

Promoting Technical and Scientific Communications at James Madison University

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Abstract

The TSC major is a diverse and beneficial program that allows students to improve on their skills and apply their knowledge. Unfortunately, the ITSC program at JMU has low visibility, and as a result, most of the students on the JMU campus are unaware that the major exists. The purpose of my research project is to discover a way to publicize the Institute of Technical and Scientific Communications (ITSC) to become more visible to both current and potential JMU students. Using surveys and student opinion, I have discovered a few ways in which the ITSC can become more desirable and visible to the JMU population. By including TSC 210 in a General Education cluster, the ITSC will receive publicity and recognition as a beneficial major. On-campus involvement would also allow for better recognition of the ITSC, so that more students become aware of the program by word-of-mouth and reputation. Another way to receive publicity is through outside recognition through high school involvement. Finally, the ITSC would be better served in a college other than the College of Arts and Letters. The College of Communication, Information, and Media would be a better location for the ITSC program, since other programs such as the School of Media Arts and Design (SMAD) and the School of Communication Studies would be able to offer a better rounded education in communications to benefit TSC students.

Introduction

For the Spring 2005 semester in TSC 230, I have been researching the Technical and Scientific Communications (TSC) major to discover why the major is having difficulty expanding. (It is interesting how something as simple as paper can affect something so great, and yet money is what makes the world go round.) In the very beginning of my research, I discovered a catch-22: The major cannot expand because it does not have the money to do so, and it cannot get more money until more students join, and it cannot get more students without the money to pay for more professors. Throughout this semester, I have talked to TSC professors and students to discover an end to the cycle. I have developed a few concepts to build on current possibilities and student recommendations.

TSC History

Technical and scientific communication has existed since the beginning of science. Anyone that has ever had to write directions or an explanation of a new technology or information was using technical and scientific communication. Since our society is always inventing new technologies and science is always expanding to new horizons, technical communication is even more important today than ever in history. At the beginning of TSC, the skill of technical writing was simply a concentration within the English department. While the English department is a good starting point, the TSC is not the typical English writing and eventually broke away to form the Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication (ITSC) in 1996.

Student Benefits

The first question I asked myself was why does TSC matter? What makes it special? These are very important questions to ask, since their answers are exactly what we should be promoting. TSC has become so much more than technical writing, and has emerged in a time it is needed most. Since there can never be enough technical writers, the TSC major has many benefits to students, and James Madison University (JMU) offers one of the best TSC programs of any university nationwide.

The Institute of Technical and Scientific Communications (ITSC) offers one of the most diverse majors on the JMU campus, and it allows students to shape their education. TSC offers the skills necessary for a well-rounded education, including document design, web design, publications management, editing, and writing skills. The small class sizes allow for one-on-one help from knowledgeable professors and allow for easy class discussions. With all of these benefits from the ITSC, students are well prepared for the real world and future jobs. With so many reasons to major in the ITSC, the question becomes why are there so few students in the ITSC?

Current Considerations

Currently, the Ad Hac Committee is considering a reconstruction of communication majors at JMU. The committee has considered moving the ITSC to other colleges such as the College of Business (COB), the College of Integrated Science and Technology (ISAT), or creating a new college, the College of Communication, Information, and Media (CCIM), which would contain Communication studies, Media Arts and Design, and Technical and Scientific Communication. Each of the colleges offers pros and cons for TSC. The COB offers a focus on business marketing, while ISAT offers a more scientific view of technical communication. The CCIM offers a focus on communications in general with complementing communication departments under one college. There are cons of each move as well. If the ITSC were moved to COB, there would be little to no science involved, and there might be more business management than wanted in a technical field. If the ITSC were move to ISAT, there might be more science than wanted, with few business skills. The ITSC seems to have qualities that fit in both the COB and ISAT, however, it also seems to be a nice medium. If ITSC were moved to

the CCIM, the classes might focus too much on communications and lose both its business and science aspects. Any way that the ITSC is moved, there are benefits and repercussions.

Research

The main source of research for this project comes from the student survey I administered to current TSC students.

Survey Statistics¹

For this research project, I issued a survey to students concerning their feelings on various topics of TSC. The survey was crucial to my research. I discovered many of the reasons behind students' decisions to major in TSC and how they felt about the major after they began taking courses. TSC students had many opinions and recommendations for the ITSC. In Appendix A, I have included the survey that the students received and the results. On the following pages, I have written some of the important statistics taken from the survey administered the week of April 11-15 of 2005. Graphs have also been added to visually display the results.

