

Date: April 17, 2020

To: Roger Munger, Director, MATC program at Boise State University

From: Morgan Ackley, MATC student at Boise State University

Subject: Recommendation Report for Elective Gap Analysis of MATC Program

Attached is the report for my study "Evaluating the Course Options and Potential Gaps in the MATC Program at Boise State: A Recommendation Report." I completed the tasks outlined in my proposal: determining the constraints of the department, evaluating student thoughts and opinions of the MATC program, and researching other graduate technical communication programs to determine the gaps in the MATC program at Boise State.

To carry out the tasks outlined in my proposal, I conducted an interview over email with the director of the MATC program, distributed a survey to students enrolled in the MATC program, and researched other graduate technical writing programs and compared their course offerings to the course offerings in Boise State's MATC program. After collecting the data and analyzing my findings, I wrote the report.

My main findings were that some students do have difficulty meeting graduation requirements and/or miss out on taking classes they are interested in taking, the department for the MATC program is restricted by budgetary and staffing constraints, and Boise State's MATC program lacks a course that provides more technical knowledge to students.

My main recommendation is to add an additional course to the MATC program. The department would have to choose whether the course covers a new topic, such as technical knowledge, or covers a degree requirement that is offered in the summer.

I appreciate the trust you have put in me to figure out what the gaps are in the MATC program and find alternative options to address those gaps. If you have further questions or concerns, please contact me at [morganackley@u.boisestate.edu](mailto:morganackley@u.boisestate.edu).

# Evaluating the Course Options and Potential Gaps in the MATC Program at Boise State: A Recommendation Report

Prepared for: Roger Munger, Director, MATC program at Boise State University

Prepared by: Morgan Ackley, MATC student at Boise State University

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# Abstract

“Evaluating the Course Options and Potential Gaps in the MATC Program at Boise State: A Recommendation Report”

Prepared by: Morgan Ackley, MATC student at Boise State University

Recent changes to the MATC program have caused a reduction in course availability and lack of course electives. Due to this reduction in the amount of elective course offerings and the course rotation schedule, students must plan their schedules carefully from the start of the program and may potentially miss out on taking courses that reflect their interests and career goals. In order to determine how to bridge the gap between course offerings and scheduling conflicts, I conducted research to determine students' actual interest and thoughts about the MATC program as well as research to understand the reasons for the changes made in the program. Additionally, I researched other programs to evaluate alternative courses and delivery methods. This research evaluates student satisfaction with the program and the overall value of the program. I distributed a survey to students in my English 512 class to gather data from an MATC student population. To gather information from the MATC department, I emailed back and forth with the director of the department. Lastly, I conducted online research about other programs and course offerings. The student survey results confirmed that some students face challenges completing graduation requirements and/or meeting career goals because of the course rotation schedule currently offered. From my interview with the director of the department, there are constraints that the department has to work with that impact the type of program being offered. In my online research, I discovered that most graduate programs offer similar courses; however, the MATC program is lacking more technical courses that teach students about software or specific fields of writing. My recommendation for the MATC program is to add at least one additional course option for students. This course option could either be an online summer course for a required course or a brand-new elective that focuses on technologies in the technical communication field.

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## 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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To determine the best approach to improving the course gaps in the MATC program at Boise State University, I conducted research about the constraints the department is bound by, the opinions of students in the MATC program, and other technical communication programs. From my research, I was able to determine two possible recommendations for improving the program.

In spring 2020, it was announced that starting fall 2020 the elective course Software Documentation would no longer be offered in the program. Additionally, the course rotation schedule would change for several required courses. Due to this reduction in the amount of elective course offerings and the course rotation schedule, students either must plan their schedules carefully from the start of the program or potentially miss out on taking courses that reflect their interests and career goals. In turn, students' career goals and ability to graduate may be hindered by the current state of the MATC program. With the approval of the director, I researched ways in which the department could combat these challenges.

Part of my research was interviewing students as well as the director of the department to get primary insight into the challenges students and the department face in terms of schedule and class offerings. The other portion of my research involved reviewing graduate technical communication programs from other universities to determine what the gaps are in course offerings at Boise State.

