

**WHITE PAPER**  
**THE RHETORIC, COMMUNICATION, AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY LITERACIES INITIATIVE**  
**FOR STUDENT AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT**

## Introduction

In its 2004 statement, *Our Students' Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) calls for educators and educational institutions to remain accountable “for the highest standards of learning and new forms of critical inquiry and reflective practice” (p. 2). The first of five key educational outcomes proposed in the AAC&U document is the acquisition of strong analytical, communication, quantitative, and information literacies. Our own institutional aims and objectives statement, adopted in 1998 and revised in 2000, substantially reflects this more recent call from AAC&U. Specifically, the St. Lawrence curricular objectives include the ability to read, write, speak, and listen well and the ability to conduct research and to think critically. Although these objectives are critically important, they do not adequately address the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies essential for citizenship in an increasingly diverse and globalized world, and that therefore go to the very heart of a liberal education.

In addition to broadening our curricular objectives to include multiple information, digital, and media literacies, we are committed to cultivating a paradigm shift away from approaching writing, reading, speaking, and research as discrete skills and toward a paradigm of academic synthesis. In imagining how we might expand our curricular learning objectives and their integration, we conclude a new model for liberal arts teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is imperative. We therefore propose the exploration and development of a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21<sup>ST</sup> Century Literacies Initiative (RCLI)*.

Excellence in rhetoric and communication centers on the ability to attend to different audiences and to formulate and evaluate a variety of messages in diverse contexts and through multiple media. The St. Lawrence University commitment to a traditional academic undergraduate liberal arts curriculum that emphasizes writing, oral communication, and research is evident in its faculty and student development efforts. However, our ability to thoughtfully and intentionally address the burgeoning and central role of digital technology's relationship to the enterprise of creating and disseminating knowledge must be developed apace.

We propose the creation of a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies Initiative* that involves curricular and cross-disciplinary efforts to encompass and integrate student learning and performative competencies in all areas of communication (writing, speaking, research, and information/media literacy) with the ways in which faculty envision, design, and teach their courses. This initiative is a logical step forward in our recent pedagogical innovations and faculty development efforts in both communication skills and instructional

technology, such as those emerging from the First-Year Program, the Summer Writing Institute, the Oral Communication Institute, and the Center for Teaching and Learning.

As the assignments we give students increasingly blur the lines between writing, speaking, research, and technology applications, we need to take the next step of systematically bringing together faculty development focused on such integrated assignment design and the support services and resources we provide to students. In addition, if we view these rhetoric and communication skills as interconnected, we must provide students with a more seamless integration of the support we provide for them, beyond the support we currently offer for writing. That is, we need to consider an expanded mission for the Writing Center; one that encompass all of the critical higher-orders skills and capacities this white paper addresses.

To start this work, we propose a self-reflective process where we come together as a liberal arts faculty to explore a new model to transform our teaching and learning methods and outcomes. In the broad context of addressing 21<sup>st</sup> century digital and media literacies through a theoretical and practical rhetoric and communication lens, we hope to examine how we are teaching and how we are expecting students to demonstrate their learning. Because this work transcends disciplinary content and boundaries and because it may engage our entire curriculum in unanticipated ways, these questions necessarily call for broad and deep faculty participation.

In this white paper draft, we offer a series of questions, working definitions, and nascent ideas to initiate the conversations that call for us to consider our liberal arts learning goals in the context of a changing and exciting landscape in higher education.

### Defining 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies

- What are the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies?
- How should they be integrated into a liberal arts curriculum?
- How might the rhetoric and communication of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies be taught across the disciplines?
- What theoretical knowledge base and practical applications guide the teaching and learning goals of these literacies in the liberal arts?
- Is “the interpretation of ideas, the generation of knowledge, and the performance of understanding through multiple modes of communication media” an adequate definition for this combined rhetoric, communication, and multiple literacies work?

Numerous liberal arts colleges are in the process of moving toward student academic support mergers to enhance library services and information technology support. For example, in 2002, representatives from 25 liberal arts colleges gathered to discuss reasons for integrating IT and library organizations.