Finding the ITSC

According to the survey I administered to current TSC majors and minors, students discovered the ITSC program in a variety of ways. Forty-four percent of students who partook in the survey discovered the TSC major from a friend or teacher. Thirty-four percent said they discovered TSC through an advisor, orientation, course catalog, class speakers, or fliers. Fifteen percent discovered TSC through and informational email, and seven percent found TSC by accessing the ITSC website (see Figure 1.)

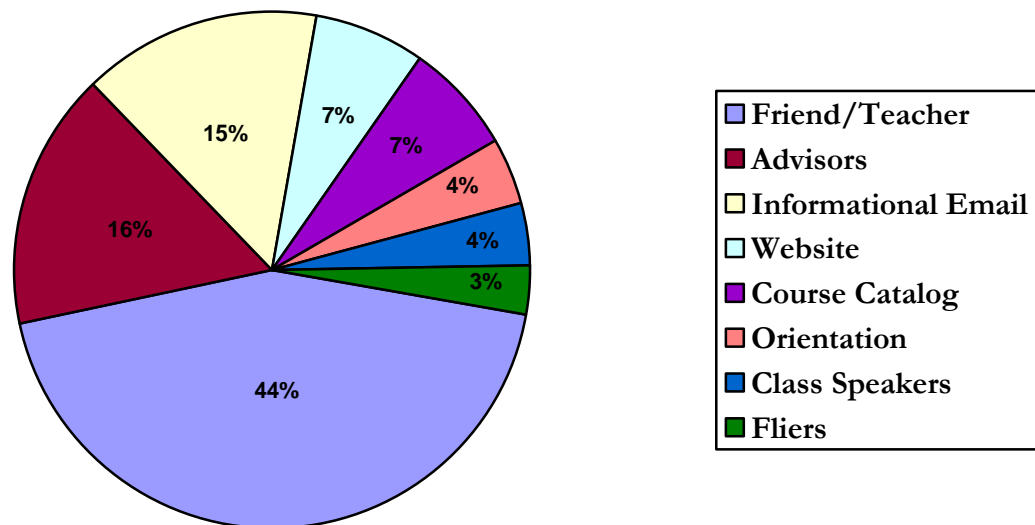


Figure 1. Pie Chart Displaying How Students Discovered TSC

¹ Harmon, Keitha. Students feelings of TSC. Administered April 11-15, 2005. See survey on pages 15-18

Choosing the ITSC

According to the survey, students chose to major/minor in TSC for many reasons. Twenty percent of students said they chose TSC because it was the closest major to what they wanted to learn throughout their undergraduate education. Nineteen percent of students said they chose TSC because it seemed interesting, sixteen percent said TSC offered the best benefits for a future job, fifteen percent said they chose TSC because of the courses offered, thirteen percent liked the benefits TSC offered to their overall education, twelve percent thought the major/minor was the best they had found, and five percent had no response (see Figure 2.)

