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## The Role of Occupational Branding in the Professionalization of Technical Communication

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THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL BRANDING IN THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF  
TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

by

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B.A., Florida State University, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the relationship between professional identity and professional status by exploring the quest for professionalization within technical communication. An established professional identity is crucial to an occupation's professionalization process, as it enables members of a given field to create a common sense of being and facilitates a recognizable personal and collective identity. Such recognition is vital to an occupation's rise to professional status, as it creates a distilled image of the ideal practitioner for outsiders and forms the basis upon which claims of expertise may be made. By constructing the meaning surrounding their profession, members are able to portray an image which designates their knowledge as a scarce expertise and their profession as the appropriate source for the services they provide.

A lack of professional identity constitutes the primary factor hindering technical communication from realizing the professionalization process, as it prevents the formation of practitioners' common sense of being, promotes the absence of identifiability and precludes the possibility of recognition by larger society. Without an established professional identity, the field cannot formulate a culturally-relevant perception of its role, claim professional expertise or jurisdiction over their work, or achieve the social and cultural legitimacy necessary in order to increase its professional status. By implementing processes of occupational branding within the professional project, efforts involving the construction of collective professional identity will increase professional status by enabling a group's management of professional meaning, facilitating the creation of an occupational brand and assisting in value production.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ATTW- Association of Teachers of Technical Writing

BOK- body of knowledge

GEWS- Group on Engineering Writing and Speech

IEEE- Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers

IEEE PCS- Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers' Professional Communication Society

PGEWS- Professional Group on Engineering Writing and Speech

PTGEWS- Professional Technical Group on Engineering Writing and Speech

SMEs- subject matter experts

STC- Society for Technical Communication

STW- Society of Technical Writers

STWE- Society of Technical Writers and Editors

STWP- Society of Technical Writers and Publishers

TC- technical communication

TCs- technical communicators

TPS- Technical Publishing Society

TWE- Technical Writers and Editors

# **CHAPTER ONE: RECONCEIVING PROFESSIONAL FOR TODAY'S TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR**

## Introduction

Though technical communication work existed well before its bestowment of a proper name, the field became formally recognized as such with the emergence of the first generation of professional technical communicators in 1953 (Malone 2011). Since this inception, the topic of professionalization has remained at the forefront of discussion, numerous evidenced within literature and research. Though established as a mainstay in disciplinary dialogue from this time forward, there has been little, if any, palpable growth in the field's attainment of a professional prestige. The deficiencies pinpointed as matters of concern and debate, identified as those preventing full evolution to a mature profession, remain implicated as such today. Complicated by a lack of consensus on relevant issues, an often ambiguous and misunderstood professional identity and a lack of social presence or commitment to activism, technical communication remains in much the same position regarding its professionalization process as it was at its inception.

To understand the reasoning behind the sense of urgency attributed toward resolution, as well as to decipher what issues complicate the field's professionalization process, requires an understanding of the current economic, cultural and social environment in which the field currently functions, in addition to an understanding of the profession itself. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, technical communicators' writing activities involve the preparation of documents such as instruction manuals, how-to guides, journal articles, grant proposals, medical instructions and other supporting documents which intend to communicate technical, complex

information, in a way that may be easily understood. The Society for Technical Communication defines the field as involving communication about technical or specialized topics, communicating through the use of technology and/or providing instructions that detail how to do something. In addition to document preparation intended for use by the consumer, communicators are involved in the development, preparation and distribution of technical information within an employing organization. Communicators may take part in usability studies aimed at improving product design in the product prototype stage, as well as following a product's release, in an effort to implement design changes that improve the end-user experience. Technical communicators often work with engineers, scientists, developers and other subject matter experts, managing the flow of information between project groups during phases of product development and testing.

The technical communicator's responsibilities are reflective of their large skill set and many organizational contributions, with professional technical communicators responsible for: determining user needs; communicating with product designers and developers for document preparation and simplification of product-use; organizing and writing product content; increasing user understanding, often through the use of diagrams, animation, photographs, drawings, charts and other visual media; selecting situationally-appropriate mediums for effective message communication; standardizing content across an organization's various business departments; gathering user feedback, before updating and improving content; and performing revisions as new issues come to light. Communicators are recognized as protecting consumers through the provision of documentation that ensures a product's proper use, while simultaneously protecting employers from potential legal concerns and adverse events with the potential to draw negative

press. In addition, technical communication documentation contributes to budgetary efficiency, helping to guarantee operation efficiency and outcomes. Above all else, it is imperative to understand the duality of technical communication's value-added—communicators provide a known audience increased usability and accessibility of information that, in turn, progresses employing organizations' goals.

Today, technical communication work has become more in demand, with a growing number of organizations filling technical communication-specific positions and a number of graduate programs opening within higher education institutions. According to Moore, “the growing material economy has led to a greatly expanded need for technical communicators” (236). However, he goes on to state—despite such growth—many technical communicators continue to express worry over their struggle for prestige. Though the time is seemingly ripe for technical communication's evolution to a mature, established profession, there undoubtedly remains hesitation concerning the field's ability to make such strides. While the field is undoubtedly offering practicing communicators great professional prospects, this thesis intends to demonstrate the manner in which technical communication has yet to fulfill its professionalization goals, as well as to explore existent areas of improvement with the potential to further the profession's standing and overall prestige.

As an increasingly technological world realizes the need for and value of the field's contributions to the bottom line, the profession has arguably begun to experience an increased public awareness. As such, the need for technical communication to address and resolve its professionalization issues is pressing. A realization of the professionalization process would benefit the many practitioners now heading out into professional world—while the timing would



allow such efforts the publicity and recognition needed, within an environment that would promote permanence of progress made. Accordingly, I believe that the time is now that we, as the new generation of technical communicators, take an active stance in finishing the work of our field's predecessors. By looking at the process of professionalization through the lens of institutional, sociological and organizational theory, the technical communication professionalization project may be presented with a seemingly simplistic solution: establishment of a shared professional identity and implementation of legitimacy-building activities—efforts that hold promise for the field's eventual evolution into an identifiable, established profession.

This thesis is a study of the relationship between professional identity and the quest for professionalization within the field of technical communication. It further looks at the necessity of an established professional identity within an emergent field, a crucial aspect of the professionalization process that enables members of a given field to create a common sense of being and facilitates a recognizable personal and collective identity. Such recognition is vital to an occupation's rise to professional status, as it creates a distilled image of the ideal practitioner for outsiders and forms the basis upon which claims of expertise may be made. Further, it contributes to the achievement of several forms of closure—market, occupational and social—which not only protect the professional group's expertise and jurisdiction over work, but also enhance the various forms of social and cultural legitimacy that are needed in order to achieve recognition as an acknowledged profession.

I theorize that a lack of established professional identity constitutes the primary factor hindering the field from realizing the technical communicator's rise to professional status, as it prevents the formation of practitioners' common sense of being, promotes the absence of

identifiability and precludes the possibility of recognition by larger society. Without an established professional identity, technical communication cannot optimally formulate a culturally-relevant perception of its role, claim absolute jurisdiction of expertise, or definitively achieve market closure.

I find it important to note that, despite the field's ongoing professionalization struggles, the future remains bright for technical communicators. As of May 2014, the field's median annual wage was \$69, 030—with the lowest 10% earning below \$41,450 and the highest above \$108,460—a rate well above other media and communication workers' reported \$52,370, as well as the overall occupations' rate of \$35,540. (*Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016-2017 Edition*). According to *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016-2017 Edition*, industry employment is expected to grow 10% between 2014 and 2024—a rate significantly faster than the average for occupations as a whole—on account of the continued expansion of products in the scientific and technical fields, as well as increasing numbers of Web-based product support systems. Furthermore, job opportunities are expected to remain sufficient, as these same areas of growth are projected to drive demand for technical communication employment. While high-tech and electronic industries are likely to enjoy continued growth, increasing the need for professional communicators, the profession is expected to expand its reach to an even broader range of industries as time goes on. STC's *2014 Year in Review* reports similarly encouraging data, citing membership growth and an increase in both the number of working technical communicators, as well as the number of job posting to the organization's STC Job Board.

With this future growth in mind, the prospects for technical communicators are great and, in fact, will only continue to improve. When considering my options prior to entering graduate

school, I chose technical communication studies *because* I recognized the potential for professional success it offered. As such, I do not intend to convey an idea expressing professional technical communication as a field without opportunity, or a profession in which one cannot enjoy immense success, in terms of economic and personal rewards. Instead, I aim to address the issues which communicators have expressed as hindering the success of the field's professionalization project—a specific professional endeavor that, alone, does not determine an occupation's value or a practitioner's individual professional opportunities. This thesis, then, is an argument that illustrates potential areas of improvement, discusses plausible factors contributing to such complications and offers a solution intended only to ensure that today's technical communicators are *ideally* positioned for *ultimate* professional success. The odds are already in our favor—I simply endeavor to situate the profession in a manner that allows for the fullest realization of technical communication's professional potential.

## Professionalism

### A Short History of the Professions

Professionalism is described as being “a historical process, through which certain commercial services sought to improve their social status (and economic reward) by separating themselves from mere crafts or trades” (Edgar 195). An established profession materializes from an occupational group as its members seek out a means of differentiating their work from others, in an attempt to secure market closure, to delegitimize potential competitors and to establish jurisdiction over their specific sphere of work (Coppola 2012). The attainment of such exclusivity is crucial to an emergent profession, as it bestows upon practitioners a certain

authority which they are able to exercise in their favor. As the professional group successfully establishes a monopoly on their specific form of expert knowledge, they simultaneously achieve control over the market for their services, while also structuring the market adequately in their favor (Faber 2002).

Professionalism is believed to be the historical offshoot of the medieval guild, an association which first emerged in seventh century England (Baizerman 2015). Discretionary in terms of participation, these initial organizing entities were a product of individuals' desire to achieve commercial control, accomplished through a regulatory system that sought to differentiate workers on the basis of skill level and experience. Guilds functioned as monopolistic entities that protected their crafts through such practices as quality control, practitioner reputation and standards of practice set by those who had achieved the level of "Master" (Baizerman, 2015). These expert individuals not only established competencies, but also evaluated individual progress and further regulated practice in the field through controlling entry into the profession. In this manner, such guilds set the foundation for later professionalism, establishing a system by which one's inclusion or exclusion to a given profession dictated participation within the field and, ultimately, barriers to entry.

"Professionalization" is the term used to describe the evolutionary process involved in an occupational group's emergence as an established profession. Khalili, Hall and DeLuca theorize professionalization in terms of its dual purpose. As a process, professionalization "serves to secure and protect exclusive areas of knowledge, skills and expertise" (93); while in practice, it functions as the profession's means of "controlling who has access to their particular profession's 'knowledge' through regulated professional entry" (93). Regardless of its particular

usage at the time, the process of professionalization invokes efforts aimed at achieving closure—and, because these efforts are aimed at external social groups, professionalization also inherently involves mitigating conflicting interests of various societal groups. Thus, conflict involving “relative power and access to scarce resources, such as cultural capital and prestige, exist between and within the groups” (Burrell 26). It is due to this turmoil—and owing to the high stake that would accompany control—that “the process of professionalization inevitably involves ideological, political and economic struggles” (Coppola *Body of Knowledge* 23).

Professionalism, then, may be best understood as “a social movement predicated on knowledge control, social elitism, and economic power” (Faber 332). In order to place an occupational group within the high-status position afforded by recognition as an established profession, the group must “differentiate the various social, contextual, and discursive fields” (Faber 308) involved in their specific line of work, as well as any and all tasks carried out in the provision of service. Traditionally these needs are met through the professional groups’ ability to maintain control of the market for their services, through the aforementioned monopolization of their expert knowledge (Faber 315). Though researchers have differed on the specific form of professionalism they espouse, every professionalization effort involves the profession’s successful execution of three forms of control:

Professionals control entry to the professions by establishing stringent requirements for school admission and completion for professional licensing.

They control access to services by the power of their associations and their ability to control who may be a licensed practitioner and where that practitioner may

operate. They control levels of accountability to the general public through self-regulatory and self-disciplinary procedures. (Faber 318)

It is through exclusivity founded on monopolizing procedures concerning access to their knowledge that the professions achieve professional closure and “gain both social and material currency” (Faber 319). It is through such currency that they increase authority over their jurisdiction, legitimize their expertise and further structure the market in their favor, so as to attain status, recognition and monetary reward.

#### Approaches to Professionalism

A long history of professionalism, in accordance with an ever-evolving economy, has resulted in the variability of professionalism approaches apparent within literature. Subject to the particular political, social, cultural and economic environment in which they originated, these approaches may be lumped into two broad categories: political-economic approaches to professionalism and cultural-economic approaches to professionalism. While the two models demonstrate an inconsistency among tactics and methodologies employed, they each focus on a particular manner of the profession ensuring its larger societal position of higher status and prestige. While political-economic approaches have tended to follow the historically endorsed model of professionalism, based in models of professional closure, cultural-economic approaches seek to create acceptance of their expertise and a culture of using their services.

Regardless of the specific approach taken, all professionalization efforts involve a race for wealth, power and status. The strategy implemented may differentiate in terms of the exact manner in which a professional group arrives at its ultimate destination, but success of the

group's end result may always "be determined by the degree to which it has successfully closed access to a particular set of market opportunities to its own members" (Richardson 636).

Ultimately, the professional group's exclusivity—and, perhaps more importantly, its *perceived* exclusivity—remains the deciding factor in the success of its professionalization project.

### Political-economic Approach

Political-economic approaches to professionalism follow what are considered to be the more "traditional" methods with which professions have, historically, engaged. Stemming from a conception of professionalism as involving "power struggles between distinctive groups within a broader political economic order" (Muzio et al. 702), this line of thought most often approaches professionalism as a way of controlling or organizing an occupation (Muzio et al. 2013).

Political-economic approaches involve a profession's achievement of two distinct models of closure: market closure, a means to "create a protected market which can be exploited by an occupation" (Richardson 638) on the basis of competency and professional closure, the ability to "control recruitment to a corporate group which has privileged access to market opportunities" (Richardson 638). Often based in the traditional professional dominance model, this approach "assumes that professionals have subject-area expertise that elicits credibility, authority, and social power and prestige and that professionals are recognized as highly educated experts who are rewarded for presenting their clients with conclusive, decisive solutions" (Faber 322). It is often surmised that attempts using such approaches involve attaining closure through "autonomy from and recognition by the state of professions" (Beaverstock et al. 836). The traditional approach involves "Processes of legal closure whereby the state grants exclusive rights to

provide a service” (Beaverstock et al. 827), the rationale being that by enforcing such restriction, service provision is subjected only to “an exclusive body of registered and regulated practitioners” (Beaverstock et al. 827), rather than governed in accordance with general market competition.

### Market Closure

Market closure is significant to an emergent profession, endowing the profession the means with which they are “able to endorse and guarantee the education, training, expertise and tacit knowledge of licensed practitioners” (Evetts 137). It involves professional autonomy, in that it acknowledges a certain profession as capable of exercising self-governing practices. Muzio et al. equate this facet of professionalism as “a means of *organizing* and *controlling* an occupation” (702); describing a process through which attainment of formal occupational closure empowers an occupational group, this concept positions professions as “able to leverage their superior technical, political, and organizational resources to retain control over their own occupational labour [*sic*] markets” (702).

### Professional/Occupational Closure

Occupational, or professional closure, is defined as a process “through which professions seek to maintain skill scarcity and maximize rewards by limiting access to privileges and opportunities to a restricted number of eligibles [*sic*]” (Muzio et al. 702). Once achieved, such closure rewards the profession with “the monopoly supply of the expertise and service, and probably also in privileged access to salary and status as well as in definitional and control rewards for practitioners” (Evetts 137).



### Cultural-economic Approach

Approaches to professionalism which use cultural-economic methods differ in their emphasis on “discourses of ‘professionalism’ at an individual performative level rather than ‘professionalization’ at the level of regulatory closure and the creation of barriers to entry” (Beaverstock et al., 2009). Such methodology involves practitioners’ “Being professional and behaving in a way that fits accepted cultural models of professional performance” (Beaverstock et al. 829); through such normative measures, the profession is able to provide consumers with an idea of what to expect from the occupational group. In addition, this strategy enables the provider “to highlight the benefits offered compares with services from a non-professional provider” (Beaverstock et al., 2009), further cementing claims to the value and situational-appropriateness of their expert knowledge. Cultural-economic approaches to professionalism may be increasing in popularity, due to the recent realization that “the value of objective scientific knowledge may still be subordinated to the hierarchical social relationships within which the profession and their client stand” (Edgar 198). Because professionalization “involves a transition to a new form of social institution dependent upon the acceptance by society of its general social value” (Hill 30), cultural-economic approaches to professionalism are beneficial.

In juxtaposition to political-economic approach’s invocation of regulatory measures intended to achieve professional closure, cultural-economic approaches to professionalism still draw on the appeal of their expert knowledge—be it through less formalized modes. In their study of executive search markets in Europe, Beaverstock et al. examined the use of such cultural-economic approaches in their quest for professionalization and legitimization of their field. According to the researchers, “cultural economy approaches use the existence of such

[expert] knowledge as a device for legitimating the expertise and role of ‘professional’ headhunters in elite labor searches, thus leading to demand for their services and a culture of employing headhunters” (839). Although the group may not have intended to achieve professional status via formal models of professional closure, this cultural-economic approach did indeed seek to recreate the effect of such closure, via a less rigid system of legitimizing their expert knowledge and creating a culture of using their services. This representation of professional status strategy can be seen as seeking professional power, “which gives the group control over its technology and influence over clients” (Richardson 638). It also further demands the use of strategic efforts aimed at market enhancement, or the profession’s ability to establish the practical value of their services (Richardson 1997).

### Social Closure

Like occupational closure, social closure is used to describe the process by which a group attempts to restrict access to rewards and opportunities to a certain, limited group of eligible practitioners (Parkin 1979). However, the intent in this case is to achieve such closure in terms of societal recognition, rather than through legal jurisdiction. Traditionally, research has shown that “the greater the workers’ monopoly or social closure is around a specific form of work, the greater the economic and cultural reward attached to that occupation” (George 196). With regards to the professions, social closure is believed to provide the basis upon which an occupational group is capable of obtaining control over their specific form of knowledge (Pernicka and Lucking 2015), as it furthers the concept of closure from the sole level of government, to that of a degree institutionalized by cultural acceptance.

## Professionalization Factors

Research on the professions has acknowledged several factors involved in the establishment of a mature profession, which may be organized into three separate spheres of activity. In total, the market, socio-political and ideological factors involved in the professionalization process recognize the process as one consisting of several variables. As stated by Burrell, “In the ‘Anglo-American system,’ the legal relationship of ownership is about the detention, or capacity to hang on to an object; but the ‘social’ relations of ownership are about the power to control, to issue commands, and to have them enforced” (32). In order for an occupational group to professionalize, they must fulfill specific requirements related to different spheres of control. It is in accordance with these variable spheres that the factors of professionalization are organized below.

### Market Factors

Market factors of professionalization concern the profession’s performance in the marketplace and are intimately tied to the group’s satisfaction of market closure. As such, fulfillment of market factors of professionalization lies in a profession’s ability “to establish itself with an identifiable status in the marketplace, to the exclusion of other occupational groups who would offer or claim to offer comparable services” (Savage 357). As has been made apparent, market factors’ relationship to concepts such as professional closure reveal the connection between a profession’s market performance and the political-economic approach to professionalism.

Born from the professions' attempt to establish themselves and the markets for their services, market factors enabled the existence of expert power "by denying legitimacy to their everyday knowledge and putting forth formal knowledge in their place" (Savage 360). To increase professional appeal in the marketplace requires a combination of social, occupational and market closure, involving facets of an established profession such as:

recognition of the field as the appropriate source for the service desired, rather than some other field; exclusion of competing fields of practice from the market by discrediting their claim to competence or expertise and by establishing certification or licensing standards which are accepted in the market as necessary credentials; and practitioners working primarily for clients rather than employers.

(Savage 362)

In accordance with established research, a profession's position in the market is dependent upon its ability to produce "a common intellectual heritage for practitioners and the legitimation of this body of knowledge as the rational means by which particular problems should be managed" (Richardson 637). Accordingly, the very ability of the profession to accomplish these goals requires, further, the presence of certain institutional agents capable of cultivating, implementing and enforcing standards for entry and practice (Richardson 1997).

### Socio-political Factors

Socio-political factors of professionalization emerge out of the social and political struggles faced by professions, due to the competitive environment and "difficulties of being

recognized by their intended clientele as having a needed, relatively scarce type of expertise” (Savage 357). Instrumental to the fulfillment of such factors are:

the development of recognition and status for the field; formal educational programs, designed according to criteria upon which practitioners have had a significant influence; limiting the number of qualified practitioners by controlling the credentialing procedures; and establishing formal organizations that unify the practice and represent the profession to the public, to government agencies, and to the membership itself. (Savage 366)

These professionalization factors are a consequence of the profession’s hopeful acquisition of status and power. Because of their focus on processes involving societal perception of their expertise and cultural acceptance of their jurisdiction, socio-political factors can be seen as more pertinent to the cultural-economic approach to professionalism. In working towards these social and political goals, the profession must be capable of encompassing an image viewed as consistent in terms of the individual practitioner and the overriding goals, or professional endeavors, to which they aspire. Because of the necessity of such commonality, “few of these social and political goals can be achieved by a field without some type of formal organization and a unified sense of identity” (Savage 358).

### Ideological Factors

In an attempt to achieve professional status, an occupational group is unlikely to progress without the consistency and expectation that an established professional identity affords.

Ideological factors of professionalization thus concern the development of professional

consciousness, a collective consciousness significant for its ability “to transform one’s orientation and allegiance from the association of everyday life” (Savage 359). An important aspect of the professionalization process involves the shedding of one’s individual identity, in favor of replacement by an identity in which individuals view themselves in terms of the profession. Because of this, and due to the lengthy process of such intrinsic evolution, “it is necessary that a group should exist through which individuals can identify with common practices, concerns, interests, discourses, and values—a group, that is, which functions as a culture” (Savage 359). Development of professional consciousness necessarily entails the presence of certain characteristics already be in place; a shared, common body of knowledge, “a common set of characteristic principles or standards, and organization into professional societies” (Savage 372).

#### Elements of a Mature Profession

With the previously mentioned market, socio-political and ideological factors of professionalization in mind, there are a number of characteristics said to be indicative of a mature profession. These criteria, when found within the work carried out by an occupational group and demonstrated within the course of such actions, demonstrate the occupation’s rise to professional status. By examining a given occupational group on the basis of such elements, as well as measuring the degree to which such features are apparent, the following elements may be used in measuring the professionalization progress of a given occupational group.

## Professional Organizations

A hallmark of the mature profession, professional organizations function as entities which “unify the practice, represent the field to the public, lobby government officials, advise government and organizations, monitor and promote education of members, promote communication and socialization among practitioners, and maintain codes and standards” (Savage 358). Through activities such as promoting their public presence and reputation, in addition to providing services to members, these organizing entities are able to contribute to “feelings of power, status, and legitimacy” (Malone 287) experienced by the professionals themselves. These associations are necessary to the extent that they are capable of acting as the public face of the profession, a sort of formal personification of the occupational group as a whole. In this manner, the professional organization is able to assist in the lobbying of issues of importance, acting as a sort of mediator between the profession and the public.

Nerland and Karseth explain the role of professional organizations as akin to such interfaced positioning, stating their responsibility to “handle and negotiate professionals’ collective relationships towards users and stakeholders” (2) and to “play a key role in defining the internal rules and norms of the professional community” (2). They are often regarded as regulatory agencies, change agents and even locales for professional growth and development.

## Body of Specialized Knowledge

An established body of knowledge, from which the professional’s skills are drawn and upon which their exclusivity is based, is a necessary facet of the established profession. Such knowledge allows for an easily discernable differentiation between the professional and the

nonprofessional, “in that their achievement rests not upon the mere mastery of mechanical skills, but upon the building of a rationally informed sensitivity, itself dependent upon a substantial knowledge base” (Edgar 196). The establishment of a formally recognized body of specialized knowledge further contributes to the development of professional prestige, through an acknowledgment of the very active role it takes in the attainment of market, social and professional closure. As explained by educational researchers Nerland and Karseth, this body of specialized knowledge from which expertise is drawn, is most significant because “the basis for professional work today lies . . . in the capacity to perform work in ways that are informed, guided by and validated against shared knowledge and established conventions for practice” (2).

