

How the East Tennessee Chapter of STC Created, and Administers, Its J. Paul Blakely Scholarship

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Every local chapter of any professional society should consider starting up a scholarship. Scholarships are obviously great for students, but they're also great for the people who give them out. You get wonderful PR, a lifeline of new blood, and that inner glow that comes from doing good.

What do you need to get a scholarship started? A little money, of course—but less than you might imagine. Most of all, you need a local hero after whom you can name your scholarship. Someone like the East Tennessee Chapter's J. Paul Blakely.

Since 1986, the East Tennessee Chapter of STC has administered a scholarship (now \$500) given annually to English majors in the technical communication concentration, and now also to graduate students studying technical communication, at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In recent years, STC/ETC has also given students about a dozen "Awards of Excellence" at \$100 each. These "mini-scholarships" recognize deserving students when the scholarship submissions pool contains more than one outstanding applicant.

Each scholarship and award has come with a plaque and has been presented to the student at the beginning of STC/ETC's annual Technical Communication/ Technical Art Competition Awards Ceremony (and usually, once again at a local Engineers' Week Banquet). This means that the student receives his or her award in front of about a thousand people, including photographers and happy parents and friends. Photos and write-ups later appear in the chapter newsletter, in the newsletter of the UT Department of English, in the local newspaper, and elsewhere. As a member of the faculty at The University of Tennessee, I particularly like the way the Blakely Scholarship enhances relations between my department and STC/ETC and helps legitimize my involvement in STC.

The positive effects of the Blakely Scholarships and Awards on students, and the public relations and membership benefits to the East Tennessee Chapter and to the profession at large, have been substantial. Many winners of the scholarships and awards have gone on to technical communication graduate schools and to positions in business and industry. For example: the 1987 winner, now a successful digital entrepreneur and president of his Atlanta chapter of STC, told me that the Blakely Scholarship was a major factor in launching him into the field of technical communication. ("If people are giving me a scholarship in technical

communication," he'd said to himself, "then I must be able to do technical communication!") A number of scholarship and award recipients who have stayed in the Knoxville/Oak Ridge area, as well, are successful technical communicators and members of STC. For example, two recent scholarship winners have served as the first two student liaisons between the university and STC/ETC, helping to educate students about STC and to bring new blood into the profession.

J. Paul Blakely

All these good things began when chapter members decided to create a scholarship that would 1) bolster the educational funds and resumes of local technical communication students, 2) enhance the chapter's image as a community-conscious, not-for-profit professional organization, and 3) honor one of our most distinguished members: J. Paul Blakely.

Blakely was an active, well known, and well loved member of STC. At the society level, he'd been assistant to the president for conferences (1984), manager of the strategic planning committee (1981–84), assistant to the president for recognition programs (1979–82), and technical program manager for the society's annual conference (1980). In 1986, shortly before his death, he was made an associate fellow of the society.

Blakely's society-level activity did not steal him away from local service or from excellence in his job, however, as many people here still remember with gratitude and admiration. He was three times president of the chapter and was a long-time representative of the chapter in planning WATtec. As assistant director of the Information Division for Martin Marietta in Oak Ridge, he consistently promoted STC and encouraged potential leaders of the profession and society. His favorite words of encouragement were "Sure you can!" Under his mentorship, many did.

Nor did Blakely's diagnosis of cancer in the early 80s keep him from either personal or professional service. Notably, he organized and led CancerNET, the only cancer support group of its kind in Tennessee. (Blakely's wife, "Tinke," continues to honor her husband's memory with service and contributions to the American Cancer Society, and that organization has recently named a room in their Knoxville headquarters the "Tinke Blakely Crusade Conference Room"—despite her protests that it should bear her late husband's name).

The night that the first Blakely Scholarship was to be awarded—at the 10th annual Practical Conference on Communication (PCOC)—Paul Blakely was very ill and in a hospital receiving treatment for his cancer. His death, it was to turn out, was just a few weeks away. Attendees at the awards ceremony had been saying to each other how sad it was that Paul couldn't be at the banquet to witness the awarding of the first Blakely Scholarship. But during the ceremony, to everyone's surprise and delight, in walked Paul, who had checked himself out of the hospital in order to attend the ceremony. Still taped to his hands were hospital I.V. catheters.

That kind of behavior was characteristic of Paul Blakely; he refused to let his illness destroy his life while life was still in him. It's the reason, his wife relates, that he had taken the Mensa membership tests two years before his death. To his great satisfaction, he had passed the tests and joined the organization.