In such an Information Commons model, cost-savings and organizational flexibility are central reasons for these mergers and they also address students' and faculty members' increasing reliance on and expectations for direct access to networked services (Ferguson, Spencer, & Metz, 2004). In April 2005, eight liberal arts colleges, including St. Lawrence, sent teams to Colorado College to collaborate on an expanded concept for integrating academic support services on their respective campuses.<sup>1</sup> In addition to greater access to IT support, students services in this Learning Commons model could also find tutoring available for writing, speaking, and research skills. The conversations surround this work are complex. Ultimately, it is becoming clear that institutions have frontloaded investment in technology-rich space without understanding relevant paradigm shifts occurring on several fronts. Scott Bennet (2005) builds a case for the college as an institution which exists to produce learning, rather than provide instruction and calls for space planners to join faculty in the shift from a teaching to a learning culture. Malcolm Brown (2005) outlines the transition from a "transmission" paradigm to a constructivist paradigm and emphasizes the importance of supporting active learning by meeting the needs of the "net generation". These needs call for pedagogical innovation and appropriate infrastructure designed for virtual spaces and informal learning.

As we write this white paper draft, faculty and administrators on many liberal arts campuses are engaged in conversations about Information Commons (IT/Library mergers) and Learning Commons. We, however, sense fundamental questions about the liberal arts are not receiving full consideration: how are faculty to define information, media, and digital literacy; how do we ensure that these literacies are addressed broadly in the curriculum and in the context of writing, speaking, and research skills; how do faculty members want to approach their own work with emerging technology and media; and how can we imagine offering fully integrated academic support for faculty and for students in these various and integrated learning domains? Basically, we are asking how to develop a coherent liberal arts curricular framework for merging and advancing this work. We expect that input from St. Lawrence faculty as well as findings from senior survey and other data from our Institutional Research Office will afford opportunities to develop collaborative and creative solutions for these emerging issues.

### **Teaching and Learning as Rhetorical Endeavors**

Rhetoric is a term that students use rarely and that faculty may use with as much a pejorative sense as a positive one. The Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative strives to reclaim the word rhetoric as a term that represents a vital intellectual foundation for all levels of scholarship throughout our curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Lawrence was one of the organizing institutions and was represented by Kim Mooney, Hillory Oakes, Traci Fordham-Hernandez, and Sondra Smith.

Many definitions of rhetoric, both classical and contemporary, exist. A broad definition of rhetoric as it pertains to our academic endeavors might be this: “the use of and the study of the use of verbal, nonverbal, and other available means of persuasion to share and disseminate knowledge. Persuasion is communication intended to influence the acts, beliefs, attitudes and values of others.” Rhetorical awareness means being attuned to the way words and images function in written, oral, and visual communication—both what we communicate ourselves as writers, speakers, and designers and what we receive from others as readers, listeners, and viewers. Drawing on the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric as the ability to seek the best means of persuasion, rhetorical awareness also requires an understanding of the means of critically inquiring into a problem and discovering and constructing an effective argument in response to that problem.

Communication is the process of creating meaning and sending, receiving, and interpreting information. If rhetoric is the *how* and *why* of social and intellectual interaction, then communication is the *what*. People create and exchange meanings through many media: the spoken or written word, in art or music, and via electronic and digital technologies. Oral communication, or speech, is a medium whereby spoken words or symbols are used to create and convey meaning. Although the forms and functions of communication may vary, it is a complex social process that is often taken for granted.

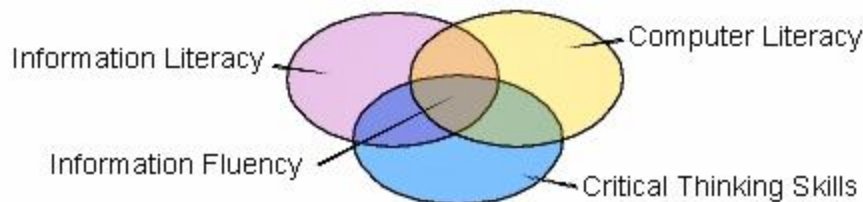
Effective communicators are, by definition, rhetorically sensitive, understanding that any communicative context has multiple dimensions to consider. Whether communication is intentional or unintentional, it involves making choices about one’s messages, whether written, spoken, or designed. Any communicative or rhetorical choice will bring about different consequences. Effective communicators realize, then, that the creation of meaning is a dialogic process, involving mutual negotiation over messages and meanings. Since communication, or the creation and exchange of meaning, is dialogic, then speaking and listening are intertwined, just as writing and reading are intertwined. Therefore, speakers and writers must learn to be audience-centered as they speak or write, while at the same time strengthening their skills in reading and listening to the work of others.

