PROGRAM REVIEW
M.A. in PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION
November 2010

Assessment Plan: The assessment plan for the M.A. in Professional Communication is available on the Provost’s website.

Assessment Information Collected: As indicated in the assessment plan, the Department consistently employs three direct and one indirect source of information in assessing graduate student learning outcomes. The three direct measures are student performance on the Comprehensive Examination, the Master’s thesis required of all graduates, and the video recorded, public defense of the thesis. The indirect measure is an exit interview with graduate students to gather perspectives on the Program’s strengths and weaknesses. The Assessment Plan notes two other possible indirect measures: surveys of alumni five years post graduation, and of graduate program coordinators or employers one year post graduation. These latter two indicators have proved very difficult to gather, given both the difficulty of tracking graduates much beyond their first year following graduation, and very low rates of return for surveys that are distributed. The lack of consistency makes what data are collected of only marginal value.

The entire faculty meets annually in May not only to prepare the required annual progress report for each continuing graduate student, but also to assess the M.A. Program following a two stage process. The first stage involves considering the three measures for each student who graduated during the academic year, with each faculty member contributing his/her assessment of the data at hand, together with insights as advisor and/or instructor over the time span of the individual’s progress through the Program. The focus of this discussion is the individual’s attainment of the Program objectives. The second stage involves reviewing this entire set of assessments for patterns indicative of strengths and weaknesses in the M.A. curriculum and in instruction, apart from individual student achievements. Again, the focus is on the Program’s objectives. Having considered this direct evidence, we also consider the evidence of the exit interviews, which we regularly find corroborate our assessments of strengths and weaknesses, and suggest others.

Summary of Student Learning Outcomes for the Previous Three Years: The faculty consistently find evidence that graduates have achieved the intended outcomes of what we, a recent national professional association president, and our students perceive to be a rigorous M.A. Program. With regard to Objective One, M.A. graduates do possess a mastery of the history and use of theoretical constructs and methodological paradigms employed in the discipline of Communication. The results of the Comprehensive Examination (usually at the start of the fourth semester) reveal that students have moved beyond the core communication theory course (Comm 625) to much more complete understandings of a range of key theories and constructs, and importantly, have gained the ability to conceptualize human behavior from the perspective of Communication, as distinct from the perspectives of Psychology, Sociology, or Anthropology. In addition, both the Comprehensive Exams and the M.A. Thesis reveal not only students’ understanding of both social science/quantitative and of human science/qualitative methodologies (Comm 601 and 602, respectively), but also a grasp of specific data-gathering and analysis methods that is entirely adequate for designing, conducting, and defending a research project that advances understanding in the discipline. While they report being challenged by the
undertaking, graduates also uniformly recognize the significant integrative and professional value of conducting their own research. These assessments are relevant to Objective Two, as well, in that graduates must be capable of conducting, applying, and synthesizing Communication research. Beyond theory and methodology, the remaining two areas of the Comprehensive Exams provide evidence of application and synthesis of Communication research in contexts of training and development (Comm 675), and in communication contexts characterized by human diversity (Comm 680), the latter being essential in the increasingly diverse world of the twenty-first century (24% of Program graduates are international students). Students consistently reveal their ability to integrate across diverse types of research in both of these core courses, and to apply their knowledge in addressing the types of problems they will encounter as Communication professionals in contemporary organizations. These abilities derive in part from their work on applied projects in both courses.

The M.A. Program has two overarching goals that are reflected in Objective Three: producing graduates capable of (1) doctoral study and/or (2) professional employment, this dual focus accounting for the Program’s emphasis both on theory and research, and on synthesizing and applying communication research in organizational contexts. Again the Comprehensive Exams and the M.A. Thesis are indicators of preparation for advanced study or professional employment, but the more important indicators for this objective are external to the Program. Out of 60 plus graduates since 1997, 18% have been admitted to Ph.D. programs at top universities, including the Universities of Denver, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma, as well as Arizona State, Carleton, and Rutgers Universities. The remaining graduates readily find employment in positions that utilize their expertise in interpersonal, small group, and organizational communication, in a wide range of “people-focused” positions in the profit, non-profit, and governmental sectors (see discussion below on the market for graduates). Finally, Objective Four focuses on graduates’ demonstration of effective communication skills, both interpersonal and public. The requirements for presentations in courses across the Program push students to improve in their ability to speak in public situations, which we assess against professional standards in their defenses of their theses. Consistent with our evaluations of attainment, external evidence includes high praise for the presentations of thesis research by 13 M.A. students whose papers were competitively selected for the Western States Communication Association meetings in March 2010. Graduates also hone their interpersonal skills throughout the Program in coursework, in class projects, in conducting research, in interacting with faculty, and for most graduates, in interacting with their students as a teaching assistant.

