



Department of Communication
College of Arts & Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

August 15, 2018

To: Kima Cargill
 Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Planning, UW Graduate School

From: David Domke 
 Professor and Chair, Department of Communication

Re: Response to 10-Year Review Report

The Department of Communication would like to thank the review committee for its thoughtful report on our 10-year program review. We know that program reviews are time-consuming and exhausting work. We appreciate the labor of our colleagues at UW, the University of Texas at Austin, and Michigan State University in assessing our program and offering suggestions for us to consider as we embrace the opportunities and face the challenges of adapting to ongoing changes in our professional and institutional landscapes.

We are delighted that the review committee commended our unit for fulfilling its mission, recognized our teaching of a large and growing number of students, and applauded in particular the quality of our lecturers. They mentioned Ekin Yasin's recent receipt of the UW Distinguished Teaching Award and pointed to her being the second lecturer in the department to be so recognized as a "testament to the exceptional quality of the department's lecturers." In fact, Dr. Yasin is the *third* lecturer in the department to be so recognized, having been preceded in receiving this award by both Lisa Coutu and Matt McGarrity. We are understandably proud of those accomplishments, and want very much for all of our teaching faculty to feel appreciated for their hard work. In addition to praising our lecturers, the review committee recognized the research profile of our tenure-track faculty, pointing in particular to our "exceptionally strong record of public scholarship." As members of a public research university, we are committed to producing research of importance to the publics we serve, and we are pleased that the review committee recognizes and values this too.

In addition to being tasked with assessing the quality of our teaching and research, the review committee was asked to help us think through some questions that we had about how we might continue to craft our identity as a unit in the broad multi-disciplinary field of communication research, how we might adapt our programs to better meet the changing occupational and



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academic landscapes facing our students, and how we might marshal resources in the face of institutional funding constraints. The committee affirmed that we are on the right track in identifying these issues as the central ones for planning our future. They recommended that we work on “streamlining and combining some of the existing degree programs” in our department, a suggestion that endorses some moves that we have already initiated in the short time since their visit, and that we have plans to continue to develop in the near future.

Undergraduates

With respect to our undergraduate degree program, we know that our general communication majors have faced uncertainty in meeting degree requirements because of lack of seats in some courses, and they have been dissatisfied with our area concentrations, which do not adequately line up with specific careers in communication. To address this, at the end of the 2017-18 academic year, the Communication faculty approved a proposal to change the 15-credit areas-of-study requirement to a 5-credit theory course requirement, effectively eliminating the official undergraduate concentrations in the department (Social & Cultural Communication, Technology & Global Media, and Political Communication & Rhetoric). This not only removes a bottleneck that was making it difficult for students to graduate on time with the concentration of their choice, but also allows us to rethink how we are advising students to understand the relationship between academic research areas and occupational aspirations. Our next move will be to create advising materials that more accurately list the courses that students should take as they pursue specific career paths in the field. Rather than requiring students to specialize in broad concentrations that unite historic areas of research specialization in the department but that only vaguely and inaccurately align with broad careers in the field, we will offer students recommendations for specific courses that they should consider if they want to pursue careers in, say, public relations, or data analysis, or law (each of which might include courses drawn from all three of our former concentrations). These lists of courses will not be official concentrations, but rather advising documents for students as they seek to match their occupational goals with the rich opportunities afforded them by a broad liberal arts education. The flexibility of this solution is particularly appealing to us, as these career-pathway course lists can be updated regularly to reflect ongoing changes in the rapidly shifting job market.

We also have begun thinking about ways to bring the riches of our highly successful journalism concentration to more students. For example, the faculty who run the journalism sequence have been working on a proposal that would broaden the focus of our accredited journalism program to include coursework associated with public relations and strategic communication. This shift might encourage some more students who are currently in the general communication major to specialize in the journalism sequence. To the degree that the journalism program can accommodate them, students in the general communication major might also take some of those new courses without becoming journalism students.



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To manage other bottlenecks faced by our undergraduates, the department has recently altered its process for collecting information from faculty about their yearly teaching plans. A new electronic system for gathering teaching interests, launched in the 2017-18 academic year, encourages all faculty to pull their weight in offering larger courses and teaching more methods courses. This system asks faculty to agree to teach a course in a list that the department has marked as needing to be taught, before allowing them to indicate other courses that they want to teach. As a result, in the next academic year, we will be offering significantly more seats in methods courses than in the previous academic year. Our hope also is that with a new major admittance requirement we have approved that is finalizing in the Curriculum Office now (with only COM 200 and one additional 200-level COM course, rather than three courses, being required for admittance), students can be admitted into our major earlier, alleviating last-minute rushes to complete their methods requirement. In addition, we voted this year to restrict 300-level and 400-level courses to Communication majors only. This change will improve our students' access to methods courses and other courses needed for their major that were previously crowded with non-majors. With regard to entry-level courses, we have increased our number of seats slightly from recent years, and we will attempt to increase those levels further by designing and offering more 200-level courses, which will be necessary to meet our new major admittance requirement.