Research and critical inquiry represent additional dimensions of learning to integrate into a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative*. Students develop critical thinking skills through the construction of an argument and the formulation of creative, sophisticated, and appropriate library research strategies to explore that argument. Critical thinking requires the ability to analyze, critique, and advocate ideas; to reason inductively and deductively, to

reach conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from clear statements of knowledge or belief.

Students communicate to their instructors and peers the results of their inquiry and research through writing, speaking, and other multiple media—again demonstrating the interrelationship of the various modes of rhetoric and communication.

Information fluency is a term that designates the integration of the abilities to collect the information necessary to consider a problem or issue, employ critical thinking skills in the evaluation and analysis of the information and its sources, and formulate logical conclusions and present those conclusions in an appropriate and effective way (Associated Colleges of the South, 2003). Under this heading might also come the exploration of appropriate applications of technologies, not just as tools but as sites of learning and making meaning; such an exploration leads to an understanding of how technology makes us better and more critical receivers of messages and how various technology and media allow creation of new kinds of meanings and messages. In short, the convergence of information and computer literacy and critical thinking skills should help students achieve a standard of information fluency by the end of their undergraduate careers.



Writing, speaking, research, information fluency—all require an ability to analyze a rhetorical situation and communicate effectively within that rhetorical context, as well as an ability to evaluate and respond to others' communication, and all are endeavors pursued in academic settings across the university curriculum.

All of these competencies and skills are acquired and performed through multiple media. If 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy includes “the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap and include the ability to understand the power of images and sound, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms” ( A Global Imperative, pg. 2 ) then a rhetoric and communication framework for this work is necessary for a liberally educated person.

## Ongoing Program Objectives: Pedagogies and Learning Goals

One central mission of a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* is to cultivate rhetorically competent and critically aware communicators. As students acquire disciplinary skills and conventions during the four-year undergraduate liberal arts education, they will need to further integrate and augment these rhetoric and communication competencies.

In practice in the classroom and coursework, instruction in rhetoric and communication entails teaching and learning such things as

- § how to parse the semantics of written and spoken language
- § how to analyze a text or image as a whole
- § how to discover what to write or speak about observations and analyses
- § how to analyze and respond to the requirements of a formal assignment
- § how to design research strategies that facilitate entering into a scholarly conversation about questions and discoveries
- § how to address “ethics” (ethos, credibility) and “audience appeals” (pathos, etc.)
- § how to construct a thesis that conveys an analysis or argument
- § how to plan, draft, and revise a project with a thesis and support
- § how to present an argument in the most effective form (whether written, spoken, designed, or a combination of these)

Such applications of rhetoric and communication are not exclusive to any one discipline but instead reflect the intellectual processes that all members of the scholarly community hold in common.

Every discipline, department, or program, however, is guided by particular discursive conventions. Discourses are “ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. These discursive formations...define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and ‘true’ in that context; and what sorts of persons or ‘subjects’ embody its characteristics” (Hall, 1997, p. 42). Students’ abilities in rhetoric and communication are thus tied into their learning of the discourses of their chosen disciplines.

Given the number of students at St. Lawrence who elect multiple or interdisciplinary majors, as well as the number of departments and areas with an interdisciplinary focus, a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* would strive to make a concerted effort to promote the pedagogy of integrated rhetoric within various departmental and disciplinary conventions, with special attention to the complexities of interdisciplinary work and the myriad ways disciplines apply technology and media to scholarship.