J. Paul Blakely is a superb role model for young men and women in our field: a person of compassion, courage, service, accomplishment, and intellect. The chapter could not have done better than to name its scholarship for him. Every year at the awards ceremony, he is remembered and honored in a short speech. Recipients of the Blakely Scholarship and Awards are given copies of a 1986 Transcript (newsletter of STC/ETC) article about Blakely. All recipients know who it is their award is named for—and why.

Administration of the Scholarship

Executive decisions in the East Tennessee Chapter of STC are made by its executive committee, consisting of the elected president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, managers, and a few venerable, active members of the chapter whose input is always valued whether or not they happen to be holding an official chapter position or managership during a given year. In 1986, this executive committee created the J. Paul Blakely Scholarship and appointed a scholarship committee to administer it. The members of that committee became trustees of the fund and defined scholarship guidelines (the rules for student submissions to the scholarship). It also appointed a panel of judges made up of senior members of STC and technical communication faculty members from The University of Tennessee. The faculty members of that panel advertised the scholarship to UTK students; later, the entire panel reviewed student submissions and chose the winner of the competition.

A word about the kinds of students who may enter an STC scholarship competition. We have had more than one scholarship recipient, in the years since 1986, who was not clearly headed for a career in technical communication, narrowly defined. For example: one recipient was most

likely going into acting; another was on his way to law school; yet another had applied to medical school. All were fine and deserving students. All had made excellent submissions, and all had done a good job of describing the relevance of technical communication (broadly defined) to their future studies and careers. Of course, many of us educators and practitioners in technical communication like to define our field as embracing just about everything connected with communication. We easily see medical communication, legal communication, and script writing, for example, as instances of technical communication. Yet when we give our hard-earned chapter money to future actors, lawyers, doctors, and other pre-professionals, how likely is it that we are supporting people who will become the true technical communicators in law, medicine, theater, and other professions? For example: the medical doctor and the medical writer, and even the skilled medical speaker, can live inside the same skin—but how often do they do so?

Individual chapters of STC will address these questions in their own ways. There are good arguments on every side of the debate about the definition of technical communication. Perhaps I am particularly aware of it because I am in the academy, where turf definitions are critical and entire colleges, departments, and programs are formed, merged, broken up, and otherwise transmogrified (or petrified) on the basis of them.

Undeniably, there is value in extending a hand to “sister disciplines.” And certainly, a technical communication scholarship can help turn students headed elsewhere (or “who knows where”) into the field of technical communication. Indeed, many chapter members have seen this as a major goal of the Blakely Scholarship. Over the years since 1986, however, a sentiment has grown up among members of STC/ETC's executive and scholarship committees that we should award the Blakely Scholarship to students who are on the track to careers in technical communication rather more narrowly defined. (Both committees change in membership over the years, yet certain core members remain and provide vital historical continuity.) In accordance with this sentiment, I have collaborated with the other judges of the competition to create the following call for entries. Note especially the description of the “autobiographical essay” that applicants are required to write:

J. Paul Blakely Scholarship Competition Call for Entries

Entries are now being accepted for the J. Paul Blakely Scholarship Competition, an event sponsored annually by the East Tennessee Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC/ETC). STC/ETC awards the \$500 scholarship to the competition winner at an awards banquet, at which the winner is a special guest. If submissions merit,

STC/ETC may also give out one or more \$100 Awards of Excellence.

Applicants must be English majors in the technical communication concentration or graduate students in English who are either writing or planning theses/dissertations in the field of technical communication.

Entries must consist of five elements:

- Cover letter formally applying for the scholarship.
- Résumé.
- Transcript (unofficial transcript is fine).
- A sample of the applicant's communication skill in the form of a report, proposal, handbook, newsletter, brochure, set of instructions, web site, CD, or other scientific/technical "document." Applicants who submit editing or collaborative projects must describe their contributions to the project (e.g., writing, editing, programming, designing).
- Autobiographical essay (about 500 words) that includes a description of the applicant's educational and career plans and how those plans relate to the field of technical communication. This essay should also describe the student's involvement in STC (meeting attendance, service, contributions to society publications, etc.).

IMPORTANT: provide three copies of your submission, each in a large envelope labeled like this:

J. Paul Blakely Scholarship Competition
Jane [or John] Doe

These materials should be submitted to Dr. Russel Hirst no later than 5:00 p.m. on [date]. The winner will be honored at the annual awards banquet hosted by STC/ETC in March. Details on the time and place of that event will be announced later.