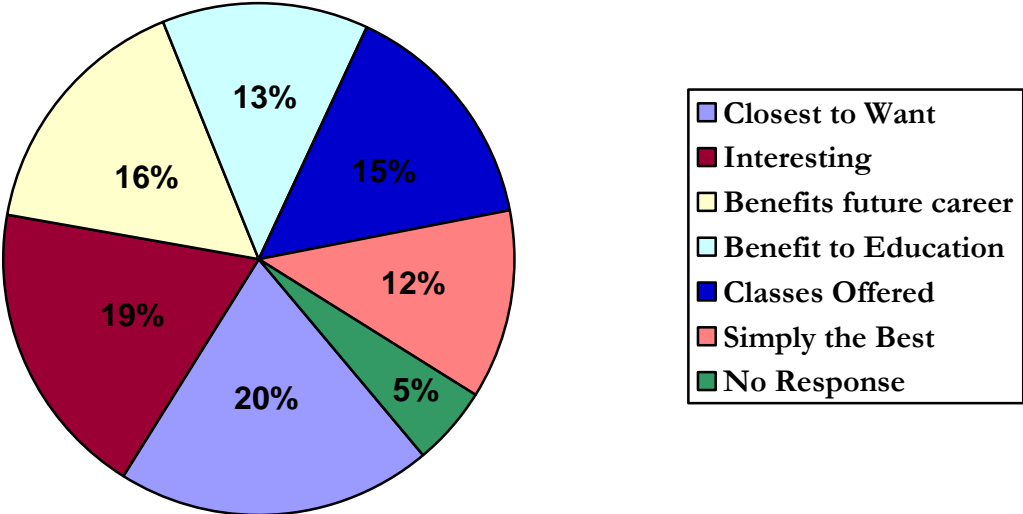


Figure 2. Pie Chart Displaying Why Students Chose the TSC Major

Moving the ITSC

I thought it would be interesting to see how students within the ITSC felt about moving out of the College of Arts and Letters (CAL). When asked about the association between themselves and CAL, fifty-one percent of students felt highly to moderately connected, while forty-nine percent felt little to no connection (see Figure 3.)

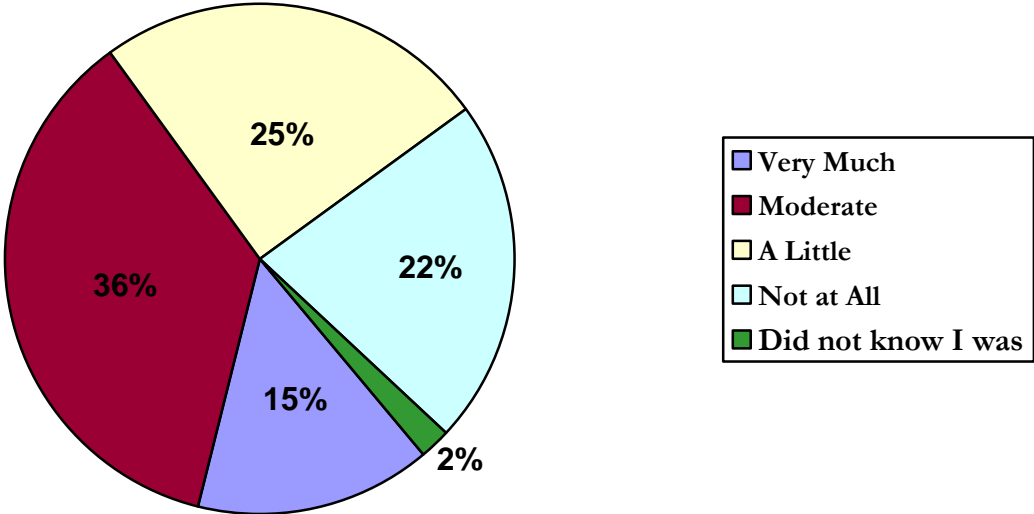


Figure 3. Pie Chart Displaying How Connected Current TSC Students Feel to the College of Arts and Letters

After reviewing the association between the students and CAL, I looked at the students' opinions of other possible colleges where the ITSC could be moved. Twenty-four percent thought TSC could be better served at the College of Business, while seventy-one percent thought it would be an ineffective match. For the College of Integrated Science and Technology, thirty-one percent of students said it would be a beneficial match, while sixty-four said it would be a bad match. For the College of Communication, Information, and Media, eighty-six percent said it would be a beneficial match, while five percent said one of the other colleges would be a more effective match. Finally, to have the ITSC remain in the College of Arts and Letters, thirty-six percent said the ITSC department did not need to move, while fifty-three percent said the ITSC needed to move to another college (see Figure 4.)

