

To: Professor Gary Ruud, Chairperson
Department of Human Communication Studies
California State University, Fullerton

From: Patricia Riley, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, USC
Thomas Hollihan, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, USC

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RE: Academic Review

Thank you for the opportunity to visit the Communication Studies program on November 12-13, 2015 for the purpose of providing an academic review. We were delighted to meet you and your faculty colleagues. We also had the opportunity to meet with Interim Dean S. Irene Matz, Associate Dean Ed Fink, your office-staff members, and a handful of graduate and undergraduate students. Without exception, everyone with whom we spoke was upbeat, friendly, and deeply committed to the academic mission of the college and the program. We were most impressed by the collegiality and enthusiasm expressed by the faculty. It was apparent to us that you and all of your colleagues find joy in your work. It was also clear that people were creative in their strategies to overcome the daily challenges and resource limitations they encounter.

It is important to begin with the strengths of the program, which are numerous. First, the Communication Studies program has a number of senior faculty members who are world class in their areas, especially in intercultural communication, and all are very highly respected. Their research productivity has the faculty ranked near the top in national rankings for research. The program has also moved to secure its future success by hiring outstanding junior faculty who show great promise in both teaching and research. The adjunct and part-time faculty were also extremely competent and well-regarded by their colleagues and your students. It is rare to find such an amalgam of happy, expert faculty and excited, well-satisfied students.

Communication Studies also has a top-ranked debate and forensics program that offers students a creative and intense laboratory for studying and competing in argumentation and oral deliberation—a program that is superior to the ones at many of the best US universities. We also learned during the visit that Communication Studies TAs are truly outstanding—praised by students and faculty alike with very impressive teaching evaluations.

The program has one other significant advantage—extremely supportive administrators. The Interim Dean, Associate Dean and Department Chair are all smart and knowledgeable about the field, and they are considering a number of ways they might further enable the program's success and are thinking big about the program's needs and challenges (e.g., a possible new building, more visibility for the program outside campus,

potentially more training for the teaching fellows and assistants, and ways to improve access to new technology.)

As has been the case in every previous academic review that either of us has conducted for a California State University campus, we also found a department that was significantly overworked and under resourced. Faculty teaching loads are punishingly heavy (most teach four courses each semester and while some courses are much smaller, a class can have up to 70 students without a teaching assistant which is not good for faculty or students). This is a difficult burden given the significant time required for research, working with students, faculty governance and service, not to mention keeping up with new scholarship in a field that changes as rapidly as communication. In addition, faculty salaries are woefully inadequate given the cost of living in Orange County so a number of people have significant commute times. Nonetheless, almost all of the members of the faculty have maintained active publication profiles--writing books and book chapters and publishing in leading and significant journals.

Communication Studies is fortunate in that it has been able to add new appointments to its tenure stream faculty in recent years and it is currently undertaking a new faculty search. These new appointments do not represent a net increase in faculty members as they are replacements for lines that have opened due to retirements or departures for other reasons (and in fact, the program continues to be somewhat short-staffed given its enrollments), but these new appointments have enabled the hiring of several entry level scholars who promise to become well-known researchers and illustrious teachers. The new faculty hires also expressed great satisfaction that they have been warmly welcomed into the department by their senior colleagues.

While our general view of Communication Studies is profoundly positive, there are of course, some areas for possible improvement. The issues we identify will not surprise you as many of them were in the self-study document prepared for this review and they surfaced repeatedly in our conversations with faculty members.

This report is divided into four sections that focus on *administrative concerns*, *curriculum innovations*, *improvements to the student experience* and *enhancements for faculty*. It should be noted that these categories are simply schema for organizing our comments and representing the voices of those we interviewed. Clearly some of these concerns and recommendations cut across multiple areas.

Administrative/Structural Concerns:

1. Communication Studies should attempt to increase the number of undergraduate majors.

The Communication Studies faculty members are currently teaching a large number of students. The self-study document indicated that in the most recent year it produced 842 UGAFTEs, 40.6 GAFTEs, for a total of 882.6 AFTEs. These numbers have been fairly consistent over the past eight years with only minor variations from year-to-year. Given

the size of the faculty (including both full and part-time appointments), these FTE totals confirmed the heavy teaching burden alluded to in the first paragraph. Yet, the Communication Studies program has relatively few majors in comparison to other programs and departments in the college, and also in comparison to other nearby and comparable communication studies departments at California State University, Long Beach and San Diego State University. Communication Studies is meeting its FTE targets because it is teaching multiple sections of courses that are required for all students as part of their general education requirements. Faculty members and students would benefit if the program had more majors because more upper division elective courses could be offered. In addition, the Communication Studies program would likely have a bigger footprint on the campus if it served more majors.

