Communication Studies Graduate Student Outcomes Report
Draft 1

1. Process

All Communication Studies faculty and graduate students were asked to respond to a Qualtrics survey. Respondents were asked to articulate basic program goals, desired outcomes, and metrics. Faculty and graduate students discussed the resulting report. After additional revisions, the document was approved by the faculty and forwarded to the Graduate School.

2. Educational Goals and Outcomes

The mission of the Communication Studies graduate program is to provide advanced study in three areas of specialization: Media Studies, Rhetoric, and Interpersonal Communication. We provide national and international leadership in our collective research specialties, while emphasizing integrative communication theory, rigorous methodological development, and engaged social practices.

Although some students will choose from proliferating array of communication-related jobs in industry, governance, and the nonprofit sector—a decision we fully support—the main goal of the program is to admit and prepare students for academic employment. We seek to produce highly skilled professionals, scholars who are effective researchers as well as successful instructors. Incoming students designate one of the three subfields as their primary focus of study. In addition to gaining mastery in their chosen subfield, students are required to take coursework across all three tracks to develop an integral and synthetic understanding of the discipline as a whole.

As opposed to the crosscutting nature of communication theory, it is recognized that methods vary significantly across the subfields and according to topic. Students are encouraged to choose subject-appropriate methodologies and are encouraged to develop a mixed-methods approach when warranted.

Pedagogical development is also essential. Communication Studies students should graduate with advanced pedagogical skills and
appropriate levels of teaching experience. Rather than separate domains, the program views research and teaching as complementary, interrelated practices.

Finally, the program seeks to help students develop an ethical orientation toward scholarship, teaching, and service. We seek to graduate “public scholars” whose research and teaching benefits the wider society, including research, teaching, and applied work that contributes to the needs and interests of marginalized communities.

3. Assessment of Achievement of Programmatic Goals and Learning Outcomes

The above goals should be incorporated into the entire curriculum, including rigorous testing and evaluation to make certain that each student is fully prepared to advance. As for measuring outcomes at the programmatic level, basic metrics will include placement data, publications, awards, grant support, and student evaluations of teaching.

Using Gradtrakker, the program will continue to monitor placement of recent graduates, seeking a placement profile that ranges from small liberal arts colleges to large research universities, with recognition that the increasingly exploitive nature of adjunct and other contract positions, we seek to place our students in tenure-stream posts. However, we also recognize the increasingly fluid and variable nature of academic employment; some of our most successful students are teaching in contract positions.

Publication is increasingly important to student success. Therefore, the program will request that recent graduates share their publications and updated CV's with the department. Unfortunately, the time consuming nature of producing publishable manuscripts, combined with journals' relatively slow publication cycles, make it difficult for graduate students to publish while also completing coursework, writing theses, and dissertating. Therefore, changes are underway to help students to produce publishable journal manuscripts during the early stages of the graduate program, including changing master thesis requirements to better align with the production of publishable manuscripts. One metric of success, therefore, in addition to gross counts of publications, will be the number of master's theses resulting in published articles.
Not all communication-related associations and conferences confer awards to graduate student members. However, the National Communication Association is among the bodies that do extend such awards. Therefore, the program will use graduate student awards as one metric for measuring programmatic success. However, neither this nor grant support will become a central metric. Relatively little research conducted in Communication Studies is dependent upon grants and much less grant funding is available compared to disciplines that are dependent on external funding. Furthermore, the program provides full support for graduate students during the academic year, lessening the need for external funding. However, external fellowships and grants can provide important supplemental aid so that students matriculate in a timely manner. That includes summer funding and grants for research related travel. The program will monitor grant acquisition and seeks to increase the success of students in acquiring supplemental grant funding.

As for teaching, the program seeks to provide students with experience in teaching at least one of the foundational Communication Studies courses (public speaking, argumentation, and/or media literacy) as well as an advanced course in the student’s subfield. We will monitor the program’s success in providing those opportunities. Student evaluations will periodically be compared to prior cohorts as well as other instructional groups, including tenure-track and contract faculty. It should be noted that these and all of the above metrics will be used to assess our success in achieving programmatic goals, but will not be used to assess individual student achievement.

Finally, the Wednesday Noon Research (WNR) series remains the best ongoing measure of the department’s collective intellectual health and community. The WNR succeeds to the extent that faculty and graduate students invest their collective time and efforts. Attendance ratios—number of actual to possible attendees—will be used to track the ongoing health of the departments’ grad-oriented research and training focus from year to year.

Of the above metrics, student placement is paramount. Publication is also very important. The remaining metrics will be used mostly for the purpose of internal monitoring for sake of improving the graduate curriculum and program.