

Program Performance Review (PPR)
Human Communication Studies Department
California State University, Fullerton

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a pleasure to review the undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the Department of Human Communication Studies at California State University, Fullerton. The Department of Human Communication Studies (HCOM) is home to nationally and internationally recognized scholars, a nationally ranked debate team, and offers an array of coursework across its degree programs. The department is fortunate to have a faculty with excellent research and teaching records. Students enjoy being exposed to different methods of communication to address today's most pressing communication issues and applaud the department's emphasis on transferable skills that recognize their varied, and ever changing, career objectives. The department has a long history of focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion, and continues to identify ways to better serve their underrepresented minority population. Faculty and students expressed a strong sense of belonging and collegiality, no doubt in large part in response to the participative and transformational leadership of Dr. Jon Brusckke, Department Chair, and Dr. Bey-Ling Sha, Dean of the College of Communications.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

This external review report takes into consideration the Human Communication Studies Program Performance Review (PPR) self-study and insights gathered during the site visit. The self-study report, reviewed by the review team prior to the site visit, was prepared by Dr. Jon Brusckke, Chair for the Department of Human Communication Studies, for the 2022 Program Performance Review. The site visit occurred on Tuesday, February 15, 2022 and included meetings with Dr. Bey-Ling Sha, Dean of the College of Communications, Dr. Deanna Leone, Associate Dean of the College of Communications, selected Department of Human Communication Studies committee chairs, Dr. Irene Matz, Dr. Tara Suwinyattichaiorn, Dr. Alyssa Samek, Dr. Zac Johnson, Department of Human Communication Studies faculty, and graduate and undergraduate students.

The report is divided into four sections: **Section I** highlights the program's strengths; **Section II** reviews the department's response to recommendations from the previous program review; **Section III** focuses on the areas identified as weaknesses by the review team; and **Section IV** includes the review team's recommendations regarding areas of opportunity for growth and change with an eye to helping the program prepare for the future.

I PROGRAM STRENGTHS

The Department of Human Communication Studies' most notable strengths include the research productivity of its faculty, its quality forensics program, a curriculum that aligns well with the university's mission and goals, and a deep commitment to teaching excellence. The department has managed to sustain their efforts in these areas while navigating numerous changes in leadership at the university and within the College of Communications, experiencing curriculum and staffing disruptions, and through continued budgetary issues.

Faculty Research Productivity

Department faculty are active and influential researchers. Nearly all full-time faculty members maintain an active research agenda, some with dozens of publications during the review period. The quality and importance of the department's research is demonstrated by the significant number of top paper awards at regional and national conferences. Faculty research interests cover a broad range of important topics in the field, including intercultural communication, instructional communication, LGBTQ+ representation, and health communication. Much of the faculty research addresses issues of diversity and equity. And, while not mentioned in the self-study, the review committee acknowledges the independent and collaborative research of the department's non-tenure track faculty and graduate students. It is clear that members of the department are actively engaged in advancing their fields of inquiry and utilize their research to enhance student learning.

Forensics Program

The Department of Human Communication should be commended for their continued support of an intercollegiate forensics program. As mentioned in the PPR self-study, since the last review, the department was able to stabilize funding for the program via IRA funds. In addition to being identified as the Department's signature High Impact Practice (HIP), the Forensics program has been at the forefront of some of the most important anti-racism conversations both on campus and across the country in the intercollegiate debate community. The forensic program's Statement of Racial Justice demonstrates the long history and commitment to racial justice and anti-racism within this program.

In addition to being a powerful space for student engagement on some of the most important topics of the day, the forensics program is also competitively successful. In 2021 they finished in the top eight at the prestigious National Championship Tournament hosted by the National Debate Tournament.