### Faculty Development: New Programs, New Collaborations

Faculty development work on rhetoric and communication issues would focus on course and syllabus design, assignment design, and classroom strategies and pedagogies. Drawing upon the work of the Summer Writing Institute, the Oral Communication Institute, the ongoing faculty development efforts of the First-Year Program, and the emerging deliberative dialogue initiative, faculty development work in rhetoric, communication, and multiple literacies would attempt to integrate goals for student learning with the ways in which faculty envision, design, and teach their courses.

The *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* would foster faculty development programs throughout the academic year, during the January interterm, and as part of the annual May Faculty College. Rhetoric and communication faculty development would be coordinated with faculty development workshops in the FYP, as well as with other programs offered through the CTL. Another component of faculty development work would address issues of research, critical inquiry, and information fluency. Faculty workshops might take the form of seminars and lunch talks presented through the Center for Teaching and Learning. Individual consultations and discussions between teaching faculty, librarians, and Instructional Technology staff would also be available as needed.

In January 2005, this working group ran a pilot *Rhetoric and Communication Institute* (RCI). During this intensive two-day workshop, four faculty members engaged in discussion about their writing, speaking, and research pedagogies, as well as their use (where applicable) of visual rhetoric, media, and technology in student assignments. The RCI participants also planned rhetoric and communication learning goals for a particular course and designed and exchanged feedback on assignments that integrated multiple modes of rhetoric and communication.

As part of their work with the RCI, each of these faculty members also chose a student mentor who would take on two tasks over the coming year. First, these student mentors (trained in the Rhetoric and Communication Theory and Practice course) assisted the faculty during the spring semester with

planning their chosen course for the following fall semester; mentors also created integrated rhetoric and communication assignments for this course and were able to work with faculty to create others. Second, in Fall 2005 these students will be course-linked mentors, peers who will assist students in their RCI faculty's course with integrated writing, speaking, and research assignments while continuing to work with faculty on broader pedagogical goals as the course evolves. The establishment of a faculty development program that encompasses a peer mentor component strengthens and deepens the relationship between engaged pedagogy and the ways in which the university delivers support to the students participating in our curriculum. We envision expanding this course-linked mentor program in coming years and offering RCI sessions on an annual basis to prepare faculty for their work with rhetoric, communication, and media pedagogies in such a course.

### A Four-Year Commitment: From FYP to SYE

In offering some guiding principles for how institutions might approach the recommended learning outcomes, the AAC&U document makes clear that such outcomes are not developed in one semester, in one area of concentration, or by taking a handful of particularly relevant courses: “Rather, these are the complex capabilities which are appropriately cultivated from high school through the final year of college, at increasingly higher levels of challenge and expected accomplishment” (p. 4). Central to achieving the AAC&U communication learning outcomes and our own speaking, writing, research, reading, and listening objectives as expressed in our aims and objectives document is the effort to create and establish a broad-based rhetoric and communication program starting in students’ first-year courses and extending through their entire four-year undergraduate experiences.

Throughout their educational experience at St. Lawrence University, students should be given opportunities to acquire and cultivate their facilities with rhetoric and communication over the four years. Rhetorical and communicative tasks and activities should reflect an increasingly sophisticated understanding of purpose, context, audience, self, and medium/mode of delivery.

### *The First Year*

The First-Year Program's philosophy and goals reflect the University's commitment to cultivating students' rhetoric and communication abilities. The FYP and FYS focus on the skills and abilities needed to be a successful student, learner, and citizen. Disciplinary content and conventions for writing, speaking, and research are less prominent in the first year than are the opportunities to practice and to think more critically about various ways of reading, seeing,

listening to, understanding, and creating different kinds of messages, whether through written, spoken, or visual means. Outside of the FYP, introductory level courses allow students to begin learning the foundational questions of a discipline or field. As students are being introduced to multiple and interdisciplinary arguments, they should be given numerous opportunities to learn and to express their understanding of these arguments. Following from the First-Year Program's focus on diverse and sequential assignments (or sequenced aspects of a single assignment), introductory level courses in the discipline should provide students with the opportunity to learn and express their learning of disciplinary conventions through multiple, formal, informal, and sequenced tasks. Students should begin to see the dialectical connections between multiple ways of communicating as their assignments ask them to think of writing, speaking, and research tasks as integrated endeavors.

