

Creating an STC Chicago Student Chapter: Professional Development for the Future

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Executive Summary

This report contains my recommendation for the creation of an STC Chicago student chapter. With my recommendation, I also include the primary and secondary research I collected to help explain the benefits that a Chicago student chapter would provide both students and the STC.

As a student and new member of the STC, I was disappointed to learn that there was not a student chapter in Chicago. Although there is a regional Chicago chapter, the absence of a student chapter poses risks for students and the STC. Without a professional organization that specifically targets students, it can be difficult for students to learn about the technical communication profession and discover the opportunities that build professional experience. Further more, students new to technical communication can often be discouraged from joining an organization in which the majority of members already have technical communication knowledge or experience. The possible loss of student members not only decreases the STC's chances of collecting funding, but also diminishes the STC's popularity among prospective students in Chicago and surrounding areas. To attract knowledgeable students to the technical communication profession and strengthen the STC's presence in Chicago, the STC must establish a Chicago student chapter.

My research for this report is primarily based on six e-mail interview responses from current STC members, university professors, and a graduate instructor. My research reveals that two of the three university professors, four of the five STC Chicago members, and the graduate instructor support the creation of a Chicago student chapter. Those in favor of creating a Chicago student chapter primarily believe that the chapter would provide students with valuable networking and career building opportunities. The single interviewee who did not support the creation of a Chicago student chapter believes that students should create a student chapter if the regional chapter does not meet their needs. My interviewees' knowledge of technical communication and their involvement with the STC provided me with the information needed to construct the benefits that a Chicago student chapter can provide. You can find my e-mail interview responses in the Appendix section.

For students, a Chicago student chapter would provide the following benefits:

- **Education for members with limited knowledge of technical communication**—For students who have little or no knowledge of technical communication, a Chicago student chapter would allow them to comfortably learn about the field without worrying about asking basic questions.
- **Collaboration between students of various experiences levels and between professionals in the Chicago chapter**— The combination of academic and workplace knowledge of the profession would allow students to determine which area of technical communication to pursue and whether or not the profession fits their goals and needs.
- **Exposure to what technical communication students are doing at other schools**— Networking between students and schools in Chicago would provide valuable opportunities for students to learn from their peers. Students would be able to grow within the academic realm and also have opportunities to strengthen their skill sets when transitioning into the professional world.

The resources and development that members can receive from a Chicago student chapter would increase their likelihood of becoming technical communicators and of continuing their membership with the STC. As a result, a Chicago student chapter would also provide the STC with the following benefits:

- **Increased awareness of technical communication in Chicago**—The useful resources and networking opportunities of a Chicago student chapter would increase the chances of members continuing their membership as technical communicators. More working technical communicators not only increase the popularity of the profession, but also the popularity of the STC, which represents the profession.
- **Stronger pool of young professionals in Chicago**— As more students take advantage of the resources and opportunities that a Chicago student chapter would offer, there would be a stronger pool of professional technical communicators in Chicago. This is important for the STC because the future of the profession hinges on the education and preparation of college students.
- **Strong relationship between the Chicago student and regional chapter**— Collaboration between a Chicago student chapter and the regional chapter would showcase the benefits of the regional chapter, thus motivating student chapter members to join the regional chapter.

Despite the benefits available to both students and the STC, some possible costs for members of a Chicago student chapter could be the isolation from professional technical communicators and the payment of membership dues. Another cost or problem in creating a Chicago student chapter could be the amount of time it takes to implement and maintain the chapter.

However, by co-hosting meetings and arranging a mentoring program with the regional chapter, a Chicago student chapter can provide members with practical workplace knowledge of the profession. Although the cost of membership dues can be difficult for students to pay, the experience and knowledge they can obtain from a Chicago student chapter can make them more attractive job applicants after graduating. The abundance of colleges and universities in Chicago would provide the people needed to create a successful student chapter. With the proper recruitment methods and appointment of leadership positions, a Chicago student chapter would not have any problems maintaining members and helping students become technical communicators.

