

**Academic Program Review of the
Department of Communication Studies
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
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BACKGROUND:

The Department of Communication Studies resides in the College of Liberal Studies. At the time of the last Academic Program Review (1996-97) the Department of Communication Studies was part of the former Department of Speech and Theater. The Department has 13 tenured or tenure-track faculty and between 11-14 full and part-time instructional academic staff and offers both majors and minors in Communication Studies. The number of majors in this program has increased significantly recently from a total of 60 in 1997 to 306 in 2008. Similarly the number of minors has also increased from 50 in 1997 to 120 in 2008.

The Department of Communication Studies submitted its self-study report to the College of Liberal Studies, Dean's Office spring semester, 2007. Prof. Melissa L. Beall, University of Northern Iowa completed the external review on March 9-10, 2006 and submitted her external review report February 2007.

SUMMARY OF THE SELF STUDY:

Goals and Objectives

The Department of Communication Studies has a clearly stated Department Mission Statement and Department Objectives listed in the "Purposes" section of the self-study document. The Goals/Objectives of the Department include:

1. to provide programs that prepare competitive candidates for successful communication intensive careers and graduate work in communication based disciplines.
2. to conduct scholarly and creative activities to enhance departmental programs.
3. to provide instruction to UW-L's General Education program that develops basic public communication skills of all UW-L graduates.
4. to provide service to the college, university, and community.

Summary of how the program reaches its Goals/Objectives

These goals are achieved by having dedicated faculty members who care about student learning and student success. The faculty are responsive to changes in the communications field, assessment data and past program review. The program provides important learning experiences through their core curriculum, emphasis-specific courses, and senior research project. Furthermore, the Communication Studies Department also provides support for the University Core Program through its CST 110, Public Oral Communication, course that averages 37 sections per semester.

NOTABLE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PROGRAM:

The faculty in Communication Studies is their strongest asset. The department has a dedicated group committed to quality teaching, scholarship and service to the University. Notable strengths of the Department include the following:

- assessment being used to improve core course offerings
- dedication by faculty to offer a senior undergraduate research project to all students
- a variety of service learning opportunities incorporated into the curriculum
- the aforementioned strong faculty-student connections.

Areas of concern for the Department of Communication Studies include the following:

- limited resources available to maintain necessary program equipment
- limited technology available in the teaching classrooms used by members of this program
- lack of unity between the numerous CST110 course sections and inconsistent assessment of student learning outcomes
- a perceived disconnect between department members

APR comments on particular components of the self-study

Programs: Students declaring a Communication Studies major or minor must choose between one of the following emphasis areas:

Interpersonal Communication
Public Relations/Organizational Communication
Persuasion and Public Communication
Telecommunication

All majors must complete a set of core courses and then additional courses specific for their selected emphasis.

As stated in the report and in the external reviewers comments, these emphasis areas should be reviewed to determine if they are in line with current trends in the communications field, prepare students for future careers or educational opportunities, and fit with the department's future direction.

Curriculum: The Department of Communication Studies has a core curriculum focused on introducing students to the area of communications and then providing them knowledge in the theory and research methods of this area. In response to assessment results, the courses included in the core were recently revamped to provide a better introduction and flow to the program.

The department curriculum supports the University Core Program through its CST 110 course and also supports other programs such as Radiation Therapy, Family and Youth Care and International Studies.

Assessment of Student Learning and Degree of Program Success: The Department of Communication Studies has an assessment committee that is made up of

representatives from each emphasis area and the CST 110 Basic Course Director. This committee is responsible for overseeing assessment activities and writing assessment reports. Three major assessment activities that have occurred in the department are direct course-embedded assessment in the core courses in relation to particular course student learning outcomes, direct assessment of student anxiety in CST110, and indirect assessment related to an extensive alumni survey carried out in 2005.

The core course assessment results were effectively used to modify the core curriculum through renaming courses, modification of core courses and creation of a new CST 301, Theories of Communication. Future assessment will determine if these changes improve the core curriculum. The alumni survey revealed that graduates overall felt that their Communication Studies major/minor prepared them for their careers. Alumni also responded positively to writing skills and effective academic advising.

Two aspects of assessment that should be considered by Communication Studies are the following. First, a set of **program** student learning outcomes, not just course outcomes, should be developed. Development of these program outcomes will provide the faculty with an opportunity to discuss the overall qualities they want Communication Studies students to have upon completion of the whole program. This task will also provide the opportunity for the department to start the discussion of “who we are” and “where do we want to go”, which was noted by the external reviewer as a need in the department. Furthermore, this exercise can provide a basis for a discussion of what courses particular topics should be covered in and what sequence students should take these courses, which was noted by students and the external reviewer as a need to avoid overlap in the courses.

Secondly, in regards to assessment, the Communication Studies program must look carefully at CST110 and develop a method to provide effective assessment of student learning outcomes of that course beyond assessing student anxiety. The assessment method that is developed must have “buy in” from all CST 110 faculty and be utilized to make improvements in the course.

