2021-2022 Academic Assessment Report
Master of Arts in Communication (COMMMA)
June 23, 2022

Students who complete an M.A. in Communication at the University of Arkansas learn how they can use communication theory and research to investigate a civic engagement related area of concern facing communities, organizations, states, nations and/or world.

Learning Goals & Objectives

Upon graduation, students with an M.A. in Communication will:

Goal #1. Understand the historical, theoretical and methodological foundations of and differences in the discipline of communication and identify an area of interest to them;

Goal #2. Understand the major research methodologies used in our field and demonstrate some proficiency in using them;

Goal #3. Apply research-based, theory-informed knowledge to identify and address real-life civic engagement communication issues in the form of a capstone project or apply theory-informed and research-based knowledge to extend research on a communication issue in the form of a thesis.

Learning Processes (LP)

To achieve these learning goals and objectives:

LP #1. Graduate students complete the Paradigms in Communication course. This class has been offered every fall since it was piloted in Fall 2015. All graduate students after August 2015 have taken this class.

LP #2. Graduate students complete two methods classes. All graduate students in the program historically took two methods classes. Redesigned classes were first offered in Spring 2017 and underwent additional modifications each semester thereafter, especially as the courses were taught by other instructors in a three-year cycle.

LP #3. Graduate students complete either a master's thesis or a capstone project. Both options require that students identify a research question pertaining to an issue, articulate a theory that can illuminate the research question, utilize a research method appropriate for the theory and research question, gather data appropriate for answering that question, write up the results of the experience, create a tangible product (i.e., thesis, capstone project), and publicly present their results. The Department of Communication has offered the thesis option since the

program began. The Capstone in Communication course was pilot tested in Spring 2018. Faculty and current graduate students provided input into the course design in 2017, and procedures have continued to be clarified for students. A third exit option, restoring the comprehensive exams, was redesigned by the graduate faculty during the 2021-2022 academic year and will be available to students in Fall 2022.

Assessment Methods (AM)

To ensure students are achieving these goals and objectives:

AM #1. Graduate students successfully complete assignments in Paradigms of Communication which expose them to the areas of the field and help them develop their own interest areas. Final grades in Fall 2021 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content, following trends dating back to 2015.

AM #2. Graduate students successfully complete assignments in two research methods classes which help them demonstrate their knowledge of various research methodologies. Final grades in Spring 2022 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content.

AM #3. Graduate students successfully complete either a master's thesis or a capstone project. These numbers have been fairly consistent year to year. In Spring 2018 three students completed their theses, two students defended their capstone projects, and two students governed by the older requirements completed their comprehensive exams. In Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 eight students defended their capstone projects (4 per term) and four defended their thesis. In Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 six students defended their capstone projects (3 per term) and three defended their thesis. In Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, nine students defended their capstone projects and two defended their thesis (with at least two more scheduled to defend in Summer 2022).

Assessment Processes: When and Who

1. Goal #1 and Goal #2 are assessed at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters by the course instructors (Direct Assessments). Results are shared with the Graduate Director.
2. Student completion or scheduling of the courses important to achieving Goals #1 (Paradigms in Communication) and #2 (two research methods classes) are assessed by the Graduate Director each spring as part of the department's annual graduate student academic review process which is reported to the Graduate School.
3. Goals #1 and #2 are assessed by the Graduate Director through an interview held with the Director's Graduate Student Liaison Council each Spring as to whether or not students feel their first-year experience helped them achieve those goals (Indirect Assessment). Student recommendations for changes are sought.
4. This process was conducted in Spring 2017-2020, with a break in 2021 due to the pandemic. Regular assessment has restarted for the 2021-2022 academic year.
5. Goal #3 is assessed at the end of a graduate student's final semester through their completion of either an M.A. thesis or capstone project. For the thesis students, a thesis defense occurs

before three faculty members and the thesis advisor completes a Master's Record of Progress form and sends it to the Graduate School. For the capstone students, the Capstone Advisor grades part of the students work in the capstone class. Three faculty members judge the student's work during a defense of their final project (Direct Assessment) using the Capstone Panelist Evaluation Form. This defense includes a comprehensive assessment of their understanding of theory and research. Students must pass their capstone course to graduate. A Master's Record of Progress form is completed for each capstone student and sent to the Graduate School. Goal #3 is also assessed by asking students to complete the Capstone Student Feedback Form (Indirect Assessment).

The information below is from the 2021-2022 reports for COMM 5163 (Paradigms), COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods), COMM 5173 (Qualitative Methods) and COMM 5183 (Interpretive Methods). As specified in the report, however, no assessments were available this year for COMM 5123 or COMM 5173.

