

California State University, Fullerton
Program Performance Review:
Department of Communications Graduate Program
External Review Report (Fall 2019)

Review Team Members

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The Review Process

This report is based on the review team's study of the Department of Communications' Program Performance Review self-report and supplemental materials, followed up with a site visit that took place on October 28, 2019. During the on-campus visit, the review team met with Dr. Bey-Ling Sha, Dean of the College of Communications, Dr. Jason Shepard, Chair of the Department of Communications, and Dr. Andi Stein, Graduate Program Coordinator. In addition, the reviewers had the opportunity to meet with the department office staff, tenure-track, full time and part time faculty, current graduate students, and alumni. Members of the review team also visited Dr. Stein's COMM 525 class.

This report is organized in three principal sections in which we outline commendations, challenges, and recommendations for the Department of Communications Graduate Program.

Commendations

The external review team observed many strengths with the program, including the leadership of the department and the program, quality of instruction, meaningful interaction with faculty, high impact practices, and institutional knowledge.

Leadership. The leadership provided by Chair, Dr. Jason Shepard, and Graduate Coordinator, Dr. Andi Stein, was referenced repeatedly by all constituents participating in the review as an asset to the program, with faculty and staff reporting, “I feel like a valued member of the team,” and a student reporting, “It meant a lot that Dr. Stein treated me like a person.”

Quality of Instruction. Because the program has such a personal touch with Dr. Andi Stein as the longtime program coordinator, much of the student feedback referred to her, with students commenting on her supportive nature and her engaging instruction, as well as their eagerness to learn more--all of which were witnessed during the observation of her class. Students and alumni reported engagement and favorable attitudes toward having freedom to research topics of interest in communication and also being able to take 400-level courses as electives, thereby expanding the program into specific areas of interest. They also appreciate the study and social opportunities to form class cohorts so they can support each other as they progress through the program. A benefit of a graduate program in a state comprehensive university is the greater emphasis on teaching, leading to observations and reports of quality instruction in the classroom as noted by the review team.

High Impact Practices. Current and former students expressed interest in high impact practices, including research with faculty, internships with faculty, and teaching assistantships or associateships with faculty. Few, however, reported availing themselves of the opportunity, and some reported challenges in accessing the opportunities. Those who did complete research with faculty said it was very beneficial to them in their studies. Similarly, faculty reported that chairing theses or serving on committees aligned with their own research and led to future research. Students complete either projects or theses as culminating experiences in the program, with the project option involving a community-engaged element of service learning in collaboration with a nonprofit.

Advising. Advising is done solely by the Graduate Program Coordinator with a personal touch, reported by all those who used it to be beneficial. Many reported attending the program because of meeting Dr. Stein at college fairs across the region.

Quality Faculty. Faculty come from a broad range of practical and academic backgrounds with advanced degrees, longevity with the graduate program, and meaningful information to bring to students. Graduate faculty are true leaders in their respective disciplines and it is evident in reviewing their CVs, in meeting with them, and discussing their work. While there have been recent retirements in COMM, new hires create the opportunity for new information, updated fields of study, and the introduction of new technology into the classroom.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Faculty and students are diversifying, a fact that is also referenced in the self study and in the university mission statement. Dr. Shepard reports

increased diversification of the faculty, from 86% White in 2016 to 67% White today according to statistics provided by Dr. Shepard and corroborated by numbers provided by the institutional dashboard showing 67% White faculty, 12% Asian, 15% Latinx, and 6% African American. Diversifying faculty can be an avenue for new ideas and cultures to enter the classroom for a diverse student body who see themselves reflected in their instructors. Currently, the student population in the graduate program is 35% White, 5% Asian, 30% Latinx, and 10% African American according to the institutional dashboard, and the Orange County population as a whole is 41% White, 21% Asian, 34% Latinx, and 2% Black.