The self-study document states, and our conversations with the faculty and students confirmed, that most Communication Studies majors do not enter CSUF with this major in mind. Instead, they discover the major after arriving on campus and experiencing one or more of its courses, or after conversations with peers or academic advisors. One obvious challenge that this program faces is the confusion generated by the naming of the college and its departments. This is a College of Communications but it also contains a Department of Communications (offering a degree of the same name) and a Department of Human Communication Studies (offering a degree in Communication Studies and Communication Disorders). It is not surprising that potential students and their parents become confused and have difficulty determining which of these pathways might be most intriguing for further study or as a potential major. We were confused at the distinctions between them and we have been members of the communication discipline for four decades. Obviously these duplicative names are a legacy of historical and political decisions that required compromises, but we believe that it would be in the interest of the entire college and of the university to get the faculties together to sit down to seek a wiser solution, particularly in an era where the lines of distinction between sub-disciplinary boundaries are increasingly blurred.

2. Relatedly, the HCOM Department and indeed the College of Communications needs a complete makeover of its website so potential majors and other stakeholders understand its structure and mission.

Communication Studies would be more visible to potential students (and indeed all of the departments in the college should be more visible) if some new resources, attention, and creative energy were devoted to its website. The website is the virtual front door of the college and as a result it is the place where almost everyone (prospective students, current students, parents, alumni, employers, foundations, and potential faculty hires) first turns to find information about your programs. Yet we found the current website to be profoundly text heavy, stale (some very outdated material), and difficult to navigate. Also important information is missing, for example, the MA in Communication Studies is not on the page that describes the other MA degrees in the college, instead it repeats “MA in Communications” from the previous column (<http://communications.fullerton.edu/departments/>). The site was almost completely lacking in lively photographic images of students engaged in the many different types of

learning opportunities, projects, and activities offered through the college and there is almost nothing about the kinds of jobs obtained by recent graduates. This is especially troublesome for a College of Communications where many students enroll to develop their own skills in creating content, mastering web design, and learning techniques to facilitate ease of navigation so that users can easily find the information that they are seeking. When we turned to individual faculty pages for Communication Studies we discovered that most of the pages were incomplete and contained almost no content and one of the faculty members we interviewed is not listed. Perhaps we accessed the site in a moment of transition, but nonetheless we saw this as a problem that urgently requires attention, as this is the time of year when students are making their choices about where they will apply for their undergraduate and graduate studies. These changes will require web design expertise and money as well as faculty and student time. Redesigning the architecture of the site may require a contractor, however, you could enlist the creativity of your students in relevant classes next term to design new content, or perhaps create a contest.

3. Communication Studies needs to do more to increase its visibility in feeder high schools and community colleges.

It is unclear to us what efforts Communication Studies was currently undertaking to increase its visibility and to attract students directly from important feeder high schools. Several faculty members indicated that they had participated in such outreach activities in the past, but were no longer actively engaged. It seems to us that one or more faculty members should be given assigned time and a reduced teaching load in order to undertake such a recruiting plan and then develop a rotating schedule to involve multiple faculty in the recruiting process over time and work out a system for calculating the release time for these activities since it is unlikely that faculty can devote time to this given the current workloads.

4. The HCOM Department/Communication Studies needs to secure and assure predictable funding for its forensics and debate team.

The CSUF forensics and debate team is a jewel in the department's crown and an important learning laboratory to develop students' critical thinking, research, public speaking, and organizational skills. CSUF has been among the most competitive forensics and debate programs in the nation, consistently qualifying for the highly prestigious National Debate Tournament and more than holding its own against such debate powerhouses as Harvard, Dartmouth, Northwestern, Emory, Berkeley, and yes, USC. The competitive successes that the team has enjoyed since the 1960s are even more noteworthy when one considers that the program has always been somewhat underfunded and that it does not have access to the generous scholarships and financial aid available to the above mentioned programs.

