication, Oral Communication, Group Processes and Collaborative Writing, The Composing Process, Theory, and Ethics (558–59). What was really useful is that these categories help to differentiate technical communication topics. A history of composition studies, for example, would fall outside the framework, as would projects that focus on communication activities in first-year writing courses (as opposed to organizational and management contexts). But this differentiation was not inflexible because categories like Rhetorical Elements and Theory encompass a wide variety of projects and approaches. As well, we noted in the proposal that the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication should be allowed to define other submitted topics into the framework if there is majority agreement. We believed that such a stipulation would permit judges to be inclusive as they considered the nominated dissertations.

To develop evaluation criteria, the committee examined descriptions of dissertation awards in other academic fields. And there were a great many to look at both within and without the liberal arts. Common to most of these descriptions was the sentiment that projects should be original, significant, and methodologically sound. We certainly agreed with this sentiment, especially the part about significance. To be frank, we discussed the reality that some projects turn out to be less important to a field than others, such as projects that reflect highly personal interests or make modest contributions to heavily researched areas. The committee also felt that projects should be well written because English, rhetoric, and humanities departments continue to house the majority of doctoral programs in technical communication. In the end, our deliberations produced five evaluation criteria: originality of the research, the contribution the research makes to the field, methodological soundness of the approach used, awareness of the existing research in the area studied, and the overall quality of the writing. Note that we did not rank-order these criteria. Instead, we presented them as a heuristic to help judges assess dissertation projects and make decisions.

In July 1997, the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication submitted a final proposal to the CCCC Executive Committee for their consideration. The minutes of the meeting at which the proposal was considered do not contain the details of the discussion, but the proposal was approved. I suspect the discussion was sympathetic because our prize request for a certificate was expanded to include CCCC convention registration and CCCC membership for one year. The only issue that needed to be worked out was where and when to hold the award ceremony. We originally asked if the ceremony could be held during the general convention session at which the other CCCC awards are given. Our rationale was that we wanted the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication to be as visible as possible. However, because that general session is already too overcrowded with agenda items, we were asked to find another venue for the award.

This was a perfectly reasonable request, and in truth it probably makes more sense, even in terms of visibility, to present the dissertation award in conjunction with the other technical communication awards presented at the ATTW annual conference associated with the CCCC. The officers of ATTW enthusiastically welcomed the award onto their conference program, and this gesture has created a fruitful partnership between ATTW and the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication.

The origins and development of the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication were shaped by several factors, including the pragmatic posture of the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication, historical relationships between the Committee and both the NCTE Committee on Technical and Scientific Communication and the CCCC, work overlap, and kairos. In hindsight, kairos might appear to be the most significant factor: Support was certainly needed at the highest levels of the CCCC. But it is probably more accurate to say that all of these factors contributed more or less equally to the establishment of the award.

## SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR THE AWARD

This section provides some summary statistics for the first five years of the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication. Longitudinally speaking, and by almost any measure, five years represents a considerable period of time to contemplate and analyze, particularly given that the overall number of submissions is rather healthy. In addition to summary statistics related to numbers, the submissions also speak to issues of topic and method in technical communication. First, however, let me review the numbers.

With permission from the nominees, Appendix A provides a comprehensive list of the dissertations that were submitted to the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication between 1999 and 2003. I offer this list with some minor trepidation, for it inevitably distinguishes the projects that did not win awards from those that did. At the same time, being nominated is in itself a mark of outstanding work, to which the judges who struggled to name past winners can attest. Moreover, there is clear value in a comprehensive archived list of dissertation projects judged by their directors to be outstanding. The main value I see is that it can serve as a resource for future dissertation writers in search of research questions. The titles of the dissertations tend to be wonderfully descriptive, often suggesting both topic area and approach. So if one scans the list, it is not difficult to identify the people and projects that should be considered in inquiries into a particular area. The list is as valuable for its absences as it is for its inclusions. The lack of a topic could suggest that it is considered to be uninteresting or not wholly relevant, but it could also indicate a research opportunity, a gap in the knowledge base of the field. For these reasons, Appendix A serves inventional as well as archival purposes.

