



January 21, 2020

To: Pamella Oliver, Provost

From: Bey-Ling Sha, Dean

Re: Dean's Summary Report and Recommendations  
Program Performance Review: Communications M.A.  
Department of Communications

I have read the self-study of the M.A. program in Communications submitted by the Department of Communications in Fall 2019, the report of the review team that visited the program onsite on October 28, and the response of the program coordinator dated November 13. This dean's report summarizes those documents and offers my observations and recommendations regarding this program.

### **Summary Overview**

**History.** The 30-unit M.A. program in the Department of Communications began in 1968 and has been updated several times, in 2007, 2013, 2017, and 2019. The most recent changes involved a slight reconfiguration and labeling of "core courses" to ensure compliance with EO 1071; these changes are expected to go into effect with the Fall 2020 catalog.

**Curriculum.** The M.A. in Communications has three concentrations: (a) Mass Communications Research and Theory; (b) Professional; and (c) Professional, Tourism and Entertainment Communications. The Department views strengths of the program as being its flexible curriculum and its elective internship. The concentration in Tourism and Entertainment Communications is particularly popular with students and has gained some national attention. The M.A. program has robust learning goals, while individual graduate courses have specific student learning outcomes.

**Student Assessment.** Formative assessment is conducted at the start of the graduate program via completion of a literature review in the required course Comm 500, Theory and Literature of Mass Communications. Evaluative assessment occurs in one of two forms: (a) a master's thesis for students in the Research and Theory concentration or (b) a professional project and accompanying report for students in the two Professional concentrations. Indirect assessments include graduates' job placements, admissions to doctoral programs, and willingness to return to CSUF as guest speakers and part-time lecturers.

## Dean's Observations and Recommendations

**Program Mission.** As noted on pages 4-5 of the self-study, the program has a clearly articulated mission statement. Despite its clear articulation and good fit with the overall mission of the Department, the M.A. in Communications mission statement does not offer clear positioning that would distinguish this program from competitors in the Southern California market by leveraging the strong scholarly and professional backgrounds of the faculty and the unique opportunities made possible by our geographic location and industry relationships. Another way to approach program mission statements is to consider them as “competitive advantage statements” that clearly articulate the ways in which a particular program differs from others in the same market, and I recommend that the faculty reflect on the program’s competitive advantages so as to bolster student recruitment and enrollment.

**Enrollment.** The program graduated 41 M.A.s in the 2011-2012 academic year, compared to 21 in the 2018-2019 academic year. Overall enrollment is down, although international student enrollment has remained steady at 1 to 3 per year, which is commendable given national trends in declining international student enrollments due to visa restrictions and other immigration challenges. I commend the hard work of the graduate coordinator in recruiting students via graduate school fairs and presentations to prospective students.

Looking toward the future, I encourage the faculty to discuss ways in which this important work might evolve into a shared responsibility, to diffuse institutional knowledge and, in doing so, enhance program sustainability. For example, faculty might take turns participating in recruitment activities, or faculty might agree to formalize recruitment pipelines with specific institutions that would pre-vet potential applicants for the M.A. program and commit to sending us specific numbers of students each year. Formalized recruitment pipelines may also mitigate to some extent the challenges identified by the review team that are unlikely to see resolution otherwise, i.e., advertising/marketing (no budget, and no evidence that such promotions and their collateral materials yield actual enrollment), paper-based systems in the CSUF Graduate Studies Office (no control), and Cal State Apply (no comment).

I note that the use of graduate assistantships as a potential recruitment tool is within the purview of the Department and its instructional budget as administered by the chair, although the use of these funds for the hiring of graduate teaching assistants obviously reduces their availability for the hiring of lecturers.

**Resources/Space.** I concur with the review team that the “lack of a dedicated space in College Park for graduate students to meet and collaborate makes fostering a cohort model difficult” (cf. External Review Report, page 4). I am hopeful that some of the spaces on the second floor (CP 250 and CP 275) acquired in Spring 2019 by my immediate predecessor can be used for student community-building purposes, although the tradeoff is obviously that any square footage dedicated to communal student use cannot then be used for faculty offices.

**Curriculum.** I am pleased that the Department is “[i]nvestigating ways to enhance learning opportunities for students, such as by partnering with the Latino Communications Institute” (cf. Self-study, page 7). Given current demographic trends, the possibility of providing graduate-level education that parallels and/or extends undergraduate-level offerings of the Latino Communications Institute would be a timely consideration. I am hopeful that such investigations also will include taking a hard look at the curriculum and the extent to which curricular adjustments – in both content and mapping of offerings – may be needed to enhance the long-term sustainability of the M.A. program.

For example, if data show that journalists are leaving the profession to enter strategic communications, perhaps a new graduate course targeting those in transition could be proposed. If research shows that adult learners wish to learn at their own pace, perhaps the M.A. program could adjust to include course offerings that are online and asynchronous (as already mentioned among the program’s long-term goals [cf. Self-study, page 21], and only with appropriate faculty training). If research shows that admitted students do not matriculate

because they lose interest while waiting for the August and January semester-start dates, perhaps the M.A. program could offer a rotation of graduate courses via Special Session self-support modes, with a new class starting every two months. If data show that the most popular concentration in the M.A. program is the one in Tourism and Entertainment Communications that debuted in 2013, perhaps faculty need to discuss whether maintaining all three concentrations is realistic for the future, or whether focusing on the program's existing strengths is more strategic (see note above re: program mission as a competitive advantage statement).

Like the program review team, I commend the graduate coordinator for gathering and using student input in planning and scheduling course offerings, while noting that, of course, these efforts don't capture insights from those students who chose not to matriculate in the program.

**Faculty.** I support the Department's stated priority to increase "the diversity of faculty participation in the M.A. program by encouraging more faculty to teach graduate courses" (cf. Self-study, page 7). In that effort, I encourage the graduate program coordinator and the department chair to keep in mind that, because graduate courses typically enroll fewer students compared to undergraduate courses, any increase in faculty numbers teaching in the M.A. program should be accomplished by (a) appropriate rotations of graduate course offerings among faculty members and/or (b) commensurate increases in seats offered in undergraduate course sections to maintain the expected overall student-faculty ratio (SFR).

Furthermore, until the SFR assigned by the University to the College of Communications is rebalanced as part of a campus-wide conversation about workloads, budgets, and enrollments, the option mentioned by the review team to allocate "one future tenure-line hire to teach exclusively in the graduate program" (cf. page 5) is unlikely to materialize. On a related note, the offering of course releases to support faculty research with graduate students (or faculty research in general) is a College-wide desire that I would be happy to support on a competitive basis, when instructional budgets permit.

## **Closing Comments**

I thank the program coordinator, department chair, and review team members for their hard work in this important process, as well as the faculty, staff, and students who participated in this program performance review for their engagement. I concur with the overall sentiment that the program has many strengths, and I am optimistic that – working together – we will not only sustain, but also strengthen, the program for the long-term future.