The main finding of my research is that students do have some difficulty in being able to take the classes they are interested in or need for graduation because of the current course rotation schedule. Additionally, students would like to see a class offered that focuses on more technical information. To counter with some background information, the department is aware of these challenges but is bound by staffing and budgetary constraints. In short, the department is unable to meet every student's needs because the program is full of diverse students with diverse needs and the department does not have the resources to meet every single need of every student. Concurrent with some of the responses from students about wanting more technical training, Boise State's technical communication program is lacking a course in this subject. Other universities offer training in either science writing or more technical programs such as Adobe and authoring tools.

My recommendation for the MATC program is to provide at least one additional course. This course could either be a summer course that covers required information, thus freeing up students' schedules for electives in the fall and spring semesters, or a new course that offers training in more technical subjects.

### 3 INTRODUCTION

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Due to the recent reduction in the available elective course offerings and the changes made to the course rotation schedule, students may have difficulty scheduling classes that fulfill both their career goals and their graduation requirements. In turn, students' career goals and ability to graduate may be hindered by the current state of the MATC program.

For the MATC program to continue meeting students' needs, the current course offerings should be evaluated and modified. Research is required to make effective and responsible decisions to address the issues students may have with the program.

In order to address the issues, I conducted research that investigates the constraints and direction of the program from the English department as well as addresses student concerns. To develop possible solutions to the issue, I carried out the following tasks:

- Determine what steps the department has taken to account for the removal of one elective course offering
- Determine if the department has received input from students on the program course offerings and if the department has considered the effects of the course rotations on students' schedules
- Assess student concerns regarding the recent changes made to the program as well as the program in general
- Evaluate alternative solutions to the gaps in the program

The major findings in my research about the department were that the department makes changes to the program based on the feedback received by graduating students. The department also has to work around budgetary and staffing constraints that prevent the department from meeting all the needs and desires of every student enrolled in the MATC program.

The results of the student survey proved that some students do have difficulty meeting graduation requirements and/or do miss out on taking courses that suit their interests. Some students would like to see a course that offers more technical training. Overall, students responded they would enjoy having the option to take a summer course to meet a graduation requirement.

Finally, my research about other programs revealed a slight gap in the Boise State program that correlated with the type of information student would like to see in the MATC program. While most other programs offered the same types of courses Boise State currently offers, other university offered at least one course that offered more technical knowledge – scientific writing, software programs, authoring tools, content management, etc. Boise State does not offer an equivalent course; therefore, I was able to determine the major gap in course offerings at Boise State.

I recommended the program address the current issues students face by choosing one of two options: introducing a new course that is modeled after the course offerings at Portland State University or providing at least one online course option for a required course during the summer. Both options require offering an additional course to the program. One option would require hiring new staff with knowledge in new subject matter while the other option would simply require extending existing resources to one additional course.

## 4 RESEARCH METHODS

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This section explains the methods I used to conduct my research.

### 4.1 DETERMINE STEPS DEPARTMENT HAS TAKEN TO ADDRESS PROGRAM CHANGES

To better understand the reasons for the recent changes, I analyzed the initial email sent out detailing the changes made to the program and the explanations given for why the changes were made. Additionally, I corresponded with Dr. Roger Munger through email about the program. Specifically, I questioned the course rotation schedule, the course delivery options, and program ability to extend courses into summer. Dr. Munger replied back with explanations about working through various budget, staffing, and deadline constraints that determine the way that courses are offered in the program.

### 4.2 ASSESS STUDENT CONCERNS REGARDING THE PROGRAM

In order to collect my data from students, I created a Google form and distributed the form to my ENGL 512 class. I was unable to distribute the survey to the wider MATC student population due to university policies that protect students' privacy. I was only able to distribute the survey to the smaller population of the class in which I am enrolled and completing this research for. Out of the total population of the class, only six students participated in the survey. While the results of the survey likely do not accurately depict the thoughts and opinions of the larger group affected by changes and decisions made for the MATC program, this small sample may give some idea of general thoughts and opinions of some students in the MATC program.