As explained by Fincham, “The knowledge base of expert labour [*sic*] plays a crucial role in expert abilities and claims” (218). When such expertise is acknowledged, it creates a distinction further denoting the profession’s jurisdiction over their specific service and enables their claims of expertise. The most crucial element that the body of knowledge lends towards professionalizing efforts may be in its tendency to be “seen as a way proving the ability and skills of an individual, thus justifying the award of the title professional” (Beaverstock et al. 828). Richardson concluded as much in his study of the incomplete professional project undertaken by the accounting profession. As he found, “the level of social rewards to the accounting profession can be shown to be related to the extent to which accounting knowledge has been codified” (644). Standardization and solidification of a professional’s breadth of knowledge thus leads to gains in cultural legitimacy. When a profession is perceived as encompassing the necessary know-how to accomplish his specific task, society will then extend their recognition of that professional as the proper service provider.



### Set of Ethical Standards

Because of the stipulation that society allows the professional group to govern themselves—and in return for their allowance to occupy a position of high status—a “set of guiding ethical principles” (Malone 296) is a necessary means by which professionals are able to ensure that professional decisions are moral and responsible. Bachman furthers this description of the sort of ethical agreement all professions must enter into within society at-large:

All regulated professions have a contract with society: in return for a monopoly on their specialized area of expertise, practitioners are obliged to certain moral and ethical codes of conduct. To remain relevant to ‘wider society’ in post-industrial context...professionals must constantly and progressively invigorate their societal contract. (756)

In his discussion of professional characteristics demonstrated within the field of technical communication, Faber asserts the ethical responsibility of professionals “emerges from their monopoly position as knowledge specialists, from sociopolitical activism and struggle, and from their own ideological values” (314). What emerges from this explanation is an understanding of the necessity of ethical standards that expands upon the traditional view as denoting professional responsibility; ethical standards are more than a means of ensuring good-nature—they are capable of furthering the profession’s claims to expert knowledge. As he asserts, “Professionals derive credibility and power as social activists from this ethical self-consciousness through which they position themselves as sole providers of vital, knowledge-based services” (314). Thus, ethical standards are used to further expand upon the profession’s social and cultural

legitimacy, as they denote its social responsibility to the consumer and also are capable of the creation of a culture of drawing on the profession for their services.

### Licensure or Certification

Practitioner certification or licensure is a means by which the profession is capable of measuring expertise in the field. Such efforts not only further the development of market closure, but also assert the professional's capabilities and experience. Explained as market signals that enable distinction, they are mechanisms which "allow workers to differentiate themselves from people whom they consider less qualified and to indicate a level of worker competence" (George 195). Such formal recognition benefits practitioners through signaling "a certain quality in their training and provision of service" (George 196), while also granting credibility. Ultimately, licensure and certification function by restricting claim to the profession itself and providing the means by which practitioners are able to assert their superiority over competitors. Baizerman relates the ability of licensure and certification systems to "analyze, parse, and particularize a 'job' into its 'elements'—tasks and activities, and then assign relevant knowledge, attitudes/beliefs, and skills to each task/activity" (192). These modes of particularizing are beneficial in that they easily denote specific qualifications and a correlated necessary competency; by breaking down such work-related activities, licensure and certification systems provide a means of measuring practitioner performance, which translates into measurements of competency and further secures jurisdiction boundaries to named experts.

### Accreditation of Education Programs

Mature professions are often distinguished by implementing accreditation procedures within their academic programs, acknowledged as “a powerful factor in establishing the social status of a field” (Savage 368). This process involves the certification, by an elected body, that a particular institution’s academic program meets “established quality standards for programs of its kind” (Malone 296). It has additional importance upon considering the specific role specialized education has to play within the professionalization context. Bishop explains the effect of a long, highly specialized education: “Firstly, it isolates and socializes the initiates; secondly it controls numbers and restricts admission; and finally it sorts out unsuitables [sic] in training” (38). Such steps are taken so as to ensure the profession has an ability to assess the sufficiency of their academic programs, while simultaneously contributing to future employers’ confidence in graduate abilities and providing a means of external review (Malone, 2011). The accreditation of degree programs lend credibility to claims of expertise, due to the fact that such academic credentials “are almost universally recognized . . . as signifying achievement of a certain level of expertise in the area of study” (Savage 366).

### Legal Recognition

Legal recognition by a government body is indicative of professional status, as such acknowledgement of the profession bestows upon practitioners “authoritative evidence” (Malone 299) of having attained professional status. Such acknowledgement contributes to an increased social capital, through the legitimacy which often accompanies such designation from a well-recognized governing body. Furthermore, legal recognition grants a particular profession the sole

authority to provide a particular service, effectively controlling access to the profession via legally-sanctioned authority.

### Modern-day Professionalism

As has been cited in recent research, globalization and an increasingly internationalized economy have led to a profound evolution of the concept of professionalism. In fact, the emergence of several political, social and economic factors have led many to what many have termed a decline of the professions. Rather than proscribe to one of the two approaches below, the current environment necessitates a blending of the two, as certain circumstances involving the professions in modern society have made it increasingly difficult for the professions to claim jurisdiction over their specific expertise and area of work.

In his study of professional communication, Faber explains the contentious nature of the profession in today's society:

The professions' distinct history and sociology have been challenged by the increasing number of professionals who are dependent on their position within organizations and who must learn to adapt not only to their own professional culture but to the organizational cultures in which they work . . . A significant amount of the professions' occupational autonomy and power has been supplanted by nonprofessional groups. (324)

According to Faber, an understanding of contemporary professionalism is crucial to the field of technical communication, due to its professed interest in the professionalization process. He views the current environment as especially challenging for emergent professions, largely due to

a belief in the weakening professional claim to expert knowledge. With circumstantial environmental elements such as “increased of electronic resources, the democratization of professional training programs, and the growth of consumer watchdogs, interest groups, and other venues for the dissemination of specialized knowledge” (325) comes, too, an erosion of the distinguished occupational position. In an era in which most every occupational group desires the prestige afforded the title of “professional,” professional autonomy, authority and power are often transferable to the nonprofessional. This view is echoed by Savage who concludes that today’s professions cannot relish in the “unqualified prestige” (360) of days gone by. Quoting Haskell’s *The Authority of Experts: Studies in Histories and Theory*, he explains the consequence of modern professions as such: “experts have become so numerous and their knowledge and services have become so deeply interwoven with the fabric of our existence that some writers regard our reliance on expertise as the most distinctive feature of modern culture” (360).

As explained by Edgar within his article on professional values, aesthetic values and the professionalization of painters in eighteenth century England, “The nature of the profession is potentially open to dispute within the profession. In effect, this is to suggest that modernity encourages a greater reflexivity within professions” (200). He goes on to conflate such reflexivity with the emergence of “greater and more highly contested levels of theorization” (200); a theorization that does not end in consensus, but “equally in the articulation of competing understandings of the profession” (200). What the modern professional environment requires is an understanding of the many conceptions of professionalism to which individuals proscribe, as well as of the possibility that one particular approach may not satisfy completely all professionalization projects. Coppola also alludes to this transformation in her discussion of

technical communication's ongoing professionalization project, claiming it is imperative that technical communicators grasp the significance of such efforts in the context of current political fluxes and contemporary professionalism. With the emergence of factors such as globalization and technology, the evolution of today's work environment necessitates comprehending the manner in which such variables have affected the nature of work. There has been a decisive split from traditional mores of professionalism, resulting in "more emphasis on individuals who constantly define their value through self-transformation and rebranding" (2).

Instead of limiting the scope of professionalization activities to include either closure through political-economic efforts, or those built upon the foundation of social consensus and acceptance, it is preferred that the profession "accomplish dual closure, marrying occupational closure in the labour [sic] market with the control over specific spaces, tasks, and processes" (Muzio et al. 710). The benefit of such an inclusive professionalism approach would only add to effectiveness of the professionalization project, furthering the profession's social and cultural legitimacy. Because simply achieving professional and/or market closure may no longer be sufficient to claim jurisdiction over their specific areas of work, professionalization efforts now "must learn how to generate public interest in, and commitment to, their professional activities" (Faber 330).

### Occupational Branding in the New Professional Environment

Today's professional environment thus necessitates a more aggressive approach to professionalism, one that often blends the best available aspects of the aforementioned approaches, while further focusing on elements of a profession capable of endowing it with a

certain prestige, and, thus, indicative of a certain level of professional status. As argued by Bishop, the difference between expertise of a profession and professionalism is merely one of status. In other words, the occupation's rise to professional status relies less upon actual expertise than on the perception of the occupation as being such. As Bishop rightly concludes, "aspiring professionals, by process of anticipatory socialization, internalize the norms and values of the groups to which they aspire" (39). Collective identity is crucial to the processes of professionalization within any occupational group, because effective professionalization requires an occupation's established professional identity to not only define themselves and their profession, but also as a means by which they may be defined by outsiders.

Occupational branding describes a process by which an occupational group generates brand and value creation via "strategic work on the identity of work" (Ashcraft et al. 468). Essentially, it is the process of creating a characteristic, inferred association between a specific line of work and a concise image. As described in the study, occupational branding is beneficial to an emergent profession's professionalization process, because it "(a) foregrounds collective identity work as a core professionalization activity, (b) acknowledges the common aim of such an activity is to yield a habitual association between an occupation and a preferred distilled image and (c) recognizes how this activity stakes claims of value within an identity economy" (468). To look at the professionalization of technical communication through an occupational branding lens is, ultimately, intended to facilitate the occupation's strategic collective identity work. Such an effort involves "branding" an occupation via the creation of, and adherence to, the identity of work within a specific occupation.

I suggest that the establishment of a technical communicator's professional identity constitutes the primary milestone in the realization of the field's professional status. Moreover, it is the first step towards societal recognition of that professional status—which may be fully realized with the assistance of the processes of occupational branding and a coinciding institutionalization of the technical communicator's position. These processes not only function as agents of legitimation, but also lend themselves to eventual institutionalization of the practitioner's position and the field of technical communication itself.

#### An Occupational Branding Approach to Professionalism

“Occupational branding” is a term coined by Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam and Sullivan within their study, “Professionalization as a Branding Activity: Occupational Identity and the Dialectic of Inclusivity-Exclusivity”; according to the researchers, occupational branding describes a process by which an occupational group spawns brand and value creation via “strategic work on the identity of work” (468). Essentially, it is the process of creating a conjectured association between a specific line of work and a condensed image. Because exclusivity is pivotal to the professionalization process, a profession's rise to professional status entails professional projects aimed the establishment of successful exclusivity claims. These exclusivity claims aim to “establish that a knowledge domain is the sole province of an occupation” (473), but also to depict practitioners themselves “as precious goods” (473).

#### Establishing Exclusivity

As mentioned previously, a profession's successful exclusivity claim is crucial to its eventual professional standing, as it relates to the occupation's market position, the success of



jurisdiction claims regarding expertise and its ability to construct a culturally-relevant perception of its professional role. According to Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam and Sullivan, establishing exclusivity “is a pivotal part of the professionalization process” (473), stemming from its relationship to professional knowledge. Ultimately, a successful exclusivity claim establishes an occupation’s ownership over their specific form of work, a recognition which enables simultaneous acknowledgment of the group’s professional knowledge. Because such claims “are always made amid a system of occupations or inter-occupational relations” (473), professionalization projects cannot be separated from jurisdiction contests in which the profession’s stakeholders must participate. Defined as “essentially social construction matches that play out on many stages” (473), jurisdiction contests are recognized as being “the primary professionalization mechanism” (473) through which exclusivity claims may be made. Such contests involve activities “in which stakeholders vie for control of work by advocating and disputing the nature of tasks and requisite expertise” (473), thus establishing the group’s jurisdiction over their expert knowledge, while simultaneously legitimizing this expert knowledge.

Exclusivity claims must not only “establish that a knowledge domain is the sole province of an occupation, but also that it is exclusive in other senses (that is, distinctive, valuable and reserved for the very few and finest)” (473). As a process, professionalization is “inextricably bound to the person and the personality of the producer. It follows, therefore, that the producers themselves have to be produced if their products or commodities are to be given a distinctive form” (Larson 14). Creating exclusivity of expert knowledge is not alone sufficient; attaining professional status requires that members of the profession be perceived “as precious goods”

(473), as well. Because professional status has been threatened by an ever increasing number of occupations scrambling for such recognition—and because neither expert knowledge alone is enough to solidify exclusivity claims, nor is legitimation by governmental agency conducive to achieving such closure—professionalization projects much accomplish legitimacy of expert knowledge through securing jurisdiction, while also legitimizing individuals’ enjoyed professional status on the basis of their scarce expertise. It calls for a combination of social, political, economic and cultural approaches, all of which aim to not only legitimize expertise and practitioners, but to also make the profession culturally relevant and recognizable.

Achieving claims to exclusivity has been complicated by many factors of the current work environment. According to the researchers, the “classic instance of professional exclusivity through practitioner closure has become increasingly difficult to maintain” (480); despite an occupational group’s possession of a specific form of expert knowledge, having this type of expertise recognized as legitimate by society is a frequent challenge to many modern professionalization projects. This circumstance, the authors contend, is the motivating factor behind the use of the processes of occupational branding. The contemporary economy demands implementation of a more comprehensive approach to professionalization than those of prior generations, with the success of emergent professions no longer solely determined through the legal recognition enjoyed by our forefathers. As the authors conclude, “professions are not born through a natural fit of requisite features; rather, they are made through professional projects designed to control a market of expertise and thereby launch collective social mobility” (473). A new work environment calls for an expansion of efforts and a broadening of the professionalism approach; occupational branding fills such a quota.

## Key Features

Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam and Sullivan identify three key features of occupational branding, each of which corresponds to the benefit its implementation has in the process of professionalization. The researchers' claim of an occupational branding lens as productive is based on its use within what they term an "identity economy" (468); related to the existence of "many occupations that [now] claim distinctive professional knowledge" (473), the term describes the contemporary work environment complications discussed previously and how this environment has necessitated the commodification of both professional knowledge and practitioner expertise within claims of exclusivity. These elements of contemporary professionalization indicate the new significance of professional identity, within the successful professionalization project of a given occupational group. As a result, the sort of efforts now needed by an emergent profession will inevitably demonstrate a focus on establishing an identity for the profession itself. It is due to such circumstances that occupational branding has been found especially appealing. The authors comment:

We argue that a branding lens is especially productive because it (a) foregrounds collective identity work as a core professionalization activity, (b) acknowledges the common aim of such activity is to yield a habitual association between an occupation and a preferred distilled image and (c) recognizes how this activity stakes claims of value within an identity economy. (468)

The three key features of occupational branding—strategic occupational identity work, brand production and value creation—direct professionalization efforts and enable the successful navigation of professional projects "amid the contemporary crisis of representation" (475).

### Strategic Collective Identity Work as a Core Professionalization Activity

Occupational branding recognizes professionalization as an activity which inherently involves efforts aimed at strategic collective identity work. According to the researchers, “a collective occupational identity can be seen as akin to the extant construction of organizational identity, as both capture attempts to construct who ‘we’ are” (475). The process not only acknowledges such identity work as the core component of contemporary professionalization, but also implicates the significance of both legitimizing the group’s expertise and delegitimizing that of others’, in the pursuit of successful knowledge exclusivity claims. Concluding that this identity work “is best approached as a relation of entwining people, institutions, objects and practices” (476), it follows that occupational branding intends to examine and identify “how knowledge exclusivity is won through persuasive constructions of work, the knowledge it requires and who should logically exercise it”(476). Thus, occupational branding recognizes strategic collective identity work as a core professionalizing activity because of its use in the management of meaning; by constructing and legitimizing one’s occupational identity, a profession is able to “activate competitive advantage for organizations . . . [and] create tangible benefit for occupations, boosting their relative position in an inter-occupational market” (476). In short, “today’s knowledge exclusivity claims—as they confront the crisis of representation described earlier—can be usefully framed as branding endeavor” (476). Seeing professionalization in light of this consideration, occupational branding is thus an opportunity for a professional group to construct their own meaning of professional identity, before then pursuing relevant outlets through which to communicate this identity. With this branding perspective in place, the professionalization project furthers its reach beyond meaning

construction and into spheres where such constructions are capable of earning credibility, recognition and professional legitimacy.

### Strategic Collective Identity Work and Occupational Brand Production

In occupational branding, strategic collective identity work is seen as primarily concerned with “the creation of an occupational brand, or a habitual, taken-for-granted association between a line of work and a condensed image” (476). Defined as “highly distilled essences aimed at abridging or standing in for the complexity of occupational identity” (476), these occupational brands function as the means with which “to invoke a knee jerk response—a reflex, rather than reflexive, reaction—among multiple stakeholders” (476). Their construction assists in brand creation through their ability to communicate the most essential aspects of professional identity, without the need to be highly demanding of stakeholders pertinent to the profession. They enable the profession to concisely craft what is perceived as its occupational core, as well as to communicate this identity in a way that resonates with a diverse population. As explained by the researchers, the notion of occupational branding coincides with an understanding which recognizes “most occupations have a public image (that is, abstractions of their fundamental content, value and likely practitioners) and that various stakeholders consume and act upon this image” (476). By creating this habitual association and promoting public adherence to this identity conception, occupational branding aims to assist in the production, coproduction and reproduction of meaning.

For Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam and Sullivan, occupational branding considers such a brand to be an object of knowledge. Defined as “perpetually unfinished; problematic rather than

predetermined” (477), considering brand as an object of knowledge necessarily implies that its meaning is fluid. In other words, “brands are continually under construction . . . [and] Their pliable character invites intervention” (477). In fact, it is only “through interaction with stakeholders [that] brands assume ‘objectivity,’ a readily recognizable form or stable essence” (477). It is due to this malleability and adaptive quality that occupational branding is capable of organizing and managing the meaning of a specific like of work, functioning as “coordinating objects through which multiple agents (for example, people, institutions and artefacts) meet and are mediated” (477). By implementing occupational branding within a group’s professionalization endeavor, it “facilitates control over work through interface among stakeholders across place and time” (477), allowing the profession to brand itself through communicating their professional identity to a diverse audience.

#### Strategic Collective Identity Work and Claims of Value

Finally, the strategic collective identity work of occupational branding has an “overt interest in the production (or destruction) of value” (478), which is achieved through measures of worth that are both economic and non-economic. Due to the fact that “knowledge exclusivity claims are political assertions of occupational worth” (478), value creation plays an extremely significant role in an occupation’s rise to professional status. Occupational branding, to this end, is “a matter of claiming that knowledge practitioners, the work they perform, the organizations for which they do it, the clients they serve and the outcomes they yield deserve high valuation” (479); it is for this exact purpose that the process may be implemented, enabling collective identity work which facilitates the creation and recreation of the occupational brand. This facet

of occupational branding also introduces a new conception to its use; not only is the process used in order to create meaning surrounding professional identity, as it may be used in order to deconstruct any negative meaning surrounding the occupational identity, as well. This aspect of occupational branding may be most significant to the field of technical communication, because of its ability to remove any present undesirable identity aspects so as to put forth a preferred notion in its place.

The researchers include two case studies that perform this exact activity, exemplified through an examination involving airline pilots and massage therapists. As noted, commercial airline pilots “have long enjoyed palpable material benefit from their occupational brand legacy; that of the professional pilot and his elite technical knowledge” (480). This image, however esteemed, was found to negatively affect the industry’s 30 years of efforts, aimed toward racial and gender diversification. Such shortcomings were the result of an institutionalized occupational brand which, though contradictory to current wants, was proven extremely difficult to shake:

the pilot’s potent blend of occupational imagery—the high-ranking officer, the scientifically trained professional and the virile, dependable father—was strategically created in collaboration between the airline pilot union and airlines, first against white, upper-middle class ‘ladyflier’ [*sic*] figure of 1920s and 1930s, then against the increasingly sexualized white stewardess and, eventually, against the exoticized [*sic*] flight attendant as well as the male, working-class ground personnel associated with Other race, ethnic, and/or national origins. (480)

Researchers identified an attempt, on the part of the airline industry, to negate such an identity, through replacing the authoritative, assertive, dominant male, with an image evoking “the benevolent, potentially fallible parent” (480). According to the researchers, strategic collective identity work was at play which meant to deconstruct—and then reconstruct—the occupational identity of commercial pilots:

airline pilots creatively navigate this shift through a range of (especially gendered) techniques and that their performance involves a wide range of agents, including the federal regulatory agency, airlines, pilot unions, passengers and even the pilot uniform (which, virtually unchanged over decades, carries the historical brand forward). Such strategic occupational identity work clearly endeavors to preserve professional brand value (that is, exclusivity and its quantitative and qualitative benefits) while ‘softening’ the brand to make it compatible with social responsibility (that is, inclusivity). (481)

Thus, by drawing upon several separate entities capable of disseminating a new image to a wide audience, pilots shifted the meaning surrounding their occupational identity and even lent it credibility through its entities of transmission. By propagating these changes over time, the profession experienced a decisive shift in their favor.

In the case of massage therapists, the occupation desired to reconstruct occupational meaning they perceived as “historically . . . blocking their access to professionalization: a pervasive distilled image as sexual laborers treading fine lines of morality” (481). Coinciding occupational branding efforts were thus “aimed at the destruction of an old brand and the



production of a new distilled image” (481). Essentially, through professional organizations’—and individual practitioner—activities, the group hoped to

Gain legitimacy and shed a tainted image by enhancing their material and symbolic inclusion in the exclusive profession of medicine, especially through carefully constructed branding campaigns mobilized through traditional institutional activities such as lobbying, building networks with medical professionals and constructing clinical education mandates. (481)

In weakening their perceived correlation with sexuality and strengthening ties with legitimate, institutionalized, already well-respected and established professional groups, massage therapists engaged with a process of occupational branding that “revalues massage as legitimate medical knowledge” (481). As both examples demonstrate, concerted collective identity work is an appropriate venue through which a profession endeavors to transform their perceived identity, as well as within which to ensure such a preconception is consistent with their preferred distilled image.

The process of occupational branding, then, seems most befitting to the professionalization project with which technical communication is concerned. This may be ascertained from its ability to act as not only a means of establishing professional identity—which necessarily fulfills several lacking aspects of the technical communication professionalization process—but also its function as an agent of legitimation. It provides a framework for the formation of an established professional identity and has the potential to enable market closure, through the creation of a public persona that others connect to the

technical communicator's line of work. This would constitute value creation, branding the occupation via an established technical communicator professional identity, as well generate legitimacy for the occupation's claim of jurisdiction. Subsequent institutionalization of the profession and its positions will satisfy the as yet unrealized processes of professionalization, resulting in the technical communicator's attainment of professional status. In today's complex professional environment, a successful professionalization project necessarily involves furthering efforts to include those which aspire to the creation of the profession's public image.

Occupational branding is a framework capable of leading to the institutionalization of the field of technical communication and its ultimate rise to professional status, the solution to the field's lacking professional identity, as well as the realization of the field's professionalization process.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

### Historical Motivations

Evidence of the quest for professionalization within technical communication is easily distinguishable; rather than merely a recent phenomenon, the topic has long maintained its presence within disciplinary discussion—and its enduring nature may be trumped only by its highly-contested status. The reasoning behind such concern is rooted in an understanding of the history of the profession itself. Decidedly, there are a number of factors regarding the history of technical communication which have seemingly led to a pervasive view amongst technical communicators that they are often seen as sub-professional, illustrated by work-related situations in which they are misunderstood, underappreciated and undervalued. Perhaps as a result, many in the field are left coveting acceptance of their significance in the workplace, as well as a recognition of the value they contribute within it. What follows is a discussion of the variables involved with the historical motivations for professionalization in the field. With a background of such circumstances, a better understanding of the need to professionalize may be given—as well as an understanding of the significance of such efforts within the sphere of technical communication work.

### Origins of the Field

The origins of the field are a frequently cited cause for status concerns and the need to professionalize. In their discussion of the history of the field, Pringle and Williams find an association between the emergence of technical communication as a profession and the historical tendency to be perceived as sub professional. Locating the origination of the profession as a “by-

product of print technology and literacy” (362), Pringle and Williams go on to state that, while technical communication work may have a long history, much of it involves activities performed before practitioners operated under a proper name. That occurrence, they argue, took place only after engineers and scientists discovered a need to communicate with their audience. What had previously been done only out of necessity, and “as an adjunct to their main jobs, to explain the ‘real’ work that occurred in engineering or scientific settings” (363), an increasing need for technical documentation—spurred by the fast pace of technological innovation and consumer demand for “more professional and higher quality information products to accompany their purchases” (363)—led to the birth of what is now known as technical communication. Further, the relationship between these early technical communicators and their co-workers often resulted in a marginalization of their position. Engineers in this period viewed writers as mere technicians, “people skilled at fixing things but who ‘cannot do the original design work to create a new product’” (363). Thus, rather than existing due to fulfilling a need of its own, the birth of technical communication was seen as due only to “the sheer pace of technological innovation” (363).