University Mission Related Curriculum

The department serves a crucial role in the university's mission to enrich the lives of students and inspire them to thrive in a global environment. The basic communication course (e.g, HCOM 100), is a well-established fixture in the first-year college curriculum at colleges and universities across the nation. This foundational course is often the only formal training in communication that many students receive, despite professional organizations' continued emphasis on the importance of communication skills in the workplace. The HCOM curriculum, especially HCOM100, prepares students to be competent communicators able to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion within a variety of contexts. While many departments, and universities, struggle to include issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in their traditional curricula, HCOM has a solid cohort of classes dedicated to social change. Courses in communication are critical to students' future personal and professional success and should be required of all majors.

Teaching Excellence

The department prides itself on providing students with meaningful learning opportunities through excellent teaching. It is clear that faculty are dedicated to high-quality instruction in the care in which they design their courses, the enthusiasm they display about the subject matter, and the degree to which students enjoy the courses. The communication department might leverage the expertise of its communication instructors by working with the Faculty Development Center to help facilitate workshops or certificates in support of faculty teaching and learning practices.

Facilities and Space

Overall, the review committee was pleased to see the space dedicated to full-time faculty, part-time instructors and teaching associates, and a research library. Departmental offices/rooms were split across two floors (4th and 6th), however it appears that faculty and students navigate this with ease. The Andersen Research Library (ARL) houses a collection of periodicals, books, and course materials from the personal libraries of past faculty members and appeared to be a dedicated space where graduate students could study, print materials, and engage in conversation with faculty who stopped by. The importance of the Andersen Research Library to non-teaching graduate students was apparent when speaking to students who regularly use the space.

Collegial Relationships and Supportive Leadership

Overall the Department and the student's we interviewed demonstrated a strong sense of collegiality and belonging. Students report having access to their professors and feeling welcome in the department. Graduate students, in particular, identified a sense of collegiality amongst their peers, with no distinctions being made between those with teaching associate positions or employment outside the university. The Committee commends Dr. Jon Brusckie for his leadership as Department Chair. It is clear to the committee that his guidance, sense of humor, and dedication to excellence have been instrumental in helping the Department manage multiple challenges amid a global pandemic. Members of the review team would also like to commend Dr. Bey-Ling Sha for her leadership as well. During our scheduled meeting, Dr. Sha indicated that she saw her role as educator and advocate. More specifically, she believes it is important to educate department chairs and faculty on ways they might respond to budgetary constraints (e.g., providing a document with a menu of options for operational realignment). Dr. Sha also believes in advocating for the department and created a Dean's Faculty Input Committee to gather insights about the budget and ways to engage with the community.

II. RESPONSE TO PREVIOUS REVIEW'S RECOMMENDATIONS

We commend the department for their dedicated efforts to respond to the feedback received in the last program performance review (December 2015). As noted in the HCOM self-study, many of the recommendations from the prior review have been met with department-level initiatives whereby they have been able to: (1) increase enrollment in the undergraduate major, (2) update the curriculum to address trends in the field, (3) work to identify more internship opportunities, and (4) offer a minor in communication studies. Due to the global pandemic, a recommendation to offer courses in an online modality resolved itself with a university-wide shift to online courses during the 2020-2021 academic year. Each of the noted updates since the last review are discussed in detail below.

Enrollment

Since the last review, the department has grown its enrollment in significant ways. As indicated in the self-study, the department roughly doubled the number of transfer enrollees from 63 in the fall of 2017 to 125 in the fall of 2020 and increased their FTEs by 20% in the time between AY 2017-2018 to AY 2020-2021. The consistent growth since 2017 illustrates the importance of the major to the university's mission, and the central role communication plays in the nation and world's ability to engage citizens in effectively addressing our most important emerging challenges (e.g., curbing climate change, mitigating political polarization and radicalization, discrimination; mitigating health risks and public health emergencies; increasing literacy skills).

The Department should be commended for reaching the Chancellor's 2025 transfer graduation targets two years early. The data provided demonstrates that the two year rate is currently 69% (target is 45%) and the four-year graduation rate is over 90% (target 85%). The Committee also recognizes that the repeatable grade rates for URM students are overall less disproportionate than other departments in the college and across the university.