The forensics program was dealt a significant setback this past year, however, when it lost half of its travel budget without warning in a decision made by the committee that allocates student fees to support student activities. Although a portion of these funds

were returned in direct allocations from the central administration and from the college, there is profound anxiety that the program may not be able to count on the resources to support student competitions next year or in some future year. Furthermore, this decision was not communicated to the director of forensics until last summer making it all but impossible to plan for the coming year's activities. We would strongly recommend that the college and central administration work to develop a secure and stable budgeting plan to assure the continued health and vitality of this program which has served hundreds of CSUF students over the decades and has also produced many very successful and loyal alumni. It is no doubt the case that nationally competitive forensics programs may on the surface appear expensive if costs are judged on a per-student basis. One must recognize, however, that they are less expensive than the technology costs for educating students in broadcasting, film or television production. As we observed above, this is the learning laboratory for students in this program and they uniquely benefit from the competitions in which they engage and from the feedback provided by an inter-institutional faculty. The historical legacy of this program has also greatly benefited the CSUF brand, and the program has produced hundreds of very successful and loyal alumni.

5. Communication Studies should focus on improving its MA program and should systematically collect data to benchmark its progress.

There was a surprising lack of concrete data about the MA program offered in the self-study or gleaned in conversations with faculty members. The only real data in the self-study was the number of applicants, the number admitted, accepted, and the graduation rates. The program does not require GRE scores, so the benchmark data that is most frequently used to facilitate comparisons of graduate programs was not available. We are not arguing that GRE scores are necessarily the most valuable metric as the research indicates that a composite of metrics are needed, but there was also no information available about average GPA's of admitted students, or their undergraduate institutions or funding levels. There was also no concrete information about student placements or careers following the completion of their degrees. We did hear anecdotal data that several students each year went on to doctoral programs, which of course should be celebrated, but the program and the college needs to begin to collect additional data to assess its program and to benchmark its progress.

It seems that a significant percentage, although we could not determine precisely what percentage, of the MA students were CSUF undergraduates, but there was no information available regarding where most of the other graduate students completed their undergraduate work. No one could offer us details about the recruiting strategies for the MA program or what efforts were underway to increase enrollments (which were slightly down recently), or to improve the quality and visibility of the program. This seems to be another example of what happens when faculty members are so busy teaching their undergraduate classes that they do not have time to do the program building and sustaining work that would enhance the reputation and visibility of the program's graduate program.

We were able to meet with only a few MA students and they reported that they were generally were satisfied with the program. These students also expressed concerns, however, that in some cases, the content of their graduate classes was not substantially different than their undergraduate classes with the same professor. In addition, there was frustration that Communication Studies had too few graduate students to offer the array of seminars that would capture and satisfy fairly diverse student interests.

Another possibility is to consider a progressive degree where students do their BA and MA simultaneously by continuing for a fifth year to earn their degrees as a “package.” This idea was developed in the EU (part of the Bologna Agreement) and it has now spread to many US universities. Typically a program sets the standard for undergraduate success necessary to enroll in the progressive degree by the end of the sophomore year. The new students from the progressive degree program could create a critical mass of students for senior seminars and additional graduate courses.

Faculty members with whom we spoke were largely satisfied with the quality of their graduate students, although several mentioned that students fell along a broad continuum. Some were highly qualified, hard working, and well prepared for graduate study. Others were less well prepared, distracted by too many external demands on their time (jobs, family, etc.), and found graduate study too challenging. We believe Communication Studies should focus more attention on its graduate program and that it establish clearly defined goals to improve the quality of its students, the breadth of its course offerings, and the impact of its graduates in the discipline, the community, and society. This means that more faculty members need to be engaged in recruiting graduate students and developing new courses for the program. A new vibrant website will be very helpful but a presence at graduate recruiting fairs, events on campus, etc. will also be important making the program more successful for all.

6. Communication Studies needs to rethink the course scheduling process to enable better planning for all.

The graduate teaching fellows and a number of faculty, particularly part-time and adjunct faculty members, mentioned the difficulty in preparing to teach when there are so many last-minute changes to the schedule. Several interviewees mentioned that other institutions with which they are, or have been, associated are much better at scheduling. We also learned from staff that it is not unusual to cancel 20 courses at the beginning of the term in HCOM, most in Communication Studies, which seems excessive. We are suggesting several changes but the faculty will certainly need to brainstorm other possible improvements.

First, we suggest that Communication Studies list faculty on all courses on the class registration schedule. When no instructor is listed for a course, we have learned from our own surveys that students are reluctant to register for the class—they tend to believe that it has a higher probability of being canceled because the chair has been unable to locate someone to teach the class, when instead the department is simply trying to preserve some flexibility. Thus an attempt to make life easier for the department probably

increases class churn. This system should alleviate some of the uncertainty for graduate student and part-time faculty teaching assignments. Second, a faculty committee should examine the patterns of class selection at the undergraduate level and try to create better predictions regarding class selection, then develop a better plan to advertise courses that are under-enrolled at the end of pre-registration. Third, the smaller numbers of graduate students means that patterns are harder to discern and more variable so it is important to create a rotation of required courses and stick to it even when enrollments are low (this would need to be negotiated with the dean) and then create a system for elective courses so the program can better balance needed coursework for the areas of interest for the current group of graduate students with faculty opportunities to teach graduate courses.