Kynell explains the emergence of technical communication as due to the influence of “defense-related production” (148) occurring in the late 1930s. She pinpoints the manner in which such circumstances influenced the field, citing both the production of increasingly technological weapons and the insufficient English practice of engineers. Because of the complexity of use involved with such weaponry, as well as the need to explain such use to an often less-than-technical audience, engineers’ inability to provide explanations discernable to the common man was soon recognized as problematic. Thus, positions were created to fill this

demand and companies began employing technical writers to carry out such composition duties. As Kynell contends, “Technical writing, then, was realizing full status as a discipline because people were being hired to do it” (148).

#### Early Power Differentials: The Belief in the Separation of Content and Form

Tebeaux further explains the complexity of relationships between the first technical writers and coworkers, citing a pervasive belief in the separation of content and form. According to Tebeaux, scientists and engineers perceived their subject matter as “stable” (82), a view which could only lead to a belief in technical writers’ “ability to destabilize” (82) their knowledge, using language capable of distorting the meaning that their work most clearly communicated. These individuals thus kept writers at the “margins of science, technology, and business” (82) in an attempt to prevent their ability to exercise authority over language and, they believed, misrepresent established knowledge. In this marginal position, technical writers were incapable of disrupting the status quo and were, conversely, resigned to their position of lower status. For Jeyaraj, this belief in the separation of content and form continues to marginalize technical communicators, occasioned by subject matter experts (SMEs) operating under an assumption of “uninformed dualism” (19). This belief in the separation of content and form assumes that language can be “a completely transparent tool” (19), with content and meaning viewed as entirely unaffected by any variance in delivery. Accordingly, technical communicators’ perceived influence is drastically diminished as coworkers remain oblivious to the potential influence that language and delivery may have upon the effectively communicated message. Without the “content knowledge” (20) used by SMEs in the course of their work activities,

communicators were seen as “incapable of being epistemic in salient matters” (20). Such perspective only further lessens claims to professional status, as it allows experts to assert their own justification for retaining authority and further emphasizes the belief in the technical communicator’s ability to negatively affect their work, through “trivialization of their domain knowledge” (23).

#### Placement within English Department

Further compounding status issues within the field is the fact that professions preceded academic programs. When implemented within higher education and available as areas of study, technical communication programs were often institutionalized within preexisting English departments. Kynell and Tebeaux identify the opposition of hostile English faculty members to this pairing as another instance of the field’s lesser-than status. Upon its introduction to the university, technical writing was frequently “seen as vocational” (109), due to the lesser “industrial craft” (118) of its subject matter when compared to the “humanizing” (109) work carried out within literature and composition. Moore explains this English department disdain as due to a ubiquitous contempt towards “work-oriented curricula” (208). Technical writing programs were viewed as lacking esteem because they were “associated with science” (212) and emphasized “basic language practices” (212) that advised “simple, direct, and correct” (212) writing. A belief in technical communication theory as baseless and its practice as unenlightened, the derision of English faculty would eventually relegate technical communication to being simply “a skills course” (212).

Kline and Barker further identify complications stemming from the field's English department home. Technical communication professors, they claim, were often forced to conform their research and theory to fit within the confines of their departmental placement. Such an adaptive tendency was perhaps damaging, as "humanities-based conceptions of education" (42) are not complimentary to technical communication, but rather "against the workplace culture itself" (42). Kynell elaborates on the consequences of English department association, saying that while technical communication content "bridged" (149) the technology and science of STEM departments with the humanism of English, being neither "purely scientific nor purely humanistic" (149), the discipline was very often "claimed by neither" (149). Kynell attributes such a straddling of interests to initial program implementations which sought to be representative of a "cooperation" (147) between English and Engineering departments. Upon institution within the existing English department, technical writing programs often created tension with existent faculty, who expressed attitudes ranging from "open hostility to sympathetic cooperation" (147). As many programs were initially staffed by members of the department with no interest in becoming "English engineering" professors, their concern for technical communication ended in a reluctance to "get a disagreeable job off their hands as quickly as possible in order that they may bask in the sunshine of pure culture on some more congenial department" (147).

In the rare event that programs were staffed with interested parties, genuinely interested in the growth of the discipline, they were often welcomed with a supercilious gaze of English department faculty who believed the "main purpose" (MacNealy and Heaton 43) of their department was to teach literature. According to MacNealy and Heaton, a resultant "lack of

respect” (43) formed for a subject believed to represent a lower rung of education and intellect, “not worthy of effort by true academics” (47). With many technical writing instructors not formally educated in the field, a concomitant sub-par bar was set, as “asking anyone without training in the discipline to teach technical writing implies that anyone can do it” (48). Though given a home within English departments, technical communication instructors—not unlike the first technical communication practitioners—were looked down upon by colleagues, many of whom viewed them as inherently lesser and occupying a perhaps undeserved position within their departmental entity.

Moore further elaborates upon the tension between technical communication and English, making note of the field lacking prestige in both its departmental home and the workplace. According to Moore, the field’s status issues are due to the fact that “the academy and the workplace create their capital within different overlapping economies” (208). The academy creates value within a positional economy, an environment that determines prestige according to the extent to which one’s position is “rare and distinguished” (210). The workplace, conversely, operates within a material economy in which success is often determined by the perception of one’s morality. This conception becomes rather significant when Moore implies an association between the struggle for prestige within the academic community and that of its success in the workplace. Moore concludes that, with no sense of respect in the academy, technical communication will ultimately suffer within the work environment as well. As he states, “Without respect in the positional economy, success in the material culture is difficult” (216). If technical communication cannot garner respect for its higher education programs, research, or



overarching academic purpose, then such absences—indicative of its lesser status—will be carried over into the professional world and remain as such.

### Professionalization Efforts

#### The First Wave of the Professionalization Movement

As noted by Malone, “The first generation of technical communicators was deeply interested in the process and prospects of professionalization” (285). Speaking of the years between 1953 and 1961, Malone locates the first instances of professionalization attempts as characterized by the emergence of journal publications and professional associations, the establishment of academic programs and the development of codes of conduct occurring in the early 1950s. More concretely, he points to professionalization discussions evidenced within even “The earliest technical communication journals and conference proceedings” (285); akin to Malone’s conclusion, articles such as “Technical Writing Grows into a New Profession” (1952) and “Is Technical Writing a Profession?” (1957) seem to denote a growing interest in the prospect for professionalization of the field, even as the profession was, arguably, in its infancy. What follows is a more in-depth look at the professional organizations of this first generation of technical communicators, as well as professionalization efforts undertaken and progress achieved.

#### Professional Organizations of the First Generation

Malone provides a wealth of knowledge concerning the professional associations founded by the first generation of technical communicators, as well as the efforts toward

professionalizing undertaken in the name of the field. The first professionalization movement was an endeavor which resulted from the activities of organizations founded in those formative years of the field's emergence as a profession: the Society of Technical Writers (STW), which was founded in Boston; the LA-based Technical Publishing Society (TPS); and the Association of Technical Writers and Editors (TWE), based out of New York.

Recognizing the division of efforts as counterproductive to the field's ultimate goal of advancement and growth, TWE and STW would later reemerge under the newly unified Society of Technical Writers and Editors (STWE) in 1957. Interesting to note concerning this merger, is a belief in the influential nature of its establishment. Though the organization was the result of the unification of TWE and STW, this merger was not without conflict. Namely, the two groups argued over membership qualifications—STW supporting restrictive membership, while TWE believed in the admittance of all interested parties—and grades of membership—TWE being against the use of a “grading scale,” while STW expressed a desire for “grading” membership in terms of general members, senior members and fellows. Ultimately, the two agreed to follow TWE's membership qualification model, which allowed anyone with “a professional interest in technical communication” (Malone 288) to join its ranks. As Malone notes, “Indeed, the adoption of TWE's policy on membership qualifications may have contributed (however modestly) to the broad-based profession of technical communication that we have today” (289).

With the newly unified STWE comes, assumedly, further recognition of the power of further professional unification. Thus, in 1960, the west coast-based TPS joins, with the three, once separate organizations uniting under the name Society of Technical Writers and Publishers (STWP). Malone identifies this merger—the founding of STWP—as quite significant; the

establishment was perceived as especially noteworthy, because “members of that first generation of professionals believed that goal of unifying the profession by and large had been achieved and that mature, professional status and recognition were just around the corner” (289).

Eventually, STWP would become the Society for Technical Communication (STC); the 1971 name change a consequence of it being, as then-president Mary Schaefer would describe, “explicitly consonant with the primary purpose for which our Society was formed [in 1953]—to advance the theory and practice of technical communication in *all* media” (Malone 287). As her statement seemingly concludes, the change from “writer” to “communicator” represents an attempt at being more inclusive of the many positions that practitioners may fill within the professional realm; rather than functioning solely in a “writerly” position, the technical communicator fulfills a number of various, broad professional functions. This final merger—the union of TWE, STW and TPS—thus presents the STC that we know today.

Almost concurrently, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) emerges in 1973. Its founding members, described by Kynell and Tebeaux as “college faculty members passionately committed to teaching technical writing to undergraduates” (108), viewed the organization as an answer to a problem which first arose in the 1960s—a lack of teaching resources, the most significant of which were textbooks. During this period, much of the textbooks on which the teaching of technical writing was based were founded in either the “military or industrial consulting experience of writers” (110). This insufficiency, combined with other issues such as the need for “teaching resources, course content, assignments, and camaraderie with other teachers” (108), were felt even more pointedly as the number of academic programs increased—along with an acknowledgement of the “growing number of

teachers who had scant background in the discipline” (119). Though other organizations were currently active at this time, ATTW members were dissatisfied with their ability to provide professional development opportunities. From their perspective, technical writing courses were solely focused on meeting the needs of science and engineering students, while seemingly oblivious to students enrolled in technical communication programs. Thus, ATTW was founded with the intent to provide a forum in which academics could convene, discuss and share ideas. According to Kynell and Tebeaux, early members shared a common practical background which allowed them the foresight to understand the importance of both developing, as well as preserving, a sense of community. This commitment to developing community was similarly demonstrated in the organization’s publication endeavor, with 1973’s *The Technical Writing Teacher*’s first issue the result of ATTW’s belief in professional and scholarly literature as a hallmark of professional and disciplinary existence.

Another significant early organization, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, or IEEE, is now the second-largest professional organization for technical communicators and operates under the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers’ Professional Communication Society (IEEE PCS) (Malone *Formation of IEEE PCS* 2015). While today’s IEEE was formed in 1963 with the intent to serve electrical and electronics engineering, the organization’s interests soon grew to include a broad array of engineering and computing professionals. At the same time that the professional groups which would eventually become STC were pursuing professionalizing activities of the 1950s, intent “to establish an independent profession of technical communication” (Malone *Formation of IEEE PCS* 106), another group of individuals sought to not separate themselves, but “to elevate their status within

the engineering profession” (Malone *Formation of IEEE PCS* 109) itself. Working under a succession of names—Professional Group on Engineering Writing and Speech (PGEWS), the IEEE Professional Technical Group on Engineering Writing and Speech (PTGEWS) and IEEE Group on Engineering Writing and Speech) GEWS—the organization eventually became the IEEE PCS in 1978. The organization, whose founding members, as described by Malone, “viewed themselves more as engineers than technical communicators” (127), first attempted to teach practicing engineers how to improve their writing skills, an attempt “to empower electronics engineers to communicate more effectively and efficiently” (126). In this way, many have equated such an attempt to the creation of a niche market—one which intended to share “the engineer’s professional status rather than developing a separate professional identity as technical communicators” (127). After realizing their teaching strategies often proved futile in improving the communication of practicing engineers, IEEE PCS, quite ironically, “brought visibility to the full-time practice of engineering communication” (127), secured its status as a specialization within the IEEE and eventually began serving the needs of full-time technical communicators—which it continues to this day. In an effort to facilitate understanding and promote effective communication practice in the engineering, scientific and technical fields, the IEEE PCS endeavors to advance the field as an essential component of professional engineering and to improve the communication practices of colleagues in their respective fields.

### Body of Knowledge

Founded following the Workshop on the Production and Use of Technical Reports in 1953, TWE came into being as attendants of that conference took note of the need for a national

organization within the field of what was then referred to as technical writers and editors. With the cause of advancing the growth of the profession, TWE's primary objective was advancing the profession "through such activities as developing 'a literature of the profession'" (Malone 288). Even at this early date, then, we see the need for creating a body of knowledge as pivotal to the professionalization aspirations of the field.

Defining this body of knowledge was, in fact, an important goal for the first generation of professional communicators, who believed such codification would enable the "specialized, academic education and training" (Malone 291) required by a mature profession. These early practitioners' attempts took the form of the development of professional journals, "created, in part, to begin the necessary process of developing and delineating the body of knowledge required for technical communication to become a mature, recognized profession" (Malone, 292). TWE's *Journal*, TPS' *Technical Communications* and STW's *Technical Writing Review* illustrate such efforts while, further, being indicative of "a corpus representing the profession's collective attempt to develop, identify, and codify its body of knowledge through research and intellectual exchange" (Malone 292).

ATTW's early issues of *The Technical Writing Teacher* also expressed concern regarding the need for development of a coherent body of knowledge. As early as the first issue in 1973, the publication was clearly calling for a means with which the field could be defined. As the organization communicated, the field must "determine how to best present concepts fundamental to technical writing, explain how best to justify the study of technical writing to students, and determine what to teach based on the demands of the nonacademic setting" (Kynell and Tebeaux 129). By the mid-1980s, these same individuals "realized that publication needed to focus on

philosophy, theory, or demographic issues, or some type of empirical research to show that technical writing had an academic foundation” (Kynell and Tebeaux 132). As Kynell and Tebeaux conclude, if it hoped “to survive, technical writing needed some kind of firm disciplinary status” (132).

The IEEE PCS’ mission statement also provides direct evidence of the significance the fields’ professional organizations place on establishing a specialized body of knowledge, stating the association’s endeavor to promote and circulate best practices and research, so as to develop and maintain a shared approach regarding technical content. As has been shown, the need for a codified body of knowledge was thus seen as akin to the field’s hopeful enduring relevancy, a necessary means upon which the practice could be based, legitimized and accepted as such. As has been made apparent, the development of a shared, specialized body of knowledge, is not only desired by today’s communicators—but was of primary importance to our forefathers, as well.

#### Code of Ethics

The first evidence of the need for a set of guiding ethical standards may very well be the stipulation included within TWE’s 1955 Constitution, which noted “promoting professional ethics” (Malone 288) as one of their primary objectives, in line with the organization’s ultimate goal of advancing the profession and “fostering higher professional standards” (Malone 292). This ethical interest was shared amongst the professional organizations of this time, with STWE similarly drafting and implementing their Canon of Ethics in 1958. According to Malone, however, these “ethical initiatives were largely forgotten by 1975” (294), with an interest piqued again—perhaps—only because of the moral disaster associated with Watergate in the late 1970s.

In 1978, STC again drafted a set of ethical standards, titled “Code of Communicators,” which was “apparently created without an awareness of the 1958 [STWE] code” (295).

### Certification

As previously mentioned, the first generation of communicators were deeply interested in the development of a body of knowledge so as to enable specialized education and training; the reason behind such education, for many, being its application within a workable certification system. First recorded in proceedings from a joint STWE-TPS convention in 1960 which noted “the long-standing interest in the possibility of a certification or licensing system” (Malone 295), such discussions seem to have already been at the forefront of conversation even in the 1950s. STWP also addressed the feasibility of certification in 1960, with their Board of Directors issuing the following statement:

A discussion was held concerning the feasibility of formulating voluntary examinations which, when passed, would entitle the writer, illustrator, or other publication personnel to be registered as a professional and be given a certificate similar to a ‘professional engineer.’ This item was referred to the Standards and Ethics Committee with recommendation that they check with state examining boards and other professional societies, and if the project seems feasible, formulate the examinations to test basic ‘knowledge,’ not the ‘how he does it or what techniques are required for specific writing tasks.’ (Barry 6)

Though expressing an interest, STWP seems to have made no further efforts toward this end at that time.



## Accreditation

Interest in the accreditation of academic programs was also evident within the efforts, as well as issued documentation, of the first generation of technical communicators. As part of the organization's 1955 mission statement, TWE clearly noted its objective to advance the profession via "the establishment of professional college and university curricula for the training of technical writers and editors" (TWE Constitution 8). Also in 1955, TPS began a similar initiative in commencing efforts intended "to create a graduate curriculum in technical publishing" (Malone 297) at Los Angeles State College. As both examples communicate, these early communicators took note of academic degree programs playing what Malone calls "a pivotal role . . . in the professionalization of other fields" (297). In accordance with this understanding, these individuals thus espoused the view that formal education programs were indeed crucial to professionalization efforts; not only did they see accreditation systems as a necessary component of professionalization, but also as the means by which practitioners were adequately trained, prepared for professional work and, ultimately, reflective of the ideal technical communicator.

By 1960, STC was also expressing such notions, with meeting minutes that evidenced discussion of "the feasibility of creating an internal system for accrediting academic programs" (Malone 302). Once founded, ATTW voiced similar concern over the accreditation of degree programs; as many members began "moving beyond [technical communication] courses to establish programs to prepare technical writers" (Kynell and Tebeaux 129) in the 1980s, communicators began taking note of instructor insufficiency. As Kynell and Tebeaux note, "Not enough teachers were available to fill the need, and the lack of qualified faculty members created

a problem” (131). In other words, academic programs were not only suffering from sub-par instruction, but also producing graduates whose performance was not—in any way—ensured to be satisfactory.

### Legal Recognition

In terms of legal recognition, technical writing had been somewhat characterized as a “profession”; the U.S. Employment Service’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* included a similar listing beginning in post-war 1939 that, while not titled “Technical Communicator,” or even “Technical Writer,” did recognize “Editor, Trade-or-Technical Publication” as an occupation, while the 1943 edition did begin to list “Writer, Technical Publications,” in addition to the former. In his 1957 “Is Technical Writing a Profession?,” Sweet discusses the “great comfort” (Malone 300) that communicators of the time took in this classification, as well as those listing “technical writer as a professional worker” (Malone 300) issued by both the Federal Security Agency and the Bureau of Census. Though the aforementioned individuals likely took the acknowledgement as a formal recognition of “belong to a group of ‘professional and kindred occupations’ . . . [or those] requiring specialized study and training” (Malone 300), Sweet was quick to point out that the same agencies similarly “recognized the billiard player, jockey, dog trainer, freak, masseur, gambler, fortune teller, animal impersonator, yodeler, and stooge as professional workers” (65). In other words, although “Technical Writer” may have been recognized by governmental agencies—thus bestowing upon it a bit of credibility—this alone was not sufficient to satisfy the profession’s desire for status and prestige.

ATTW seemed to take a page from the same book, as illustrated by the organization's efforts in the 1970s and 1980s to increase the profession's standing and recognition. During this period, members "mobilized to make technical writing a presence at conferences, in workshops, and on university campuses" (Kynell and Tebeaux 125). In addition, ATTW further noted the "need to stimulate [and reward] publication" (Kynell and Tebeaux 125), all of which seemingly strove to increase the public standing of the field, while also fostering a certain sense of societal esteem associated with its activities.

#### Current Standing

To realize the field's rise to professional status, technical communication must first identify and resolve the issues which complicate the field's development of professionalism. As Savage contends within "The Process and Prospects for Professionalizing Technical Communication," technical communication has not achieved professional status due its inability to fulfill the three factors of professionalization: market factors, socio-political factors and ideological factors. These professionalization factors involve occupational autonomy as achieved through practitioner licensure or certification, accreditation of educational programs and occupational standards. According to Savage, such factors are rarely achieved "without some type of formal organization and a unified sense of identity" (358); without this collective identity, there is no basis on which claims of value and expertise may be based.

Ultimately, though its attainment has been of interest since the birth of the profession itself, the professionalization of technical communication has remained an unrealized process. This is due to not only its unsuccessful endeavors regarding the satisfaction of acknowledged

elements of a mature profession, but to the field's inability to resolve internal divisions and to create an established professional identity, as well. Realistically, consensus on relevant issues and professional identity development go hand in hand; to formulate identity entails solidarity, while decision-making would enable the standardization required of a shared identity. As previously mentioned, the market, socio-political and ideological factors of professionalization are necessary prerequisites to the fulfillment of technical communication's professionalization project. These three factors, while distinguishable from one another, entail elements of a mature profession that remain intimately interconnected; simply put, without satisfying the three in their entirety, professionalization would be severely hampered, if not entirely implausible. Savage sums up technical communication's current standing, in terms of professionalization, as well as the reasons behind its position:

Despite the ever-increasing demand for technical communicators, there is little evidence of the ability of the field to organize itself professionally in order to limit access to the market to those who are credentialed according to standards determined by our professional organizations. This problem relates to the lack of status and societal recognition of the field, not only among the public in general but within the industries that employ technical communicators. The problem also involves the difficulty of defining the expertise of technical communicators in order to effectively set the field apart, on the basis of specialized knowledge, from the general public or from other fields which might lay claim to being qualified for technical communication work. Finally, practitioners of technical communication do not yet have a well-defined sense of professional identity.

Indeed, there is evidence that many of them may not see themselves as professionals at all, and do not see themselves as members of a category of workers who are distinguished by specialized knowledge and practices, nor by a professional history in terms of which they can identify themselves. (375-376)

These three main areas of focus—the lack of status and recognition, the difficulty of defining expertise and the lack of professional identity—correlate, in that order, with the field’s inability to satisfy the market, socio-political and ideological factors of professionalization. In what follows, each of these factors will be explained in detail, along with the coinciding elements of a mature profession to which they relate.

## Barriers to Professionalization

### Market Factors

Technical communication’s marketplace performance has been, and continues to be, severely limited by the field’s inability to establish itself as an identifiable presence. Essentially, technical communication’s market position is noticeably compromised due to its lack of status and societal recognition of the field. This comes a result of the inability to achieve market closure—or garnering public acceptance as being the appropriate source for services offered, through denying the legitimacy of external groups—and professional closure—limiting access to privileges and opportunities. Without effectively achieving such closure, satisfying the market factors of professionalization will remain unattainable.

According to Savage, a profession's market position is dependent upon its ability to produce some sort of unifying intellectual heritage, and to have their specialized body of knowledge legitimized as the rational solution to their specific professional activities. Often, these efforts are seen as part and parcel to systems of certification and the implementation of standards for entry and practice. Thus, market factors often necessarily entail aspects of a profession such as its body of knowledge and system of certification, but also those related to educational requirements and specialized training.

Savage argues that the field has yet to fulfill the market factors of professionalization, a claim based on such characteristics as job qualifications that do not require a formal education in technical communication, the lack of practitioner licensure or certification and the absence of standardized degree programs and qualifications—all of which undermine the technical communicator's breadth of knowledge and prevent market closure.

As first mentioned by Savage, the field suffers from a lack of societal recognition from not only the public, but also the industries in which practitioners are employed. Carliner provides one such illustration in his discussion of what he views as technical communication's changing career path. According to Carliner, disparity between academics' perception of technical communication work and that which occurs in practical work environments has significantly influenced the field's market standing. While the academic community has long held technical communication to be an interdisciplinary field, in which communicators are capable of performing a vast array of services, the actual professional experience of practitioners does not reflect such diversity. In fact, a number of circumstances are present which vehemently oppose this position: job descriptions often emphasize only basic skills of writing and editing, job

qualifications frequently focus on capabilities regarding tool-use and hiring situations repeatedly concern only basic communication skills believed to be more concrete. Without a clear understanding of what a technical communicator is able to provide employers, or what value their contributions may add to an organization's bottom line, society will continue to focus on only lower-level skills—and communicators will be hired in order to fulfill such limiting purposes.

