Academic Audit

Pellissippi State Community College

Media Technologies program

Audit Team:

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Introduction

We were introduced to the media technologies program via their status report. The position paper revealed a robust program with over 400 students, four specific programs, a new building (under 7 years old), five well-equipped, Macintosh labs, a recording booth, a modest video studio, an art gallery, and a
photography studio. Though modest-sized the facility itself was impressive and well-utilized. The program is based mostly at the Hardin Valley main campus because the majority of the facilities are available at this campus. The program has impressive equipment and strong software (AVID, Premiere, Adobe, and the Apple I-life suite).

This suggests the program can be identified under the new designation Digital Humanities in which technology and humanistic disciplines are merged.

Added benefits of such programs is that they are intentionally cross-disciplinary, technology linked, and capable of fulfilling societal needs in humanistic and media-tech fields. A downside to such programs is that they are based in technology and upgrading tech is a sizeable expense, especially since the program uses studios, equipment that can become quickly obsolete, and that such programs must provision studios, maintain software, and upgrade five labs.

The program offers four concentrations and four AAS degrees and an additional 14 certificates. The school offers certificates in visual communication,
basic photography, studio photography, video editing, sound production, videography, e-commerce, web page authoring, and mobile design. The team witnessed the impressive breadth and depth of the program.

**Overall performance**

The work of the self-study was a communal project of the department and division administrators. It was impressive to see the close collaboration between the Dean of the Division, Professor Margaret Ann Jeffries and the faculty and staff of the division. The division offers nearly a full complement of courses every semester because the students in the program have varied schedules and simply cannot physically complete the programs in two years. Most take three years and longer. A major commitment of the program is to dual enrollment courses. The report detailed the extensive offerings to area high schools, and explained that as many as five different video production courses were taught at area high schools. This suggests a strong subscription to the area programs, and that students in
the dual enrollment classes may possibly enroll in the program. This illustrates a very strategic use of the dual enrollment courses to build enrollment.

Focal area 1 – Learning Objectives

The Media Technologies program is to be commended for its comprehensive approach in providing meaningful learning objectives for its students. The self-study report and the site visit provided evidence of consistent and pervasive use of the stated learning objectives to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum development. The application of program expectations that are applied across all concentrations ensures students receive an excellent educational experience. It is clear that these expectations are the result of collaboration between administration, faculty, staff, graduates, industry partners, and advisory committee members. A viewing of the master syllabi for the courses in the discipline showed a strong consistency in style and program requirements. The weekly meetings of the program coordinators ensure
consistent communication between concentrations. Continuous communication 
with dual-enrollment faculty ensures that they are committed to the published 
student learning objectives. Program goals are supported by specific course 
goals, which are detailed in each course syllabus. The course goals are linked to 
assessment in courses as well. It is very evident that Media Technologies uses 
learning objectives to manage curriculum and to ensure students are fully 
prepared to enter the workforce upon completion of the program.

The Media Technology faculty strive to stay current within an ever-
changing field. Extensive use of professional development opportunities is 
evident. Faculty are engaged in conferences, professional organizations, 
competitions, and industry. Advisory committees for each of the concentrations 
provide timely counsel on the workforce needs in the various concentrations. 
Several of the advisory committee members are alumni and/or provide 
mentorship through the required internships. These close relationships enhance 
ownership on the part of the advisory committees. Surveys of alumni, input from
advisory committee members, and feedback from employers of graduates are used to determine and refine student learning objectives and assessment methods.

The yearly “Design Showcase” by students of the Communication Graphics Technology concentration is certainly commendable. Faculty, industry professionals, and advisory committee members judge student displays and provide feedback to the students. In addition, the student work is on display in the Bagwell Center for students and visitors.

Focal area 2 – Curriculum and co-curriculum

Curriculum and schedules

The team witnessed the processes of a very strong curriculum with many classes taught not only on a rotating schedule but nearly every semester due to the students’ complicated work/social/family commitments. The faculty expressed
that staggering classes was difficult because students had individual needs to complete certain classes every semester, so staging classes became difficult.

Co-curricular

Students were actively engaged in the program and subject areas and expressed profound interest in the fields of web, video, graphics, and photography beyond the course work. They were avocationally committed to the field and expressed a natural affinity with these fields as part of their culture. They also expressed that their work was for the most part practical, pragmatic, and technical, as opposed to theoretical. Clearly the program had little time for ideas that did not play an active part in the students’ training and the faculty, staff, and students spoke in specifics about the nuts and bolts of video i/o’s, bandwidth, web configurations, software, responsive design for emerging mobile platforms, machine limitations, setup and configuration of software/hardware, and the best software, tech solutions, and technologies for the field. The underlying infrastructure and technical support staff, though small, were clearly adapted,
proficient and focused on presenting and fielding the best program possible to accommodate the needs of the students. Money in the program was carefully and strategically allocated to provide the best user experience in the classroom, the widest range of classes and strong faculty, and the best allocation of Technology Access Fee (TAF) monies available.