For the time period in question, 34 dissertations were submitted in total, which averages out to approximately 6 entries per year. The only thing that needs to be clarified here is the seemingly large number of entries in 1999 (11), the first year for the award. When the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication wrote the award procedures, we decided that a project should be able to be submitted one time over the span of two years. Our rationale was that we wanted to provide a comfortable and accommodating window of time in which to submit a project. Life on the tenure track can indeed be a time-consuming adjustment. Also, dissertations are frequently defended at nonstandard school times—that is, over summers and in random weeks throughout the year once a project is defensible and once an entire committee is available. So the dissertation projects submitted in 1999 were completed in 1998 or 1997. The total number of submissions for 2000 (5), 2001 (5), 2002 (7), and 2003 (6) were more typical because most people elected to submit their projects during the first year of eligibility.

The other summary statistics related to numbers have to do with the degree-granting institutions. Table 1 summarizes the schools from which the submissions came together with the number of submissions. Although there is not much to say about this table, which is interesting on its own, I have two comments: First, unlike many other fields, thus far we do not seem to be overproducing PhDs. I fully realize that not every dissertation project gets nominated for the award, but only Texas Tech has averaged one submission per year, with all of the other schools being well below that number. I am hopeful that these modest averages generally indicate that the field has a handle on program size rather than an excess of undistinguished doctoral work. From the conversations I have had with those who have written nomination letters, I believe this to be the case. Second, a significant

TABLE 1  
Schools and their Submissions

<i>School</i>	<i>Number of Submissions</i>	<i>Percent of Submissions</i>
Texas Tech University	5	15
New Mexico State University	4	12
Iowa State University	3	9
Michigan Technological University	3	9
Penn State University	3	9
Purdue University	3	9
University of Minnesota	3	9
Miami University (Ohio)	2	6
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	2	6
University of Twente	2	6
McGill University	1	3
Texas Woman's University	1	3
University of Louisville	1	3
Wayne State University	1	3

amount of doctoral work is being done at schools without full doctoral degree programs in technical communication. We all expect to see submissions from schools that have put “technical communication” or some close variant in the title of their degree programs (e.g., New Mexico State, Iowa State, Texas Tech, University of Minnesota). These schools typically offer a full complement of courses in technical communication. Yet, several submissions have come from doctoral programs that combine many more courses in rhetoric and composition with a dissertation in the area of technical communication (e.g., Miami University, Texas Woman’s University, University of Louisville, Wayne State University). This situation signals—to my way of thinking, anyway—strong intellectual connections between technical communication studies and composition studies, with rhetoric serving as a bridge between these two areas at the doctoral level.

The 34 submissions, of course, cover a wide range of subjects, but I have constructed an oversimplified taxonomy in order to group the projects into broad topical areas that help to make some sense of the research terrain. Table 2 lists the topical areas and notes the number of dissertations in each one. Let me first characterize the areas and their projects (in ranked order) and then make a few overall comments about tendencies. Projects in the Writing in the Workplace category engage various—and mostly nonacademic—organizational settings, including a bank, a meatpacking company, a nonprofit organization, an industrial research and development laboratory, and engineering companies that offer co-ops, and they involve issues related to writing and communication processes, editing practices, writing and editing technologies, cross-functional teams, and professionalization. Projects in the Rhetoric of the Disciplines category engage field-specific sites, especially scientific sites but also accounting, law, and nursing. These projects consider the ways in which the literate practices of disciplines shape their histories, debates, conventions, and workers. Projects in the Information Design category are interested in the relationships between verbal and visual rhetorics, in text designs, in communication media, and in system designs that support writing and communication tasks. In general, the projects involve issues of usability and visibility.

TABLE 2  
Topical Areas and their Frequency (Dissertations Nominated  
for the Outstanding Dissertation Award 1999–2003)

<i>Topical Areas</i>	<i>Number of Dissertations</i>	<i>Percent of Dissertations</i>
Writing in the workplace	8	24
Rhetoric of the disciplines	7	21
Information design	6	18
Rhetoric of institutional discourses	5	15
Rhetoric of technology	4	12
Pedagogy	4	12

Projects in the Rhetoric of Institutional Discourses category engage texts of consequence in and/or for the public sphere. Although the texts are associated with specific institutional sites and practices, they tend to focus not on disciplinary specialists but on more general populations and audiences, or at least have implications that are very broad in scope. Projects examine the rhetoric of military reports, environmental public policies, medical crises and conditions, and body images, taking into consideration questions of power, authority, and equity. Because projects in the Rhetoric of Technology category understand technology as a cultural artifact that shapes and is shaped by social forces, they investigate the rhetorical aspects of systems with interconnected agents, objects, practices, and values. In addition, they consider the ways in which technology is discursive—that is, how representations of technology shape our understanding of it. The dissertations in this area research the contexts of sewing technologies, writing technologies, and Internet technologies. Last, the projects in the Pedagogy category consider the classroom as a research site. These projects address online pedagogical environments and their development and management, assessment practices, and theories of instruction.