This misunderstanding of technical communication work has been both present and even acknowledged by the field for a number of years, yet remains unresolved. Cogan makes mention of such a circumstance in his 1974 call for the pursuit of professional identity and maturity. He describes such barriers to professionalism as “a severe lack of training and educational facilities or standards” (2), diverse communicator backgrounds and the difficulty in describing work activities that “change rapidly because they are allied to explosively changing technologies” (2). Akin to contemporary belief, Cogan acknowledged defining technical communication as a challenging endeavor, complicated by abstract processes and any attempt at explanation to the outside world. Without the kind of external recognition and status invoked by a successful performance in the market, Cogan describes “an implicit fear or discomfort that the activities performed in the discipline may not be worthwhile” (3). The solution he presents is still relevant, describing a need which still stands to be filled: professionalization necessarily entails defining “very carefully and thoroughly the services that a technical communicator performs” (3), as well as “the occupational requirements for technical communicators and the associated training and educational curriculae [*sic*] needed” (4).

In other words, the field requires codification of its skills and knowledge to enable formulation of a specialized body of knowledge from which expertise is both drawn and exercised. Further, an absent body of knowledge is not only applicable to expertise, but also relates to the issue of certification and even academic curriculum. Returning again to Malone, defining a body of knowledge is recognized as “the first step in the creation of a workable certification system” (290); because such systems are founded on shared expert knowledge, gained in the process of specialized education and training, “defining a specialized body of knowledge and developing technical writing curricula are integrally related” (291). With that said, certification is an aspect of professionalization that technical communication has found to be extremely enduring. The issue has been, and continues to be, a point of contention within the field, with communicators expressing a range of opinions concerning its practicality, usefulness, or want of implementation. In fact, as mentioned previously, STC appointed four separate feasibility committees for the sole purpose of surveying opinions before concluding interest was not high enough to support such an undertaking. As of 2011, the organization has begun certifying practitioners—but the credibility it lends to the field remains questionable. In opposition to the “rigorous certification or licensing systems” (295) used within established professions such as law, medicine, or engineering, STC’s certification is not based upon assessing competency via examination, but decided by reviewing work portfolios. Without established standards of practice, a body of knowledge, or some such other formal conventions, there is no standard to which practitioners are held or against which competency may be measured; without such benchmarks, a certification system’s legitimacy is arguably unfounded, less credible and, ultimately, unrecognizably prestigious.



The same may be said regarding the accreditation of degree programs, yet another hallmark of a mature profession influential to market performance. Thus far, technical communication has “made little progress in implementing credible systems of assessment, external review, and accreditation of academic programs” (Malone 296). Moreover, the field is incapable of doing so without first developing a “process of codification and certification” (Malone 299). Without frameworks in place which preserve the integrity of academic programs and ensure some semblance of standardized procedures and competent graduates, technical communication will continue experiencing challenging market conditions. Davis provides a good example of the deficit associated with academic programs and disciplinary approaches lacking such a foundational basis. When technical communication programs opened within existing departments, research efforts were often molded according to the standards espoused by the discipline to which faculty now “belonged.” Without formal standards capable of guiding instruction, technique, or theoretical basis, consistency becomes nearly unfeasible. What results is discordancy among not only programs themselves, but between the field at large. According to Davis, technical communication does a poor job of understanding and drawing upon what good research has been produced within the field, while academic programs are very often not reflective of current theories of professionalism. Without institutionalization of the field’s formal knowledge, in the form of accreditation of academic programs, the field will remain incapable of ensuring graduates are of a consistent standard, or of instilling confidence in hiring employer’s regarding those graduates’ capabilities or expertise.

According to Malone, the most effectual accreditation effort has been CPTSC’s program review service, which “put[s] an interested academic program in touch with willing and qualified

external reviewers” (296). This initiative, however, like STC’s certification system, does not function as the established professional element it’s meant to emulate. Accreditation is meant to assure an academic program’s standing according to its ability to meet specific quality standards; it is related to program assessment and is employed in measuring student achievement of specific, institutionalized knowledge. The CPTSC service, however, does not “compare or rank programs” (297), nor does it “establish certification for programs or their graduates” (297). Instead, reviews are meant for internal usage, their results intended to assist in the development of “strong programs in technical and scientific communication” (297). Further disconcerting are the requirements against which the external review makes evaluations; rather than “established quality standards for programs of its kind” (296), evaluations are calculated according to requirements provided by the program itself. The extent of use, then, seems to be limited to a given program’s satisfaction of its own objectives, as observed by an impartial party, rather than an evaluation of its performance which positions it amid some systemic ranking of competency.

Further complicating technical communication’s effective market position is the field’s legal recognition. As yet, the most relevant governmental acknowledgement of the field is the inclusion of “Technical Writer” within the 2010 edition of *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. As touted by a news release issued by STC following the event, the addition was noteworthy because of the distinction signified by separating technical writing from other forms of writing. STC claimed that the separation was a representative of the government “acknowledging that technical writing had different requirements than other types of writing” (Malone 299), celebrating the inclusion due to a belief that it endowed communicators an “authoritative evidence to use in discussions with employers about the status of their profession” (Malone 299).

Though the recognition is indeed indicative of a sort of professional gain, the inclusion is not nearly sufficient for a field with professional aspirations. The fact that it was not added until 2010 aside, the listed position of “Technical Writer” does not, in fact, reflect the more-inclusive title of “Technical Communicator” beneath which the field hopes to operate. In using that occupational title, this legal recognition not only ignores technical communication’s decision to shed what they saw as an outdated title—but also, again, limits the scope of abilities to one basic skill: technical writing. In reality, technical writing is but one function performed by the technical communicator in the course of her/his professional activities. Choosing to focus on, list—and thus, legitimize—that sole skill narrows the field’s professional reach, confining its authority to a smaller sphere and limiting the reach of its expertise and coinciding claim to status.

### Socio-political Factors

When considering socio-political factors of professionalization and their relationship to the acquisition of power and status, the field’s historically contentious struggle for prestige may be indicative of its poor standing. Technical communication suffers from an inability to establish itself and its practice as recognizably possessing a scarce expertise, a type of which society sees as having a specific need for. These socio-political elements of professionalization, at the most fundamental level, make it “necessary for the profession to establish formal education programs” (357). Although such establishment does certainly benefit the profession to this end, such programs are often not sufficient to enable systems of certification, nor to have these certifications honored by the public or the government. With that said, it becomes further important that practitioners in the field are “able to influence the design of academic curricula

and course content” (358). Additionally, the profession must find success “in fostering the perception that that its standards and codes are maintained for the good of society” (358), often accomplished via the establishment of professional organizations which function to unify the profession, as well as to represent it to society, to the government and to members of the profession. It is also necessary that they implement frameworks intended to limit the number of individuals qualified to provide their services, through the profession’s ability to control their credentialing procedures.

#### Formal Education Programs

Thus, the first socio-political factor of professionalization involves technical communication’s lack of formal academic programs; noted as “a powerful factor in establishing the social status of a field” (Savage 366), formal academic programs often form the basis of professional expertise and is fundamental to achieving “the professional privileges of autonomy and high status” (Savage 366). In the case of technical communication, the establishment of formal education programs—the precedent for accreditation—has been impeded by one primary difficulty: the division between academy and industry. In their 2012 study, researchers Kline and Barker examined the manner in which a technical communication professional consciousness could enable the growth of professional identity. Based in prior research examining academy and practitioner community, they sought to prove the hypothesis “that effective collaboration among the academic and practitioner communities will improve professionalism through better research, better education, and a more comprehensive body of knowledge” (33). According to their findings, the “primary difficulty that most scholars find in defining our profession and achieving

professional status is that technical communication exists as both a field of practice and a field of academic study” (33). The main hindrance to professionalization—or, in our case, to the establishment of formal education programs—is again the division between academy and industry, which comes as a result of certain cultural differences between practitioners and academics. Kline and Barker identify seven major areas of concern, representative of the cultural gap between the two: methods of problem solving and conflicting ideas concerning the classification of research, in addition to “theory versus practice; industry settings versus academic settings; and business versus academic discourse styles; as well as opposing views on employment structures; collaboration strategies; and views of power, philosophies, and trust” (33). The scholars concluded that, pending resolution of such lines of division, these discrepancies will only “continue to divide the profession” (34). Thus, in accordance with their study, Kline and Barker conclude “that professionalism in technical communication depends on bridging the gap between academics and practitioners” (34).

In a similar vein, Coppola’s 2010 study also acknowledges the necessity of “an academic-practitioner partnership” (11), which, in this case, was examined as it relates to the establishment of technical communication’s body of knowledge. This article is a chronicle of STC’s BOK initiative, communicating key milestones in the organization’s development process occurring between 2007 and 2009. According to Coppola, the key challenges involved in both defining technical communication’s BOK, as well as in developing a framework for its compilation, are “The divergence between academics and practitioners, the lack of a coherent knowledge approach within the academy and the workplace, and the desire for unity among shareholders” (11). Professionalization, she argues, is a process contingent on the profession’s

ability to build “a unified body of knowledge, or the complete set of terms, and activities that make up a professional domain” (12); attaining such, however, “requires that academics and practitioners develop a shared understanding of theory, research, and practice” (12). This is where, Coppola contends, technical communication defaults. Without establishing protocols regarding a knowledge approach, efforts have been divided, with “too much research . . . driven by individual interests and inclination rather than by some overarching initiative” (23); as such, the field suffers from academic research found to be of little value by practitioners, who view academics as lacking the pragmatic industry experience necessary to the production of sound, useful research. Meanwhile, academics often opine that industry members lack awareness of the published research, concluding that it will not, in any way, serve their professional purposes. Additionally, the want for unity among shareholders finds its cause in the field’s internal divisions, often stemming from varied views on the route to professionalization—as well as what current practitioners are willing to endure so as to attain it. As Savage contends,

Professionalization is bound to have its undesirable costs for practitioners who lack formal training, for university programs and academics that fail to recognize the real of professional education and research, and for professional organizations that do not develop critical awareness of how professionalization actually occurs and accept the necessity of effective political work to that end. (162)

In short, without consensus between industry and pedagogy, professionalization efforts are unfounded and, essentially, wholly unfruitful. As Coppola concludes, not all communicators partake of a similar vision; rather, technical communicators do not “have a unified view of professionalization. Nor do all professionals have the same degree of social vision” (4).

In addition to the establishment of formal education programs, Savage notes the necessity of curriculum and course content being highly influenced according to industry practitioners. However, in the case of technical communication, the split between academics and industry may have hampered any hopes of such mutual efforts. He mentions this instance of internal division as regarding research, stating that “much of the research being conducted in technical communication is either of no practical value or is inaccessible to practitioners” (368). Citing Hayhoe’s 1997 editorial, Savage contends that, because practitioners view research as “too often conducted in an ivory tower” (Hayhoe 617), outside the realm of those to whom it should—ideally—relate to and be used by, academics cannot expect industry to “accept the academic perspective of what should constitute technical communication knowledge” (368). Essentially, Savage contends that many practitioners demonstrate no awareness of either research being currently conducted, or what resources are available at their disposal; concordantly, the field’s formulation of a sound research agenda has been entirely encumbered by the academy’s inability to produce for communicators any form of unifying vision. Savage goes on to cite a lack of unified vision concerning “a common body of knowledge” (369) as espoused by academics and practitioners, claiming that the two subscribe to entirely different knowledge bases, often a consequence of the vastly different backgrounds often associated with the practitioner, as opposed to the academic. As he explains, “relatively few academics have extensive industry experience on which to base their teaching and even fewer hold degrees specifically in technical communication” (369). Moreover, practitioners frequently lack a formal education in the field and have instead “derived the knowledge they use in their work from experience or job-based training” (370).

### Limiting the Number of Qualified Practitioners

A major aspect of the socio-political factors of professionalization entails the profession's ability to limit the number of qualified individuals, through the field's control of credentialing procedures. This represents an attempt to further restrict access to the occupation, by way of limiting opportunities to a specific group of practitioners.

### Professional Unity and Representation

Returning to claims of expertise, we are reminded of the significant role that professional ethics fulfills as it concerns societal acceptance of the profession itself. If socio-political factors of professionalization entail establishing the social status of a field, then professional ethics are a large part of creating a professional identity. As mentioned previously, expert knowledge necessarily entails societal acknowledgement of the legitimacy of that expertise. As Savage asserts, "because laypeople could not understand the specialized knowledge of the expert, acquired only through long and demanding study and practice" (366), the professions were required to develop a guiding set of ethics, intended to ensure that they had society's best interest at heart—and were not "simply self-serving in its efforts to control the market for its services" (Savage 366), but rather "determined to distinguish itself from unauthorized practitioners whose unprincipled or unregulated practice could actually do harm" (Savage 366). Faber's study of professional identity and the professional status of technical communication provides a good foundation for ethical discussions. According to his research, development of a professional ethical awareness is crucial to the formation of professional identity, as it is "a key component of the professional's occupationally derived self-image and directly informs the professional's



work-related practices” (314). Because professionals enjoy certain privileges which necessitate they—in return—“give back” to society, in a sense, professional ethics are the means by which a profession creates a mutually-beneficial relationship with the public at large. As Faber observes,

Professionals enjoy relatively high economic and social status within their local and national cultures, and they are viewed as knowledge experts and as high-profile community members. Thus, professionals’ ethics require that they perpetuate the social conditions that grant their professional community status and power. That is, professionals are ethically obliged to maintain their occupational distinctiveness and the social and economic power that comes from this elitism. (315)

Professional ethics, then, directly influence a practitioner’s sense of identity, both as an individual and as a member of the larger professional community. Such established formalities not only function as a token of goodwill to society—ensuring that they afford not only the professional status and authority, but also protect the public’s wellbeing—but also as a guide to professional behavior and a means of measuring, as well. With an established set of ethical guidelines, the profession ensures that practitioner behavior falls within formal appropriate guidelines, while providing practitioners a guiding code by which their professional behavior should be modeled. Further, Faber concludes that this ethical responsibility motivates professionals “to interact with people outside the profession (e.g., clients, general public) in a manner that continually promotes and ensures the social and occupational dominance of their occupation” (315-316).

Ethical guidelines may also be a strong motivating factor in the profession's commitment to social activism, public relations and the marketing of their preferred professional identity. In the realm of technical communication, the closest we have come to such establishment is demonstrated by STC's set of ethical principles. Developed in 1998, the principles are organized according to six dimensions of ethical behavior: legality, honesty, confidentiality, professionalism and fairness (Malone, 2011). Although established, and despite the importance of ethical principles to a profession's social status, this set of principles does not fulfill its need; in fact, to date, "STC does not monitor, enforce, or even aggressively promote adherence to these principles" (Malone 292). Thus, while arguably the field's most prominent and well-established professional organization, STC's lax ethical standards do not constitute the sort of formality desired by society, nor do they provide assurance of practitioner behavior demonstrative of a certain standing, nor provide regulatory functions for practitioners themselves.

Now, upon considering the above-mentioned issues in their totality, we arrive—again—at a standstill, when considering the general feeling amongst communicators that their work is misunderstood, their value contributions unacknowledged. In terms of socio-political factors and technical communication, Savage points to a wanting means "for defining and measuring the value from technical communication work that is added to documented products" (367) and the field's lack of "the kind of categorical specificity that typifies most professions" (367). In order to establish a profession's social status, ambiguity regarding their work, their position, or their value added, must be established, identifiable and accepted by the general public. As Jablonski asserts, technical communication may indeed resist "traditional categorization as labor or

profession” (5); often seen as spanning several disciplines, the field’s professional identity may be complicated by an intricate epistemology not easily communicated in terms of concrete, formalized knowledge. Without a semblance of some such clear-cut particularity, “communicators will find it difficult to explain to those who use, or might use, their services, exactly what specialized knowledge they have to offer” (Savage 367). This fact, however, only makes resolution of professional ambiguity all the more crucial. In order to elevate the field’s professional status, Jablonski advocates the development of certain career competencies, or “personal knowledge that extends beyond the individual’s employment relationship with a given company and has the potential to affect other institutions” (25). If technical communication hopes to provide the public with clarity as it involves the professional field, then it must find a way to link its activities and practitioner roles with broader, more recognizable entities. As Jablonski concludes, “one of the keys to increasing the status of technical communication as a field lies in our ability to articulate our work in relation to more valued spheres of activity” (38). Savage echoes this sentiment, stating that the field’s lack of a means to define and measure the value of its work “is increasingly seen as a significant reason for lack of understanding and respect for technical writers” (367). Given that communicators “commonly complain that their work is not respected or valued” (366), it would seem apparent that such professional obscurity pointedly lends to—if not causes—the permanence of such conditions.

Finally, a discussion of the socio-political factors of professionalization—with their interest in shaping perception and garnering unity among technical communicators—cannot be concluded with considering the role of professional organizations. All of the previously mentioned factors—formal education programs, credentialing procedures, ethical guidelines and

professional ambiguity—inherently involve the professional organization. In terms of establishing the social status of the field, there is perhaps no characteristic more fundamental to the fulfillment of the socio-political factors of professionalization. Physiologic representations of the activities through which occupational groups pursue status of profession, professional organizations are meant to cultivate the occupation, “unify the practice and represent the profession” (Malone 287). Aside from STC’s unsatisfactory ethical guidelines discussed above, the field’s professional associations are often cited as inadequate in managing the profession itself. As Malone first identifies, organizations are simply too numerous “to pose a unified front in the struggle for professionalization” (288); as he asserts, “cooperation, if not consolidation, is [a] necessary” (288) first step toward professional progress. As has been recognized and expounded upon in the past, organizational mergers are wholly beneficial, as a “splintering of members” (289) will only negate the advantages “in collaboration and eventual unification of forces” (289).

Furthermore, the field’s current organizations have “virtually no power to enforce standards or control membership” (Savage 371) and lack the kind of intangible authority exercised by professional associations in discussions of professionalism. Rather than existence as a set of regulations, enforced by some external agency, organizational authority “involves the social effect of expertise to appropriate to itself a particular discourse, the discourse that characterizes a profession and in terms of which professionals can easily recognize a colleague and expose an imposter” (Savage 371). Said another way, the professional organization must provide what Savage terms a “unified self-perception” (371), or unifying ideology, under and within which practitioners and academics function, and upon which society bases their

perceptions. To discount the magnitude of professional identity development to professionalization would be a grave mistake; as Savage presumes, “Without achieving this goal, it is unlikely that the field can ever realize the advantages of governing itself; it is unlikely that it can truly function as a profession and become recognized socially and politically” (371).

### Ideological Factors

Ideological factors of professionalization involve the development of professional identity, or professional consciousness. Described by Kline and Barker as “the collective, long-term, professional identity assumed by a group that defines the scope of a lifetime career” (33), the development of a professional consciousness requires “joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire” (33)—efforts identical to those concerning the formation of professional identity. Moreover, as it functions “to define an exclusive culture within which a practitioner can find lifelong fulfillment, advancement, rewards, and recognition” (33), such development also require the profession’s attainment of a level of status capable of inferring such prestige upon the profession itself. Thus, an established professional identity constitutes ideological professional fulfillment and is, furthermore, concerned with the same characteristics of professionalization from which “professional consciousness cannot be separated” (Savage 372): a common body of knowledge and common set of skills or knowledge; a unifying ethos, often accompanied by development of a historical professional identity; the development of principles and standards upon which differentiation from other groups may be based; the establishment of professional organizations which enable members to “establish themselves in relation to the larger, national culture, as well as other cultural groups with which they must compete for legitimacy,

recognition, and market position” (Savage 359); and the existence of opportunities for long-term careers in the field. Moreover, these same issues are representative of the preconditions which must be met so as to enable eventual establishment of a professional identity.

Technical communication’s development of an established professional consciousness, or professional identity, remains arguably unrealized, due to a number of factors which affect the occupation’s fulfillment. There remains dispute over the field’s common body of knowledge, from which expert knowledge is drawn, in addition to a lack of any unifying principles or standards. Such failings prevent the technical communicator from developing an established professional identity—and such an absence completely prevents the field’s rise to professional status within a society in which “expertise and professional stature are not conferred by society on specialized practitioners whose efforts are not regarded as having high social value” (Savage 372). Ideological factors, as they concern the development of professional consciousness and, ultimately, professional identity, hinge upon an understanding of their relation to professional knowledge, the existence of a historical perspective and the role of professional organizations. Taken together, these three considerations form the basis upon which professional consciousness is constructed; in their own right, each aspect corresponds to a specific condition of professional identity and contributes toward the fulfillment of ideological factors in the professionalization equation.

#### Professional Knowledge and the Construction of Professional Consciousness

As deduced by Savage, establishing a common body of knowledge is fundamentally recognized as essential to an occupation’s rise to professional status; not as well known,

however, is that such “professional knowledge is also implicated in the construction of professional consciousness” (373). Borrowing from a citation of Collins, Savage quotes:

Knowledge systems function primarily as prestigious ideological bases in order to give professionals high occupational status honor . . . Those who have the knowledge base have also the privilege of being in contact with a secular higher world of ideas that gives people a serene capacity that is the real background for the honors given to them. (qtd. Savage 3)

Thus, perceiving the theological foundation in one’s capacity as a professional may be implemented, by an individual, within their formation of self-identity. The profession’s BOK, set of common skills and knowledge, as well as principles and standards, may function beyond its use as the basis upon which specialized expertise is claimed, going on to be later projected upon and within the professional’s sense of self; it may, in fact, be drawn upon in the formulation of professional identity, used to further distinguish the professional from external groups. As Savage foretells, technical communication’s inability to establish such solidified, common expertise, may be to blame in terms of perceived low status, as “an attitude prevails that our field has no content, no ‘higher world of ideas’” (373). Frequently, this theoretical underpinning is replaced with subject matter knowledge—which, though “often perceived as most relevant to technical communicators . . . necessarily makes the communicator subordinate to engineers and other subject matter experts” (373). Jeyaraj further illustrates the power differentials that can exist within technical writing situations, stemming from the tendency to be complicit in others’ views of the technical communicator’s lesser-than role. As he states,

the dominant epistemology that organizes the status and functioning of technical writers may include patterns of discursive practices that disempower and marginalize technical writers, despite the plurality of various technical writing situations and the complexity of subject matter experts' subjectivity. Such practices occur regularly across different discursive situations. (14)

When technical communicators have no common knowledge base from which to draw their expertise—and, further, do not have this expertise acknowledged by society—they are often reduced to performing menial tasks, unreflective of the communicator's entire breadth of knowledge. This instance not only devalues the particular communicator, but may in turn project this devaluation upon the profession. Without a professional knowledge conducive to the construction of professional consciousness, communicators often accept this marginalized role, submitting to their subjected position.

An insufficient professional knowledge base thus weakens a profession's ideological development, preventing professional consciousness construction through removing a key element through which it is first formed. But could it possibly be a severe hindrance to technical communication's professionalization project? According to Faber, the answer is yes. While the field has expressed professionalization aspirations for some time, its success has been impeded because "these discussions about professional communication have progressed largely without developing a robust and theoretically sound framework" (307). Professional status can only be achieved through endeavoring to "carefully define what is professional about professional communication and how professional communication is distinguished from other forms of workplace writing" (307). According to Faber, technical communication must engage in such a



critical discussion because of the “need to differentiate the various social, contextual, and discursive fields that make up this subject” (308). Thus, the implication is that professional identity construction and establishment of the field’s BOK are reciprocal processes, each necessary to—and a component of—the other. According to Davis and Hart, establishing a common body of knowledge cannot be extracted from the professionalizing project because of its relationship to individual practitioners. Again, the BOK is likened to a professional identity construction tool, required because

New practitioners need to see their professional development pathways spelled out, along with concomitant educational/training opportunities. Veteran practitioners need a means for assessing their progress and determining what additional training they may need . . . And executives need a place to find out what it is that TCers can do for their company. (qtd. in Coppola *Body of Knowledge* 15)

Professional knowledge, then, functions not only in practitioner professional identity construction, but is implicated in external perception of professional identity, as well. Technical communication’s established BOK not only guides practitioner behavior and forms the basis upon which community is built, but also clarifies and maximizes professional value to employers.

In her study of mechanical engineering students’ design processes, Dannels examined the formation of professional identity as experienced within the technical classroom context.

