The degree we’ve proposed in DWMA, the B.S. in Content Design and Development, fills a practical need for students who want to combine interests in computer science, design, digital culture, and writing in a variety of applied positions.

The degree features two concentrations: Content Strategy and Development—which focuses more strongly on developing content with an eye towards SEO, metrics and measurable outcomes, new media publication and distribution models, and community building through a study of digital culture—along with a Writing for Interactive Fiction and Games concentration which focuses more specifically on designing narratives for interactive projects.

This degree comes as a part of a three-year evolution of what was previously the “English and Professional Communication” degree at SPSU. Several years ago our program was already moving steadily towards a stronger digital focus with a name change, 'Writing and New Media', and a curriculum revision—in part due to our polytechnic mission and growing New Media Arts focus within ETCMA.

Consolidation helped to speed up this evolution. As our department entered a comprehensive university and a lengthy disentanglement process, we began to consider the strengths of our faculty—a inter and intradisciplinary department of technical communicators, writers, and designers—and considered the growing marketplace for “content development”, a burgeoning field that combines several skill sets and requires a uniquely hybrid employee who is capable of writing, designing, and developing interactive content.

We view “content” as practices of thinking, writing, collaborating, and creating that have been transformed by their immersion in digital environments. In "When Writing Becomes Content," an article published just last month by Lisa Dush in College Composition and Communication, the author insightfully defines digital content as communicative acts that are "conditional, computable, networked, and commodified."

Concentrating on this definition and the content professions that are currently hiring students from a variety of different liberal arts backgrounds will allow the CDD degree to prepare a specific kind of digital practitioner.

There are positions throughout a variety of industries whose sole purpose is to understand, create, strategize, and write specifically for digital audiences. It’s tempting to think that “content” is all about what we see on the Internet, but that’s not the case. Digital environments and digital audiences occur within gaming environments, inside corporate training and human resource management systems, and on collaborative teams that aren’t necessary publicly networked. Still, the artifacts and systems they utilize are what industry
has come to call “content”. Whether within the open spheres of social media, blogging platforms, and open access communities or those more internal, proprietary systems, the “content designer” is the professional who can most clearly apply writing, research, and design to produce content for a variety of digital environments.

Students who have been cultivated to consider composition as digital content think differently about research, about collaboration, and about audience. We have seen this in the current iteration of our program. Our students who have gone on to take positions as content designers, strategists, creators, and developers have entered digital professions that require fluency in text, image, and network knowledge. Our future Content Design and Development students will be even more prepared to enter that world because they will understand “content” from the ground up -- starting with an understanding of how computer networks communicate and with experience in server-side maintenance of a fully structured website; continuing through case studies of existing new media projects (games, podcasts, interactive features, Digital Humanities initiatives) and through newly emerging patterns of research gathering and professional learning; and culminating in the development of a professional digital portfolio.

As content creators, designers, strategists, and digital narrators, they will grasp the inherently cross-disciplinary and iterative nature of communication for the digital audiences. Their interaction with their peers in other programs within DWMA will prepare them for that kind of work.

We understand that the English Department’s resistance to our degree comes from an assertion that no degree including writing as a major component should exist outside of its disciplinary boundaries. We understand and appreciate this position. We’ve interacted with it patiently over the last year, and we have responded by altering elements of the degree that were not differentiated enough . Respectfully, though, we disagree with the base assertion.

Writing itself is a broad activity, and an even broader metaphor, which is already being shared across a number of departments at this university in course descriptions, course titles, and learning outcomes. Even the Curriculog process requires program proposals to provide evidence for how "writing, reading, critical thinking, and presenting" are utilized in the degree. Yet, to our knowledge, we are the only department/program that is being asked to remove the mention of "writing" from all of our curriculum materials.

But rather than focusing on a single broad term, it may be more useful to consider the kind of graduate that would come from the CDD program. We think that we’ve designed a degree that focuses the right amount on writing, design, and digital culture to create a unique graduate that will answer an articulated industry-need for content designers, strategists, and developers.