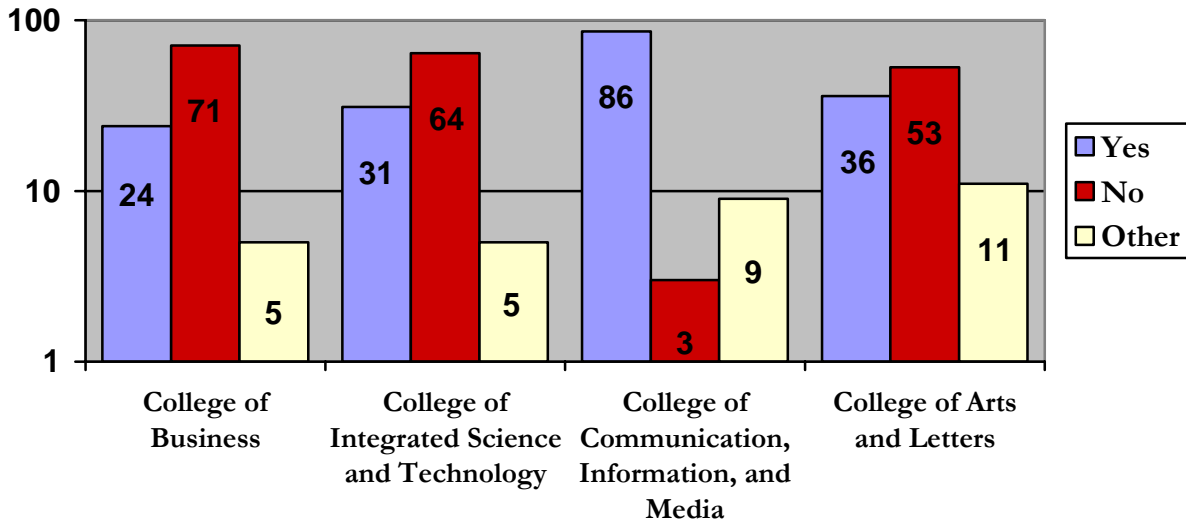


Figure 4. Bar Chart Showing Students' opinions on where ITSC should be Moved

General Education

One of my own recommendations is for TSC 210 to become a general education course in the cluster one, writing portion. I wanted to see how students within ITSC felt about the idea. Fifty-five percent of students thought TSC in a general education course would be a good idea, while twenty-five percent said it would be a bad idea (see Figure 5.)

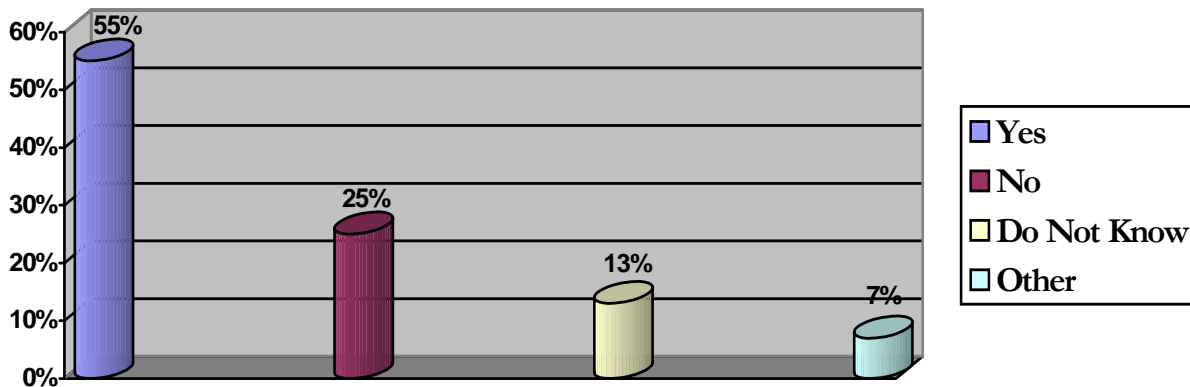


Figure 5. Bar Chart Showing Students' Opinions on Including TSC 210 in General Education

For the students who thought it would be a good idea to include TSC 210 as a GenEd course they commented:

- 210 repeats in 230/240
- Class material applies to everyone
- Big lecture format would work for introduction
- Good review of basic skills
- Provides good background of technical writing

For students who thought negatively about adding TSC 210 as a GenEd course, they commented:

- 210 is too specific for any other major
- Classes should be small
- Not enough professors in the ITSC department

After all the comments, most of the students believe that the papers are necessary for understanding the course material.

Survey Interpretations

After reviewing the survey and speaking with a few of the students, I realized that students could discover TSC in a number of ways. The problem seems to be a lack of frequency in the advertising. As discovered in the survey, TSC majors/minors are currently happy about the size of the ITSC. Many students expressed a fear of expanding the ITSC since classes are already full. My research also confirms that all of the students within TSC (who took the survey) are content with the material they are learning. All of the students commented on how beneficial the ITSC was in both their educational and personal aspirations. The topic of moving the ITSC was an interesting topic, because the statistics showed an overwhelming acceptance of the College of Communications, Information, and Media; however, students seemed divided about the COB and ISAT. After speaking with some of the students, I realized that many of them did not want to major in business or science, and the ITSC was the perfect medium. Many students have a negative feeling about moving the college in either direction. (For more feedback on student opinions, please reference the survey results on pages 14-16).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are the results of my research and student opinions.