In COMM 5163 (Paradigms), which was taught in Fall 2021, the instructor looked at the distribution of grades associated with individual assignments related to the following four course goals. The fourth course goal was added in 2021 and was being assessed for the first time. The first learning objective, focusing on understanding of the history and boundaries of the communication field, was assessed through two sets of reading responses. Student scores ranged from an A to an F, though the F was the result of the student not completing the assignment, otherwise scores ranged from A to C. The second learning objective, based on exploring the basic qualities of contemporary communication research, was assessed through a position paper and four sets of reading responses. The scores ranged from A to C on the reading responses, and the mean score for the position paper was an 88 percent. The third learning objective, focused on learning the professional landscape of the field of communication, was assessed through a reading response assignment and a position paper. Students scored a 100 percent on the reading response, and the media score for the position paper was a 90.75 percent. The fourth learning objective, focused on designing communication research, was assessed through a reading response and two position papers. The average score on the reading response was 100 percent, and the median scores for the position papers were 86 percent and 90.75 percent. Overall, the instructor for COMM 5163 assessed student learning in the course as positive, suggesting that the class accomplished its goals. Performance even improved since 2020, with average final grades roughly two points higher. The improvement was regarded to be the result of revising the course based on the 2020 assessment, particularly revising Position Paper #2. The instructor stated that future faculty teaching the course "may want to consider developing an assessment that can more clearly capture student growth over the course of the semester" through pre-tests and post-tests.

COMM 5163 Course Goals:
1. Arrive at some understanding of the history and boundaries of the communication field;
2. Explore the nature of contemporary communication research, including its primary questions, paradigms, modes of inquiry, standards, and limitations;
3. Sketch the professional landscape, including its organizational structures; and
4. Design communication research.

Unfortunately, COMM 5173 (Qualitative Methods) was not assessed for the 2021-2022 academic year. Because the department did not have the faculty to cover the course, especially after the sudden departure of one of our colleagues, students were encouraged to take Qualitative Methods outside the department. The courses that served as a substitute included: Qualitative Research Methods in Curriculum & Instruction (CIED 5313), Qualitative Research (ESRM 6533), and Qualitative Methods in Political Science (PLSC 5823). Assessment of COMM 5173 will continue during the 2022-2023 academic year, when it is scheduled to be taught again by one of our own instructors. When that happens, the assessment will focus on how the course met the following goals.

COMM 5173 Course Goals
1. Understand the characteristics of important questions and how to ask them
2. Explain the purposes and problems of various methods of qualitative research, including but not limited to: ethnography and participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and archival and visual analysis
3. Develop skills in reviewing and evaluating communication (or management) research
4. Strengthen organizational, argumentation, and writing skills necessary for theoretical and applied qualitative research
5. Develop skills in designing studies and analyzing data collected using the various methods
6. Relate qualitative work to the goals of civic engagement

Unfortunately, COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods) was not assessed for the 2021-2022 academic year. A new professor had taken over the course after our previous instructor completed a three-year cycle. However, the new instructor announced their departure at the end of the Spring 2022 semester and did not respond to requests to submit their assessment. The department is working on finding a new instructor for the course in Spring 2023 and assessment will continue at that time. It is possible that whoever teaches the class will use the following learning objectives at that time:

COMM 5123 Learning Objectives (altered by new instructor in Spring 2019):
1. To build familiarity with the basic Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) interface and its core functions;
2. To identify the appropriate statistical procedures for data to achieve analytical goals;
3. To conduct statistical analyses and interpret statistical results

In COMM 5183 (Interpretive Methods) the instructor designed a series of assignments to reinforce the learning objectives identified below. The first learning objective, focusing on analysis of critical writing and scholarly interpretive essays, was assessed through weekly discussion questions. The second learning objective, requiring students to locate salient material within critical and interpretive essays, was also assessed through weekly discussion questions. A final research paper was used to assess students' abilities to apply techniques of interpretation to public communication, relate interpretive work to goals of civic engagement, and produce extended essays of critical interpretation. Finally, a paper presentation was used to assess students' ability to present research in a public forum. Student performance on each of these objectives was assessed at the level of "Pre-Skill," "Emerging," "Basic," "Proficient," or "Exemplary." Based on grades that ranged from A to C, the majority of students were rated

"Proficient" or "Exemplary" for each objective. Students performed the worst in producing extended essays of critical interpretation, with over half the class falling in the "proficient" or "emerging" category. The instructor concluded that students are about average in their ability to apply techniques of interpretation to public communication, especially in designing literature reviews and methods sections. However, students did show remarkable improvement as they edited their work throughout the semester. The instructor also found that only about half of the students produced conference-quality essays by the end of the semester, as about half seemed disinterested in research. In deciding on changes for the future, the instructor found that students were not reading weekly, and that the shell course from a previous instructor seemed to contain too much work. Thus, for Spring 2022, the instructor scaled back on the reading and turned the course more into a writing-workshop format to focus on the process of academic research. The course now focuses on four interpretive methods: genre, narrative, tropical, and personae. While half of the class was engaged and thrived, the instructor found that still half of the class was not inspired to learn. To improve the class, the instructor proposes changing the name of the course.

COMM 5183 Learning Objectives included:
1. Analyze critical writing and scholarly interpretive essays;
2. Locate salient material within critical and interpretive essays;
3. Apply techniques of interpretation to public communication;
4. Relate interpretive work to goals of civic engagement;
5. Produce extended essay of critical interpretation; and
6. Demonstrate ability to present research in public forum;

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