After participants completed the survey, I then read through all the responses. Most questions required only yes or no answers while a few let the survey respondent answer with a short paragraph. I looked over the results from each question and analyzed the implications of the responses.

### 4.3 EVALUATE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

To provide better recommendations for improving the course offerings in the MATC program, I researched other graduate technical communication programs offered through other universities. For each program, I compared the courses offered at other universities to the courses offered at Boise State and noted any courses that were similar and could be dismissed from my search to find the gaps in Boise State's MATC program. Next, I made a list of any courses that were vastly different from the courses offered in the MATC program. I then evaluated each different course to determine if the skills and knowledge offered met the suggestions and desires of the student responses from the student survey I distributed to my peers. To provide a recommendation, I pulled from the courses that best fit the request of students and generalized the type of skills or knowledge a new course could offer students if the MATC program adopted a new elective.

## 5 RESULTS

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In this section, I present the results of research for each task.

### 5.1 DETERMINE STEPS DEPARTMENT HAS TAKEN TO ADDRESS PROGRAM CHANGES

Current changes align better with students' career goals and response to program resource. ENGL 511 will only be offered in even fall semesters, ENGL 512 will only be offered in odd spring years, and ENG 535 will only be offered in off fall years. Department recommends that students register early, take required courses when they are offered, and to either enroll in an internship or take courses in other degree programs if students still need electives but have either taken the course that is offered or the course offered does not meet their career goals. Courses such as ENGL 516 can be taken twice for credit.

The department distributes an exit survey to all students who graduate from the program to gather feedback about scheduling, course delivery options, summer courses, and strengths and weaknesses of the program. The department uses survey responses to help improve the program. The department has to work within certain budget, staffing, and deadline constraints that prove to be a challenge in meeting all the needs of students; however, the department works on those challenges every day.

### 5.2 ASSESS STUDENT CONCERNS REGARDING THE PROGRAM

I received 6 responses from students. The following is a summary of what results and explanations given by students.

- 67% of respondents said they had no problem scheduling courses in the MATC program while 33% said they did.
- Half of respondents said they did not have any difficulties meeting graduation requirements. Out of the other half that did have difficulties, one participant said they need to take a course that isn't offered until fall of 2021, which impedes their ability to graduate fall of 2020.
- When asked if students were unable to take a course they wanted to take due to the course rotation schedule, 50% said yes while the other 50% said no.
- According to 67% of respondents, the MATC program does meet their career goals. Out of the remaining survey participants, half said no the program does not meet their career goals and half said they were unsure since they were just starting the program.
- When asked about online-only options, more than half of respondents claimed they would enjoy more online-only classes. A couple of respondents said the appeal of taking an online-only class would depend on the course material.
- When asked about summer course options, every respondent agreed that they would love to see this option implemented in the program.
- When asked about improvements to the program, respondents gave varying responses – one respondent wants to see more technical classes offered such as Adobe programs or working with an actual client, another would like to see every course offered every semester, and another said that they would like to see more summer courses offered and less hybrid courses. This participant also said they would rather have fully online or fully in-person classes.

### 5.3 EVALUATE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

In order to determine what alternative options the department should look at for making improvements to the MATC program, I researched other technical communication programs and compared their course offerings with Boise State's MATC course offerings. Overall, most programs offer similar courses with a few variances in number of courses offered and content matter. Other programs offer fully online courses while some offer online or in-person classes. The major content area most other programs offer that Boise State is lacking is a course on more technical topics, such as science writing, technical software, authoring tools, etc.

According to the Master's in Communications website, science, health, and government writing specializations with possible community partnerships are some of the offerings that most technical communication programs offer. Currently, the MATC program does not include specific areas of focus but rather provides the tools and resources to apply the principles you learn in the program to various fields. However, a course in which more specific skills are taught that introduce concepts in these fields may fit the format of the MATC program and give students more technical knowledge. Of course, this option may not be widely sought after as many students may not have a specific field in mind that they want to work in.