Summary of Programmatic Revisions over the Previous Three Years: The last major curricular changes in the M.A. Program were in 2002-2003. Given our continuing assessment that the Program is achieving its goals and objectives quite successfully, we do not plan further major changes, although we are continually refining courses and procedures, as indicated below. As long as the tenure-track faculty remains at its present complement of four persons, we will continue to cap the number of graduate students enrolled at any one time at 20, 11 of whom are teaching assistants. We believe this practice is an important component of our success in achieving Program objectives, in retaining students, and in maintaining one of the shortest times-to-degree in the College (two years), because we are consistently able to devote more attention to individual students, both in coursework, and as graduate committee chairs and thesis advisors.
In exit interviews, graduates uniformly recognize and value the close attention they have received throughout the Program.

Two more recent areas of programmatic revision deserve mention. First, we have observed over recent years a decline in interest among students in conducting research using quantitative methodologies, perhaps due to the pattern of instruction in Comm 601. We have taken advantage of the considerable expertise in this area of a new faculty member, who, in conjunction with the instructor of Comm 600, Introduction to Graduate Study, has redesigned the course to lead students through the entire proposal process. In addition to better articulation with Comm 600, initial feedback suggests increased interest among students in using quantitative approaches. Importantly, these changes also address requests in exit interviews to provide students with more opportunities to engage in the research process, from design through analysis, as preparation for carrying out the thesis project. Research projects introduced in Comm 675 and Comm 680 in recent years also directly address this request. Second, each semester one of the faculty serves as Mentor for all 11 Graduate Teaching Assistants, who deliver 16 sections per semester of Fundamentals of Oral Communication (Comm 131X and 141X) in the Core Curriculum. The faculty member teaches the one-credit Comm 661, Mentored Teaching in Communication, required of all GTAs each semester, provides individual assessment and consultation with GTAs on instruction, and oversees the conduct of the basis courses. We continually refine our instruction and practices in mentoring GTAs. For example, we are currently revising practices to address needs both we and the GTAs have recognized for greater focus on the craft of teaching for GTAs in their second year, and for enhanced in-classroom observation and feedback for GTAs in their first year.

**Undergraduate Service Course Instructional Assessment:** Because Comm 131X and 141X are integral components of the UAF Core Curriculum, the Department is committed to providing high quality instruction in both of these courses. Part of that commitment involves the on-going instruction and careful oversight of all GTAs, as above, and part involves continuing assessment in a number of forms. Assessment of instructional effectiveness includes not only classroom observation and consultation, as noted, but also both regular GTA self-assessment of teaching and student input via the Instructional Assessment System. Importantly, student learning outcomes in Comm 131X and Comm 141X are assessed biennially in a separate report to the Core Curriculum Committee. The most recent report in June 2010 is readily available and is incorporated in this document by reference. The report finds strong empirical evidence of attainment of intended outcomes in both of these courses in offerings by GTAs on the UAF campus. Not all students in the M.A. Program serve as GTAs given other job commitments, but learning to teach well is an important component of an education at the Master’s level. The faculty’s assessment, supported by the available evidence, is that the Program uniformly produces highly competent teachers, whose abilities are widely sought after. In spring 2011, one GTA was recognized with a campus-wide award.

Finally, but very important, College of Liberal Arts support in fall 2008 allowed the Department to implement a 15 year old plan to open a Speaking Center in support of all students on campus involved in doing oral presentations. Disciplinary experts have indicated to us that the rate of growth in the Center’s services exceeds national averages, and the Center extended its hours and scope in fall 2009. Both continuing growth in use, direct student feedback, and on-going internal
assessment of the Center’s operation support the conclusion that the Speaking Center is fulfilling the objectives that guided its design. The Speaking Center staff consists entirely of GTAs, and their success is yet another key indicator of their competence as teachers.