Working on the notion that knowledge construction within technical and scientific disciplines

comes as a result of product design sequences centered in the complex “professional-customer relationship,” (8), this study posits the expertise—and thus the necessary instruction—of these disciplines as a “multifaceted, interactive, and interdisciplinary” (8) effort. Much like technical communication, the subjective nature of such professional realms often fuels demand for the sort of specificity codification of expert knowledge is able to offer; in contrast, an absence of such established knowledge may lead to inconsistency amongst professionals, due to the presence of “situated, context-based complications” (8). As shown by her results, it is plausible that professional identity construction within an academic environment may not be complimentary to students’ eventual professional activities. Using a case-study approach, Dannels examined and identified factors found to influence technical students’ design sequence and the manner in which such influences impact professional identity construction. Daniels’ results indicated that, though students “may have learned how to be professional in theory . . . they did not translate that theory to actual design practices in the classroom” (25); instead, the “academic context within which these students learned . . . was perceived to be distinctly different from the professional contexts to which they aspired” (25). As a consequence of such variance, Dannels concluded that “students in technical disciplines could face multilayered professional identities” (28). What this study indicates is the manner in which professional knowledge is used in the creation of professional identity; furthermore, it suggests how—when a field lacks a coherent knowledge approach—the resulting variability inevitably has severe consequences for students’ success in the professional realm. As a site of professional development, the classroom constitutes an environment in which a profession is able to mold individuals, achieving stability through socialization of students. Moreover, classrooms “are sites for learning situated

disciplinary standards and practices” (7); it is crucial, therefore, that an individuals’ academic experience reflect and prepare them for the workplace—achieved through the application of universal standards, a common body of knowledge and established standards—all of which the sphere of technical communication currently lacks.

Kynell and Tebeaux elaborate on the manner in which a dichotomy between the academy and the workplace has hindered technical communicators’ ability to establish a professional identity, through the field’s inability to solidify professional knowledge in a way that it lends itself to professional consciousness construction. As they claim, “technical communication as a discipline pursues theory, whereas technical communication in the work places applies theory and knowledge” (138). Kynell and Tebeaux attribute this disjunction as resulting from the fact that “the goals and the reward systems for those in the academy and those in the profession differ” (138). While academics must conduct research in exchange for the rewards of tenure and promotion, practitioners find success through pragmatic applications of their expertise within their specific work environments; though much of this research has been recognized within the academy, its relevancy to professional activities is often questioned, as theoretical work does not always satisfy the needs of practitioners. Finding a compromise between these two spheres is a necessary first step in having the ability to tailor professional knowledge toward a preferred professional identity; without coherence of approach, or commonality of expert skills, technical communicators will continue to fall short in terms of ideological factors of professionalism.

## Historical Perspectives and Emergent Professional Identity and Legitimacy

Parker's assertion that "a mature self-knowledge is impossible without knowing our history" (42) speaks to the importance of a professional historical narrative in the construction of a comprehensive self- and professional identity. Awareness of and interaction with a historical perspective is a critical component of the professionalization project, due to its association with the "emergence of professional consciousness and the achievement of legitimacy for the profession" (Savage 374). Knowing one's professional history can help ensure that a practitioner's "talent is derived from a long history of knowledge, beliefs, values, and instrumental practices passed down through our culture by means of formal education" (Savage 374). The credibility this notion lends to the profession is notable, but so too is the esteem it offers practitioners when considering the value and importance of their work. As concluded by Brockman, "Having a historical perspective in technical communication can help to create a better sense of self-identity and tradition" (2). Often, they are useful due to their ability to "organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (Savage 374), valued for providing a sort of context within which practitioners may perceive themselves, their work and their profession in its entirety.

The significance of characteristics identified by Pringle and Williams, then, cannot be ignored. A field that, "for most of its history . . . existed without any proper name" (362), technical communication may thus find compiling such a historical narrative particularly challenging. Further, what history has been handed down is not exactly conducive to efforts aimed at building a professional prestige. For example, technical communication has been noted as being "clearly a by-product of print technology and literacy" (362); it emerged as a higher

field of study only once engineers and scientists discovered a need for the ability to convey information to their audiences; and early writers were hired by scientists solely “because they themselves didn’t care for what they perceived as the mundane task of documenting their early work” (363). Even the birth of the profession has been historically notated as emerging only due to the “sheer pace of technological innovation” (363). In other words, the field may indeed have existed well before its recognition, but such a story has yet to be told; what history is conveyed describes a less-than prestigious emergence, frequently cites early practitioners marginalized positions and even locates its very origin to be one stemming solely from the needs of more competent, more valuable professionals, who would rather hire someone else to perform activities that they themselves considered to be beneath them.

Equally disconcerting is technical communication’s perceived dismissal of the value such a historical perspective may have in the present day. As conveyed by Malone, “Recent discussions about professionalization of technical communication have shown little awareness of . . . early history” (286) and, when such discussion is included within scholarly work at all, “they usually limit their review to post-1970 or even post-1980 scholarship” (286). In terms of professionalization discussions, technical communication would most certainly benefit from having a historical awareness, as “Many of the professionalization issues that we are discussing and pursuing today find their genesis—or at least have antecedents—in the work of . . . pioneers” (286).

## Organizations and Professional Identity (Re) Negotiation

As stated by Savage, technical communication's professional identity "continues to be negotiated and redefined through the various professional organizations we now have" (373). As a process, Siegrist asserts that professionalization "refers to the development of a specific type of collective consciousness and organization" (qtd. in Savage 371), responsibilities with which professional organizations are typically charged. These formal associations are responsible for acting as the public face of the profession, tasked with shaping this perception in their favor, for mobilizing and inciting a professional community and for constituting a forum in which professional goals are identified, common causes espoused and discrepancies resolved. Ideally, it is through the activities of such groups that a profession's common body of knowledge is discussed and formalized, legal recognition pursued and credentialing procedures codified and authorized. Problematic to such ends is what Savage refers to as a "multiplicity" (373) of organizations, which "complicates the notion of identity and the notion of ideological awareness in the range of interests, values, and constructions of knowledge represented in each organization" (373). That there are several organizations in existence creates challenges for any collective effort, but variability amongst professional agendas only further compounds these issues; not only are efforts of professional interest splintered amongst competing groups, but is further fractured by the lack any unifying vision.

Coppola identifies the field's obstacles to professionalization, naming predicaments such as "internal divisions, a lack of social knowledge, and the absence of commitment to social activism" (4)—all of which point to a lack of unified vision regarding professionalization and the steps taken to achieve it. Further, these identity issues also involve the communicator's need for

the ability to apply practical applications of their work, to develop a business understanding of their work environment, as well as to act as public advocates for the betterment of their field. An absence of social knowledge, described as “tacit consensus about moral values, strategic goals, and practices that suggest preferable actions in new situations” (4), is one indicator of professional organizations’ insufficiency. Often implicated as “the key to active participation and professional status in organizations” (4), defining social knowledge is the responsibility of those organizations hoping to foster public perception and to further growth of the profession.

Ultimately, professional organizations set out to not only progress the occupation through organizational activities, but to cultivate member identities through socialization practices and promote participation within the professional enterprise. As Coppola contends, “If we are to support professionalization . . . students need to learn how to be public advocates, working with media, generating public interest, building support, and creating political consensus for their occupational status on local, state, and national levels” (4). However, several studies have shown that this level of active participation has not yet been attained. Coppola illustrates this point, citing examples such as an examination undertaken by Cook in which doctoral graduates were found to lack “the ability to describe practical applications of their work and a business understanding of the organization they were visiting” (4); a study by Sullivan, Martin and Anderson indicating communicators new to the profession “often lack social knowledge” (4), as well as professional status within their work environments; and a study of students’ use of virtual collaboration for social tasks, conducted by Paretti, McNair and Holloway-Attaway, whose findings suggest students “were not able to transfer those skills to establish social presence and shared goals in a professional distributed work environment” (4). As these results indicate,

technical communicators do not demonstrate behaviors consistent with professional goals of active participation, seeming instead to lack a sense of some unifying vision beneath which to function and the capacity for envisioning themselves in relation to an overarching ideology. Further evidence of professional organizations failings, these missing ideological elements of the profession contribute greatly to the field's wanting professional identity and its unsuccessful professionalization project.

Kline and Barker's study found a community of practice approach conducive to the successful formation of professional consciousness. Researchers found that "properly structured collaboration can nurture a community where the specific professional identity of . . . [the individual] is greatly reduced in favor of the negotiated identity of being a community member working toward mutual goals" (33). Using a model based on the three dimensions of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, Kline and Barker sought to examine the process involved with the establishment of a community of practice and how this may be used in the formation of professional consciousness. When implemented in trials involving the two distinct realms of technical communication's academics and practitioners, this approach was found to illustrate "how professional consciousness can grow through engagement, sharing of technologies and tools, and project membership" (35). In constructing a community of practice identity, Kline and Barker contend that the field will simultaneously progress professionalization efforts by initiating the formation of professional consciousness, while the three dimensions of community enable the means with which to "identify and understand the kinds of activities engendered through membership in a community of practice, that lead to professionalism" (35). As ideological aspects of professionalism concern reaching conclusions regarding pertinent



professional interests and building consensus, the professional organization is the most appropriate forum in which such discussion, decision and execution may occur. Divergent perceptions of identity evidence an absence of mobilization efficiency, a condition which indicates the inadequacy of technical communication professional organizations. Without organizations capable of defining and communicating professional identity, promoting adherence through effective socialization of members and, later, functioning as sites in which this identity may be renegotiated as needed, an established professional identity remains unlikely. Such an organizing entity is likely necessary in achieving the unanimity to resolve the field's internal divisions and promote a unifying vision. Should compromise remain elusive, technical communication's professionalization efforts will be rendered futile by its incapacity to deliver the clout that collectivity provides.

After reviewing the literature concerning the importance of an established professional identity, I see a theme emerging involving its significance to the professional status of a given occupational group. Such conclusions give rise to the idea that professional identity is crucial to the professionalization process of technical communication, as it forms the means by which practitioners define themselves, society perceives the field and legitimacy is granted toward the achievement of market closure. Technical communication is lacking such identifiability and this absence not only precludes professionalization attempts, but has also led to the emergence of several additional complicating factors. In order to move forward in the professionalization process, the field must work to define its identity and to have this identity recognized as such by the outside world. Through the application of occupational branding as a framework for the establishment of a technical communicator professional identity, the process becomes an

important agent of legitimation and identifiability. This achievement would enable practitioners to present a unified front which communicates its ideal image to society, while also instilling the association between this ideal image and the technical communication line of work.

### **CHAPTER THREE: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONAL STATUS**

An established professional identity is a necessary prerequisite for any occupational group with aspirations of achieving professional status, due to its relationship with market identifiability and performance, as well as social and cultural legitimacy. As discussed previously, models of market and professional closure may not—on their own—be sufficient to warrant professional claims within the current environment. Professional projects must now include more advanced efforts involving building consensus for the societal recognition of expert knowledge and developing a culture of using one's service; these initiatives aim to further claims of professional status on the basis of occupational and market closure to include processes of social closure, as well as attainment of social and cultural legitimacy. The following discussion details the relationship between an occupation's established identity and its professional status and prestige. It demonstrates the manner in which professional identity determines the profession's perceived prestige through contributing to its identifiability, as well as its social and cultural legitimacy. After detailing theories regarding professional identity construction, it will then demonstrate the manner in which occupational branding may function as an agent of visibility and legitimation.

Through viewing the field's professionalization project with an occupational branding lens, a resultant professional project would entail elements such as building a professional brand, defining the profession's value and generating public awareness of information the profession finds useful to convey, all of which are recognized as activities affording professionalization efforts great value. Such strategic collective identity work is not merely supplementary, but is now seen as a necessary inclusion to an occupational group's professionalization project, upon

consideration of the current work environment and the weakened professional claim to expert knowledge. As explained by Edgar,

any understanding of professional practice and values must take account of the embeddedness of professionals within a broader cultural context. It may be suggested that the acceptance of the authority of professional knowledge is a hard won cultural and political achievement, and one that is threatened in contemporary society. (199)

Because the professional status of any group is dependent upon not only market characteristics, but concerns socio-political and ideological aspects as well, an established professional identity is most effective when construction is directed toward achieving the various types of closure described by variant professionalism approaches. The establishment of a technical communicator's professional identity constitutes the primary milestone in the realization of the field's professional status. Moreover, it is the first step in earning societal recognition of that professional status—which may be fully realized with the assistance of the processes of occupational branding and a coinciding institutionalization of the technical communicator's position. These processes not only function as agents of legitimation, but also lend themselves to eventual institutionalization of the practitioner's position and the field of technical communication itself.

### Identity and Prestige

An occupation's rise to professional status is contingent upon its ability to not only develop able practitioners, capable of providing a service viewed as beneficial to society, but

also upon social perception of such. Hill describes an occupation's attainment of professional status as significant due to its use "to express the existence of a social fabric linking occupation members" (30). An ideal-type notion of the profession is built through a twofold process of observation and consensus; it functions as not only the occupation's acknowledged identity, purpose and value, but also as the means by which individual practitioners develop a shared sense of identity amongst individuals and within the profession, at large. Thus, the formation of this association amongst members is reliant on the development of a shared professional identity, one which Hill contends "becomes intimately bound up with self-identity and institutional forms develop to conserve the meaning system and the profession's exclusive control over it" (35).

Current research and theory denotes establishment of a professional identity as the primary step in any occupational group's professionalization process. This shared, collective sense of being is a necessary precursor to the professional milestones represented by the aforementioned elements of a mature profession, as consensus amongst stakeholders necessarily precedes any standardization implementation and unanimity, by definition, cannot be reached without a unifying element which enables collective organization.

Professional status is equivalent to professional prestige, denoting the individual as a high-ranking member of a community and the profession as appealing due to its monetary reward and societal acceptance of the high valuation of services offered. Establishment of professional identity contributes to an occupation's professional status, enabling identifiability, cultural and social legitimization. If expertise and professionalism are distinguishable only due to the latter's "quest for status" (Bishop 37), then processes which determine legitimacy and exclusivity are similarly determinate in professional prestige. As Bishop concludes, "In a society

that encourages competitive self-interest, what one appears to be is of importance, not what one actually is” (37).

### Identity as Identifiability

Thus, professional status is highly dependent on an occupation’s ability to produce individual practitioners capable of behaving in a way that is reflective of the profession as a whole. As described by Bishop, “Aspiring professionals by a process of anticipatory socialization internalize the norms and values of the group to which they aspire” (39).

Professionals’ demonstration of behaviors and activities consistent with expectations of their professional identity enable the development of the profession’s public standing, giving credence to reliability through uniformity of identity. This sort of stability facilitates identifiability, a key component of professional status.

Khalili, Hall and DeLuca explain this socialization as the tendency of professions “to create their own silos to ensure its members develop common experiences, norms, approaches to problem-solving and language for professional tools” (93). This process, they claim, is implemented in the hope that the “profession is positioned to be in competition with others as a means of improving their social status as a profession” (93). Authority and status on the basis of “professional knowledge and expertise, and practicing based on gained competences” (93) is said to contribute toward professional autonomy—“a central part of the professionalization process in which professions could differentiate themselves from nonprofessional occupations” (93) and thus increase their social standing and recognizable presence. The researchers name a shared professional identity as the means through which “individuals come to develop a common sense

of understanding and expertise, [and] common ways of perceiving problems and possible solutions” (94), one that is “(re)produced through occupational/professional socialization . . . and professional membership deemed necessary for creating a shared professional culture” (94).

Liu, Lam and Loi associate this normalizing aspect of the professions as stemming from social identity theory, which asserts individuals’ tendency to create self-definitions on the basis of their membership within a certain group. This classification allows for such classification to define oneself “relative to others in terms of the group” (791), a characteristic which assists in individuals’ desire for self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction. These two motivating group identification factors not only enhance self-esteem by fulfilling the “desire to think of themselves in a positive light” (791), but also “reduce individuals’ sense of uncertainty because group identification tells us who they are and how to perceive and behave in their social environment” (791). In their study of professionals’ development of organizational identification and organizational prestige, the researchers found that “organizational prestige and organization identification are positively related” (792); when they perceive their organization to be prestigious, professionals are more likely to develop a strong sense of organizational identification. Hence, an occupational group may have further motivation to establish their associated prestige, not only because of its benefit to the status of its practitioners, but also because of its ability to further instill a sense of professional identity within individual professionals. If their affiliated profession is perceived as being prestigious, professionals “will be very likely to use the group to define their identity, that is, their perceived oneness with the group” (792). In addition, attainment of a high professional status is further beneficial, enabling

individuals to have a “clear sense of who they are and how they should behave” (794), as such status “influences how people define themselves” (794).

Organizational prestige was further found to play an important role in self-conceptualization, as well as individuals’ perceived sense of respect and regard. These findings are important, as they denote the manner in which status influences self-definition:

When constantly serving as reference points, high-status professionals are more likely to perceive themselves as prototypes of their profession . . . a well-defined prototype provides them goals and purposes, and communicates standards of appropriate behaviors. By knowing more who they are and how to behave, a prototype can reduce uncertainty. (794)

Thus, professional status enables professionals to satisfy self-enhancement needs, while also lowering uncertainty and, ultimately, produces professionals who are certain of themselves and of their position within the larger profession. In order for an occupational group to enjoy the consequence of such status, the existence of an established professional identity is thus necessary. Not only will this identity provide confidence in one’s own abilities, but it will also instill such consistency within external perception, leading to higher professional status and prestige. In turn, “The higher status individuals have, the more they possess positive attributes that others admire, and the more they are prominent and influential in the eyes of others” (793), a circumstance which helps to ensure the group’s continued success with increased status.

If, as claimed by Abbott, “The central organizing reality of professional life is control of tasks” (84), then an established professional identity would enable identifiability through



sustaining a group's jurisdiction claims over their specific professional knowledge and associated work activities. This sort of identifiability "underpins a group's capacity to persuade others of exclusive competence" (Fincham 216), increasing professional status through designating their services and activities as belonging to the occupational group via their exclusive right to exercise such expert knowledge. As Tobias contends, professionalization "has close links with social movements and generally implies the establishment of some form of organizational framework through which this sense of common purpose may be expressed" (454). Professions and professionalism themselves are socially constructed statuses, based upon the ability to draw concrete boundaries of differentiation from other occupational groups. Herein lies the basis for the relationship between professional identity and professional status, as identifiability remains crucial to an occupational group's claims of professional status and eventual prestige.

### Identity as Legitimacy

Professionalism thus inherently involves the processes of market and professional closure, whereby an occupational group is able to achieve legitimacy through formal, legally-recognized sanctions. Such activity does not mark the eventual end of professionalization efforts; rather, once an occupational group has achieved this exclusivity, they are then able "to concentrate more fully on developing the service-oriented and performance-related aspects of their work" (137), resulting in development of the more advanced processes of professionalization: legitimation of expert knowledge through the development of specific forms of legitimacy. Baizerman concludes that this type of legitimation is a result of agency-based

practice, a classification which proposes “that professional expectation, status, and autonomy may matter within the public realm, sociologically, and in cultural meanings . . . sociologically, culturally, and politically” (191). Aside from creating meaning to the public, Baizerman contends that professionalism “means more sociologically where professional status denotes a different standing than an occupation” (189). In other words, professionalism equates to professional status only once an occupational group has found success in achieving social and cultural legitimacy.

Hill describes the relationship between a group’s professionalization project and their social standing, asserting that “An emergent profession depends on wider society for its independent definition and wider societal power groups for its support” (30). Efforts involving professionalization, which aim to secure professional status, cannot accomplish such strides without the involvement of wider society. Instead, a professionalization process “involves a transition to a new form of social institution dependent upon acceptance by society of its general social value” (30); in other words, professionalization hinges on a profession’s ability to establish its social and cultural legitimacy. Hill illuminates this point, stating that “‘established’ professions are in continuous process of interaction with society and their level of ‘establishment’ is a product of more general society’s values and legitimation” (31). Akin to the socialization of members described in the discussion of identity as identifiability, Hill likens the professional identity as a tool which satisfies the profession’s expectations of individual behavior: “The ‘profession’ expects an individual’s professional actions to reflect an inner-directed acceptance of the profession’s norms. The individual is related more to the total profession . . . than by functional relationship to other specialists” (31). In turn, “Status

differentiation is based on community rewards for ideal-type behavior” (31); or, as the professional behaves in accordance with established professional identity guidelines, fulfillment of this expectation—in regards to societal expectation—leads to increased legitimacy, and thus, increased status. Hill further illustrates this point, saying, “the profession depends for its viability on society’s perception of its mechanical solidarity—that relating to a single member of the profession, he will exemplify the total profession’s values, will have access to the profession’s valued stock of knowledge, and will not deviate from professionally-accepted behavior” (31).

Consequently, professional identity may be used as a tool through which the individual professional guides his or her own professional behavior. Through exemplifying this “ideal” professional, society grants the profession the necessary legitimacy to gain recognition and prestige. Because “the process of professionalization increasingly reifies the meaning system on which the profession is built and thus rigidifies it” (32), establishment of professional identity is capable of producing such legitimating effects.

Evetts associates a shared professional identity with a collective sense of experience, modes of understanding and level of expertise. She contends that the significance of this professional identity may be equated to the legitimacy it grants to those occupations to whom it is endowed. Because professionals are recognized as such due to assumption of their expert knowledge, and because clients must recognize professionals as being worthy of such trust, professional status involves mitigating risk and instilling consumer confidence in the execution of service. In this way, Evetts again conceptualizes professionalism “as a normative value in the socialization of new workers, in the preservation and predictability of normative social order in work and occupations, and in the maintenance and stability of a fragile normative order in state

and increasingly international markets” (137-138). Like Hill, Evetts likens professionalization as the means with which a professional group is capable of producing practitioners whose behavior reflects an internalized sense of professional identity, an effort that is reciprocated through societal and cultural acceptance and legitimation.

Nerland and Karseth’s study offers an interesting perspective on the topic of identity as legitimacy, as demonstrated by their examination of the role of professional organizations in the standardization of expert knowledge. A focus on the knowledge base of professions highlights the manner in which approaches to standardization may function as sources of legitimization for a field. Akin to the concept of professional identity, Nerland and Karseth conclude that “The basis for professional work today lies, as in previous times, in the capacity to perform work in ways that are informed, guided by and validated against shared knowledge and established conventions for practice” (2). According to the authors, the concept of institutional logics may be likened to “sources of legitimacy” (7) valued for the ability to “provide a sense of order and ontological security” (7). Institutional logics “rests on the core assumption that the interests, identities, values and assumptions of individuals and organizations are embedded within prevailing institutional logics” (6), or—in other words—logics which provide individuals with ways on understanding and interacting with larger society. Legitimization through established identity is again described as accomplished through securing jurisdiction around a profession’s expert knowledge; as Nerland and Karseth explain, “some form of standardization is required in order to ground professional practice in shared knowledge” (17). These standards not only “help to define the competences needed for professional work and thereby allocate responsibilities” (17), but are further significant in their use to “secure spaces for professional discretion” (17).

Such standards are viewed as crucial in determining professional work performance, “form[ing] the basis for collective actions and shared conventions of good practice” (5). Like Hill and Evetts, Nerland and Karseth’s view posits socialization of professionals—whether through standardization of procedures, or establishment of professional identity—as an important factor in the attainment of social and cultural legitimacy. This study furthers the idea of such standards as useful in “securing the quality of professional work” (5) to include its use “to make the principles and decisions taken more transparent to user groups and other stakeholders” (5). Professional transparency, as it involves external groups, is significant in its ability to further garner societal and cultural legitimacy; in building trust and credibility, the profession is able to simultaneously increase such legitimation processes.

George’s study of the professionalization of the life coaching profession demonstrates this type of legitimation process experienced by emergent professions. As a relatively new profession, the professionalizing efforts of this occupational group were found to suffer from an inability to provide a clear definition of occupational identity. Factors such as ambiguous work activities and the absence of formal employment relations negatively affected professionalization projects, preventing the construction of individual self-definitions and thus the ability to communicate value to potential clients. Such professional ambiguity is further damaging because it prevents the possibility of implementing standardization procedures or codification of professional knowledge. As the study found, this “allows for tremendous variation among people who label themselves coaches, ultimately limiting their ability to fully claim the label of ‘professional’” (196). According to George, an established identity is a necessary precursor to professionalization, in that

Successfully defining and differentiating their labor hinges on workers' ability to shape the social meaning surrounding their activities. Life coaches therefore had to convince others that the services they are providing were commodities and second, that they are commodities worth buying. Once work becomes recognized as legitimate, workers could then strive to establish command and sole authority over a set of tasks and a body of knowledge. (191)

The act of forming meaning around a professional identity enables the establishment of well-defined occupational boundaries, which further demonstrate legitimation of the profession's occupational jurisdiction. Further, it was found that "the success of their retrospective professional projects rested on workers' individual abilities to act 'professionally'" (197). Devoting significant effort to the cultivation of a positive professional image, the success of practitioners was found to positively correlate with their participation in "impression management" (197). Adherence to an idealized social image enabled life coaches to inhabit a role which emphasized relevancy of their service and increased respectability of practitioners, "resources that expert service workers could use to underscore their expertise and increase their consumer base" (193). Ultimately, the group's attainment of cultural legitimacy was a necessary precursor to the acquisition of "occupational jurisdiction around their labor" (202)—the very foundation upon which any occupational group's professional status claims rest.