Institutional knowledge. Because of the longevity of the Department Chair and the Graduate Coordinator, the present institutional knowledge is seen as a tremendous asset to the program by the review team, giving the program added knowledge and stability. With the new leadership at the level of Dean and above, the institutional knowledge of the Department of Communications is observed to have contributed to the stability and success of the program.

Reputation. The MA Program in Communications is known to be among the best of the Communications MA programs offered in the region and throughout the CSU system.

Including Working Students. Many students work full time and are holding good jobs in the field of Communications, including work in instructional communication, public information, and public relations at the Coordinator or Specialist levels. Students bringing this knowledge to the program is an asset to the curriculum. That students can attend classes while working in their chosen professions is highly valued by them.

Input Opportunities. The review team learned that students are surveyed annually for input on what courses are desired, and that this input is considered in the scheduling of the courses. This is a wonderful mechanism for both student satisfaction and student buy-in. The team reviewed a copy of the survey and noted that perhaps the course bulletin description of the classes may be additionally helpful rather than just the course names and numbers, just in case a student may be looking for additional clarity.

Challenges

Workload. The Graduate Program demands a lot of COMM faculty. As Graduate Program Coordinator, Dr. Stein receives three units of reassigned time per semester, yet teaches a 3/3 load in addition to her advising and recruitment obligations for the program. Similarly, Dr. Shepard leads a large department with more than 2000 students and above 30 FTEF, yet is obligated to teach one course per semester. Tenure-track faculty who direct theses and serve on the thesis committees of graduate students in the Mass Communications Research and Theory Concentration do not receive units in the form of a course assignment, as with the COMM 597 Project course, nor do they receive reassigned time.

Recruitment and advising. Dr. Stein expends a significant amount of time and energy traveling to graduate school fairs and feeder schools to recruit students. Currently, the program does not

have a plan or budget for advertising online and in print. Prospective students must navigate the problematic Cal State Apply system on their own, as faculty do not have access. While the program offers graduate teaching assistantships for credit through COMM 595, the lack of paid teaching assistantships may place the program at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to recruiting students. Although CSUF offers online resources such as Titan Degree Audit and TitanNet for undergraduate advising, the Graduate Studies Office relies on an outdated paper-based system for record keeping, study plans, and grad checks, thereby increasing the administrative workload for the program coordinator and office staff.

Resources. Recent cuts to MCF allocations limit COMM's ability to maintain currency with regard to technological equipment and software purchased for its courses. The lack of a dedicated space in College Park for graduate students to meet and collaborate makes fostering a cohort model difficult. Moreover, students enrolled in COMM 595 to serve as graduate teaching assistants do not have an assigned space to work and hold office hours.

Enrollment. The graduate program maintains relatively low enrollment caps in its courses (fewer than 20 students). Occasionally, courses are canceled due to low enrollment. Offering fewer courses per semester could result in more consistent enrollment across sections, although the need to offer enough courses for students in each of the three tracks to progress toward degree completion limits the extent to which the course rotation can be tightened. The need to offer foundational courses, such as COMM 500 for both fall and spring admits, also presents a scheduling challenge in this regard.

Currency of curriculum. As Dean Sha mentioned, anticipating industry needs and planning curriculum accordingly can be difficult, given the length of time that the course approval process takes.

Online courses. The program offers traditional face-to-face courses in the late afternoon and evening to accommodate students, many of whom are working professionals. Current graduate students expressed interest in online options, citing their positive experiences in online COMM courses as undergraduates. One faculty member shared that he would like COMM to develop an online graduate degree program. Dean Sha also supported the idea, stating that such courses should be fully online and asynchronous.

Final projects. Alumni mentioned that more guidance and time should be provided for final projects in the Professional Concentration and the Tourism and Entertainment track. Similarly, more advising on theses was recommended by those who had pursued the Mass Communications Research and Theory Concentration.