My taxonomy, which is only one map of the research terrain to be sure, raises several points of interest. I was interested to see, for example, that there is not an excess of pedagogical projects. In fact, there are twice as many studies of workplace writing contexts as there are of classroom writing contexts. I have certainly done my share of pedagogical projects, and ATTW and CPTSC rightly retain a strong focus on teaching that is invaluable to the scores of new people who enter the profession each year. But many of us also believe that technical communication will not command the respect it deserves without an increasingly sophisticated body of research and scholarship. Fortunately, it is clear from the distribution of topical areas that we are on the right track in this regard. It is also interesting (although not at all surprising) that the dissertation projects continue to expand the domain of technical communication on some level. There are projects that examine more conventional writing and communication matters, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that, for we still have much to learn about texts and the work that they do in nonacademic settings. However, some of the projects are quite interdisciplinary in nature, cutting across a range of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the fine arts. In turn, the dissertations help to position technical communication as a kind of meta-discipline whose subject matter is not a self-contained system but rather is deeply embedded in the economy, society, polity, culture, the professions, and so on. As a final point, it is interesting to note recurring themes—or lack thereof—across the projects. For example, 8 of the 34 dissertations (or about 24%) address gender issues, whereas none of the projects deals with race and class issues. Likewise, nearly all of the submissions consider culture and context to be important considerations, yet only one project concentrates on international concerns. Another imbalance is that seven of the eight projects in the

Writing in the Workplace category focus on corporate sites as opposed to other types of workplace sites (e.g., nonprofits, government agencies). And while the Pedagogy category contains a suitable number of dissertations, all of them focus on academic classrooms. This focus is not a problem per se, but it does suggest that there is room for pedagogical projects that center on workplace contexts, especially as education and work become more and more integrated.

The methods employed in the dissertations also help to characterize the research terrain. My classification system here first arranges the research methods into two categories that are often put into binary opposition. It then breaks down the categories as well as complicates the binary. In the broadest sense, 14 of the dissertations (or about 41%) could be characterized as interpretive in nature, whereas 20 (or about 59%) could be characterized as empirical in nature. The distinction is between projects that employ secondary research methods combined with various analytical techniques and projects that rely to a substantial degree on primary research methods. The distribution of projects between the interpretive and empirical categories seems about right to me, especially for an applied field that by definition is supposed to be engaged in immediate and direct ways with its literate practices. On the interpretive side, the 14 dissertations separate into projects that analyze archival-historical materials (4) and those that analyze more contemporary texts (10), including arguments in public forums, disciplinary discourses, and the genres of technical communication. As one might expect, the analytical techniques employed in the interpretive projects come from a number of theoretical locations—among them feminist theory, critical theory, classical rhetoric, cultural studies, and genre theory. On the empirical side, the 20 dissertations separate into projects that primarily use quantitative methods (3) and those that primarily make use of qualitative methods (17). The quantitative projects draw on experimental designs to study various reader-text interactions. Some of the qualitative projects include nonexperimental quantitative data such as statistics derived from surveys, but the dissertations rest on ethnographic approaches, case studies, interviews, and other qualitative empirical methods. The complication I want to raise about the interpretive-empirical binary is that many of the research approaches are multimodal in design, joining the most productive aspects of the humanist critical tradition and social science methods. One project, for example, combines ethnographic, participant-observer data gathering with close cultural analysis of texts, whereas another explores cultural-historical activity through several empirical studies (both qualitative and quantitative). These projects reflect the interdisciplinary nature of technical communication, but they also gesture toward postmodern perspectives that are suspicious of overarching accounts of research findings and methods.

The summary statistics for the award indicate a healthy diversity of programs, topics, and methods in technical communication. They also characterize a set of dissertation projects that promise to elevate the status of the field through work that

matters and makes a difference, not only in academic and workplace settings but also in everyday life. At the risk of ending this section on too fine a point, I want to reiterate that in terms of topical areas we need more doctoral work on international issues, especially in these uncertain global times that rely so heavily on communication. Likewise, despite an emphasis on the social in technical communication, we have basically ignored race and class issues. This is indeed a shameful fact, one that in certain ways positions the field as more traditional than many of the other academic areas we like to dismiss as irrelevant in this day and age.

### ASSUMPTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE JUDGES

If the summary statistics provide insights into the research terrain of doctoral work in technical communication, so, too, do the assumptions and activities of the judges. Between 1999 and 2003, eleven different people served as judges for the award, with two judges serving for three consecutive years as members of the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication. Since the second year of the award, however, one of the three judges has always been the overall winner from the previous year. We still have reservations about asking untenured colleagues to put in the enormous amount of time required to assess the submissions, yet all of the past winners have been eager to participate as judges. Could it be that our invitations have been correctly interpreted as a sign of confidence and professional validation? I hope so. The other judges have been senior colleagues who represent a diversity of programs in technical communication. As this section discusses, the assessment process inevitably raises a larger question that is often at the heart of the field.

Table 3 lists the topical areas and research methods for those dissertations that have won the overall award, and Table 4 lists the same information for those projects that received an honorable mention. Let me address the research methods first and the topical areas second. As Table 3 indicates about the overall winners, the number of interpretive to empirical projects (2 to 3) mirrors the methodological distribution among the 34 submissions, which, to repeat, is approximately 41% interpretive to 59% empirical. This relative balance continues with the four honor-

TABLE 3  
Overall Winners and their Topical Areas and Methods

<i>Year</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Topical Area</i>	<i>Method</i>
1999	Katherine Durack	Rhetoric of technology	Interpretive
2000	Clay Spinuzzi	Information design	Empirical
2001	Ken Baake	Rhetoric of the disciplines	Empirical
2002	David Dayton	Writing in the workplace	Empirical
2003	Brent Henze	Rhetoric of the disciplines	Interpretive

TABLE 4  
Honorable Mentions and their Topical Areas and Methods

<i>Year</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Topical Area</i>	<i>Method</i>
1999	Brenda Camp Orbell	Rhetoric of institutional discourses	Interpretive
1999	Graham Smart	Writing in the workplace	Empirical
2002	Dave Clark	Writing in the workplace	Empirical
2003	Sandra Sterling Reynolds	Rhetoric of the disciplines	Interpretive

able mentions, which divide equally between empirical and interpretive projects. Some unevenness, however, can be detected within one of the broad methodological categories. Although the four interpretive projects listed in Tables 3 and 4 split evenly between archival-historical approaches and approaches that analyze more contemporary texts, all of the empirical projects are primarily qualitative in nature. In other words, none of the three projects that employ experimental designs have been given either an overall award or honorable mention. This situation could be interpreted as a bias that aligns with the recent research and theory trajectories of the field, but in my view that would be an unfair interpretation. The quantitatively oriented work received high praise from the judges; in fact, one of the dissertations contended seriously for an honorable-mention prize. More often than not, however, the contributions of these specific experimental projects were considered to be more limited in scope than those of the winning submissions. This consideration, in my opinion, had more to do with questions of relevance and impact than with research methods per se.

The judges have also distributed the awards rather evenly across the topical areas, as Table 5 shows. The five overall winners come from four of the six categories (Writing in the Workplace, Rhetoric of the Disciplines, Information Design, Rhetoric of Technology), and one of the honorable mentions comes from a fifth category (Rhetoric of Institutional Discourses). Although six of the nine awards have been given in just two categories (Writing in the Workplace and

TABLE 5  
Topical Areas and their Number of Awards

<i>Topical Areas</i>	<i>Overall Awards</i>	<i>Honorable Mentions</i>
Writing in the workplace	1	2
Rhetoric of the disciplines	2	1
Information design	1	0
Rhetoric of institutional discourses	0	1
Rhetoric of technology	1	0
Pedagogy	0	0

Rhetoric of the Disciplines), these relatively large categories contain 45% of the 34 submissions. It might seem slightly disproportionate to some that one-third of the categories (2) have received two-thirds of the awards (6). Then again, only the Pedagogy category has gone unrecognized by the judges. And, in this case, I would make the same argument as before: that topical area per se did not hurt the submissions. Rather, these particular pedagogical projects were judged to make less of an overall contribution than the dissertations that won awards. They also sometimes fell short by comparison in terms of other criteria for evaluation (as did some of the empirical projects that went unrecognized).