Curriculum Improvements:

7. The Communication Studies program should ask for “retreat” resources to enable them take a day and discuss some needed curriculum changes such as creating new and innovative minors and rethinking some of its courses to become more inclusive.

We recommend that HCOM consider creating attractive minors as a strategy to develop higher enrollments in some areas and also so that it can offer more upper division undergraduate classes. The only minor currently offered is a general minor in communication studies. We suggest that you consider possible minors such as the following: social media and online communication, intercultural and inter-ethnic communication, health communication, communication and social justice, professional communication in organizations, and communication law and public policy. Obviously you will not want to create too many such minors, but you should survey your current course offerings and consider which new minors might prosper and allow for the development of senior seminars. Interdisciplinary minors could be created with other departments that could foster increased interdisciplinary research and teaching, and also attract students from across the campus to create greater visibility for the department at the university.

The CSUF student body is very diverse (21% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% African American, 33% Hispanic and 4% multi-race) yet a number of faculty are concerned that the curriculum is based on a very white American/Northern European research paradigm. As part of the curriculum innovation discussion, the faculty should devote time to looking at the inclusivity of the current course offerings and discuss new possibilities.

8. We encourage the program to expand its focus on digital social media and on health communication.

Communication Studies has recently added new faculty members in the area of digital social media and in health. We strongly encourage the department to continue to invest in these areas through additional faculty appointments and through the development of new courses.

We have already mentioned a new academic minor in social media as a possible strategy to attract new students. Our experience at USC suggests that this is one of the most fertile areas in our discipline for attracting students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. This area, even if approached critically, opens up possibilities for placing students in interesting careers, since Los Angeles is a center for the development of new media technologies and applications and also for the production of content. As more and more of our society is composed of digital natives, human communication is being reshaped as children grow up living their lives online and on multiple screens. The economic and social impacts of these new technologies are profound and has ushered in the era of “Big Data” in communication. Understanding the analytic models that will reshape research into human communication in families, in business and political affairs, is now important in both undergraduate and graduate communication programs. This program, and this college, should be a center for this activity at CSUF. Having already made an important new hire in this area, we suggest that the department move quickly and expand its focus in this space as the interest is growing rapidly and the research moves very quickly.

We see health communication as another area of the discipline that is likely to greatly expand. Health communication also connects to the social media area for it is commonly understood now that most people will input their health information into their apps or export those data through devices like Fitbit. They will also seek information through mobile social media or online before consulting with their physicians. In addition, communication in doctor-patient relationships, public health campaigns, the challenges of intercultural factors influencing medical care, and even issues of social justice in the access to health care are all grounded in research and teaching that are already recognized as important in this program. Not only are health related careers increasingly attractive to communication graduates but this is one area in our discipline where there are significant amounts of research grant funding available. Additional appointments in health communication with a focus on health campaigns and quantitative research methods would clearly strengthen the department.

Improvements to the Student Experience:

9. The graduate students should be encouraged to create a graduate student association.

During our conversations with the graduate students we suggested that they look at other graduate programs and find a model for an effective graduate student association that they can modify to fit their needs. Many of the issues they raised are about gaining information and providing feedback. Those concerns can often be improved by simply regularizing communication with faculty and administrators who are very busy interacting with students who have a lot going on in their lives and are not always around as some are not full-time students. Research indicates that having a structural line of communication can be very helpful in addressing these concerns. In addition, a graduate student association may be helpful in applying for university funds, recruiting more graduate students to a project through website promotions, and developing new interdisciplinary projects.

10. Communication Studies should develop and encourage more internship opportunities for its students.

Our conversations with faculty members suggest that the program has not systematically encouraged its students to undertake internships and has not created the processes or infrastructure needed to cultivate a variety of internship opportunities or to develop the networks with internship providers to help transition graduates from their internships to careers. Although we recognize that some internship opportunities exploit student labor, our experience suggests that a healthy balance can be achieved if there is a strong director. Many of your peer institutions have very successful internship programs so learning about them would be helpful. An internship director should be named to cultivate internship opportunities, to steer students into internships appropriate to their capabilities and interests, and to visit the workplaces to assure that students are given meaningful and challenging assignments and not merely making photocopies or making coffee. Internships should be academically focused, and we believe student interns should also be asked to produce a journal, a paper, or some other assignment to document what he or she learned from their internship. We also encourage the program to invite its alumni back to campus for a career day (perhaps in association with Communication Week) to highlight job opportunities and to encourage alums to become mentors to current students. In many programs formal mentoring is viewed as crucial to recruitment and retention.