The review committee acknowledges the inordinate burden being placed upon faculty within the department (and across departments at the university). The self-study speaks to the expanding Student/Faculty Ratio (SFR) and Student/Tenure-Track Faculty Ratio (STTFR) beyond what is identified as optimal in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. While not ideal, there is an increasing trend across universities (public and private) to serve more students in our classes.

Curriculum

The prior review called for a "need to continue renewing the curriculum to address trends in the field" and "update its [curriculum] road map and course rotation plan." The review committee notes the changes made in both the structure of the program and the development of new courses in critical/cultural studies (HCOM 307), digital media (HCOM 305 and HCOM 415), sports communication (HCOM 370), and communication and the art of happiness (HCOM 428). While it is important to be responsive to changes in the discipline, the review committee applauds your commitment to sustaining curricula around a strong core of base knowledge which emphasizes the practical application of theory and research from diverse epistemological and methodological approaches (e.g., quantitative, rhetorical, and critical/cultural studies).

The inclusion of a roadmap for undergraduate majors and the course rotation schedule was very helpful, especially having this information available to students planning their coursework. In looking at the course rotation schedule, we note that beyond core courses, 300 and 400 level courses vary in course rotation. That is, some are offered every semester, every other semester, every ½ years, or every 2 years. The department might want to continue to review course rotations and make course offering decisions based on patterns of enrollment. Low enrollment in courses offered frequently might be exchanged for more sections of a class in demand.

Internship Opportunities

The prior review suggested the department work with the Center for Internships & Community Engagement (CICE) to identify more internship opportunities. The self-study noted that "internships were encouraged" and may be used to substitute a breadth area. The review committee believes that a centralized College of Communications Internships Office, with dedicated Internship Coordinators is a great resource to students. One recommendation from the review team would be to update the internship website to elaborate on why internships are important to undergraduates. Specifically, sharing information about networking opportunities, increasing marketability, and professional development would be beneficial.

Minor in Communication Studies

Since the last review, the department has added a minor. This 18 unit minor is designed to allow students to customize a series of courses, with consultation and approval from an advisor, which allows students from other majors to focus on the aspect of communication most relevant to their career objectives. This minor appears suitable to numerous other majors on campus and we applaud the department for creating this degree option.

III. WEAKNESSES AND CHALLENGES

To retain its excellence in research and teaching, we believe the department, and its degree programs, could be strengthened by taking several steps in the near future with regards to faculty support, faculty hiring, preparing for the impact of AB 928, assessment, and to a lesser extent, disaggregating URM data.

Faculty Support

As noted in previous reviews, faculty are significantly overworked and under-resourced. The needs of CSUF students and the relatively high teaching load already represent a significant demand on faculty. Additionally, demands imposed by a global pandemic during the review period and the associated budget cuts are compounded by increases in faculty workload associated with, for example, assessment mandates. During our visit the faculty also pointed out that a rule regarding the teaching of “double-section” courses is being enforced differently than in the past. The new enforcement means that to be awarded a “double-section” course faculty will have to teach over 120 students when in the past those “double-section” courses would have 60-80 students. This increases the workload and potentially decreases the quality of the education provided to students.

Another challenge faced by HCOM is retaining part-time faculty. The issue is partly caused by enrollment swings that are outside of the department's control (i.e., the size of the freshman class and their advising) and the typical fall-to-spring dropoff. Additionally, potential changes to GE requirements are expected to have a large negative impact on the department's part-time faculty pool.

The Impact of AB 928

While not a weakness on the part of the department, AB 928 will soon bring unprecedented changes that could weaken HCOM and the College of Communication. As detailed in the self-study, AB 928 aligns the UC and CSU GE transfer requirements and will likely result in the elimination of the oral communication requirements. This will affect undergraduate enrollment because the majority of HCOM students find the major through their GE oral communication requirement at community college. However, if the oral communication requirement is dropped from the GE transfer requirements, universities may still make oral communication a graduation requirement, generating a significant amount of FTES. If the University does not make oral communication a graduation requirement, the department will suffer greatly.