Co-curricular activities include the extremely well-developed internship program. While internships are usually co-curricular, in this program they are directly integrated into the course work and consequently, all students look forward to the practical experience of this component of their work in the program. Achieving a good internship with a good fitting corporation can be tantamount to greatly aiding placement. Faculty and students supported the concept that a good internship was excellent training. Faculty, administrators and staff expressed the desire that internships serve more than just placement but that the students be constantly involved in learning skills training. The staff were adamant that students would not be simply gophers during internships, but that they would
be assigned active duties and improve their already substantial capabilities.

Speaking with students and advisory committee members we found that to be entirely the case. Students were encouraged and assigned genuine tasks and had active responsibilities with employers, internship directors, and businesses. Many of the employers expressed that they had hired interns precisely because they had expressed initiative, and a *can-do* attitude at the workplace, and this translated into a job offer. The team witnessed a direct correlation between internship, advisory team, and student success in the program. It illustrated the practical and job-based nature of the program that had been intimately connected to the needs of local industries, and this, in turn, provided a continuing network and synergy between business, employers, and the program. This was excellent proof of the program’s capabilities to see the clear relationship of:

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\text{training} = \text{courses} = \text{internships} = \text{employers} = \text{relationship} = \text{employment} = \\
\text{continuing engagement} = \text{new students} = \text{synergistic growth}.
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In this regard the program is highly successful in achieving its ends and stands as a model of specific training methods, strong facilities, engaged faculty, active recruiting for jobs, a strong workforce development ethic, an active professional basis, and a lively employment environment.

It would be easy to conclude that the program benefits from a prosperous region, work environment, generous employment possibilities, and a jovial faculty, but one would believe this would sell the achievements of the program short. The administration, faculty, staff, students and employers have actively conspired to create a strong and active program and supportive environment. We have all seen programs with just as many possible active, positive, social and economic components falter, and it is a massive credit to all entities and participants in the program that it is such a success and that it creates a sense of success and achievement amongst its stakeholders. We sensed no smoke screen here. Many of the students were continually aware of the fact that employment in media arts of any form was at best difficult and in some regards nearly impossible. The
employers in the best of all worlds were few and far between and that students
must be constantly applying themselves to skill development and learning new
professional applications that potentially could increase the skill set and
encourage active growth in the field. Given this, many students were taking the
cue that entrepreneurship was an alternative to waiting for employment, and
many in photography, graphics, web, and video disciplines were either actively
considering their own business or experiencing freelancing to increase their
competency and augment their vitas.

Co-curricular pursuits included clubs and professional organizations.

Several students mentioned engagement with the AIGA (the American Institute
of Graphic Arts) and the students seemed to be keenly aware of journals,
activities, contests, and employment in the local area through such organizations.
The photography group were clearly engaged in the study of photography and
were starting their own local photography club. Video students were highly vocal
and had two clubs, one devoted to short film production and a second
organization devoted to anime and gaming called SURGE (Scifi, Ultima-anime, role-playing, games, and everything else).

**Focal area 3 – Teaching and Learning Methods**

Clearly there is a strong commitment to excellent teaching here as shown in varied student showcases that illustrate professional assessment. The staff presented us with copious examples of student video products, graphic designs, web designs, and photographic materials. It was undeniable that the students have generated an excellent variety of brilliant and well-accomplished professional level projects. This level of productivity illustrated a high level of faculty/student productivity. Historically, it has been clear that high student product output is not just a consequence of student exuberance but that such productivity is normally the natural outgrowth of student activity nurtured by a caring and accomplished faculty effort.
Another example of advanced teaching acumen was the copious
documents, appendices, and files prepared by the faculty that documented their
productivity and activity with their student population. It was clear that each
course was rigorously prepared, documented, and assessed. The student
products for each course were clearly compiled, filed, and collected. There were
multiple physical artifacts for a series of programs that were mostly web-based
and produced. The fact that there was such a strong physical representation of
products despite the digital nature of the program illustrated the care and strong
documentation of such a program. It would be clear to any outside observer that
there was little noodling around here, and that despite the ‘arty’ reputation of
media technologies, this was a highly concrete, physical, objective, and
scientifically observed and matured program determined to produce physical
case files that any outside evaluator would see as an impressive record of
student, faculty achievement, and crystal clear program design. The value of
such competency is that this sort of clear ideation of the program is not always
evident in many private school programs costing much more and serving far fewer individuals.