### Constructing Professional Identity

As has been demonstrated, an established professional identity is thus pivotal to the attainment of professional status. The construction of professional identity, then, is an important

component of technical communication's eventual process of professionalization. Current research holds that there are several paths which lead to this eventual formulation. The following discussion elaborates on the dimensions of professional identity, then illustrates these development theories.

### Paradigms of Professional Identity

Crigger and Godfrey use the term "professional identity" to refer to "an individual's perception of himself or herself, who, as a member of a profession, has responsibilities to society" (377), to clients and to himself or herself. They further identify professional identity as consisting of two distinctive paradigms. The social aspect of professional identity, in which "The socialization process is characterized by *doing*" (377): practitioners are "good professionals if they value and follow the rules, standards, and codes of discipline and of society" (377). The psychological aspect of professional identity "is characterized by *being*" (377) and concerns the development of professional character, through "Virtues like courage, humility, forgiveness, integrity, and compassion" (377). The process of an individual's professional identity development entails a "process of converting a lay person into an individual whose values are consistent with those of the profession and who will act consistently on these values in their professional practice" (377). Crigger and Godfrey go on to explain the process as such: "the process of becoming a professional as a breaking down of individual or a denying of uniqueness that replaces the student's [or practitioner's] nonconformed [*sic*], nonprofessional identity with a professional ideology. Successful professionalization results in radical change in self-identity" (377). While this explanation of professional identity refers specifically to students, the authors

acknowledge that professional identity is an ongoing development, which continues evolving as individuals “engage in their professional work environments or further their education” (380).

Nygren and Stigbrand similarly recognize professional identity as constituted by two distinct dimensions. The internal dimension of professional identity concerns “questions about how individuals look at themselves, as well as assessing what kinds of values, competences and character traits are important for individuals as professionals” (843). Conversely, professional identity also involves an external dimension involving “questions of *your* identity in relation to *other* groups—[an occurrence in which] you identify yourself in relation to ‘the other’ and this other can be professional groups or society” (843). In terms of professionalism, the ability to perceive oneself in relation to other groups is an important aspect of professional autonomy. As Nygren and Stigbrand point out, “Clear borders and strong detachment in relation to external pressures are important in this sense” (852).

#### Communitarianism: Community of Practice, Identity and Engagement

Reid et al. sought to investigate university students’ higher education experience, in terms of their development of professional identity and how the nature of their profession and educational experience may influence this identity formation, as well as how they engage with their study based on their expectations of the profession. The study demonstrates that “students develop a sense of identity throughout their studies related to their potential membership of specific professional groups” (733). The researchers identified what they term “social and professional ‘communities of practice’” (730), an aspect of professional training capable of influencing the manner in which individuals identify with their profession and of contributing to



their preparation for professional work. The study is based in the concept of communitarianism, a theory which “focuses on the importance of traditions and social contexts, the social nature of the self, and makes normative claims about the value of community” (731). The authors theorized that a student’s future profession can play a significant role in their sense of self, a claim based on Henkel’s conclusion that “identities are, first and foremost, shaped and reinforced in and by strong and stable communities and the social processes generated within them” (157). Thus, professional formation can be seen, alternatively, as “a process of identity formation within the communities of practice of higher education and working life” (733).

The study designates participation as “a central source of identity formation” (733), claiming that “identity is constituted through the recognition of mutuality in relations of participation” (733). Thus, a student’s educational experience posits learners as engaged “in the process of becoming members of particular academic and professional cultures” (734), a circumstance found to have a substantial “impact on the nature of their learning” (734). To enjoy professional success requires a professional formation capable of instilling students with several skills and abilities. These learned skills are important for professionals in terms of their future professional success and are described in the following:

the most important skills needed in modern society are the ability to deal with both change and continuity . . . an established set of core values as a basis for the ability to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty and variation . . . [the] ability to build networks, and to develop and nurture social relationships. In addition, the skills of (self-) motivation, empathy and longing (that is, anticipation for the future) . . . participation, responsibility and active citizenship. (732)

In fact, the authors argue that “scholarship, lifelong learning and global citizenship are at the core of professional formation” (732), a conclusion indicating the importance of a commitment to active participation and engagement within an individual’s formation of professional identity. Thus, a community of practice enables students to “take a personal approach to the discipline as well as their future profession, and actively integrate their learning with other aspects of their life” (735). Furthermore, it was found that “Where the professional field is considered clear, pedagogies and learning focus on the inherent requirements of that field” (737). A strong and stable community reinforces a profession’s established professional identity, providing a clear vision of the professional field that “enables students to consider their learning holistically” (737). Finally, “Professional expectations and values influence the ways that students engage with their learning” (738), as students “align their personal professional identities with qualities derived from their potential profession” (739). Thus, “discipline-specific characteristics” (740), developing “a strong notion of profession” (740) and communication of “essential professional components” (740) are not only activities performed by communities of practice, but also those which *form* communities of practice. Through such social and educational communities, a group is able to construct a professional culture known to facilitate an individual’s sense of identity as it evolves from personal to profession, as well as “help students develop a sense of identity and heighten their engagement with their learning” (740).

Kline and Barker also use a community of practice approach, as illustrated within their examination of the elements of professional consciousness present within technical communication. Through developing a model of collaboration based in the three dimensions of a community practice first identified by Wenger in 1998, the authors hoped to facilitate the growth

of professional identity in the field of technical communication. Professional consciousness, defined as “the collective, long-term, professional identity assumed by a group that defines the scope of a lifetime career” (33), is recognized as a necessary precursor to the establishment of a professional identity. This fact, along with the authors’ claim that it “functions to define an exclusive culture within which a practitioner can find lifelong fulfillment, advancement, rewards, and recognition” (33), are two characteristics which indicate the relationship between the concept of professional consciousness and that of professional identity and professional status.

Kline and Barker’s study involved developing a model, based on the community of practice, which could be used in order to promote collaboration between academics and practitioners and “improve professionalism through better research, better education, and a more comprehensive body of knowledge” (33), ultimately leading to the development of professional consciousness and the field’s professionalization. They based this model, as mentioned, on the dimensions for establishing a community of practice: joint enterprise, which “results from engaged people working toward a shared purpose and goals” (35); mutual engagement, or a situation in which “people are engaging with one another to define and negotiate the terms of the collaboration” (35); and shared repertoire, or “the language, conventions, and tools that are used for collaborative sharing” (35). Through an investigation into STC’s Technical Communication Body of Knowledge Project, an initiative involving both academics and practitioners that spanned nearly four years, Kline and Barker found that a community of practice could be used “to explain how people learn in organizations and how community and identity affect the transfer of knowledge during collaboration” (35). The study results indicated that “properly structured collaboration can nurture a community where the specific professional identity of being an

academic or practitioner is greatly reduced in favor of the negotiated identity of being a community member working toward mutual goals” (33). Kline and Barker found, for example, that an individual’s sense of belonging to a joint enterprise, in addition to a perception of a shared repertoire, “helped the members maintain a sense of a broader community” (39); while without, “the community failed to coalesce and collaborate effectively” (41).

Thus, communities of practice were found to “hold promise for bridging the academic/practitioner split” (34); the collaborative, project-based activities this approach involves were viewed as facilitating the success of future working partnerships. Collaborative activities which lead to communities of practice enable negotiation of “the meaning and character of professionalism” (36) and enables members to “share a discourse reflecting their community’s perspective” (41). The study concludes with the CANFA Model of Communities of Practice Collaboration, a model which suggests five steps of collaborative activities intended to facilitate professional consciousness: collaborate, apply, facilitate, negotiate and activate. Firstly, the community must collaborate, meaning “members must participate with other members and . . . give meaning to the practice” (43). Next, the community must develop a research community that ensures work is applicable to both the workplace and educational settings. Following, the collaboration must be facilitated, so as to balance the efforts of the two communities; the collaboration must then also be negotiated, a process which “provided members with a feeling of contribution and helped to solidify the social and professional relationship among the team” (44). The final stipulation demands that the collaboration be necessarily activity-based, due to the “importance of working as a team to build a community of practice” (45) and the chance active participation offers “to develop the mutual engagement or negotiate the shared repertoire

necessary to achieve professional consciousness” (45). Kline and Barker ultimately conclude that “Without an effective community, there is no chance to negotiate and develop the consciousness aspect of professionalism” (42); until participants “engage in facilitated, theory-focused activities of broader significance than position and employment” (46), professional consciousness, professional identity—and, ultimately, professional status—will remain unattainable in the realm of technical communication.

### Occupational Branding: Identity and Status

If “contemporary thinking criticizes traditional definitions of professional as simplistic” (Douglas 25), it is due to an approach to professionalism which recognizes professional and market closure as inadequate to ensure an occupation’s rise to professional status, as well as the role of broader status concerns such as identifiability and legitimacy. Through the implementation of the processes of occupational branding as a framework for establishing professional identity, technical communication could benefit greatly—not only through the construction of this identity, but from the identifiability and cultural and social legitimacy it would bestow, as well. Speaking explicitly for technical communication, occupational branding is particularly useful upon consideration of the field-specific concerns which have, historically, hindered professionalization efforts.

### Technical Communication and the Need for Validation

In terms of the professional status of technical communication, it is imperative that we consider the field’s historical motivations for professionalizing—as well as the field’s pressing need for validation, which stems from such circumstances. Technical communication suffers

from issues related to a lack of status and societal recognition of the field, as illustrated by its inability to limit access to the market; the difficulty of defining its expertise, so as to distinguish the field on the basis of its expert knowledge; a pervasive feeling amongst practitioners of a perceived lack of respect for their work; and what Light terms as the perception that “technical writers are a bastard group of uncertain origin with no conventional or legitimate genealogy” (E14).

Cleary conveys technical communication’s need to professionalize is due to the relationship between an occupation’s professional status and the perceived value and status of its practitioners. Her study of practitioner blogs and the manner in which they reflect practitioners’ views of professionalization sheds light on the workplace experience of many communicators. Respondents explained that the communicator “frequently feels deep-seated inferiority” (11) from colleagues, whom they perceived as having no respect for them as being an “important element” (11) of their organization; moreover, participants claimed that the need to be respected was a “core motivation . . . [and] source of daily frustration” (21) for many workplace professionals. Cleary claims that, because professionals “are valued for their contributions to organizations and to society” (11), attaining such status entails that a professional’s public persona increases in prestige and respect. Savage further associates professionalization with the field’s need for validation, based on the claim that professions are necessary “to the extent that they embody various forms of highly valued expertise in our society” (360). If this is taken to be truth, then the public perception reported by communicators—that they are “not received as professionals, nor as having highly valued skills” (364), or that they often feel inferior because “few . . . feel ‘strategic’ to the organizations we work for” (367)—is undoubtedly detrimental to

any aspirations for professional status. An STC survey illustrates as much, with results indicating an immense 50% of members believed colleagues viewed them as operating on a “lower professional level” (364).

To increase their status and sense of prestige, communicators must first resolve internal perceptions of inferiority. Hayhoe concludes that technical communicators must “satisfy their need for love and esteem” (181), through being perceived as being “on a par” (181) with those colleagues with whom they work. He cites the prevailing “need for esteem” (181) conveyed by many practitioners, theorizing it to be a consequence of a lacking “recognition” (181) by peers and management. As all these examples have cited, technical communicators’ desire for validation and legitimation is not a process which may be accomplished internally, but rather an occasion that is only plausible through obtaining the recognition of others.

Many notable technical communicators have introduced what they view as resolution to the field’s complicated professionalization project. In addition to establishing communities of practice, Coppola has advocated that, in order to support professionalization, “students need to learn how to be public advocates, working with media, generating public interest, building support, and creating political consensus for their occupational status on local, state, and national levels” (4). Savage further proposes that the profession “seek or endeavor to establish new sites of practice” (377), so as to “improve market conditions and . . . create the conditions needed for realizing other professionalization goals” (377); in addition, it is recommended that the field endeavors “to more effectively negotiate and make explicit the ethical, social, legal and political significance of any particular professional task we undertake” (377), so as to improve social status. Savage continues such suggestions with an endorsement to “continue, but intensify” (378)

efforts such as “researching and writing the history of technical communication and expanding our knowledge of communication contexts, practices, skills, texts, and audiences” (378). Finally, he suggests increasing professional consciousness through continued “involvement in professional organizations, working to increase participation” (378).

If technical communicators hope to increase their professional status and be recognized as “professionals,” the field must first recognize its successful development of “a set of professional attitudes” (Pringle and Williams 368) which create a “professional consciousness . . . and develop a sense of group solidarity” (Davis 139). Pringle and Williams’ assertion makes the field’s steps toward professionalizing explicit, concluding that the professionalization project necessarily entails an established professional identity capable of affecting a change in external perspective. The researchers rightly conclude that progress is contingent upon an initial inter-occupational shared notion of self, stating that “As technical communicators begin to articulate and understand our own professional identity and accept that we have become a profession, others outside of the field will begin to recognize that as well” (369).

### Branding As Visibility and Legitimation

With these status concerns in mind, occupational branding can be viewed as an appropriate response due to its ability to generate both visibility and legitimacy for the field. This fact is highlighted by two of the process’ key features—strategic collective identity work as a core professionalizing activity and strategic collective identity work and claims of value—which correlate to the idea of identity as identifiability, as well as identity as social and cultural legitimacy.



### Strategic Collective Identity Work as a Core Professionalization Activity

Occupational branding recognizes professionalization as an activity which inherently involves efforts aimed at strategic collective identity work. According to the Ashcraft et al., “a collective occupational identity can be seen as akin to the extant construction of organizational identity, as both capture attempts to construct who ‘we’ are” (475). The process not only acknowledges such identity work as the core component of contemporary professionalization, but also implicates the significance of both legitimizing the group’s expertise and delegitimizing that of others’, in the pursuit of successful knowledge exclusivity claims. Concluding that this identity work “is best approached as a relation of entwining people, institutions, objects and practices” (476), it follows that occupational branding intends to examine and identify “how knowledge exclusivity is won through persuasive constructions of work, the knowledge it requires and who should logically exercise it”(476). Thus, occupational branding recognizes strategic collective identity work as a core professionalizing activity because of its use in the management of meaning; by constructing and legitimizing one’s occupational identity, a profession is able to “activate competitive advantage for organizations. . . [and] create tangible benefit for occupations, boosting their relative position in an inter-occupational market” (476). In short, “today’s knowledge exclusivity claims—as they confront the crisis of representation described earlier—can be usefully framed as branding endeavor” (476). Seeing professionalization in light of this consideration, occupational branding is thus an opportunity for the professional group to construct their own meaning of professional identity, before then pursuing relevant outlets through which to communicate this identity. With this branding perspective in place, the professionalization project furthers its reach beyond meaning

construction and into spheres where such constructions are capable of earning credibility, recognition and professional legitimacy.

#### Strategic Collective Identity Work and Claims of Value

The strategic collective identity work of occupational branding is “its overt interest in the production (or destruction) of value” (478), achieved through measures of worth, both economic and non-economic. Because of the fact that “knowledge exclusivity claims are political assertions of occupational worth” (478), value creation plays an extremely significant role in an occupation’s rise to professional status. Occupational branding, to this end, is “a matter of claiming that knowledge practitioners, the work they perform, the organizations for which they do it, the clients they serve and the outcomes they yield deserve high valuation” (479); it is for this exact purpose that the process may be implemented, enabling collective identity work which facilitates the creation and recreation of the occupational brand. This facet of occupational branding also introduces a new conception to its use; not only is the process used in order to create meaning surrounding professional identity, as it may be used in order to deconstruct any negative meaning surrounding the occupational identity, as well. This aspect of occupational branding may be most significant to the field of technical communication, because of its ability to remove any present undesirable identity aspects so as to put forth a preferred notion in its place.

The researchers include two case studies that perform this exact activity, exemplified through an examination of two divergent occupational groups: airline pilots and massage therapists. In the case of the former, it is noted that commercial airline pilots “have long enjoyed

palpable material benefit from their occupational brand legacy; that of the professional pilot and his elite technical knowledge” (480). This image, however esteemed, was found to negatively affect the industry’s 30 years of efforts intended to incite racial and gender diversification. It was found that such shortcomings were the result of an institutionalized occupational brand which, though contradictory to current wants, was proven extremely difficult to shake:

the pilot’s potent blend of occupational imagery—the high-ranking officer, the scientifically trained professional and the virile, dependable father—was strategically created in collaboration between the airline pilot union and airlines, first against white, upper-middle class ‘ladyflier’ [*sic*] figure of 1920s and 1930s, then against the increasingly sexualized white stewardess and, eventually, against the exoticized [*sic*] flight attendant as well as the male, working-class ground personnel associated with Other race, ethnic, and/or national origins. (480)

Researchers identified an attempt, on the part of the airline industry, to negate such an identity, through replacing the authoritative, assertive, dominant male, with an image evoking “the benevolent, potentially fallible parent” (480). According to the study, strategic collective identity work was at play which meant to deconstruct—and then reconstruct—the occupational identity of commercial pilots.

In their attempt at inducing a shift in meaning, pilots were found to draw on a number of techniques, while also involving a number of stakeholders which were representative of varied echelons of authority and spheres of influence. The group directed efforts toward such agents as “the federal regulatory agency, airlines, pilot unions, passengers and even the pilot uniform (which, virtually unchanged over decades, carries the historical brand forward)” (481), all in an

attempt to exercise persuasion with the furthest reach and most significant impact. This example demonstrates strategic collective identity work interested in the preservation of current professional brand value, but which was also attempting to destroy any professional values that may be perceived in a negative light. Thus, by drawing upon several separate entities capable of disseminating a new image to a wide audience, pilots shifted the meaning surrounding their occupational identity and even lent it credibility through its entities of transmission. By propagating these changes over time, the profession experienced a decisive shift in their favor.

In the second example, massage therapists sought out a way of altering occupational meaning they perceived as “historically . . . blocking their access to professionalization: a pervasive distilled image as sexual laborers treading fine lines of morality” (481). Coinciding occupational branding efforts were thus “aimed at the destruction of an old brand and the production of a new distilled image” (481). Essentially, through professional organizations’—and individual practitioner—activities, the group hoped to

Gain legitimacy and shed a tainted image by enhancing their material and symbolic inclusion in the exclusive profession of medicine, especially through carefully constructed branding campaigns mobilized through traditional institutional activities such as lobbying, building networks with medical professionals and constructing clinical education mandates. (481)

In weakening their perceived correlation with sexuality and strengthening ties with legitimate, institutionalized, already well-respected and established professional groups, massage therapists engaged with a process of occupational branding which “revalues massage as legitimate medical knowledge” (481). As both examples demonstrate, concerted collective identity work is an

appropriate venue through which a profession endeavors to transform their perceived identity, as well as within which to ensure such a renegotiated meaning is consistent with their preferred distilled image.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND LEGITIMACY

### Institutional Theory

Institutional theory is explained by Dolfma and Verburg as a concept which views individual and collective behavior to be the result of a “reproduction of institutional patterns” (1035). The process of institutionalization is concerned with the stabilization of society, in terms of its normative structure and consensus regarding common values, beliefs and ideals. As Dolfma and Verburg explain,

human actions are embedded in an institutional system and therefore follow patterns in accordance with norms, directed at the preservation of that order.

Social order may be said to be secured to the extent that those actions are institutionalized, that is, sanctioned by the social system and internalized by individuals. This institutionalized system of norms is an expression of the consensus about what is just, good and desirable (values). (1035)

Hence, institutions may be said to describe “systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions” (Hodgson 2). Essentially, an institution is formed during a process in which the exchanges of various societal actors result in some form of “habitualized [*sic*] and patterned” (1036) notion regarding a particular entity, leading to a consistency which lends itself to the ability of “individuals [to] internalize these objective social realities, take them for granted and recreate them in their ongoing interactions” (1036). Dolfma and Verburg thus equate institutions to a sort of “template for action and actor” (1036), in that—in their formation—an institution “makes it unnecessary to define each situation anew and, in limiting choice, provide stability and predictability” (1036). Discussion regarding the processes of institutionalization

enables a better understanding of legitimation, as well as the role both play in the construction of public perception and generation of authority. It further highlights the manner in which an occupational group is able to influence its profession's associated meaning, impress this definition upon stakeholders and promote societal adherence to, and acceptance of, an ideal image. Institutionalization and legitimation are recognized as significant to an occupational group's professional project due to their assistance in the achievement of market closure and the ultimate rise to professional status. In the realm of technical communication, processes of occupational branding are capable of generating the cultural and social legitimacy necessary to attain status and identifiability. As an agent of legitimation, occupational branding will produce such necessary legitimacy and ultimately lead to institutionalization of the field. Once these efforts have come to fruition, the field's institutionalization will become an important guarantor of social and cultural legitimacy.

Deetz implicates the role of social institutions as integral to the "process of cultural stabilization" (47). Described as "the culturally produced forms by which human activity is given coherence and continuity" (47), institutionalization is thus seen as a process which "permit[s] 'spontaneous,' barely reflective, almost automatic actions" (47). Such normalization is appealing, as it enables the formulation of identity—in terms of the public's perception—which aligns with an entity's preferred image. In creating a consensus for this image, the entity ensures that societal actors and evaluators concur with this assumption and, ultimately, see attempting to question or reconsider the now-established belief futile. Nilsson adheres to this conceptualization of institutionalization, stating "Institutional work, then, involves the design and execution of institutional 'projects' meant to forward interest-based goals" (380). Institutional agents "use

social, political, and cultural skills . . . to mobilize and engage in framing contests” (380), ultimately increasing their own authority “by defining, populating, and regulating new social spaces” (380).

### Professionalization and Institutionalization

The concepts and processes of professionalization and institutionalization are viewed as intimately related, an interconnected tendency which arises from similar objectives and shared theoretical underpinnings. Muzio et al. contend that professionalization be “studied as a specific form of the broader category of institutionalization” (713), insofar that attempts at professionalizing “contribute to the construction, ordering, and, in short, to the institutionalization of social life” (713). Moreover, professionalism is claimed to be an institution in and of itself, classified as such due to the fact that it “represents a clear example of an attempt to ascribe a certain set of activities a particular normative value beyond their technical requirements” (713). Muzio et al. go on to describe the appeal of studying professionalism an institutionalist perspective in terms of the following existent theory:

the value of studying professions as institutions and of connecting processes of professionalization to broader patterns of institutionalization; the importance of professions and professionals as agents in the creation, maintenance, and disruption, of institutions; and the importance of organizational context as a key actor and site in contemporary patterns of professionalization. (Muzio et al., 704)

At its most elemental level, “professionalization institutionalizes a link between expertise and collective mobility” (705). Muzio et al. contend that, as “a negotiated settlement which emerges



from the interactions between different actors pursuing their own institutionalization projects” (705), which aims “to translate a scarce set of cultural and technical resources into a secure and institutionalized system of social and financial rewards” (702), professionalization involves efforts aimed at affecting broad societal perceptions. Ultimately, it intends produce substantial transformations capable of inflicting similar influence within the broader institutional setting in which they function. As such, “projects of professionalization and institutionalization occur simultaneously” (705), with the former being representative of a particular subsection of the latter, “insofar as it represents one of several ways to give order, structure, and meaning to a distinctive area of social and economic life (the production of expertise)” (705).

#### Profession[al]s as Institutional Agents

As many have claimed, the function of professions within institutional theory is that of acting in the role of institutional agents. Scott’s conclusion gives credence to such an idea, in the assertion that “the professions in modern society have assumed leading roles in the creation and tending of institutions. They are the preeminent institutional agents of our time” (219). This statement is similarly echoed by Bresnen, who asserts that this approach—recognizing the association between professionalization and institutionalization—

emphasizes the role of professionals as institutional agents and builds upon the idea that professions are not simply constrained by the institutional context in which they act . . . but instead have creative agency in being able to shape and change institutional domains through the cultural-cognitive, normative and/or regulatory elements they bring to the table. (737-738)

The significant role played by professionals in institutional processes is further explored by Daudigeos who argues that “professionals rely on their expertise, legitimacy, and social capital to promote institutional change by populating organizational fields with new actors and identities, introducing new standards, and managing social-capital within a field” (724). Muzio et al. further implicate professionals in their role as institutional agents; citing Scott’s conclusion of the role of professionals in “creating, testing, conveying, and applying . . . frameworks that govern one or another social sphere” (706) as the basis for his claim, Muzio et al. ascertains professionals as “the preeminent crafters of institutions, facilitating and regulating a broad range of human activities” (706).