Based on these benefits that a Chicago student chapter can provide both students and the STC, I recommend (1) housing the chapter at the Computing and Digital Media building at DePaul University's Loop Campus, (2) holding semimonthly chapter meetings that primarily involve peer discussion and the planning of workshops and networking opportunities, and (3) implementing a mentoring program between universities and professionals in the Chicago chapter.

Introduction

This report contains my recommendation for the creation of an STC Chicago student chapter. With my recommendation, I also include the primary and secondary research I collected to help explain the benefits that a Chicago student chapter can provide both students and the STC.

Background

The National Association of Colleges and Employers conducted a study estimating that employers expected “to hire 22 percent fewer new grads from the college Class of 2009 than they actually hired from the Class of 2008” (Portuesi). Because of this employment difficulty for recent college graduates, current college students must make themselves marketable if they hope to receive jobs after graduation.

As a student and new member of the STC, I was disappointed to learn that there was not a student chapter in Chicago. For students aspiring to become technical communicators, networking and building professional experience are key factors in determining their employment opportunities. However, without a professional organization that specifically targets students, it can be difficult for students to learn about the technical communication profession and discover the opportunities that build professional experience.

Although there is a regional Chicago chapter, the absence of a student chapter poses risks for the STC. Students new to technical communication can often be discouraged from joining an organization in which the majority of members already have technical communication knowledge or experience. The possible loss of student members not only decreases the STC’s chances of collecting funding, but also diminishes the STC’s popularity among prospective students in Chicago and surrounding areas. As the number of student members decreases, the possibility of these students becoming technical communicators also decreases. To attract knowledgeable students to the technical communication profession and strengthen the STC’s presence in Chicago, the STC must establish a Chicago student chapter.

Methods

To help determine the benefits a Chicago student chapter could provide to both students and the STC, I conducted primary and secondary research. My primary research consists of e-mail interviews with five STC Chicago members, two DePaul University professors, and an Illinois Institute of Technology professor and graduate instructor. I chose to interview these people because they have knowledge of the STC and the technical communication profession. Therefore, their answers will provide accurate opinions for how a Chicago student chapter can benefit students and the STC. I asked these interviewees the following questions:

- Would you encourage the creation of a Chicago student chapter? Why or Why not?
- Because there is currently only a Chicago chapter open to both students and non-students, what benefits do you think students can gain by joining a chapter specifically geared towards students?

For my secondary research, I referenced a blog post from DrivenLeaders.com that discusses student involvement in professional organizations. I also referenced the STC and STC Chicago websites for information about the goals of the organization and the Chicago chapter. From my primary and secondary research, I was hoping to learn how current STC members, college professors, and students feel about the creation of a Chicago student chapter. I also wanted to learn about the benefits that regional and student chapters provide its members and the larger organizations with which the chapters are affiliated.

My research does not contain numeric figures on how student chapters have benefited their organizations. However, my research does contain some figures on the effect that professional organizations have on student employment opportunities and employee retention. My research also contains detailed descriptions from current STC members and academic faculty on the benefits that they believe a Chicago student chapter can provide. You can find my e-mail interview responses in the Appendix section.

Student Benefits of a Chicago Student Chapter

For students, a Chicago student chapter would provide

- education for members with limited knowledge of technical communication
- collaboration between students of various experiences levels and between professionals in the Chicago chapter
- exposure to what technical communication students are doing at other schools

Basic Education of the Profession

For students who have little or no knowledge of the technical communication profession, joining the Chicago chapter, which contains many members with professional experience, can be daunting. Although many colleges and universities in Chicago, like DePaul, have courses in technical and professional writing, very few have programs dedicated specifically to technical communication. This deficiency of technical communication courses makes it difficult for students to not only gain academic knowledge of technical communication, but also professional and workplace knowledge of the profession.