The online master's degree program for Arizona State University also includes a course for technical and scientific reports. This program seems to offer more courses about topics that the MATC program condensed into only one course, such as data visualization and rhetoric. Overall, this program is quite similar to the MATC program. It does offer more specific courses about copyright and information in the digital age, but according to my student survey results, these kinds of courses aren't necessarily the kind of information students feel they are missing. I think the most useful courses other programs offer that the MATC doesn't is writing for a specific field.

Note: The master's degree program at University of Minnesota also offers a science writing course.

The master's degree program at Portland State offers a course in advanced topics, which varies each semester. These topics could be any of the following: DITA XML, Translation and Localization Technologies, Content Management, Adobe Creative Suite, Topic-based authoring/Madcap Flare, Web Tools for Content Providers. According to my survey results, at least one student responded that they wished the MATC program offered courses in more technical information such as Adobe programs. The way this course is set up – the topics varying each time the course is offered – fits with the current format of the MATC program. This course seems like a good model for the MATC program if changes in course offerings were ever implemented to address some of the more technical skills and knowledge gaps.

This program also offers courses in teaching. Currently, other English programs and the EdTech program at Boise state would be the alternatives to offering these kinds of courses in the MATC program. Students are limited to only taking two courses outside of the MATC program.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

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In this section, I present my conclusions based on the results of my research.

### 6.1 DEPARTMENT CONSTRAINTS

Based on my interview with the department director, the MATC program has to evaluate changes made to courses very carefully. Thus, an effective solution to the course gap in the MATC program needs to fit within the budgetary and staffing constraints that the department is bound by.

### 6.2 STUDENT FEEDBACK

According to at least half of the student population that responded to my survey, students do have some difficulty meeting graduation requirements and/or have missed out on taking a course they wanted to take. More than half of respondents said they would enjoy taking online only courses and would enjoy having the option to take a required course in the summer. Some students would like to see more technical knowledge offered in the program.

Based on the student feedback, offering an additional course to the program seems like the best way to improve the gaps in the program and difficulties with scheduling. It seems offering an online course during the summer would address the unanimous responses from students about taking a summer online course. The department could also offer a new course that covers more technical knowledge, such as Adobe program skills.

### 6.3 COURSE GAPS

Based on my evaluations of other graduate programs in technical communication, Boise State lacks a course in teaching about technical tools such as web authoring, content management, Adobe programs, and authoring tools. A couple of the programs I reviewed also taught writing for specific fields of work, such as science, government, and medical. Boise State does not offer a course in either of these subject matter areas.

## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

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My recommendation for the MATC program is to pursue either of the options I have outlined:

### 7.1 ADD A COURSE IN TECHNICAL WRITING TECHNOLOGIES

Portland State University offers a great example of a course that offers a variety of technical topics such as Adobe programs, authoring tools, content management, web authoring, and XML. Based on a couple of survey responses, students are looking for a course that offers more technical skills. In the survey, one respondent mentioned Adobe programs specifically. Each semester, the topics covered in the course at Portland State vary. This model fits well with the model that the MATC program at Boise State already has in place with course electives operating on a rotational schedule as well. Due to the limited resources and staffing that the MATC program may have, offering the course on the same rotational schedule as other courses would alleviate too much additional strain on staff and resources. Providing a more technology-focused course as an additional elective in the fall during even years would give students an additional elective that fulfills the gap in the current curriculum.

### 7.2 OFFER AN ONLINE SUMMER SESSION OF A REQUIRED COURSE

According to the survey results, most respondents said they would enjoy taking online-only courses as well as one or two summer courses. Since at least one respondent said they would not be able to meet a graduation requirement because the course is not offered the semester they need to graduate and some respondents answered that they have missed out on courses they wanted to take, offering a summer session of a required course would give students a free slot to fill their semester with an elective. Since electives vary each semester and some required courses will only be offered in even or odd years, freeing up a slot in students' schedules would allow students more flexibility in the classes they take and potentially decrease the possibility of students missing out on courses they want to take or missing a graduation requirement.