Hughes and Hughes explain the concept of professions as institutions, through a discussion of the manner in which certain characteristics of the professions are, in fact, demonstrated as present within institutions:

The professions can be considered in light of this conception; over a considerable period of time they have each created their own cognitive and distinct framework with behaviors that they have internalized as second nature, as well as their own distinct normative systems of rules and conventions determining how things should be done. (29)

The relationship between professions and institutions locates the value of professionalization in its ability to normalize professionals, structure appropriate individual behaviors and, in turn, create an institution which facilitates legitimacy and authority. Hughes and Hughes are quick to point out, however, that while this professional normalization is seemingly autonomous from outside influence, “all this takes place within, and is influenced by, the wider frameworks of

society” (29). Though the profession may work to construct their professional meaning, this process is shaped and guided according to the influence of wider society. This circumstance demands, “Therefore, [that] institutions need social acceptability and credibility to survive . . . [and] This is known as legitimacy” (29).

### Legitimation within Institutional Theory

As a necessary precursor to societal acceptance of conventional belief, legitimacy factors heavily within institutional theory. In the words of Harmon et al., “Legitimacy, defined as a generalized assumption of desirability or appropriateness of an action or idea . . . is critical for social action and is at the core of institutional theory” (76). In terms of professional projects, Rueede and Kreutzer assert that legitimacy is known to have “positive effects on resource acquisition” (40) and is implicated as being associated with an organization or entity’s successful survival. In terms of process, legitimation functions as “the explanation and justification of an institutional order” (41), a realization arrived at “by means of connecting it to broader conceptions of reality” (41); these associations enable individual actors to formulate opinions on the basis of their connection to more familiar objects, entities, or institutions. Legitimation work within institutional theory posits processes of legitimation “as an internal and external resource mobilization in order to persuade important stakeholders to confer legitimacy” (54), which often involves instances in which the legitimacy seeker purposefully “avoid[s] certain issues while ensuring other issues that are of importance to the conferrer of legitimacy” (54) are presented and their expectations satisfactorily met.

Coskuner-Balli argues that, in order to ensure effective legitimacy gains, an occupational group must first ensure such efforts take place within an environment conducive to eventual societal acceptance. As she explains, “for professions to gain legitimacy not only do they need to claim jurisdiction within an area of work but they also need to create the social structures that allow efficacy before social audiences” (195). These social structures are the result of efforts aimed at building societal consensus, indicative of the manner in which legitimacy is associated with the symbolic capital generated by processes of institutionalization. As the author explains, “The tastes and practices of the dominant groups gain legitimacy through a process in which subordinate groups accept the superiority of these cultural norms and values” (195). Coskuner-Balli explores this idea through a study that examines how new academic communities set out to legitimize their line of work. The results contend that the “legitimacy of a new field is not only or primarily linked to the intellectual correctness of scientific knowledge but rather to sociopolitical factors . . . [and that] the acceptance of theories depends upon a network of forces that are mostly political” (194). Coskuner-Balli concluded that obtaining social and cultural legitimacy is the main component of an emergent field’s legitimation process; in order for the new field to claim the legitimacy of its expertise, “it needs to achieve power and claim jurisdiction or expertise” (194).

Nilsson similarly structures legitimacy within institutional theory, claiming that it “captures the evaluative dimensions of social structuring” (373). Viewing it, again, as fundamental to institutional work, Nilsson describes legitimacy work as “changing, reinforcing, or disrupting the criteria by which people evaluate practice” (373). He further contends of legitimacy work within institutional work as a form of “encoding,” an act that “involves the

establishment and reinforcement of links between meanings and visible forms of behavior, relationship, and language” (374). In line with this view, building legitimacy involves institutional agents who “may embed and routinize forms and their linked meanings through repetitive practices and documented rhetoric, while valorizing specific examples of those forms and demonizing counterexamples” (374). The study illustrates that, in the case of legitimacy building activities aimed at eventual institutionalization, “what is important is not how institutional agents actually think, feel, or act but how they are perceived” (374). Perception is again implicated as an important factor in the act of gaining legitimacy and, in doing so, shaping public opinion to bend to one’s desires. Moreover, legitimacy is dependent on shaping perception in accordance with a variety of factors beyond simply an entity’s satisfactory performance. As Nilsson explains, “legitimacy depends not only on instrumental evaluation, but also on internalized evaluation of relational status and moral appropriateness . . . as well as a generalized motivation to see the systems one lives in as legitimate” (377).

#### Relational Legitimacy-Building

In a 2013 study examining how staff professionals were able to overcome “their marginal positions” (724) to exert influence within their organization, Daudigeos identified the use of legitimacy-building strategies and influence tactics as “a set of purposeful actions aimed at changing organizational processes” (724). Similar to previously discussed complaints of technical communicators, study participants in staff roles were said to “suffer from a lack of hierarchical power and formal authority” (734), a circumstance which forced them to ideate resources capable of bestowing them with “legitimacy to influence ideas, values, and work of

others” (734). These professionals were found to rely heavily on strategies of relational legitimacy-building, which involved constructing their own agents of legitimation within an organization. According to Daudigeos, “To do that, they rely heavily on their social skills, their ‘ability to engage others in collective action’” (734), accomplished via the use of internal and external networking. Internally, staff professionals “establish[ed] direct links with other people in the organization, regardless of their level in the hierarchy” (735), targeting organizational members with the means to promote their cause. As the study results indicate, relationships with likeminded organizational colleagues were viewed as beneficial to establishing internal alliances. Externally, these individuals sought entities outside the organization with whom they come into contact and “use these external sources of information as rhetorical resources to build the case for new organizational practices” (735). They then drew on these external sources when introducing change, claiming to “benefit from an implicit association with the authority of such external parties” (735). Both of these networking opportunities are viewed as representative of “legitimization by association” (735); through making strategic connections with such entities, the staff professionals reportedly enhanced their own organizational legitimacy and power through associating “with the regulative and normative authority of these institutions” (735).

Staff professionals were also found to draw on unobtrusive influence tactics in their efforts toward organizational change, identified as instances in which “professionals leverage their relationally acquired legitimacy to promote specific organizational practices” (737). Such tactics included “adaptive framing of issues; instrumental use of organizational processes, programmes [*sic*], and systems; and using their organizations’ market power to promote practices externally” (738). Adaptive framing of issues was found to be an “important

mechanism for applying field-level ideas to micro-level situations” (743), indicative of “the importance of versatility in methods of persuasion, and particularly the ability of staff professionals to adapt their rhetorical arguments to suit the specific context of the interaction” (743). In terms of the instrumental use of organizational resources, the findings suggest that professionals are able “to facilitate the spread of specific organizational practice” (743) through strategic “manipulation of information flows related to their area of activity, and their virtual monopoly on their specific areas of expertise” (743). Such manipulative control was the determining factor in professionals’ ability to “select evidence” (743) and otherwise persuasively affect information which other organizational members used to determine their own goals and behavior. The study “reveals that this privileged position” (744) is an important tool through which staff professionals performed their institutional work. Finally, professionals were found to use organizational market power to promote practices externally. Researchers identified this feat as resulting from the fact that

staff professionals maintain strong ties to their professional bodies and rely on these ties, as well as their relationships with other relevant external parties, in their efforts to change the organizations that employ them. Having a strong external network exposes staff professionals to various organizational innovations and as a result they are more likely to notice potential areas for improvement in organizational routines and to try to initiate such changes. (745)

Essentially, staff professionals gained legitimacy through strategic exploitation of both internal, as well as external, bodies, which enables them to atone for their perceived lack of organizational authority. As Daudigeos’ study suggests, professional “power deficit may be overcome by

specific relational tactics” (742), through the use of alternative strategies capable of bestowing authority upon staff members previously perceived as organizationally powerless.

### Socio-institutional Legitimacy-Building

Huang-Horowitz introduces the process of institutionalization as an important factor in an emergent field’s perceived legitimacy, through an examination of the evolution of nanotechnology’s portrayal in specialized and mainstream media. Defined as “the process through which an emerging organizational field achieves an agreed upon set of constituents, behaviors, and activities” (5), institutionalization is noted as an important factor in an emergent field’s perceived legitimacy. As the study notes, sources capable of granting legitimacy are “either those who have ‘standing and license,’ such as the State, or those who have ‘collective authority,’ such as intellectuals” (5). However, the study demonstrates that “Society-at-large can also be treated as a source of legitimacy” (5), illustrating one example of societal institutions capable of influencing majority opinion through shaping audience perception. Its findings prove media as authoritative in its role as an agent of legitimation, made possible by its capability to disseminate information to a vast audience, as well as to influence that audience’s perception through the portrayal they provide. Drawing on Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy’s conclusion that institutionalization becomes most likely “when texts are produced by legitimate actors” (7), the study posits both media discourse and legitimacy as crucial elements of institutional theory within studies of an emergent field.

In this manner, institutionalization may be viewed as instrumental to the processes of professionalization, due to the credibility it may lend to an emergent field—as well as the level



of coverage it is able to offer, another influential factor in the ability to effectively mold public opinion. Institutionalization is thus facilitative to a profession's rise in status, with various social institutions—such as mainstream media—playing a role in the presence and portrayal of a given profession. Accordingly, the study finds that “Participating agents can obtain legitimacy for an emerging field through discursive interactions in the media context” (7). Furthermore, elements of social institutions, such as government involvement and diversity of legitimizing agents, were found to lend additional legitimacy to the institutionalization of an emergent field.

#### Institutional Legitimation: A Multilevel Process

Bitektine and Haack explain the legitimacy process of institutional theory as involving “cross-level interactions within the social system” (49), asserting institutional processes as occurring on both a macro- and micro level. Organizational legitimacy is thus defined as “a ‘generalized,’ collective perception, which, although composed of subjective legitimacy judgments of individuals . . . is aggregated and objectified” (50). When considered from the perspective of an evaluator, it denotes “a judgment, with respect to that organization, rendered by individuals at the micro level and by collective actors at the macro level” (50). Whether legitimacy is conferred by an individual, or a collective actor, it nonetheless “remains a social evaluation made by others” (50), significant because these actors “through their actions, generate positive (or negative) social, political, and economic outcomes” (50). Institutional work thus involves efforts made on both a small-scale, such as a specific community or organization, and large-scale, such as society; alternatively, activities which occur on either level are also intended to similarly impact both.

## Propriety and Validity

Consequential to legitimacy judgments are the concepts of propriety and validity; the first refers to “an individual evaluator’s own judgment of social acceptability” (51), while the second “represents a collective consensus about legitimacy” (51). Several sources of validity have been identified within institutional theory, which Bitektine and Haack cite as “Majority opinion . . . [and] Some institutions of society—media, government, and the judicial system” (51). The researchers contend that these validity sources are recognized as being such due to their provision of “some form of forum for debates over legitimacy and a mechanism for debate resolution” (51). Bitektine and Haack identify an evaluator’s validity perception in each of these societal institutions is determined according to separate factors: in media, validity is ascertained by “the share of the voice” (52); in government, “the regulators’ and legislators’ decisions” (51); and in “the legal domain it is the judgments of judges or juries” (52). The authors explain institutionalization’s effects on validity with the following:

validity is the result of a process of aggregation of individual propriety judgments into some “collective” judgment. As proprietary judgments are “externalized” through the actions and discourse of evaluators, the repeated judgments are habitualized [*sic*] . . . [and] become a part of objective reality—they become institutionalized. (53)

Accordingly, the process of institutionalization “subsumes judgments under social control” (53), enabling the creation of a habitual, taken-for-granted perception that concretely stabilizes the social order. Institutionalization similarly effects propriety, in that assessment by evaluators are made according to some set of social norms and “Institutions control both which norms

evaluators should apply in judging propriety and what the final expressed judgment should be (validity)” (54). Thus, the normative value of professions are seen as serving processes of institutionalization, given “their role in constructing, stabilizing, and governing our physical and social worlds” (Muzio et al. 703).

### Institutional Change

In the case of technical communication, institutional theory is significant because of the insight it offers into processes of institutional change. In terms of the field’s unrealized professionalization project, the establishment of professional identity has been shown as the preferred next step in the process. Professional identity has ultimately been credited as such because of its benefit to certain factors related to professional status, such as identifiability and legitimacy. As we have demonstrated, technical communication in its current state suffers from several misgivings which have prevented the field from both constructing an ideal-practitioner image and instilling an association between this ideal image and the technical communication line of work. With that said, the professionalization project would certainly benefit from an understanding of the concept of institutional change—particularly those elements which are found to exist within both processes.

Lounsbury’s examination of institutional transformation indicates periods of transformation known to be conducive to an occupation’s ability to enact institutional change. According to his study, these periods of transformation are “characterized by conditions of heightened uncertainty, under which novel practices can emerge, actors can make new kinds of claims, organizational forms can emerge and die, status orders can be restructured, and rules of

engagement can be redefined” (263). Lounsbury found that such periods were significant because they “provided opportunities for actors to make claims related to status mobility” (263), further indicating that such processes of status mobility within professionalization projects “often involve the restructuring of authority and expertise in fields” (263). This finding implicates the significant role played by professionals within conditions of institutional transformation, due to such individuals’ “central role in stabilizing a field by establishing a superordinate belief system” (264). Professionals’ ability to influence a field’s BOK—as has been suggested in the process of constructing an established professional identity—is thus seen as an opportunity to position superiority of their expertise and to promote ensuing processes of institutionalization as concerning the group’s claim to expert knowledge.

An understanding of the multileveled legitimation process occurring within institutionalization is important because of the insight it offers into enacting institutional change. Multilevel interaction encourages an acknowledgement of the various ways in which “microlevel [*sic*] behaviors of individual evaluators can give rise to new macrolevel [*sic*] validity” (63). For example, manipulating the macro level perception of consensus may be achieved through strategies like constituency building, or “creating an additional ‘independent’ public voice that expresses the desired opinion” (59); and macro level changes in judgment “by suggesting which set of norms should be applied to an entity” (59), a tactic that enables “actors . . . [to] lead an evaluator to a judgment that reflects their own preference or interest” (59). Furthermore, actors can encourage the active processing of legitimacy judgment expression by engaging in public discussions and calling on “evaluators’ accountability” (62), thereby increasing “the likelihood that evaluators will form their judgment in the evaluative mode” (62). Encouraging an

evaluator's personal interest in one's topic, as well as providing her or him with a background of pertinent knowledge, are also seen as ways of facilitating active processing. As institutional stability is often the result of "suppressor" factors which discourage public expression of deviant judgments, tactics for suppressor removal are viewed as capable of affecting evaluator judgments of legitimacy: "The emergence of an alternative judgment in public communications signifies the beginning of competition among judgments and, hence, the emergence of contradictions . . . and destabilization of the institutional order, which, in turn, may result in institutional change" (63). Furthermore, validity cues are often strengthened when the "relative number . . . credibility" (63) and "diversity of message sources that communicate the same judgment" (63) are all perceived to be greater. Influential validity strategies involve "strategies that influence evaluators' validity beliefs and propriety judgments (1) by means of rhetoric, (2) by increasing the credibility of speakers, (3) by 'staging' a consensus for the targeted evaluator, and (4) by recourse to coercion and inducement" (64).

While institutions represent a certain type of stability and resistance to change, these conventions are not absolute. As asserted by Dolfsma and Verburg, "analyzing processes of institutional change necessitates an understanding of individuals as agents who interpret and perceive their situation, consisting of institutions, rooted in socio-cultural values, forming valuations (aspirations, preferences) that they act on" (1042). Porter et al. claim that institutional change, while difficult, is possible; as "rhetorically constructed human designs" (611), institutions are "changeable" (611) in that they "contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action" (613). These spaces are viewed as opportunities for rhetorical action, the "institutionally based, materially constrained, experientially grounded manifestations

of social power and relations” (Harvey 80) through which institutional change becomes possible. As it concerns such change, emergent professions must consider the three “constituencies of interest” (Hughes and Hughes 29) involved in processes of legitimation and, ultimately, institutionalization: “the members of a profession, the professional institution and wider civil society” (Hughes and Hughes 29). By focusing efforts on each, professions can hope to effect great influence and, in return, greater support and credibility.

Muzio et al. similarly offer advice on influencing institutional change, creating an outline for professionals’ attempt to restructure an institution. The first step in the process involves “creating or opening up new spaces for their expertise” (707), which involves spreading professional influence into new domains of activity. Following this expansion, “professionals populate existing social spheres with new actors” (707), an effort which furthers the intent of the previous step by increasing the reach of their influence. Thirdly, Muzio et al. assert that the group’s professionalization project involves activities which aim to “re-draw the boundaries and rules governing contiguous fields” so as to “create new occupations, subordinate others, institutionalize new practices, and redefine relational patterns and power hierarchies within a broader area of activity” (707). The final step in professions’ efforts to initiate institutional change occurs when they “confer social capital and sanction social order within a field, governing access to key positions in occupational and organizational hierarchies” (707).

#### Occupational Branding: Institutionalization and Legitimacy

As the discussion of institutionalization has shown, this process is not only related—on a broad scale—to professionalization, but to the processes of occupational branding, as well.

Underlying institutional work is its emphasis on a certain normalizing function, one which intends to result in the creation and acceptance of an entity's public image in a manner that allows and encourages a taken for granted association. This is indicated as the implicit objective of occupational branding as well, in terms of the processes' interest in shaping societal perception to coincide with its preferred image. Furthermore, both concepts espouse adhering to a public image which is constructed so as to furtively advance its own interests. Both institutionalization and occupational branding thus emphasize collective judgments which serve their own purposes and, in doing so, lend their respective entity social stability.

#### Institutional Work as Identity Work

Also underlying the assumption of the relationship between institutionalization and implementation of occupational branding is the notion of institutional work as identity work. This idea is explored by Hughes and Hughes, who equate socio-institutionalism's "normative and cultural-cognitive frameworks" (32) as a means to "provide role definition and give members a sense of identity" (32). Accordingly, professional identities "are socially constructed" (32) in an attempt to transform individuals into practitioners reflective of professional ideals. With an understanding of the professions as social institutions, "there is always the potential for the professional institutions in providing some kind of identity and recognition" (33). Bitektine and Haack draw a similar conclusion, asserting institutional work as being concerned with identity formation. This view is demonstrated in their conclusion that "By rendering organizations and practices widely accepted and even taken for granted, institutionalization plays

a crucial role in transmitting social order to a new generation . . . and in ensuring isomorphism and conformance in individual actors' judgments and actions" (53).

In acknowledging that "professional institutions have traditionally been at the forefront of social agendas" (34), institutional work is corroborated as being interested in the strategic collective identity work emphasized by occupational branding. As Hughes and Hughes detail, "A key feature of a professional institution is the commitment to maintain and promote the usefulness of the profession for the public advantage, *i.e.* to serve the public interest" (34). In other words, a profession must position itself for recognition—by the public—of the primacy of its expert knowledge and the profession's ultimate authority in the exercise of such expertise. As the study illustrates, "there is evidence that support from stakeholders from the wider institutional environment is key to enabling and sustaining change and innovation" (33). As such, technical communication should seek to influence and shape the perception of not only its practitioners, but society-at-large. Through developing the field's established professional identity and working to gain societal and cultural legitimacy of this identity, the field would greatly increase its chances at successfully increasing its professional status.

### Occupational Brand Production

As mentioned previously, occupational branding has an overt interest in "the creation of an occupational brand, or a habitual, taken-for-granted association between a line of work and a condensed image" (476), an interest which obviously foretells its intimate relation with the processes of institutionalization described above. It is through this function of occupational branding and its production of an occupational brand that the process is able to satisfy the



institutional work of professionalization. Defined as “highly distilled essences aimed at abridging or standing in for the complexity of occupational identity” (476), these occupational brands function as the means with which “to invoke a knee jerk response—a reflex, rather than reflexive, reaction—among multiple stakeholders” (476). Their construction assists in brand creation through their ability to communicate the most essential aspects of professional identity, without the need to be highly demanding of any number of stakeholders pertinent to the profession. They enable the profession to concisely craft what is perceived as its occupational core, as well as to communicate this identity in a way that resonates with a diverse population. As explained by the researchers, occupational branding recognizes that “most occupations have a public image (that is, abstractions of their fundamental content, value and likely practitioners) and that various stakeholders consume and act upon this image” (476). By creating this habitual association and promoting public adherence to this identity conception, occupational branding aims to assist in the production, coproduction and reproduction of meaning. As a form of institutionalization, occupational brand production satisfies many objectives of the former: “to enhance efficiency, create predictability and reduce uncertainty, imposing barriers or constraints on behavior that affect the range of options open to the individual” (Dolfsma and Verburg 1033).

For Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam and Sullivan, occupational branding considers such a brand to be an object of knowledge. Defined as “perpetually unfinished; problematic rather than predetermined” (477), seeing the brand as an object of knowledge necessarily implies that its meaning is fluid. In other words, “brands are continually under construction . . . [and] Their pliable character invites intervention” (477). In fact, it is only “through interaction with stakeholders [that] brands assume ‘objectivity,’ a readily recognizable form or stable essence”

(477). It is due to this malleability and adaptive quality that occupational branding is capable of organizing and managing the meaning of a specific like of work, functioning as “coordinating objects through which multiple agents (for example, people, institutions and artefacts) meet and are mediated” (477). By implementing occupational branding within a group’s professionalization endeavor, the process “facilitates control over work through interface among stakeholders across place and time” (477), allowing the profession to brand itself through communicating its professional identity to a diverse audience.

Coskuner-Balli provides evidence of the association between occupational brand production and legitimacy, acknowledging that “legitimacy dynamics incorporate a broad array of social behavior including the acceptance of brands” (195). Occupational branding and institutional work are significant to technical communication’s professionalization project, as both concepts emphasize the importance of creating a widespread, culturally-relevant and accepted notion. Coskuner-Balli offers great insight into an occupational branding endeavor, claiming that obtainment of social legitimacy depends on an entity’s effective public performance; as she details, “performances are successful only insofar as they can ‘re-fuse’ increasingly disentangled elements in the eyes of the audience” (195). As a field attempts to create an institutionalized, or “branded” occupation, “the cultural meanings and scripts that are being enacted by actors and more importantly the ways in which the audience interpret these performances are key to legitimacy of social action” (195). The study’s focus on market practices of legitimation indicates the manner in which “consumer studies bring forth the agentic abilities of individual actors in subverting meanings, transgressing norms and structures through mobilization of market resources” (197). The actions being described here thus fall under the

same activities involved in occupational branding—and even outline specific strategies which may be used to that end.

### Occupational Branding Activities: Market Practices of Legitimation

Coskuner-Balli's recommendations regarding market practices of legitimation are useful in providing a basis for creating an occupational branding framework aimed at achievement of established professional identity, legitimacy building, institutionalization of the technical communication position and, ultimately, satisfaction of the field's professionalization project. As Coskuner-Balli contends, "communities who can claim jurisdiction as well as communicate the value of their work to a large group of constituents" (203) are those that will also "enjoy both cultural and social legitimacy" (204). The following discussion illustrates these aforementioned market practices of legitimation.

#### Mobilizing Cultural Myths

Cultural myth is a term used to describe "a popular belief embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or a segment of society" (197). Because of their culturally-relevant permeability, such widespread beliefs factor greatly into "the creation of compelling brand stories and the construction of individual and national identities" (197). Coskuner-Balli suggests mobilizing cultural myths as a legitimacy-building activity, a process that "refers to groups rearticulating the meanings of their . . . work . . . vis-à-vis the dominant cultural myths and practices" (197). She cites examples which demonstrate groups that were able to rearticulate meanings associated with "a once stigmatized activity" (197): the transformation from gambling perceived as being "aligned with filth and poverty" (197) to associated "with entertainment,

excitement and wealth” (197); or of Star Trek rearticulating the negative stigma of being a “Trekkie” to one that fans associate with a “respect for diversity, the universality of alienation and the formation of a future utopian society of free justice” (197). In either case, the examples illustrate the manner in which “mobilization strategies” (197) have made a group’s consumption practice “less stigmatic . . . and more legitimate” (197). Such accomplishment was made possible through a mobilization that involved “highlight[ing] relevance to a broader audience group” (198) and branding an occupation’s work in a way capable of “offering a more appropriate definition” (198)—specifically citing defining work boundaries “by claiming jurisdiction over areas of social, political and ideological issues” (198) related to a field of study. Mobilizing cultural myths contributes to a field’s social and cultural legitimacy by enabling it to distinguish itself from other fields; in addition, it is able to enhance “the range of their cultural jurisdiction and make known their treatments and inferences and academic knowledge to wider audiences” (205).