Shaun Slattery, a current STC member and professor in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse department at DePaul University, believes that a benefit of a Chicago student chapter is the ability to “bring speakers to campus to help students learn about the profession, and to gain some other hands-on experience that might not be possible in classes” (Slattery). A Chicago student chapter would provide a comfortable environment for students to learn and ask questions about technical communication and the profession. Furthermore, a Chicago student chapter would provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge of technical communication. Although I have taken a college-level technical writing course, it has been difficult for me to find additional opportunities where I can apply the knowledge I have learned in the classroom. Slattery believes that students could practice their document design skills through a student chapter newsletter. A student chapter newsletter and workshops on software applications like Adobe InDesign would be opportunities for students to strengthen their technical communication skill set. With a better understanding of the technical communication profession, students would be able to more easily determine if they want to enter the field.

Current Knowledge from Working Professionals

In addition to teaching students about technical communication, a Chicago student chapter can also provide students with knowledge from professional technical communicators. Shaun Slattery believes that “many chapters that focus on current professionals assume a great deal of knowledge and experience; their workshops tend to be for folks who already have some familiarity with certain kinds of software, for example. So a student chapter would help professionalize students without real prior experience” (Slattery). With guidance and information from practicing technical communicators, students would be able to extend their knowledge of the profession beyond what they learn in the classroom.

Knowledge from professional technical communicators would also provide students with the current, best practices within the profession. Beyond learning the skills that technical communicators use day-to-day, it would also be beneficial for students to learn how technical communicators interact with other professionals in a workplace setting. If students are more knowledgeable about the profession and have the opportunity to network with professionals, they will become more attractive job applicants. Furthermore, the combination of academic and workplace knowledge of the profession would allow students to determine which area of technical communication to pursue and whether or not the profession fits their goals and needs.

Networking between Local Students and Schools

A Chicago student chapter would also provide opportunities for members to network with other local students and schools. In my e-mail interview with Liz Coughlin, a current STC member and professor in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse department at DePaul University, she wrote:

Student chapters provide valuable opportunities for student-to-student discussion forums on topics of particular interest to undergrad and grad students (such as questions about grad schools, internships, funding, community-service opportunities, publishing opportunities, resume-building, social gatherings, etc.). (Coughlin)

These opportunities would not only help students transition from the academic to the professional world, but also make them more attractive job applicants.

In addition to helping students transition into the professional world, a Chicago student chapter would provide academic networking opportunities for students. Andrew Roback, a graduate instructor in the Illinois Institute of Technology's Technical Communication program, believes that "[a]ny opportunity for students to collaborate on research projects would be a good thing, and a student chapter might be able to link up students with similar interests at different universities (Roback). A Chicago student chapter would provide an environment for students across Chicago to speak with other students interested in the field; a student chapter would also allow members to work on strengthening the presence of technical communication within their schools. With the state-of-the art resources and technology from schools like DePaul University, Loyola University, and the Illinois Institute of Technology, students would be able to grow within the academic setting and also have the opportunities to strengthen their skill sets when transitioning into the professional world.

STC Benefits of a Chicago Student Chapter

In addition to the benefits that student members would receive, a Chicago student chapter would also provide benefits for the STC at large. A Chicago student chapter would provide the STC with a stronger

- awareness of technical communication in Chicago
- pool of young professionals in Chicago
- collaboration between the Chicago student and regional chapters

Stronger Awareness of Technical Communication in Chicago

The success of any professional organization depends on its members building awareness of the organization itself and of the profession that the organization represents. Increased awareness attracts prospective members to professional organizations, which generates the funding needed for organizations to function. Successful student chapters not only benefit their members, but also the larger, regional chapters and the organization as a whole. If student chapters provide members with useful resources and networking opportunities, the members will be more likely to join the regional chapters after graduation. As members transition from student to regional chapters, the chances of former student members becoming professionals increase. More working professionals not only increase the popularity of the profession, but also the popularity of the organizations that represent the profession.