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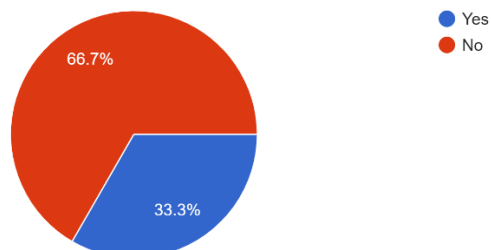
## 9 APPENDIX: STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSES

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These are the survey questions that I distributed to students in my 512 course. I received 6 responses.

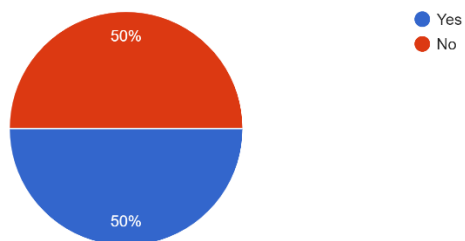
Have you had any difficulties scheduling classes?

6 responses



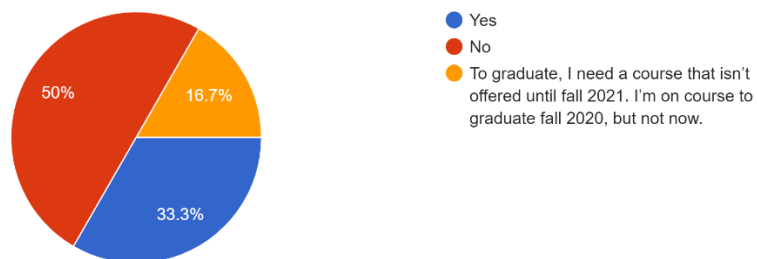
Because of the course rotation schedule, were you unable to take a class you wanted to take?

6 responses



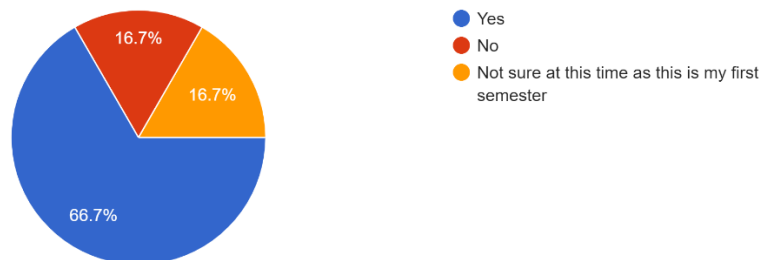
Have you had any difficulties meeting graduation requirements?

6 responses



Do the courses offered in the program meet your career goals?

6 responses



What is your opinion on having more online-only options?

6 responses

I like it if the class doesn't need group work it would depend on the content I'm learning

I work full-time and would like this option.

I would love more online-only options. I am a student, works full time, mother and wife—flexibility key in my life.

I struggle with this question as some courses just can't be taught without in-class discussions and interactions with instructors, but, at the same time, evening classes are difficult to manage with our already hectic schedules.

Currently, it makes sense.

I'm all for it! Online classes definitely have a learning curve, but the flexibility they afford is worth it.

What is your opinion on having 1-2 summer course options?

6 responses

Great option

I would like this option and would likely consider taking a course during the summer

That would be fantastic!

I would love that option!

Yes, please!

YES. Since I work full-time, taking 2-3 classes a semester is tough. I was really disappointed when I saw that there were hardly any summer options. At this rate, it could take me 5 years to finish my masters. With summer options, I could finish much earlier.

What improvements would you like to see in the MATC program?

6 responses

I've had a great experience so far only a year in and everyone has worked with me and helped me accommodate my needs

This is my first semester so I have no complaints

A few technical classes would be nice or even weekend technical workshops.

I can't answer that as I don't have enough experience with the program yet.

Every course available every semester.

More summer classes and less hybrid classes. I would rather have a fully online class or fully in-person class. Hybrids are tough to handle and stay on top of.

Is there a specific class you wish was in the MATC program?

5 responses

Not off the top of my head

Again to repeat myself, I would like to have the opportunity to take classes on programs, such as, Adobe and even classes where we actually have an actual client that would give us real-world experiences.

Not at this time.

I'd like to have a certification in accessibility, or a focus somehow.

Not that I can think of right now.