### **The Sophomore and Junior Years**

Ideally, as they move forward from their first year of study, students have begun to learn that different rhetorical contexts call for different communication strategies. At the same time, students are beginning to learn the central arguments and pressing questions of different disciplines and are given opportunities to begin entering into these scholarly conversations. Therefore, in addition to creating environments where students are learning the specific content of a discipline, faculty should be providing opportunities for students to begin doing more substantive and creative advanced research and making more sophisticated arguments about scholarly material. By the end of the second year, students should be moving from learning about the critical arguments and questions of disciplines toward learning how to "do" scholarship in those disciplines through their work in disciplinary methods courses. As they become members of scholarly discourse communities, students in their second and third years should be exploring and creating knowledge in and about their chosen academic fields.

### **The Senior Year**

Although SLU has instituted a university-wide senior year experience, it remains unclear what specific rhetoric and communication abilities are required as a foundation for this experience. Optimally, the senior year includes a capstone or culminating experience in which disciplinary conventions and rhetoric and communication abilities coalesce. The development of the *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* would allow us to collectively and critically analyze what abilities beyond disciplinary knowledge we expect from our seniors upon graduation.

In order to encourage and support this four-year commitment, the *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* would necessarily create the need for two major initiatives: the creation of a Rhetoric,

Communication and Literacies Center to support students and the development of an innovative and ongoing faculty development program addressing the rhetorical challenges of integrated and interdisciplinary work.

### Conclusion

Although this document addresses many of the core rhetorical and communicative competencies, we recognize that some disciplines require additional competencies—for instance, quantitative rhetoric and numeracy in the sciences, visual rhetoric in social sciences and the fine arts, or creative and expressive communication in the performing and visual arts. We see this current proposal as but a starting place for a university-wide discussion of rhetoric and communication, and we would like to receive input from faculty in all disciplines to help us both refine and expand our definition of rhetoric and communication as concepts that truly exist across the curriculum.

We believe that a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* would create and integrate, in a methodical and systematic way, faculty and student skill development programs centered around multiple modes of rhetoric and communication in a variety of contexts. As student assignments become more rhetorically sophisticated over the course of a four-year undergraduate education, so too should the institution's capacity to support both student and faculty efforts.

### An Invitation To St. Lawrence Faculty and Staff

The theoretical and practical assumptions underlying the development of a *Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative* is currently under discussion among a small group of faculty and staff. In order to encourage the critical review, thoughtful revision, and ultimate ownership of this or any program we hope to collectively develop, the broad dissemination and deliberation of this white paper is a priority this academic year. Involving the St. Lawrence University faculty in reading and discussing complex rhetoric, communication, and critical literacy issues may happen outside of normal, sometimes constraining, parliamentary procedures. If you are interested in joining the conversation about this proposed initiative, please get in touch with Kim Mooney (x5981) or [kmooney@stlawu.edu](mailto:kmooney@stlawu.edu) before mid-semester break. Once we know who would like to work on this initiative, we'll first spend some time planning a process for the discussions and then put that process into place.

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## APPENDIX 1

**Student Resources: A University Rhetoric, Communication, and 21 Century Literacies Center (RCLI Center)**

Each semester, the Munn Writing Center serves an average of 350 individual students for over 750 tutorials. Students seek help on their writing for courses at all levels and in all departments and programs, although Writing Center statistics show a predominance of visits from students in Government, History, and English courses. Statistics also show that each semester, fewer seniors than any other class visit the Writing Center, even as, we might imagine, they are engaged in the heaviest workload of their four years. Part of the reason for the departmental and graduating-class inequity seems to stem from persistent misconceptions among some students and faculty that the Center is (1) a place for remedial work, a place for “improvement or correction” of “bad” writing, or (2) a place for nearly-finished work to get simply a final read-through, not an environment for conversation about ideas, early questions, and first drafts.