Previous Academic Program Review and New Program Initiatives:

Communication Studies was reviewed last in 1997 while it was a joint department of Speech and Theatre. The recommendations associated with Communication Studies and responses were:

1. The department is clearly recognizing the importance of mentoring new faculty. The work which they have started in this area should be continued, including the development of a standardized structured review process for probationary faculty and a faculty handbook describing the department and University expectations for tenure and promotion.

Response: The faculty has developed a process involving tenured faculty feedback and recommendations for probationary faculty activities that increase their likelihood for becoming tenured and promoted. Six faculty have been tenured and eight promotions have occurred since the last APR.

2. Faculty should be encouraged to apply for sabbaticals. This would provide an opportunity to pursue the type of scholarly and/or creative work which is difficult to do while handling a full-time teaching load.

Response: Though no sabbaticals have been granted to Communication Studies faculty since the last APR, scholarly output of the faculty has grown steadily. The faculty have found strategies to producing academic research and creative applications of scholarship while handling their teaching loads.

3. The department should be more aggressive in securing external funding.

Response: Over thirty grants have been procured by 10 faculty members since the last APR.

4. Every effort should be made to better balance the ratio of junior/senior faculty.

Response: Nine of the 12 department faculty have achieved associate professor status; however, only one faculty member has achieved full professor status.

Personnel: The faculty in Communication Studies overall provide a diverse range of expertise necessary to provide a good learning experience for students in any of the four major emphases offered by the department. One emphasis area, Public Relations and Organizational Communication, was noted by the external review as needing more faculty with APR designation. This need may be dealt with through future faculty hires or with changes of emphasis areas offered through the program. Overall the department must be commended on recruiting underrepresented faculty into their program.

The other major personnel challenges that Communication Studies faces is the lack of a technician to support their television and radio studios. The need to maintain and repair the sophisticated equipment in these studios is vital to the program. Furthermore, Communication Studies does not currently have a full-time Academic Department Associate and with the program size increasing a full-time ADA is quickly becoming a necessity.

Support for Achieving Academic Program Goals (Resources): The greatest resource concern Communication Studies currently has is the need for improvement in equipment and facilities. The department needs access to more classrooms with technology capabilities, space for students to conduct research that is critical for the program's required senior project, and an updated Communication Resource Center. Associated with this is the need for updated equipment in these facilities (i.e. computers, video equipment, televisions) so the learning experience is enhanced for students. Hopefully many of these concerns will be addressed with the design and construction of the new Academic Building in which this program is slated to be housed, but in the meantime this is a serious concern.

Comments on External Reviewer/Department Response/Dean's Letter

Both the Dean and the External Reviewer agree that Communication Studies is a very good department that is moving towards becoming even better. The external reviewer particularly noted throughout her report the excellent faculty-student relationships and the program's obvious commitment to students. The reviewer however noted that there is a need for more cohesiveness among the faculty in the department. There should be a discussion among **all** faculty regarding "who we are and where do we want to go". This will provide the opportunity for all members of the department to have their voice

heard. Furthermore, course offerings, course sequencing, intellectual sharing and the direction of CST110, areas the reviewer described as program challenges, can all be included under this discussion. The external reviewer also commented on the increased need for research and publication within the department.

The reviewer commented extensively on CST110 saying that it “needs to be fully integrated into the department and validated for the successful program that it is”. The main challenges that she sees with this course are as follows:

- there is a lack of consistency between course sections
- faculty who teach this class feel less valued
- there is a lack of sharing of teaching ideas among instructors of this course
- the course director not being compensated

Other comments by the external reviewer are found throughout this report.

The Dean’s comments were consistent with the external reviews but also included the following suggestions: 1) faculty should consider increased scholarly collaborations with colleagues in other departments, 2) there should be increased communication with the English Department in regards to coordination between CST110 and ENG110, and 3) the department is encouraged to study their readiness in regards to creating a graduate program.

APR's Recommendations

The Department of Communication Studies should undergo its next Academic Program Review in the next regularly scheduled cycle. There are some areas that need to be addressed in the coming years. Specific recommendations include:

1. The Department should continue its efforts in assessment focusing on development of program student learning outcomes and assessment of these outcomes and development and implementation of an assessment plan for CST 110.
2. The Department should work towards providing cohesiveness among the multiple sections of CST110 to ensure a common, rich oral communication experience for all students at UW-L.

Suggestions on how to accomplish this are:

- Form a departmental subcommittee that regularly meets to discuss course issues and make departmental recommendations for course improvement.
- Explore ways to facilitate better communication between course instructors, such as pre-semester course workshops, new instructor training, course resource sharing, increasing instructor connections
- Explore increasing the authority of the CST110 coordinator by providing release time designated for the coordination task or hiring a tenure-track faculty with partial administrative responsibilities to direct CST110.

For any change that is made, the impact of that change needs to be assessed several years after implementation.

3. Analyze the current emphasis areas offered in the Department and modify as necessary, taking into account current trends and overall program direction.
4. The Department should work towards securing a technician responsible for maintenance and repair of program equipment along with a full-time ADA position to support the program.