At the graduate level, losing the oral communication requirement at the community college level will eliminate employment opportunities for MA graduates who typically go into community college teaching. If there are no jobs for community college oral communication instructors, there will be less demand for MA programs to train them. This would also undermine the Forensics program, which relies on graduate student coaches.

Assessment

The Department of Human Communication engages in ongoing assessment of Program Learning Outcomes and has access to institutional data on student success. The Department has made a commitment to engage assessment in a way that is meaningful for faculty, developing a White Paper on assessment to guide their efforts. In fact, the department was “recognized as exemplary by the Office of Assessment and Educational Effectiveness (OAEE).” The committee, however, notes that the seven year rotation is too long. The faculty should be encouraged to more meaningfully investigate both the program learning outcomes and the equity gaps that may exist within them. We agree that assessment can be misused, but the committee also believes that it is important for the Department to ensure that equitable learning outcomes are happening in their classrooms.

Disaggregating Data as a Tool of Inclusion

It was impressive to see emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion related to student enrollment and achievement of student learning outcomes. The self-study report provided numerous data tables that addressed differences between under-represented minority (URM) and non-URM students, and the efforts to minimize any existing gap between those two groups. However, members of the review committee note a lack of disaggregating data (i.e, dividing data into samples to share nuances and outcomes of different under-represented groups). Disaggregating data is important for creating an inclusive environment, especially when considering the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on different racial/ethnic groups.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the prior sections as a foundation, this section focuses on both short term and long term strategic directions recommended by the review team. Moreover, we present ways that department strengths may be leveraged to address weaknesses or limitations. The goal of the recommendations is to improve the quality, productivity and efficiency of the programs.

Planning for AB 928

We recommend that the department, in coordination with the College, prepare for the potential loss of the GE lower-division oral communication requirement at the community college level as a result of AB 928. As discussed above, this will have a drastic effect on both undergraduate and graduate programs. Plans to deal with AB 928 might include: advocating for oral communication as a University graduation requirement; generating new FTES by expanding offerings of the GE A3 class HCOM 235; creating new high-enrollment courses; coordinating with other campuses to devise region-wide solutions; exploring new models for undergraduate and graduate study, such as certificates and self-support; and prioritizing faculty hires in areas that will attract graduate students to the program. We recommend that any new hires the department is granted be focused on areas that would support a transformed graduate program. This could mean more professionally oriented faculty and faculty with expertise in organizational communication, campaigns, and consulting.

Future of Online Instruction

More and more, students want online instruction. The HCOM department is willing and able to deliver high-quality online instruction to serve student demand. Online instruction, whether synchronous or asynchronous, must play an important role in increasing enrollment. We understand that the pandemic brought the issue of online instruction to a head and the University is still considering options. We recommend that the department be as involved as possible in the University’s discussions about the shape of online instruction and that faculty begin to consider the process of developing high-quality online offerings. Online course

offerings during the summer might be proposed based on the department's ability to get sufficient enrollment and the interest of faculty.

Inter-departmental Collaborations

One other element that stood out was the separation of the departments, despite all being part of the College of Communications. In an effort to establish separate/unique identities, the departments appear to miss out on opportunities to collaborate on issues of social, political, and economic importance. To illustrate, there are connections between the creation of media content (Department of Cinema and Television Arts) and the analysis of its impact (Human Communication Studies Department), how tourism communications (Communications department) influences interpersonal or intercultural relations (Human Communication Studies), or how communication disorders (Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders) are managed in an organizational context (Human Communication Studies). Going forward, it would be advantageous to explore ways to capitalize on the excellence found within all departments with opportunities for cross-departmental curriculum integration (e.g., a shared/common course required of all undergraduate majors in the College of Communications) and scholarship (e.g., a Dean's Research Initiative to provide internal support for cross-departmental research collaboration). Two areas of growth mentioned by HCOM faculty were digital social media and health communication. We believe that these areas could be enhanced through interdisciplinary scholarship and shared curriculum.