### Code Switching

Code switching refers to an ability “to employ different habitus in diverse social fields” (198), an activity which illustrates an entity as being capable of effective communication within various audience segments. According to Coskuner-Balli, it “requires not only high social, cultural and at times economical capital but also a reflexive awareness of the desired modes of conduct in different social settings” (198-199). The claim is made that codeswitching is beneficial in that it “can aid academic communities to attain cultural legitimacy and broaden their scope of jurisdiction” (199), a finding founded in its ability to “prevent hyperprofessionalism

[sic]" (199) and its narrow intellectual focus; to "exhilarate the diffusion of new ideas and approaches" (200) by increasing broad communicative practices and reach; and to "help address incommensurability issues" (200) arising from the transference of such communication across various fields and among divergent audiences.

### Creating Market Resources

In terms of an emergent field, availability of resources is indicated by Coskuner-Balli as crucial to "the sustainability and growth of the community" (200). To establish their presence and broader their reach, "communities need to create and legitimate alternative publication outlets, conferences, organizations and educational tools" (200). In a study of entrepreneurial strategies used by "the subfield of Consumer Culture Theory within consumer behavior" (193), Coskuner-Balli indicates the creation of market resources such as "online blogs" (201), or the use of "film and books in order to create alternative media of knowledge" (201), as efforts conducive to "the long-term impact and diffusion of useful and relevant work" (201). Moreover, collective research projects were found "to facilitate mentoring, transgress institutional boundaries and create formal platforms investing in social relations with other interested communities" (201). When such market resources were successfully created by an emergent field, the group was viewed as finding simultaneous success in the expansion of cultural legitimacy. Decidedly, it has "the potential not only to push the market to provide fitting resources but also to create liminal social and material spaces and transform market relations" (205). In creating alternative market resources, an occupation is investing in the future success of

the profession, while also helping to ensure that its associated status within society reflects the level desired by the group.

### Community Building

As “a group of individuals marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility” (201), Coskuner-Balli locates the established community’s benefit as stemming from the support it offers members “through creating a sense of belonging as well as offering a source of subcultural capital” (201). In community building strategies, “Consumers mobilize virtual, liminal and geographic spaces to build communities, enhance their social relations and share their experiences” (201). The author portrays practical implementations of such strategies, citing examples such as “branding the community by adopting a name and investing in new community structures” (202), describing its research community’s “theoretical interests” (202), definitively defining jurisdiction areas, “organizing annual gatherings” (202) and otherwise “describing the boundaries, traditions and theories of the field” (202). Such activities are said to build community through the creation of a consciousness of kind, a term used to describe a circumstance in which individuals identify themselves as a member of the community, interact with other members of that community and stay current with members’ professional work. This shared sense of identity further ensures that members “share a common language, common understanding and adaptation of a theory, a class of problems or methodology” (202), creating a communal perspective which facilitates consistency in individual members and enables them to easily identify themselves in terms of the group. Finally, community building “helps groups create and sustain an alternative identity” (205), by

“build[ing] solidarity” (205) and, ultimately, “transform[ing] an informal community into a legitimate subfield” (205).

#### Intermedia Agenda-setting

Huang-Horowitz provides another strategy for building social and cultural legitimacy through a discussion of intermedia agenda-setting. Described as “the process of salience transfer from the media agenda to the public agenda” (3), the concept is centered in a transfer of salience that “involves both objects, what to think about, and attributes, how to think about the object” (3). The study describes what is termed as “the status conferral function” (6) occurring among and between media and a specific entity, a theory which proposes that “when the media provide coverage to specific objects, such as organizations or social movements, they also confer status upon those very objects” (6). The media is hence viewed as possessing a sort of “legitimizing power” (6) which enables it to “provide a measure of legitimacy, affect audiences’ perceptions of legitimacy, and propagate the legitimacy of an emerging field” (6). As a discourse, media is able to provide the mechanism through which institutions are established and individual behavior is shaped. In understanding the institutionalization of an emergent field, the study finds that “Participating agents can obtain legitimacy for an emerging field through discursive interactions in the media contexts” (7). It is through such authoritative measures that media may be used by an emergent field in the propagation of its professional meaning and expertise, enabling the group to draw upon an existing medium in order to make definitive legitimacy gains and to influence societal perception in a manner that reflects the groups’ desired preference.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ACHIEVING PROFESSIONALIZATION IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

### Key Findings and Discussion of Results

The process of technical communication's quest for professionalization—while much discussed and certainly enduring—has been severely hampered by the field's lack of an established professional identity. This absence not only prevents the field's market identifiability, diminishes claims of expertise, prevents jurisdiction over work and thwarts development of social and cultural legitimacy, but also precludes any attempt at presenting the profession as distinguished, or as reflective of professional status. Findings show the primary factor hindering technical communication's rise to professional status is a lack of professional identity, which prevents claims of professional expertise and jurisdiction over the work, while also inhibiting social and cultural legitimacy.

Without an established professional identity, technical communication has found limited success in its enduring professionalization project. This absence has taken a toll on the field, preventing the formation of a common sense of being amongst members which has had severe consequences. Without an established identity, or the identifying set conventions or standards that accompany it, technical communication has experienced a noticeable split between its professional and pedagogic spheres. While many studies of the professions emphasize such elements as an established body of knowledge, licensure or certification of practitioners, accreditation of degree programs or guiding ethical standards, the field has yet to reach a consensus on decisions which must be made prior to the pursuit of such steps towards professionalism. At its most fundamental level, the lack of established identity can be found to



underlie an assumption of the field's lack of perceivable unifying principles. Additional factors are pertinent in this regard, such as the absence of a professional history or a historical narrative capable of bestowing credibility, value and significance upon the technical communication line of work. Such circumstances make mature self-knowledge of professionals elusive and may be further telling, implying that an absence of unifying principles and shared background may actually be indicative of naivety regarding the power of collectivity, or even evidence a rather apathetic professional project. Such ambiguity surrounding the professional's identity, or the occupation's conventions of practices and work-related activities, has only further compounded problematic issues identified within the field.

Technical communicators have—and continue to—report a perceived lack of status and recognition of the field. This condition, rather than coming as a surprise, seems to be more of an expected outcome upon consideration of an absent professional identity. Without established parameters regarding the technical communication line of work, colleagues, clients—even some communicators themselves—have no basis upon which understanding and expectations may be formed. Without such distinction, receiving recognition from wider society is nearly impossible; providing no tangible markers of distinction, the resultant shapelessness promotes an absence of identifiability which has seemingly become difficult to shake. Status concerns result from an inability to be perceived as having a high social value and society's ignorance of the technical communication expertise relegates many practitioners to low-level skill utilization and rudimentary work activities. While communicators have long since expressed such concerns, and though the field did indeed suffer from early misgivings—in terms of its professional origins, working relationships with trivializing coworkers and contempt from academic colleagues—such

inaugural griefs have only persisted because they have been tolerated. Many researchers have named a lack of social presence and commitment to social activism as one of the field's most significant deficiencies. Early power differentials do not necessitate enduring conditions, nor do they define the profession's position—they simply require the attention and action of those with an interest in their transformation.

As another consequence of technical communication's lack of professional identity, the field's difficulty in defining their specific form of expertise has equally impacted its current standing. Plagued by the same factors hampering their status and recognition—those which, again, fall under the umbrella of “absent unifying principles”—a subsequent ambiguous and misunderstood professional identity is essentially unavoidable. Again, there is an implication that the difficulty of defining expertise is due to the field's lack of consensus on relevant issues, as well as the historically contentious struggle for prestige. Without established standards or conventions of practice, there is no foundation from which a collective expert knowledge may be deduced. As a result, technical communication does not provide practitioners with the sort of shared principles necessary to the development of a professional approach which communicates stability of knowledge, consistency of performance, or expectations of professional behavior. The fact that the profession has a long history involving a struggle for prestige further implicates an inability to establish itself as possessing a scarce source of expertise, a notion that not only further cements claims of being “nonprofessional,” but also prevents societal recognition of the worth and validity of their expert knowledge—a necessary component of the legitimation process.

## Occupational Branding within the Professionalization of Technical Communication

Professional status is no longer awarded to occupational groups on the sole basis of their professional knowledge and right to practice, but involves a more complex process which introduces the concept of positively shaping public opinion. While expert knowledge gained through some form of specialized training or education and securing jurisdiction via legal or governmental entities was once sufficient, expertise and jurisdiction now hinge on a profession's ability to legitimize these same boundaries in the eyes of wider society. Thus, professional status attainment within the modern economy may be determined by a complex interplay of expert knowledge, professional jurisdiction and social and cultural legitimacy. If an occupational group aspires to reach a level of professional status, the modern economy demands the use of market based practice, as well. Public perception is key to an occupational group's public standing and, further, the process of bending public opinion to one's will has become crucial. In short, professionalism equates to professional status only when social and cultural legitimacy has been achieved. An emergent field is inseparable from its relationship with wider society, because of the latter's role in determining associated meaning and provision of authoritative support. A profession's level of establishment is wholly reliant on its ability to construct an identity that is perceived as both legitimate and in accordance with wider societal values.

Essentially, an established profession emerges from an occupational group's ability to establish successful exclusivity claims, on the basis of distinguishing their work from others; it is further dependent on its ability to secure various types of closure, which effectively monopolizes both jurisdiction over work and professional expertise. Exclusivity claims assist an occupational group in securing and structuring the market in their favor, further cementing their claims to

jurisdiction and delegitimizing potential competitors. Occupational branding designates successful exclusivity claims as pivotal to the professionalization process, designating it as the initial distinguishable feature of an occupational group which establishes jurisdiction over their specific knowledge domain and further claims exclusivity of the professionals themselves. It further acknowledges such jurisdiction contests as the primary mechanism through which professionalization is achieved, describing circumstances in which stakeholders struggle for control of work. The processes of occupational branding further assert that these jurisdiction contests are determined through the occupational group's ability to effectively promote their views regarding the nature of their professional tasks, to dispute and disprove the claims of divergent groups and to advocate their professional knowledge as equating to mandatory expertise. Within occupational branding, a successful exclusivity claim is the result of an occupational group's ability to shape assumptions regarding their professional knowledge. These areas of influence involve establishing the worth of their particular expertise, creating clear boundaries surrounding the knowledge it requires and naming its practitioners as the appropriate source to exercise it. This occupational identity work is necessarily collective, creating a normative structure from which the profession's institutional forms may emerge. Collective collaboration provides a consistency enabling professional monopolies and formal or informal credentialing procedures, while also increasing salary and market demand.

The strategic identity work of occupational branding would contribute to technical communication's professional project through strengthening its exclusivity claim and encouraging inter-occupational collaboration. Framing the modern day exclusivity claim as a branding endeavor that recognizes the tangible benefits of managing meaning, the approach advocates

concerted professional efforts aimed at generating awareness and influencing perception. When implemented within technical communication's professionalization, occupational branding involves collaborative, consensual efforts, with the potential to resolve the pedagogical/professional split. The necessity of carefully defining work tasks and professional knowledge within constructing an established identity directly addresses concerns pertinent to the field's current ambiguity, facilitating an exact definition of the technical communication expertise. These factors would force technical communicators to both address and resolve those issues which have historically plagued the field and prevented its progress, while simultaneously encouraging active participation and facilitating collective mobility.

In addition to monopolizing an occupational group's expert knowledge, professional status is seen as a consequence of the group's ability to maintain control over the market for their services. A profession's performance in these regards is measured in terms of their ability to garner the social and cultural legitimacy necessary for societal acceptance of such established occupational boundaries; this rests, in turn, upon the profession's successful exclusivity claim, which effectively distinguishes its work from others. The extent to which their professional status and prestige is acknowledged is further determined by their successful closure of access to market opportunities, be it by way of legally-sanctioned certification, cultural legitimization of their profession's appropriateness and credibility, or both. Hence, technical communication's professionalization project must incorporate a more contextually-appropriate means by which prestige is garnered. These circumstances have resulted in processes of closure that gain status via creating a culture of using one's services and in legitimization of expert knowledge. An occupational group's ability to garner social and cultural legitimacy is crucial to its coinciding

professional status. A process of legitimation entails establishing and reinforcing connections between an object or entity and its meaning; this level of association is achieved through the efforts of actors who embed, then routinize forms and their linked meanings in a process of repetition. Effective legitimation results in societal acceptance of the meaning surrounding a specific entity; one in which the legitimacy seeking party has established their preferred meaning, in terms of societal perception.

Occupational branding assists in processes of legitimation in two ways, increasing legitimacy of an occupation via the production and destruction of value, in addition to the establishment of an occupational brand. Value claims are based in knowledge exclusivity claims which are often viewed as political assertions of a profession's worth. Knowledge exclusivity is capable of producing both economic and non-economic value, the former involving salary and profit and the latter referring to professional autonomy, designation as complex work and recognition of social responsibility. An occupation achieves such ends through an examination of professional identity and an assessment of that identity's worth, constructing a professional identity that best projects its ideal image and promoting societal adherence to this image. The profession enables its professionals to be seen as furthering its claim to exclusivity, manipulating its public image in a way that elicits the profession as deserving a high valuation on the basis of its practitioners, their professional activities, organizational contributions, employing organizations and clientele. Collective identity construction benefits the profession by enabling their own definition of occupational value and, consequently, furthering their success in the struggle over resources.

Legitimation processes operate on the level of the individual's personal judgment regarding such social acceptance—propriety—or a collective consensus regarding legitimacy, known as validity. Rather than a conclusion which results from one's personal judgment, propriety is influenced by wider culture in that the individual's assessment is made in accordance with some already-established set of cultural norms. This characteristic represents the manner in which an emergent field may hope to influence individual propriety, as controlling which set of cultural norms used in decision-making may result in convergent judgment decisions. Various methods of legitimacy building are relevant to influencing assessments of propriety, strategies in which legitimacy gains are made through active participation. Akin to approaches intended to influence propriety assessments, occupational branding intends to engage professionals in collective action and promote the implementation of persuasive influence tactics. Claims of value within occupational branding are established through the use of such strategic persuasion, as is construction of the preferred, distilled professional image. When a community is formed in which shared goals and mutual concerns have been established, collective efforts have the potential to become strong motivators within the professional itself, as well as wider society, in terms of the profession's interest-based activities and consequent impact.

Validity is important due to the judgment it renders regarding a specific entity's perceived legitimacy; this decision, rather than confined to an individual or even a specific subset of individuals, is viewed as applicable to the beliefs of wider society. Various sources have been recognized as plausible sources of validity, such as majority opinion and media. Although validity judgments occur on a much larger scale than those involving propriety, they are still capable of being influenced through many of the same tactics used in coercion attempts that

occur on the smaller scale. The interconnectedness of the macro- and micro-levels of legitimacy is crucial to an understanding of the manner in which processes of legitimation do not occur in a vacuum, but rather reverberate subsequent conclusions among and between the many layers of society and culture, inflicting change on a number of levels. The validity component of legitimation is crucial to a discussion of an emergent field's professional status in that, like an occupational brand, it represents a mechanism through which collective, habitual associations are formed. Reflective of not only such established linked meanings, but also of society's acceptance of such definitions, they provide society the means with which assessments of legitimacy and appropriateness are made. In addition, these shared agreements provide individuals with a putative knowledge that guides subsequent behaviors and actions; in this manner, validity judgments stabilize societal interactions, attitudes and wide-held beliefs, leading to a probable consistency in shared perception. These forms of social acceptability, credibility or legitimacy are a necessary precursor to the further-cemented process of institutionalization.

Once established, a profession's now-habitualized association generates a stability that enables individuals to internalize social norms, before eventually going on to presuppose their relevancy and, unknowingly, recreate them. Institutions structure societal relations in a way that stabilizes both the normative structure and consent regarding shared values and beliefs; social institutions—such as the professions—normalize acceptable identities and socialize behaviors and attitudes of the individuals who function within them. As a form of institutionalization, professionalization involves activities intended to imbue a specific profession with a particular normative value. In this manner, the production of expertise is endowed with a certain structure, order and meaning, which shape its identity and deem such an identity culturally appropriate.



Institutions can be altered and established through directed efforts of professionals and professions. Such changes are best accepted when the occupational group is able to heighten the uncertainty surrounding conditions within their environment, creating a situation in which circumstances are conducive to institutional change. During such periods, the profession is able to take advantage of a perceived instability, so as to allow for the emergence of new practices and claims, restructuring of status hierarchies and redrawing of certain boundaries around the profession's work. Because periods of institutional change often involve a restructuring of expertise and authority, they are—perhaps most importantly—constructive to any group's claims regarding status mobility.

With its interest in the production, coproduction and reproduction of an occupational brand, occupational branding is an opportunity to achieve such institutionalization. It recognizes the tendency of professions to encompass a specific public image, in terms of assumptions regarding professional activities, value of work and expectations of practitioners, as well as how such perceived notions affect the attitudes, values and beliefs of wider society. Establishment of an occupational brand involves structuring stakeholder interactions that enable formation and acceptance of a specific, highly distilled essence. An enduring process, this aspect of occupational branding projects the profession as possessing an identifiable form and communicates stability of this image through continued exchange with stakeholders over periods of time. As such, the occupational brand facilitates the profession's control over work through promoting the temporal and spatial movement of meaning within interactions with shareholders. The result is a dynamic occupational brand that allows for the creation of a well-established, accepted social rule and concludes in institutionalization of professional identity.

By constructing the meaning surrounding their profession, an occupational group is able to portray an image which designates their knowledge as a scarce expertise and their profession as the appropriate source for the services they provide. These efforts, in turn, create the foundation upon which market, occupational/professional and social closure are based and further increase the group's success in claims of jurisdiction, expertise and social and cultural legitimacy. Through activities intended to assist in the construction of collective professional identity, occupational branding benefits increased status by enabling a group's management of professional meaning, facilitating the creation of an occupational brand and assisting in value production. In perceiving professionalization as the performance of strategic collective identity work, occupational branding represents an attempt to effectively construct the identity of an occupation, as well as its practitioners. By creating and linking meanings and relative positions of people, practices, institutions and objects, occupational branding enables technical communication to construct a professional identity, encourages collaboration resulting in a definitive expertise and resolve issues regarding status and recognition.

Now armed with a solid background in technical communication's professionalization project and well-developed framework of the processes of occupational branding, how does such knowledge translate into actual implementation? What, then, would a practical application of the theory look like? Outlining such an effort along the same lines exemplified within the discussion of airline pilots and massage therapists, technical communication should endeavor to resolve any perceived lack of status and inferiority by definitively defining its expertise, providing tangible markers of distinction and conveying the scarcity of its expert knowledge. I suggest that such aims be realized through increasing our social presence and commitment to activism, so as to

establish the field and its professionals as having a high social value via strengthening ties to established professions which have obtained the social and cultural legitimacy necessary for occupational institutionalization. Through concerted efforts aimed at the members of our professions, the professional institution and wider civil society, technical communication could satisfy its need for brand and value creation.

The first step in such an undertaking necessarily involves members of our profession participating in activities involving strategic collective identity work. Implementing occupational branding within technical communication's professionalization project begins with efforts to construct occupational meaning, ultimately leading to an established definition of the field's collective identity. Through execution of project-based collaborations—namely, the technical communication body of knowledge initiative—cooperation between academics and practitioners would not only facilitate the formation of a common sense of being, but also assist in resolving the field's internal divisions. Such collaborations would entail members of our profession working together to persuasively define our occupational worth and its required knowledge, while establishing a common body of knowledge would enable communicators to structure themselves as the ultimate authority in the provision of such services. Furthermore, it is my belief that we increase emphasis on community-building activities in an effort to build solidarity. Technical communication's professional organizations should thus encourage inter-organizational social relations, uniting forces to organize joint conferences and other cooperative meetings. Organized proceedings would assist in establishing our presence and broadening our reach, enabling a collaborative undertaking while would allow for a unification of vision, in

terms of shared goals and interests, while simultaneously providing a forum in which determination of such professional goals may be discussed, negotiated and agreed upon.

Upon solidifying the technical communication collective occupational identity, we could then focus efforts outward, with activities meant to influence the professional institution and wider civil society. This phase of implementation involves increasing our social presence and commitment to activism, in an effort to provide society with information enabling tangible markers of distinction, as well as the establishment of our profession's high social value. To do so, technical communication must close access to market opportunities; whether this is accomplished through certification systems or societal legitimization of expertise, the profession must increase its legitimacy through rearticulating the meaning and value of work. Akin to the massage therapist case, the field should seek to organize and implement a far-reaching branding campaign intended to promote acceptance of and adherence to our preferred ideal image. Technical communicators should engage with the professional institution, positively influencing perception of occupational worth through interactions conveying the exclusivity of expert knowledge and of knowledge practitioners. Communicators should actively participate in activities capable of offering such returns, such as lobbying for government recognition, or building networks with the engineers, developers and other SMEs with whom we work. such instances are opportunities to not only resolve professional ambiguity, but also chances for communicators to provide clarity regarding the usefulness of our profession, to instill in other professional communities an understanding of our occupational worth—and perhaps even to provide colleagues with definitive proof of outcomes yielded. Continued efforts to broaden our professional reach and promote identifiability, such as creating outreach programs within high

schools that promote student interest and discuss career opportunities, disseminating materials to guidance counselors that promote awareness and provide resources for additional information, or any other number of efforts that further establish social presence and standing—would facilitate in the construction of a distinguished, worthy, socially significant and recognizably rewarding, perception of technical communication. Through implementation of the processes of occupational branding within the professionalization project of technical communication, the field promotes identifiability and establishes the profession's presence within wider society. The establishment of such an identifiable form fosters acceptance of the profession's preferred, condensed image, promotes continued adherence to such valorization and facilitates status mobility. Through execution of the strategic collective identity work described by the processes of occupational branding, strategic brand and value production negates technical communication's correlation to a perceived lack of status and recognition and reconstructs an image conducive to the success of its professionalization project. By enhancing social presence, engaging in interest-driven activism and giving the profession a distinctive form, technical communication strengthens exclusivity claims and positions itself for maximum reward.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Possibilities for further research involve further examination into professionalization approaches currently being used within the modern professional environment. As many have recently asserted, there is a common belief among researchers regarding what is perceived to be the erosion of professionalism. Traditional approaches to professionalism, rooted in authority on the basis of legal recognition and attainment of market and professional closure, are now often

viewed as incapable of achieving the level of closure they once ensured. The occupational branding described here is one example of a recommended professionalization approach that attempts to respond to such concerns, intending to further an occupational group's exclusivity claim beyond historically drawn upon formal measures. I recommend further research into the effectiveness of such professionalization approaches, with an interest in whether or not a professional project involving facilitation of legitimacy and cultural acceptance produces greater results. Researchers may also endeavor to understand whether the various models of closure demonstrated within traditional approaches to professionalism are still relevant, or even plausible, within today's modern professional environment.

The collective occupational identity work of occupational branding offers numerous opportunities to resolve issues known to hinder the professional project's success and positions the field for future activities and furthered progress. Its interest in the production and destruction of value addresses status concerns, requiring the field to produce its own assertion of worth. Now able to control definition of expertise, as well as to provide the means by which others may understand the value of their work, technical communication is better positioned to perform work in which practitioners operate at full capacity and to depict scarcity of their expert knowledge. With the strategic collective identity work of occupational branding and establishment of professional identity, market control of expertise and collective mobility are now possible. Through strategic work on the identity of work, establishment of occupational brand and value, the field will institutionalize the profession, increase its status and prestige—and, finally, realize the professionalization of technical communication. For those who, like me, are on the verge on beginning our careers in the field, such prospects offer an increased likelihood of professional

success and further our opportunity to participate in a recognizably rewarding field. With continued job growth, expansion into new fields of employment and enhanced relevancy already on the horizon, the future holds great promise for technical communication. With the implementation of occupational branding within the field's professionalization project, technical communication offers practitioners great prospects for success, exploits the appeal of processes of professionalism to their fullest potential—and only further stacks the odds in our favor.

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