Recommendations

The Department's Self-Study identifies three main and inter-related priorities for the Master of Arts graduate program for the future: 1) Increasing enrollment; 2) investigating ways to partner with the CSUF Latino Communications Institute, and 3) enlarging the number of diverse faculty who teach in the program. The program review process also identified a number of long-term

goals/strategies and the attendant resource implications, as outlined in the challenges listed above.

Increasing Enrollment

Boosting enrollment should remain a top priority in this demanding program. This can be done by expanding and funding recruiting efforts beyond the current hands-on practices, such as the graduate coordinator's time-consuming participation in local and regional graduate school fairs or her presentations to prospective students at feeder campuses.

As outlined above, the program faces significant impediments to achieving this goal. To build a competitive advantage, one recommendation would be for the Department to work with the College's Development officer to pursue grants and establish new revenue sources to fund upgraded recruitment efforts. These would include:

- a much-needed marketing budget for online and/or print advertising and related promotional materials, with support at the college and university level from the office of grad studies.
- paid teaching assistantships and scholarship to support new recruits, instead of the one-time, three-unit internship credit currently used for interested students.
- involving students in recruitment efforts, perhaps through internship courses or paid positions.
- developing new in-person and online courses that meet student needs and keep up with trends in the field and in technology.
- possibly converting the Communications in Tourism and Entertainment to a fully online program to take advantage of its distinctiveness as perhaps the only one of its kind in the country.

Program Partnerships

The Department would greatly benefit from investigating formal ways to enhance diverse and inclusive learning opportunities for students and faculty by partnering with the CSUF Latino Communications Institute. Much like the existing Spanish for Hispanic Media Certificate Program, innovative interdisciplinary options seen as high impact practices for graduate students should be developed in all three concentrations thereby enhancing the potential for multicultural service learning opportunities.

Involvement in the LCI might also be a low-cost vehicle for improving the diversity of faculty participation in the M.A. program. The Department has made important strides in the last five years to increase diversity among the full-time faculty that serves both graduate and undergraduate students. So, encouraging new and more diverse faculty to teach graduate-level courses is recommended. Another option, not necessarily tied to recruitment, would be to use at least one future tenure-line hire to teach exclusively in the graduate program.

Additional Recommendations

Workload, resources and enrollment are intertwined challenges that will need to be addressed at the College level. The Department has maintained a high-quality program, despite the lack of

a graduate funding differential, or any dedicated budget for that matter. More budget tightening is expected in the coming months.

In lieu of formal funding, one alternative is to provide reassigned time to support faculty work on thesis committees, making sure faculty is compensated appropriately and equitably in compliance with CSU personnel policies. During the site team visit, several faculty noted they had turned down work on thesis committees due to the extensive additional unpaid time involved. That can put students at a disadvantage if they are not able to work with faculty in their research/creative activities area.

Another option would be to reconsider the current practice of allowing Spring admittance. The number is low, creates problems for class caps, and generally sets these handful of students apart from their Fall counterparts. This could be a cost savings that might also enhance the cohort model students and alumni said, during the site team visit, they preferred.

The program would greatly benefit from consistent allocation of funds to support workload and other resource challenges.

While the graduate program coordinator does have office staff support, the outdated paper-based system employed by the Graduate Studies Office increases the workload. As an alternative to free up some time, a Department-based electronic system might relieve some of the workload.

Finally, continue to schedule courses that reflect student needs and interests based on survey feedback.

Summary

In sum, the Department of Communications Graduate Program at California State University, Fullerton is doing an exceptional job in fulfilling its mission to provide quality instruction in theory, research, and practice in the field. It has articulated learning goals that are aligned with those of the department and university. The faculty and staff in the department are committed to the program and to the success of their students, as evidenced by the culture of service that characterizes COMM. The department greatly benefits from strong leadership and advocacy from the graduate program coordinator as well as from the department chair. Moreover, the dean appreciates and supports the program. With these assets in place, the program has a solid foundation from which to explore initiatives and implement changes such as those mentioned in this document. The review team hopes that the comments herein provide starting points for COMM to strengthen successful practices as well as to cultivate new ones.