Graduate Students

While the demand for our undergraduate courses has outpaced our offerings, the opposite has become the case for our MA/PhD courses. Like other departments in the College of Arts and Sciences, financial exigencies have forced us to reduce the size of our incoming cohorts of funded MA/PhD students over the last couple of years. As a result, we have had to cancel some graduate classes because of lack of demand. This is unsatisfactory for those students who enrolled in those classes, as well as for those faculty who had planned to offer them. To keep that from happening in the future, faculty are conferring with each other and with the graduate program coordinator about which graduate courses will be offered over two- or three-year cycles, and graduate faculty have been told that they might not be allowed to teach a graduate course every year if the demand is not high enough. Some of our courses regularly enroll students from other departments, either because they are of broad interest or because they are part of interdisciplinary graduate certificate programs. We might look into collaborating on the development of more interdisciplinary certificate programs in the future, such as one focused on media literacy, or one focused on health communication. Another way of increasing enrollment in our MA/PhD courses is to let MC students in our self-sustaining fee-based Communication Leadership program take courses in our daytime state-funded graduate program; we have done this on a case-by-case basis in the past, but we might encourage more of it in the future, even exploring the possibility of trimming back some courses in the two programs, or combining them. Faculty in both the MA/PhD and MC degree programs approve of greater integration, and we are confident that students would be interested in and would benefit from such activity. We also have begun opening some of our graduate courses to advanced undergraduates, and



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experimented with offering 500-level versions of some of our 400-level courses, taught simultaneously to husband our resources.

In addition to pursuing these options, we have made changes to our MA/PhD admissions process to ensure that the students who come here are a good fit to the course offerings that we can sustain. Nearly all the graduate faculty in the department participated substantively and collaboratively in the new MA/PhD applicant review and recruitment process this past year, one component of which was the support of at least two faculty as a minimum criterion for admission. In the future, we might also want to consider accepting some terminal MA students again, without assistantships, as we used to do before we added the MA/PhD option and began taking on only those students who we planned to see through to the PhD and for whom we could afford assistantship offers.

In their set of recommendations, the review committee suggested that to create more “truth in advertising,” we reconsider the seven areas of study that we list for our MA/PhD program, areas that “reflect conditions and staffing that defined the department years ago” but may not anymore. We made the same assessment in our self-study, identifying this as an “essential conversation for Department faculty in the near future.” One way to proceed would be to name areas from the research groups that have developed naturally in the department. Our website has seen five of these germinate on their own on our research pages: Communication, Difference, & Equity; Communication & Civic Engagement; the Rhetoric Group; Social Interaction; and Technology & Society. Another way of proceeding would be to follow the lead of our undergraduate program by getting rid of official “areas of study” altogether. Graduate students are already being recruited for their intellectual fit with particular faculty mentors, rather than because they work in specific areas of study; moreover, our MA/PhD requirements are designed to provide coverage across the department’s full range of epistemologies, theories, and methods. A vision of graduate education that operates on an apprenticeship model, rather than through the listing of rigid areas of specialization, might be preferable in the current climate of small graduate cohorts.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this process, we are satisfied to find the review committee echoing so much of what we had set out as our plans for self-improvement in our self-study. With respect to matters that are not related to the streamlining or integration of existing degree programs, we also found their recommendations in alignment with our own. Regarding transparency of funding decisions, the Department has already made some changes to our faculty travel funding policy. Since meeting with the visiting committee, we have expanded our reimbursement policy to encourage non-tenure-stream faculty to travel to conferences for instructional development, and to increase and spread out funding to research conferences for faculty at all ranks. We have more work to do when it comes to managing our department’s finances, especially in planning sustainable long-term solutions to permanent reductions of funding in the department. But we already have made some hard decisions, such as the termination of our relatively young, award-

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winning debate program, and we are prepared to make other difficult decisions going forward. We trust that with the encouragement for self-reflection that this ten-year review has initiated, we are well-positioned to have more productive discussions about how to improve ourselves in the years to come.