The resources and development that members can receive from a Chicago student chapter would increase their likelihood of becoming technical communicators and of continuing their membership with the STC. As a result, the increasing number of student members in Chicago would contribute to the popularity of the technical communication field among Chicago colleges and universities. As the profession becomes more popular among students and schools, more students would be motivated to learn about technical communication through professionals and other knowledgeable students. A Chicago student chapter would provide an outlet for students to network and learn about the profession, thus generating more members and funding for the STC at large.

Stronger Pool of Young Professionals in Chicago

In addition to building awareness of technical communication, a Chicago student chapter would also produce a stronger pool of young technical communicators in Chicago. If students have practical knowledge and experience in their intended profession, they will be more prepared to enter the workforce. Cicilie Gildersleeve, a senior technical writer and current STC member, believes a Chicago student chapter would result in the “availability of a specific pool of students that local employers can draw from for internships and entry-level hires” (Gildersleeve). Members who take advantage of the education, workshops, and networking opportunities of a Chicago student chapter would become more marketable to local employers. A growing Chicago student chapter would cause local employers look to the chapter for promising, potential employees, thus increasing the chapter’s popularity.

As more students take advantage of the resources and opportunities that a Chicago student chapter would offer, there would be a stronger pool of professional technical communicators in Chicago. This is important for the STC because the future of the profession hinges on the education and preparation of college students. Furthermore, students transitioning into technical communication professions would have more incentive to join the Chicago chapter to stay current on technical communication trends. Therefore, the Chicago student chapter would help the regional Chicago chapter in gaining and retaining new members, thus contributing to the growth of the STC at large.

Collaboration between Students and Chicago Chapter

As a benefit for the STC, a Chicago student chapter would also lead to collaboration between the student and regional Chicago chapter. In my e-mail interview with Rachelle Korth, current president of the STC Northern Illinois University (NIU) Student Chapter, she stated, “The STC-NIU student chapter is close in proximity to STC-Chicago, so it’s easy to connect with professionals in that organization...Both organizations can share resources and offer opportunities for networking, which makes for a mutually-beneficial relationship” (Korth). Because the location of a Chicago student chapter would be near the regional Chicago chapter, there would be many opportunities for collaboration. For example, the Chicago student chapter could co-host meetings and networking events with the Chicago chapter.

Mentoring would also act as another form of collaboration between the Chicago student and regional chapters. A study conducted in 1999 by Louis Harris & Associates revealed that “35 percent of employees who did not receive regular mentoring [were] likely to look for another job within 12 months” (Korth). If Chicago chapter members were to mentor student chapter members, employers would be able to retain more qualified employees. As a result, the pool of entry-level technical communicators would be stronger, thus contributing to one of the STC’s goals of “improv[ing] the practice of technical communication” (“About STC, Vision & Strategic Plan”).

Collaboration between a Chicago student chapter and the regional chapter would also showcase the benefits of the regional chapter, thus motivating student chapter members to join the regional chapter. More members who join the regional Chicago chapter would contribute to the chapter being one of the largest in the STC (“Who We Are”). Increased membership would generate a more prominent presence in Chicago, thus contributing to one of the STC’s goals of ensuring “the long-term viability of the organization” (“About STC, Vision & Strategic Plan”).

Possible Costs of a Chicago Student Chapter

Despite the benefits available to both students and the STC, some costs could result from the creation of a Chicago student chapter. Karl Stolley, assistant professor in the Technical Communication department at the Illinois Institute of Technology, believes it would “be better for students to see what the Chicago chapter has to offer first before jumping in to start their own student chapter” (Stolley). Some possible costs for members of a student chapter could be the isolation from professional technical communicators and the payment of membership dues. Another cost or problem in creating a Chicago student chapter could be the amount of time it takes to implement and maintain the chapter.

