



Meet Katherine Upchurch

“A happy accident” is how Katherine Upchurch (BS TCH COM, FS17) describes her transition from engineering to technical communication. Arriving from her childhood hometown of Saint Louis in fall 2012 with the goal of becoming a mechanical engineer, Katherine had to change her plans because of the rough time she had in math and science courses.

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that fewer than 40 percent of first-time, bachelor-degree-seeking students graduate from the public universities in four years and only 57 percent within six years. These numbers imply that over 40 percent of students who start full-time undergraduate programs drop out of college within six years. Assuming that this trend remains constant, we can estimate that about 8 million out of 16.6 million

students who enrolled as degree-seeking students in postsecondary universities and colleges in 2018 will drop out by 2024.

College students drop out of school for varied reasons. For some, their classes are “killers,” resulting in disinterest in the program of study and bad grades. Many students at S&T view engineering classes on campus are “hard.” Katherine shares this view and states that her engineering classes were difficult to battle with. In fact, on several occasions, Katherine contemplated leaving college to find something different to do. Luck, however, befell her one Saturday when she met a guardian angel — Dr. Kathryn Dolan, a professor in our department — who suggested she switch majors to tech com.

Katherine says that Dr. Dolan provided an overview of the

tech com program and she immediately “fell in love with it” and also thought that enrolling in tech com was an “interesting way of getting away from math and science.” She would switch majors in spring 2014 and “start from the back” with a capstone course in TCH COM.

Three TCH COM professors, Dr. Northcut, Dr. Malone, and Dr. Wright, would support Katherine to navigate through this new terrain with encouragement and constructive feedback on her assignments and projects.

Katherine describes Dr. Northcut as “one of the best role models” she has ever had. “Dr. Northcut is someone I really like professionally and academically respect. I spent a good amount of time in her office in my senior year. She was my advisor, took an interest in my academics, and pushed me to work harder.”

She gave the following example: “When it came time to pick my interdisciplinary areas for the tech com degree, I wanted to do something that would be easy rather than hard. Dr. Northcut said, no, that is not what you’re going to do, and she suggested I take technical courses in the engineering fields or computer science. ‘Go and take your architectural engineering classes again,’ she said. I never realized I would love computer science so much and ended up with a minor in computer science. I never would have pushed myself to do that without Dr. Northcut. Looking back, I am so glad she pushed me.”

(continued on p. 18)

Katherine is happy to have mi-nored in computer science and notes that in many workplaces technical writers are embedded with subject matter experts. She advises technical communication students to take interest in technical courses to prepare them for industry because they are going to work with technical people. Citing herself as an example, Katherine says that her employment at Mastercard since 2018, first as an adhoc writer and later as an embedded writer, has involved working with technical teams.

Starting as an adhoc writer, she worked in the Content Strategy and Development unit and had to oversee 45 to 50 projects. She wrote technical documentation, maintained and updated documents and tables, and worked on a 1700-page manual. As an embedded writer, she is responsible for writing announcements and distributing them to a wide variety of companies, following stories and features created by the technical scrum team, and producing technical manuals and user guides. Her background in engineering and computer science has enabled her to succeed in the technical roles she has assumed since graduation.

Katherine says, “Getting technical writers and subject matter experts together can be very challenging,” and she applauds our department for getting tech com students to work with engineering students to build a foundation of cooperation and understanding, something she argues is “extremely valuable,” and she encourages the department to continue that effort and ensure its improvement.

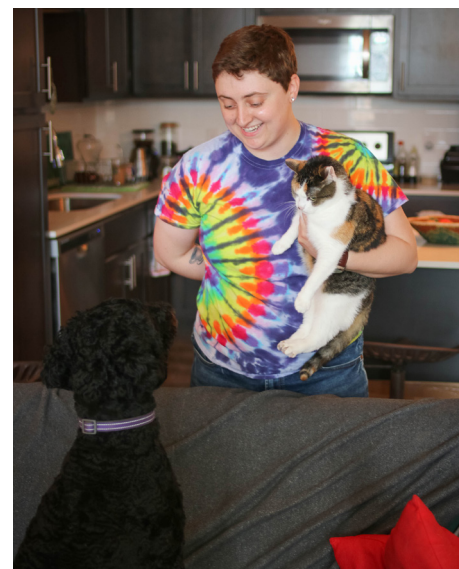
“Getting to work with a group of people who communicate in a technical language is necessary experience,” Katherine says, and recommends that the department find more opportunities for students to collaborate with students from engineering and the sciences.

Katherine currently works in the Global Customer Care department at Mastercard from her office in O’Fallon with amazing people who measure their work ethic and relationship by a decency quotient (DQ), ensuring that all employees respect and care for one another. Katherine’s involvement in extracurricular activities such as a sorority while at Missouri S&T taught her how to build successful interpersonal relationships and has made it easier for her to live by her organization’s expectations for employee relations.

It was a rough journey for Katherine, who faced many uphill challenges, especially when she was trying to find her feet in engineering, but she found a home in our TCH COM program. She has no regrets for changing majors and says “it was the best thing that ever happened” to her. Katherine has two amazing pets, Bash (dog) and Hallie (cat), who wake her up every morning.

She looks back to her college days and advises TCH COM students to get involved with engineering students to obtain technical knowledge and to build a professional portfolio for work in industry. She says that “students should enjoy college and really get into it.” She added that “students shouldn’t be afraid to take classes they are not sure about and feel free to drop a

few” if they are unable to make a headway. For her, the experiences on campus made her a better technical writer, and she says she is ever ready to share her academic and professional experiences with students.



Katherine with her pets

HONORS BANQUET

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in Spring 2020, the department held an online honors celebration in lieu of its annual honors banquet. In pre-recorded videos, some faculty said goodbye to our 2019-2020 graduates and wished them well. Dr. Kristine Swenson, chair of the ETC department, pretended to be on a roller coaster in a playful allusion to the sudden shift to all online courses in the middle of the spring semester.