General Education

One of the ways that many departments receive acknowledgement from current students is through General Education (GenEd) clusters. To qualify as a GenEd course, the course must be taught by two professors, offered to 150 students each semester, and must be open to all JMU students. Students had mixed opinions about TSC 210 as a GenEd requirement among current TSC majors/minors; however, they all agree the ITSC would become more visible to the JMU population. I believe that if TSC 210 were added to cluster one under the writing portion, more students would discover the ITSC. The course material in TSC 210 is repeated in TSC 230 and 240; however, TSC 210 is a wonderful introductory course for non-TSC majors/minors. (If TSC 210 were in a lecture format with papers on the main topics, it would be a great introductory course providing beneficial information to students.) I have discovered that five different professors teach the six TSC 210 courses offered each semester; if two professors taught three separate TSC 210 classes, with twenty-five students per class there more opportunities would be available for other professors to teach higher-level TSC courses, thereby allowing for TSC's expansion without adding new professors.

High School Involvement

Many students in the ITSC have commented on the late discovery of the major. Too many students miss the opportunity for a major in TSC simply because they do not know of its existence until junior or senior year. I believe that one of the major problems in promoting TSC is that no one outside of JMU really knows about the program or how beneficial the JMU ITSC program is. To grow as an institute, there must be acknowledgement outside and within the university. In order to grow as an institute, there must be acknowledgement outside and within the university. I suggest that the ITSC produce a brochure that would be sent to as many high schools as possible. This way, guidance councilors could become aware of the program and suggest the option to students. It is a commonly known advertising ploy to “get them while they’re young,” and I believe the same applies in promoting the ITSC.

On-Campus Involvement

The current students of JMU tend to overlook things that are not abundantly clear. The “out of sight, out of mind” phrase applies. The ITSC is out of sight, and therefore out of mind. Many students on the JMU campus have no idea that TSC is a program available to them. In advertising, this is a tragedy, and one that needs corrected. In order to catch the attention of the average college student, there needs to be a bold and clear statement. The best way to acquire the attention of an entire population is to be fun and colorful, and I suggest fun and games. The best place to put an advertisement is *The Breeze*. Start with a simple advertisement that lists job possibilities or explain the major and how it benefits students in a technological age. Then add in word-finds or crossword puzzles. Students enjoy small activities that can take their minds off the everyday hassles. Another way to introduce the ITSC into the JMU public is to participate more in major fairs. Let the students know that TSC is there. Post flyers or have volunteer students hand out flyers on the Commons. By becoming more active in the everyday life, students will recognize the major and begin promoting the ITSC by word-of-mouth.

Moving the ITSC

The university is currently considering the idea of moving the ITSC out of the College of Arts and Letters. While many options are available, some have more benefits than others according to current TSC students. In a survey that I issued in TSC classes, students had mixed opinions about where they think the ITSC should go. The most popular idea was the College of Communication, Information, and Media. The idea of combining the communication departments at JMU is brilliant. As stated in the College of Communication, Information, and Media proposal², “In a college of like-minded disciplines, we will have a faster response to market demand.” By combining SCOM, SMAD, and TSC, students will have the benefits of a more focused education, and will receive more recognition from outside the university.

Conclusion

It is obvious how important communication is in today’s society, but there is not enough emphasis on the technical portion of communication. Technical communicators are the future, and JMU’s ITSC program is the only program in the nation with its own department and concentration in online publications, publication management, and the public sector. The ITSC has so much to offer both current and future students, and with a little effort and recognition, it has the power to change the way people view technical and scientific communication. Simply handing out fliers or sending mass email on a regular basis could improve the image of the ITSC. The surveys that I conducted were helpful to my report because the students themselves are very creative and have plenty to say. The TSC major/minor is composed of creative, artistic people who would love to express their feelings for the ITSC. By communicating with the students and using their skills, the ITSC can improve its image simply by showing off its best aspects. The students themselves and the wonderful knowledge provided by a major in TSC.

² College of Communication, Information, and Media Proposal. 12 April, 2005. http://www.jmu.edu/cal_restructuring.

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Appendix A

Survey Administered to TSC majors/minors

The following survey is for **Technical and Scientific Communication majors/minors**. The survey is for a research paper that questions how students within TSC feel about the major. The information retrieved from this survey will be used in the research paper to see how TSC could be better advertised among current and prospective JMU students. This survey is completely anonymous, and at no time will your information be used in any way other than for this specific research paper.