Although the isolation from professional technical communicators might seem like a cost for student members, a Chicago student chapter can implement numerous networking events to collaborate with the regional chapter. By co-hosting meetings and arranging a mentoring program with the regional chapter, a Chicago student chapter can provide members with practical workplace knowledge of the profession. Partial isolation from professional technical communicators might also be beneficial for some student members. For members who have little or no knowledge of technical communication, a Chicago student chapter would allow them to comfortably learn about the field without worrying about asking basic questions.

Although the cost of membership dues can be difficult for students to pay, the experience and knowledge they can obtain from a Chicago student chapter can make them more attractive job applicants after graduating. For example, a student chapter could provide students with internship and employment opportunities from current STC members. Furthermore, student chapter members can learn about the latest trends and best practices in the profession that they may not have known without joining the student chapter. Therefore, the benefit of increased, future employment options outweighs the membership dues that members would have to pay as students. The implementation and maintenance of a Chicago student chapter could be difficult. However, the abundance of colleges and universities in Chicago would provide the people needed to create a successful student chapter. With the proper recruitment methods and appointment of leadership positions, a Chicago student chapter would not have any problems maintaining members and helping students become technical communicators.

Conclusion

Creating a Chicago student chapter would not only benefit its student members, but also the STC at large. For student members, a Chicago student chapter would provide basic education about technical communication with the opportunity to learn from professional technical communicators. Student members would also have the opportunity to network with local students and schools to expand their academic knowledge of the field. These benefits would ultimately guide student members' career decisions and make them more attractive job applicants after graduation.

More knowledgeable and experienced student chapter members would provide the STC with an increased awareness of technical communication among Chicago schools. This increased awareness would attract more student members who, upon taking advantage of the chapter's resources, would become more knowledgeable of the field. As students transition from the academic to the professional world, they would have more incentive to join the Chicago chapter to stay current on technical communication trends. These knowledgeable, young professionals would not only improve the practice of technical communication, but also help sustain the STC by continuing their membership with the regional Chicago chapter.

Recommendation

Based on my conclusions, I recommend the following in creating a Chicago student chapter:

- **Housing the chapter at the Computing and Digital Media building at DePaul University's Loop Campus**—This location would provide close proximity to several universities, to Chicago's business and technology sectors, and to the regional Chicago chapter.
- **Holding semimonthly meetings**—These meetings would primarily involve peer discussion and the planning of workshops and networking opportunities.
- **Implementing a mentoring program**—A mentoring program with universities and professionals in the Chicago chapter would allow students to learn from more knowledgeable scholars about the academic realm of technical communication. A mentoring program with the Chicago chapter would also provide students with practical knowledge of the profession, which would help them decide if technical communication is the appropriate field for them to join.

By implementing a Chicago student chapter at DePaul University, students in colleges and universities across the city would have more focused opportunities to learn about the profession. As a result, the STC would gain a strong pool of educated and experienced young professionals who can help your organization achieve its goal of propelling the technical communication profession across the world.

Works Cited

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Appendix

E-mail Interview Responses:

Subject: RE: STC Primary Research Questions

From: "Slattery, Shaun" <SSLATTE1@depaul.edu>

Date: Mon, November 9, 2009 4:19 pm

To: asamardz@students.depaul.edu

Priority: Normal

Options: [View Full Header](#) | [View Printable Version](#) | [Download this as a file](#) | [View Message details](#)

Hi Aaron,

Typically, STC student chapters are affiliated with a school rather than a region. I believe the closest is at NIU, so you might tweak your proposal to be about starting one at DePaul.

The benefits of a student chapter are the ability to network locally, bring speakers to campus to help students learn about the profession, and to gain some other hands-on experience that might not be possible in classes. For example, many chapters have newsletters and that's a great chance for students to practice designing a document.

The for-students chapter benefit is more targeted information. Many chapters that focus on current professionals assume a great deal of knowledge and experience; their workshops tend to be for folks who already have some familiarity with certain kinds of software, for example. So a student chapter would help professionalize students without real prior experience.

Hope this information is helpful.

Best,
~Shaun

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