Hard wired" technical communication programs—like the ones in St. Paul, Las Cruces, and Seattle, for example—have less trouble spotting students who are serious about careers in technical communication, especially at the graduate level. But at UT and many other schools, it is not quite so easy to know. We don't offer a technical communication degree; we offer a concentration in technical communication within our BA in English, and we have MA students (and the rare PhD student) who are orienting their curricula and theses/dissertations, as much as possible, to the field of technical communication. That's why we now ask students to confirm that 1) they are studying technical communication, 2) they plan on further education and/or careers in technical communication, and 3) they are actively involved in STC. This last requirement is the newest, and I think it's the proof of the pudding. What better indicates seriousness of intent

than activity in the premiere professional society for the field of technical communication?

The Money Setup

The initial award amount for the Blakely Scholarship was \$300, drawn from the chapter's operating fund. The first Blakely Scholarship investment (just \$100, again from the chapter's operating fund) was deposited into a savings account at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory Federal Credit Union. Over the past 15 years, the chapter, and some individuals, have continued to contribute to the Blakely fund, while the award money for the \$500 scholarship and \$100 awards of excellence has usually come from chapter operating funds in order to leave the investment untouched and growing. The money in the scholarship fund has, through the years, been placed in several savings accounts and certificates of deposit (CDs). The fund now has in it about \$16,000, in a single CD (at 4.6% as of February 2000), and so is self-perpetuating at the current award level.

The advantage of a CD, of course, is that it is safe and needs very little attention. This is no doubt why Chapter 26 of the society handbook ("Scholarship Programs") recommends "bank accounts or higher-yield certificates of deposit" and requires that the banks we deal with be "government-guaranteed banks." However, individual chapters should be aware that they, like STC itself, can invest their funds through investment firms like Merrill Lynch, through mutual funds handled by insured banks, and through other financial instruments. Investment decisions must come by way of executive committee (administrative council) vote, and all decisions must be *prudent*. It would be imprudent, for example, to sink all the chapter's scholarship funds into a volatile Internet stock!

The law uses a rule of thumb for judging cases where someone is accused of mishandling someone else's (or some organization's) investments: it's called the "prudent man rule." Did the investor act with reasonable prudence? Did he handle the money in question as he would have handled his own money? This is a grey area, and I hope no chapter of STC need ever endure any kind of legal investigation. But so long as they bear in mind that their freedom to invest chapter funds is not absolute, chapters shouldn't be afraid to make some prudent investments that will earn something more than, for example, 4.6%! Our chapter is considering such investments, and it is also planning to continue taking money out of operating funds in order to bolster the principal of the scholarship fund. Our goal now is to elevate the amounts of the awards we give to students.

Although the award money comes from STC/ETC, students winning the competitions collect their prize from the bursar at The University of Tennessee. Every year, we deposit just the award amount (\$500) with the UT Office of Financial

Aid, which then turns over the money to the bursar. Later, at the chapter's award ceremony, amid thunderous applause, the Blakely Scholar is handed a plaque and an empty envelope, having been told before the ceremony how to collect the money.

This arrangement serves various purposes. For one thing, it keeps us out of trouble with the tax law that says organizations like ours can't award money to our own members. But most importantly, we want to give as much prestige as possible to the recipient, who can then claim to have received not only an award from STC but a university scholarship as well.

We confess, though, that the other prizes (the \$100 Awards of Excellence) are not handled through the university, so recipients get their checks, made out by our treasurer, on the spot at the awards ceremony. This may be a less prestigious procedure for the Award of Excellence winners, and those winners are often student members of STC, but we have yet to hear a complaint from either students or Uncle Sam.

A caution to chapters considering a similar university scholarship liaison: the path to this arrangement can be rocky. At first, our own university wanted us to deposit \$10,000 with them—at 3% interest—in order to establish, from the onset, a self-perpetuating scholarship that would yield a \$300 yearly prize. If this amount had not been enough to scare off our scholarship committee, the dismal interest rate alone would have done it! The committee finally arranged for the simple “put and take” deposit of \$500, but the Office of Financial Aid didn't like it much. The negotiations also led to a bit of friction between some chapter members.

Conclusion

Establishing a local STC scholarship is one of the best things a chapter can do to promote its own image, benefit students, infuse itself with new blood, and honor a distinguished chapter member. Chapters hesitating to start up such a scholarship should bear in mind that large amounts of money are not necessary to establish a scholarship, that STC can help with “seed money” via its merit grant program, and that initial awards (which can come out of chapter operating money) need not be big. The resume of some fortunate student will still carry a very impressive line as a result of your award, his or her wall will still bear a great-looking plaque, and you will have given that student a big boost along the path of success in technical communication. What's more, you'll get great PR value out of the event—and you'll have the satisfaction of honoring someone you believe the world ought to remember and emulate.

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