1. How did you find out the TSC program?

Friend/Teacher
 Website
 Email
 Other (please specify) _____

2. Why did you choose TSC as your major/minor?

3. What do you see yourself doing after you graduate?

4. How associated do you feel with the College of Arts and Letters?

Very much
 Moderate
 A little
 Not at all
 Did not know I was

5. Do you feel that TSC would be better served by being associated with...

College of Business?

Yes
 No
 Other: _____

College of Integrated Science and Technology?

Yes
 No
 Other: _____

College of Communications? (Possible new college with SMAD and SCOM)

Yes
 No
 Other: _____

College of Arts and Letters? (Remain where it is)

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

6. Do you feel that TSC 210 would be a good option for a General Education class in lecture format with few or no papers? Please explain.

- Yes, _____
- No, _____
- Don't know
- Other (please specify) _____

7. What do you feel could be done to promote TSC as a major in order to make it more visible to current students?

8. If you have any suggestions or comments please feel free to write them below.

Survey with Results

Student feelings of TSC

The following survey is for **Technical and Scientific Communication majors/minors**. The survey is for a research paper that questions how students within TSC feel about the major. The information retrieved from this survey will be used in the research paper to see how TSC could be better advertised among current and prospective JMU students. This survey is completely anonymous, and at no time will your information be used in any way other than for this specific research paper.

1. How did you find out the TSC program?

44% Friend/Teacher
7% Website
15% Email
34% Other (please specify) Advisors (16%); Orientation (4%);
Course catalog (7%) ; Class speakers (4%); Fliers (3%)

2. Why did you choose TSC as your major/minor?

5% Ease of double major
7% Ease of minor
15% Good classes
19% Interesting
20% What you want in a major/minor
13% Benefits current major/minor
16% Benefits in future career
5% No response

3. What do you see yourself doing after you graduate?

73% Job
9% Graduate/Law school
16% Not Sure
2% Taking a break

4. How associated do you feel with the College of Arts and Letters?

15% Very much
36% Moderate
25% A little
22% Not at all
2% Did not know I was

5. Do you feel that TSC would be better served by being associated with...

College of Business?

24% Yes

71% No

5% Other: Maybe; Business Dept. is too uptight

College of Integrated Science and Technology?

31% Yes

64% No

5% Other: Maybe, if more computer learning skills were added; too much science

College of Communications? (Possible new college with SMAD and SCOM)

86% Yes

3% No

9% Other: Maybe; The majors seem to fit together, but it might remove all science, and it might become too competitive like SMAD

College of Arts and Letters? (Remain where it is)

36% Yes

53% No

11% Other: Maybe; Not sure

6. Do you feel that TSC 210 would be a good option for a General Education class in lecture format with few or no papers? Please explain.

55% Yes;

- Good review of basic skills
- Provides good background of technical writing
- GenEd classes would free up other professors for higher level classes
- 210 repeats in 230/240
- Class material applies to everyone
- Big lecture format would work for introduction
- Must keep papers! They are very helpful and necessary for understanding course material, especially the resumes

25% No;

- Papers are absolutely necessary
- 210 is too specific for any other major
- Classes should be small
- Should be available for outside majors, but not as a GenEd
- Only if 210 would be an option instead of GWRIT
- Not enough professors as it is

13% Don't know

7% Other (please specify);

- The small classes allow for better understanding
- The small classes allow for bonding with professors and create a desirable atmosphere

7. What do you feel could be done to promote TSC as a major in order to make it more visible to current students?

- More PR on campus and at orientation
- Set up an interesting booth at the major fair
- Have advisors discuss TSC options (in SCOM/SMAD)
- More mass information emails
- Create a better website (more colors, pictures and graphics)
- Send out newsletters that describe the major
- Advertise in the breeze
- Make presentations in other major classes
- Put up fliers in other buildings
- Use the benefits of word-of-mouth
- Have more class options and more times
- Include more information in the course catalog (course descriptions)
- Open the major to non TSC majors
- Move away from the College of Arts and Letters since TSC is not literature writing it does not fit
- Sponsor a campus-wide event (like a concert etc.)
- Include more computer learning courses
- Promote the wide variety of possible careers associated with TSC

13% No Response

8. If you have any suggestions or comments please feel free to write them below.

- More professors/instructors
- Do NOT promote until more professors are available
- Need better class scheduling
- Offer courses more than once a year
- Stay away from the College of Business, TSC is the last good option between COB and ISAT
- Get rid of 230, it is just a repeat of 210
- In 210, include more lecture information and use papers to reinforce the information, not the other way around

78% No Response

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact Harmo2kl@jmu.edu