Focal Area 4 – Student Learning Assessment

*General assessment characteristics:* The Media Technologies faculty evaluate student learning by means of various types of assessment, including tests, quizzes, projects, assignments, team collaborations, demonstrations, and presentations. The collaboration of students was evident in both the tour of facilities and interviews with students. Assessment in Media Technologies is closely tied to course and program learning objectives. The focus on excellence in the use of the appropriate technologies was emphasized in the interviews with both students and advisory committee members. The creative nature of this instruction requires faculty to invest considerable time in evaluation of student work.
Specific assessment initiatives. Departmental assessments were comprehensive and specific to each discipline. **Digital Graphics.** Assessment included the Spring showcase of student work in the graphic design area.

Professor Gilbert had an exhibition area in the second floor of the media technologies facility that was devoted to digital graphic design and from the quantity and quality of the work, it was evident that much was produced.

**Photography.** The division provided copious examples of print photographic work, case books, and professional applications where student and faculty photography was presented in a professional format. Again, all work under Professor Goodrich and the staff was ambitious, professionally rendered (in web and print format) and illustrated a breadth of styles and forms. Clearly students were geared towards professional applications (portrait, studio, infant and child photography, weddings, occasions, journalistic, fine art), and there were many examples of abstract and process photography that showed students had mastered highly advanced digital manipulations of the photographic craft. **Web**
**Technology.** Clearly from the curriculum, the web technology program is on the leading edge of technology and the field with courses in Flash, Java, HTML/XML, CSS, and responsive/mobile web design, it is clear these students are being trained as strong web designers/developers that would fit equally well in CIS and Design programs. Their products must pass the most stringent assessment. Does the code run on web standards-based browsers and modern systems? We witnessed examples of their work, and despite its beauty and functionality, it received no gallery space, no wall displays, and few print examples. We recognize the natural home for web appliances is the web, but despite web tech’s functionality and natural inclination to the computer monitor display, the laptop, the tablet, and the smart phone, we believe it merits equal billing and space with the other media technologies, (gallery space, wall display, monitor display, showcases, etc.) and such common display would make assessment more approachable. **Video Production Technology.** We discovered through watching student works, and observing classes in lighting that students are daily assessed
in lab assignments and on-ground projects. Not only do students study editing, sound production, scriptwriting, documentary work, and explore campus broadcasting, they also intern for the local PBS station and enter local and regional film competitions. Assessment is aggressive, because video work is usually extremely public and has a visceral impact on an audience.

The result of the faculty efforts is that students possess technical expertise to succeed in the workplace. Both students and advisory board members acknowledged that the Media Technologies Program provided excellence in technical education above theoretical understanding. Students leave this program with profound and deep training in recent technologies, expertise in practical work, and comprehensive field experience. The placement rate for graduates with Media Technologies degrees is commendable.

**Suggestion:** While the gallery on the first floor was used by the art department, it would seem appropriate that that facility should be utilized by the
media technologies program to showcase divisional works in photography, web
design, digital graphics, and video.

Suggestion: Regularly meet and revisit graduation and placement data (as
suggested in the division’s self-study document) to determine where students
find employment and how internships and internal assessments indicate best
placement potentialities.

Suggestion: A dedicated space for web design technology would provide
more emphasis on an area that is fundamental to our web economy but is often
overlooked as a less obvious design medium. Citizens are so used to the
spectacular and casual use of beautifully designed web portals that they take
such forms for granted. The division should emphasize and call attention to the
important and often overlooked work produced by designers and developers.

There are few rewards or plaques for developers that write tighter, more
efficiently-coded web sites, that provide better SEO and findability, or for
developers that have pioneered better more responsive web design for mobile
devices, but such achievements should be lauded as loudly as the more obvious achievements of graphics, photography, and video. Do not hide such accomplishment. Give it a corner of your building, a dedicated huge wide screen showcase to illustrate the design and the products of these proud and often essential but overlooked designers and engineers. Professor Merrill’s students deserve the same level of exposure even though their coding contribution might not seem as obvious upon first viewing.

**Focal area 5 – Quality Assurance**

One aspect of the program that supports the concept of quality is the structure of all four programs united by a common core of courses. This provides students with three core components that they share across the four programs. First there is a shared common course entitled MDT 1000 Introduction to Media Technologies, which provides foundation concepts and introductory material that gives students a further insight into the disciplines before they venture into the
fields themselves. Secondly, there is MDT 298, the Media Technologies Internship in which all students arrive at an internship pursued and arranged with their advisors. This serves as a capstone and professional exposure experience for all students that starts to situate the students in the profession. Finally, the students have a small opportunity to sample other fields in the MDT by taking one elective within the four disciplines. This allows them to sample another area that is not an area of principle focus. The core achieves many things. For one it provides all students with a common course, secondly it provides them with a common internship experience that is the same and yet different for all. It is the same in that they all do internships that provide professional experience and it is different in that each internship is unique. Finally, they all have an opportunity to sample the rest of the programs and to share their experience with their peers in that other discipline area.