Having been privy to the extensive e-mail exchanges between the judges, I can say with confidence that, in the abstract, they did not value certain research methods over others or certain topical areas over others. It is, of course, the case that everyone has personal preferences when it comes to research and scholarship. In spite of that, the judges have been able to rise above personal preferences and adhere to the five criteria for evaluation. The more delicate matter has not been questions of bias but perceived conflicts of interest. Yet, this matter further points up the general level of conscientiousness of the judges, which has been more than adequate if you ask me. At numerous junctures over the past five years, judges have worried about the need to recuse themselves from the assessment process, or at least from part of it. Advisors with doctoral students submitting dissertations are not eligible to be judges, as the rules for the award make clear and as should be obvious. On the other hand, judges have occasionally come from the same institutions as submitters or have been collaborators with submitters in other contexts. The point I want to make here is that these inevitable situations have not created any real problems for the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication or for the award. Although the committee has been careful in its selection of judges, the judges themselves have been hypersensitive to perceived conflicts of interest. As a matter of fact, any weak connections between the judges and dissertation projects have potentially been more of a disadvantage than advantage for the graduate-student submitters because the judges have been reluctant to press decisions that involve their own institutions or sometimes collaborators.

So what larger question has come up in the assessment process? Not surprisingly, it has to do with the intellectual boundaries of the field, which, as already mentioned, troubled the CCCC Committee on Technical Communication when it prepared the proposal for the award. Although the judges have yet to exclude a nominated project, the question of boundaries has persisted in both the exchanges between judges and in the nomination letters from dissertation directors. The only observation—and a rather obvious one—to make about the judges is that the boundaries delineated in their exchanges frequently reflect certain institutional understandings of the field. For example, a judge from a program that makes very

clear distinctions between professional and technical communication brought those distinctions to the table. This is not a problem in and of itself, but such a reality underscores the need to create slates of judges that include people from different types of academic programs. With regard to the nomination letters, several dissertation directors made explicit arguments related to boundary issues. All but one of these arguments made efforts to define dissertation projects into the field, usually by relating them theoretically and/or methodologically to important and well-known topics and figures. The other argument came from the opposite direction, making the case that a particular project was a “true” dissertation in technical communication rather than an “inquiry slanted in our direction from another field, such as composition studies or science and technology.” As with the judges, this perspective reflects a very specific institutional sense of what is technical communication (fair enough).

To sum up, the judges have awarded prizes in five of the six topical areas and in both of the methodological categories. Although neither a pedagogical nor a quantitatively oriented project has been recognized, the choice of topic or method by itself was not a determining factor for the judges, who, to their credit, have managed to adhere to the criteria for evaluation. The larger question about disciplinary boundaries is not going to be settled anytime soon, and certainly not by the award. What the award underscores, however, is that the boundaries marked out in conversations about professional identity get shaped to some extent by institutionally determined frameworks for the field.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I offer a narrative that attempts to make some social sense of the first five years of the CCCC Outstanding Dissertation Award in Technical Communication. My retrospective analysis contextualizes the origins and development of the award, provides some summary statistics for the award, and considers the assumptions and activities of the judges. As I reflect on the award, I am most struck by the good work of the graduate-student submitters and the goodwill of the judges. The students have produced a body of work that is impressive in both its range and vision, while the judges have been fair, even-handed, and responsible. Of course, the real measure of the dissertations will be their contribution to the published research literature in technical communication. And while it is perhaps too soon to conduct a full assessment, the early signs point to a significant contribution. As I completed this narrative, I was able to make contact with 16 of the 34 graduate-student submitters. To date, these individuals alone have produced five books, twenty articles, and two book chapters. And there are many additional books and essays in development, especially

from the dissertation projects that were completed in 2002 and 2003. This is indeed an impressive record of achievement, one that is certain to continue into the future.

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- Welch, Nancy, Catherine G. Latterell, Cindy Moore, and Sheila Carter-Tod, ed. *The Dissertation and the Discipline: Reinventing Composition Studies*. Portsmouth: Boynton, 2002.