11. Communication Studies needs access to needed technology and suitable classrooms.

Although everyone we spoke to expressed satisfaction with their offices, several people mentioned that finding a sufficient number of classrooms suitable to meet program needs remained a problem. Several faculty members also expressed concerns that access to computer labs was a challenge. It seems that the college lacks a sufficient number of computers and labs accessible to students and to instructors teaching classes. One idea that was proposed, and that we hope can be implemented given the decreasing cost of equipment, is that the program is given the funds to purchase mobile carts with computers that can be wheeled from classroom to classroom to ensure that students have access to computers equipped with the appropriate software to complete the work they need their courses.

Enhancements for Faculty:

12. The program needs additional support for very large undergraduate courses.

We have seen large classes at other CSU campuses but most of them have some teaching support for instructors of large classes. We do not know enough about resource allocation, budgeting and distribution at CSUF to suggest the best way to alleviate the problem, however, we know of two universities in the CSU system that have been creative and found ways to give faculty more support following reviews like this one. There may be opportunities that come from more class size balancing, cross-listing or

inter-school partnerships. There are also new possibilities using technology such as “flipped classrooms” that might enable the merger of multiple section courses and make better use of teaching assistant time. Just as the administration provided resources to “internationalize” classes, or enact the strategic plan, the college can lobby for resources to rethink the use of communication technologies in the classroom and free up TA time.

13. The junior faculty should have a more structured onboarding process and mentoring program.

Junior faculty suggested that a thorough introduction to the college and department would be very useful. The university provides an introduction to CSUF but the college (as mentioned above) is a historical structure that is confusing and somewhat complicated. Besides a guide to departmental processes and procedures, there was a particular request to instruct faculty on the advising process and to help them learn all the required rules and regulations across the undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

We also discovered that there is generally strong informal faculty mentoring, and some of your instructors have really benefitted from this practice. Others, however, do not have a mentor and could benefit from one so we suggest that everyone who is not yet a tenured professor have an assigned mentor. These roles do not have to be static and can be changed over time according to a set of guidelines that should be developed by your faculty.

14. We encourage Communication Studies to become a salon for important conversations about new developments in communication related issues in society.

We believe that this program (and this college) could dramatically increase its visibility on campus and in the community and discipline, if it became a site for important conversations regarding new developments in communication practices, intercultural, intergroup and global communication, political rhetoric, social media cultures, etc. One suggestion that was offered to us, and that we applaud, was an attempt to brand the department as a destination for information and conversations about local political campaigns and elections. Also, in the past there was a Research Roundtable that could be re-started. We urge the creation of some type of weekly seminar/salon where you invite authors, media personalities, political leaders, alumni, business executives, etc. for one-hour conversations about their latest achievements and interests. Invite speakers to talk on a diverse array of topics and take advantage of experts in your own department and elsewhere on campus, on other campuses in the region, and those passing through Los Angeles. Advertise the events on campus, on the web, and through word of mouth and encourage professors to assign participation to their classes. Showcase your own faculty work. To start building an audience it helps to offer food! Allow your debaters and individual events competitors to give demonstrations on hot topics of the day. Most importantly, create a buzz by focusing on faculty research to ensure that everyone understands that the communication discipline is the most exciting field at the moment. A program such as this will require a small investment of resources (food, room, promotion, organization, etc.) but we believe it will also help the perception that learning from

faculty is the essence of a university community. We especially urge you to reach out to colleagues in other departments and colleges. This will enhance your reputation and standing on the campus and build a community of intellectuals.

Conclusion:

As we have already expressed, there is so much to celebrate in this department. We were most impressed by the amazing quality, true friendliness and high morale of the staff, faculty, as well as the support the department received from Interim Dean Matz and Associate Dean Fink, and last but not least, the enthusiasm of the students.

We certainly hope that as the CSU system continues to recover from the terrible and regretful cuts that it endured during the Great Recession. It needs to devote new resources to increasing faculty salaries and creating greater opportunities for faculty members to gain reassigned time so that teaching loads can be reduced, especially for those faculty members who are most productive in their research and teaching. If support does not come from on high, however, we hope that the program's productivity, expertise and devotion to students can be supported locally through creative dialogue and collaboration.