**Conclusions**
The report included the program's own recommendations, which showed a very prescient response to the audit concept. The Dean and the faculty clearly used the opportunity of the audit to explore issues and challenges confronting the program, and the team found the report to be an honest straight-forward exploration of things that can impact program health and growth. Challenges are significant. Space has not kept pace with explosive program growth, and a lack of new resources can limit future growth and retard the program. If enrollments stay at their current robust levels it is a concern that unless new resources be provided, the program growth will not continue and the program could potentially contract. This would be bad. Other challenges continue. How does the program continue to recruit and provide internship possibilities? How does the program continue to update labs and equipment that are essential for program success. The debate over the Adobe Creative Cloud subscription debate being held at the state level is indicative of the challenges confronting the program. If the program prides itself on the use of cutting edge technology, and the debate over the
creative cloud thwarts efforts to stay current in contemporary technologies this
could disable the program’s ability to maintain credibility as a cutting edge
training facility. This would be an error, since one of the program’s big
advantages over area competitors is its nice complement of labs, studio space
and recent software. The program’s own recommendations for additional facilities,
workers, new buildings, more release time, a director of the center seemed
reasonable requests considering the strength and productivity of the program.
However, state financing will likely not allow all such additions. Potentially funds
for such improvements could be raised through potential corporate partners. In
any event, the program is advised to explore avenues for outside funding. The
state and many other states are entering an era in which state funding will
inevitably be matched by outside corporate partnerships. This is merely a factor
of resources and resource allotment. Corporations have more income in this era.
States have less.
Additional programs. We considered evidence from the trip and the speakers we heard and the report we read.

We heard from many of the advisory panel members, and they suggested there be a composite degree program where students could gain skills in the four subject areas simultaneously. This joint degree would train students in video, web, photography, and digital graphics. It has been suggested that the mix of macs and a large sound board would begin to support a sound tech program as well, but there may be a pre-existing recording industry program in the area, so that may not be an option, but if there is an opening, it might be a capable addition to programming in the division.

Facilities. While the program has had newer facilities than most programs in the state, the number in the program seemed to suggest that that program could use more space for communal spaces, classrooms and facilities. The web tech program has no indigenous facilities and would welcome its own lab space.
This would improve the program and help to professionalize the space for the students in web tech.

Some parting thoughts. Since the program is very aligned with science programs and opportunities in the area, it might be helpful if the *engineering program* might better interact with media technologies. We sense that synergistic interactions might occur if these two programs shared more. Secondly, thought facilities are cramped, we believe that web technologies does not have the same stake and investment from the program as the other media technologies programs, because they do not have a dedicated lab or specific work area. We think it is a *blind spot* to assume that because web technologies exists in cyberspace it does not require a physical presence. We think this is a common societal oversight, not because anyone has been derelict or malicious but because some of the strongest work being done in the field of responsive web design and in cyber/web technologies does necessitate a place to play, and a lab to arrive at the next level of sophistication and technology. Think of the most
profitable sector of our society, web start-ups in silicon valley. These mega-corps build billion dollar playgrounds for their web employees yet google only exists on a desktop/laptop or mobile device. While we know much of web technology is going to the cloud we believe a dedicated space for web technology would improve the program, serve to professionalize it further, and offer opportunities for positive growth and exploration that perhaps even present faculty do not currently consider. The only way to uncover hidden serendipitous experiences would be by allocating a dedicated space. Albeit this is expensive, we believe it is necessary to maintaining parity amongst all the media technology fields. Another area for exploration might be to include two new program areas. Students and industry advisors mentioned that a composite media-technologies major that gave a more generalized overview of web, graphics, video, and photographic functions might be another employable area. Finally, the well-developed capabilities in digital sound and music evidenced by a massive sound board, the presence of multiple mac labs with strong music capabilities and an ad hoc
sound booth suggested that sound technology or sound engineering could be another potential growth area for a program in media technologies.

Overall we found this to be an engaging, inspiring, and strongly motivated program with great leadership within the faculty and department heads, and great leadership and support from the administration of the institution. Certainly like all programs in Tennessee it faces challenges, not the least of which is a worrisome fear for future facilities, funding, technology, and expansion capabilities, but at its heart the program is strong, well-subscribed, supportive of a strong student body, focused on practicals and determined to serve in the most tempestuous of times.