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APPENDIX A  
Dissertations Submitted Between 1999 and 2003

<i>Author</i>	<i>Dissertation Title</i>	<i>School</i>
1999		
Katherine Durack	Documentation and Domestic Technology: Household Sewing Technologies and Feminine Authority	New Mexico State University
Menno de Jong	Reader Feedback in Text Design: Validity of the Plus-Minus Method for the Pretesting of Public Information Brochures	University of Twente
Melinda Kreth	Writing, Learning, and Persuading: The Experiences of Women Engineering Co-Op Students	University of Louisville
Nancy McGee	The Balance of Academic Accounting Discourse: Between Scientific Objectivity and Professional Judgment	Wayne State University
Brenda Orbell	Discourse, Power, and Social Ruptures: An Analysis of Tailhook '91	Texas Tech University
Frances Ranney	Reading, Writing, and Rhetoric: An Inquiry into the Art of Legal Language	Miami University (Ohio)
Dickie Selfe	Critical Technical Literacy Practices In and Around Technology-Rich Communication Facilities	Michigan Technological University
Graham Smart	An Ethnographic Study of Knowledge-Making in a Central Bank: The Interplay Between Writing and Economic Modeling	McGill University
Nicole Ummelen	Procedural and Declarative Information in Software Manuals: Effects on Information, Use, Task Performance, and Knowledge	University of Twente
John Waisanen	Thinking Geometrically: Multi-Modal Approaches to Problems of Space	Michigan Technological University
Mark Zachry	Workplace Genres: A Sociohistorical Study of Communicative Practices in a Production Company	Iowa State University
2000		
M. Ann Brady	A Critical Inquiry into the Gendered Understanding, Interpretation, and Use of Rhetorical Technologies as Inventional Heuristics	Miami University (Ohio)
Russell Clark	Computer-Mediated Communication Patterns in an R&D Organization: The Role of the "Technological Communicator" in the Wired Laboratory	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Gail Lippincott	Ellen Swallow Richards: Rhetorical Strategies of a Nineteenth-Century Technical Communicator	University of Minnesota
Blake Scott	Risky Rhetoric: Aids and the Cultural Practices of HIV Testing	Penn State University
Clay Spinnuzzi	Designing for Lifeworlds: Genre and Activity in Information Systems Design and Evaluation	Iowa State University

2001	Ken Baake John Chandler	Metaphor and Knowledge: The Rhetorical Challenges at a Postmodern Science Think Tank Managing Cross-Functional Teams: An Activity-Theory Approach to Software Development and Documentation	New Mexico State University Texas Tech University
	Kelli Cargile Cook	Online Technical Communication: Pedagogy, Instructional Design, and Student Preferences in Internet-Based Distance Education	Texas Tech University
	Laurie Cubbison Summer Smith	Validating Illness: Internet Activism in Response to Institutional Discourse A Comparison of Engineering and Writing Teachers' Practices of Reading and Evaluating Students' Technical Writing	Purdue University Penn State University
2002	Eva Brumberger	The Rhetoric of Typography: Five Experimental Studies of Typeface Personality and Its Effects on Readers and Reading	New Mexico State University
	Dave Clark Lynne Cooke David Dayton Baotong Gu	A Rhetoric of Boundaries: Living and Working Along a Technical/Non-Technical Split Remediation and the Visual Evolution of Design Electronic Editing in Technical Communication: Practices, Attitudes, and Impacts From the Oracle Bones to the Computer: A Rhetorical Perspective on Writing Technology Development in China	Iowa State University Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Texas Tech University Purdue University
	Michele Simmons	Building Public Rhetorics: A Critical Approach to Public Participation in Environmental Public Policy	Purdue University
	Greg Wilson	Articulation Theory and Disciplinary Change: Unpacking the Bayesian-Frequentist Conflict in Statistical Science	New Mexico State University
2003	Tracy Bridgeford Brent Henze	Narrative Ways of Knowing: Re-Imagining Technical Communication Instruction Scientific Rhetorics in the Emergence of British Ethnology, 1808-1848: Discourses, Disciplines, and Institutions	Michigan Technological University Penn State University
	Amy Koerber Sam Racine Sandra Sterling Reynolds Heather Sehmel	US Breastfeeding Education and Promotion, 1978-99: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis Changing (Inter)Faces: A Genre Analysis of Catalogues from Sears, Roebuck to Amazon.com Collaboration or Subordination: The Role of Rhetoric in the Conception of Primary Healthcare Giver Websites and Advocacy Campaigns: Decision-Making, Implementation, and Audience in an Environmental Advocacy Group's Use of Websites as Part of Its Communication Campaigns	University of Minnesota University of Minnesota Texas Woman's University Texas Tech University