Mentoring of Assistant and Associate Professors

Mentoring is recognized as an effective way to support the development of faculty members in higher education. During the site visit, faculty noted the lack of a formalized mentoring structure in the department. Moreover, faculty acknowledged less informal mentoring occurred for Associate Professors. The department might assign a senior faculty member as a mentor to every probationary faculty member, and that relationship could continue until promotion to full professor.

Attract Students through Curriculum Innovation

The department has several courses that attract students, particularly Sex Communication and Sport Communication. We note that the department has several faculty with expertise in instructional communication, which is an area where the department could expand the curriculum. This could be added at the graduate level, providing graduate students with exposure to an important area of research and practical knowledge for their future teaching. The department also has a strong group of faculty working in health communication, which is another important area where curriculum could expand and integrate with other strengths, such as intercultural communication. As recommended by the dean during our visit, we believe courses in visual rhetoric and procedural rhetoric should also be considered, as should undergraduate and graduate certificates with professional emphasis that could be run through self-support. We recognize that the department may not have the capacity to expand into new areas, but there is much they can do with their existing faculty expertise.

Reinstate Student-Retention Initiative

During Spring 2019, Dr. Zac Johnson received a small grant to implement a student-retention initiative in HCOM100. This initiative focused on addressing the gap in URM and non-URM student performance within a largely first year (freshman) dominated course. The effect of this effort was a dramatic decrease in the URM/Non-URM gap. Unfortunately, this program ended. We recommend that this program be reinstated and supported to expand to other courses.

Graduate Communication Association

The department maintains an undergraduate chapter of Lambda Pi Eta, the communication studies honor society. However, no such organization or association exists for the graduate students. While graduate students have opportunities to collaborate on research projects with faculty, a graduate communication association would allow students to connect academically, professionally, and socially. The association could coordinate networking opportunities, guest speaker events, and also plan community service events. This would be good for the graduate students as a way to expand their career opportunities beyond just community college instruction or PhD degrees.

Department Name

Despite the popularity of the communication coursework, and the faculty, the review committee was surprised to hear that enrollment was often driven by “discovery” through general education courses taken at a community college prior to transfer or those taken at CSU-Fullerton. One explanation for this presented in the self-study report was potential confusion stemming from the similar, yet varied, names of departments (Department of Human Communication Studies, Department of Communications), the major (Communication Studies), and the college (College of Communications). The department should be given the option to change the name of their department and drop the “human” from the title. This seems reasonable, especially given the discipline’s increasing focus on leveraging emerging technologies and tools in communication research (e.g., social media/networks, virtual environments).

Facilities

The space needs of the department outlined in the self-report prioritize two things: classroom access and computing lab space. The issue of classroom availability might be reduced with online teaching formats becoming more common, however regular access to a computing lab for courses that involve data analytics is important. Proficiency in data analytics is increasing in demand and often gives students the competitive edge when applying for internships or jobs. The computing labs on the first floor, while accessible to the department, are shared spaces for an entire college that includes degree programs with digital and computational skills curriculum. The college should consider expanding its computing spaces in consideration of the needs of the four departments. While the department has accomplished their goals related to this space (i.e., modernization of the computers, a laptop cart, and exclusive use of the space for graduate students to work appropriately), members of the review committee suggest that the department seek alumni funding for the continual upgrade of resources in this space.

Further, there does not appear to be space where undergraduate majors can socialize with each other, study or run into faculty members. In fact, the building that houses HCOM is somewhat separated from the rest of campus where undergraduates spend the majority of their time. We recognize that space on campus is limited. However, we recommend that in the event that additional space becomes available, consideration should be given to the needs of undergraduates.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Human Communication is a strong program facing many uncertainties and challenges. Faculty are active and influential researchers. The curriculum supports the University’s mission and is delivered expertly by well-trained instructors, as demonstrated by the

assessment data provided. The department appears collegial and a good place to work. Going forward, the department will need to address issues of online instruction and the impact of AB 928. We hope that the department will have the support and resources necessary to successfully transform in the years to come.