Yet the mission of the Writing Center is and always has been to “provide students with an opportunity to discuss their writing with trained tutors in order to...help [them] write better papers” (Munn Writing Center Mission Statement). The Writing Center continues to strive to have the entire campus community understand the work of tutoring as the critical engagement of peers with each other and with each other’s written work. Not merely a “skill and drill” center, the Writing Center is a place of student learning. The training writing tutors currently undergo is built on the best practices in peer tutoring theory, a theory that stresses that collaboration with peers helps students learn material better and make more sophisticated rhetorical decisions about their work.

If the Writing Center were recast as a Rhetoric, Communication, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies Center, its mission of critical engagement among peers would not change. However, its service to students would be greatly increased as students could pursue advice and conversation not just about writing assignments but about speaking and research assignments that involve technology and other media as well. And if the recasting of the Center occurred alongside a focus on faculty development in rhetoric, communication, and literacies concepts and pedagogy, we would imagine that both faculty and student perceptions of the work of the Center would evolve. Ideally, faculty would challenge students in courses at all levels and across departments to demonstrate their rhetorical abilities in integrated writing, speaking, and research assignments; at the same time, students, whether doing work for a 100-level course or a senior seminar, would have in the RCLI Center a resource for planning, composing, and revising these rhetorically sophisticated and media-rich assignments.

The physical space and staffing needs of a Rhetoric, Communication, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies Center would be slightly greater than the current space and staff configurations. The current Writing Center space in ODY Library would continue to be the hub of the RCLI Center. The RCLI Center would provide the same drop-in and appointment-based tutorial services as the Writing Center now does; the hub space would

also be the site of regularly offered student workshops on writing, speaking, and research issues, and various applications of technology and media in course assignments.

Ideally, some additional square footage—as near to the hub as possible—would be needed as a practicum space; this practicum room would provide space and equipment for formal and informal communication and dialogue assignments and exercises (for example, to practice in-class debates, rehearse formal oral presentations, run through PowerPoint presentations, perform role-play assignments, prepare for recitations, or create posters) and would also be a place to receive informed critique and appraisal from tutors. In addition, the practicum space would provide computers and other resources for research and inquiry work with peer tutors, as well as for tutors' assistance with rhetoric and communication assignments with media or technology components (for example, visual design).

The peer-tutoring staff would stay much the same size, with approximately 20 to 25 tutors trained in writing, speaking, and research pedagogy, as well as in peer tutoring theory. All tutors would be required to have proficiency in tutoring all aspects of rhetoric and communication, although individual work assignments—e.g. the sit-down tutorials of the hub vs. the more performative sessions in the practicum space—would be decided in part based on tutors' particular strengths. So that they might best support students as they conduct research, tutors would also be trained by librarians to read student drafts critically, recognize areas where more research is needed, and suggest other approaches and databases for finding additional sources. Librarians would be available to whom students could be referred when more advanced research is needed. Tutors would also be trained to assist students with technology as a medium for displaying learning.

Currently, training for peer tutors consists of a series of intensive first-of-the-year training sessions, supplemented by weekly hour-long staff training meetings. In addition, a formal, for-credit course—Responding to Writing—has been offered irregularly through the English department. This past year, a pilot course—Rhetoric and Communication Theory and Practice for Peer Mentors—was offered on a half-credit basis; this course expanded on the writing theory training currently offered to tutors to cover communication and inquiry theory and additional tutoring theory and practice. Training for tutors working in the RCLI Center would incorporate a combination of pre-term workshops, weekly training sessions, and a half- or full-credit version of the Rhetoric and Communication Theory and Practice course taught by collaborative teams of instructors specializing in writing, oral communication, and library research and inquiry.

Of course, students will seek out conversations with peer tutors about assignments involving writing, speaking, research, media Rhetoric and technology—and, especially, assignments integrating two or more of these—only if they are receiving such assignments from faculty who are emphasizing principles of rhetoric and communication in their classrooms. If we wish to expand student abilities, and the student resources to support the acquisition of these abilities, a Rhetoric, Communication, and 21st Century Literacies Initiative must offer faculty ample support and resources to explore and implement new pedagogies.