

Department of Communication
Assessment of COMMMA Report
2023-2024

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, apply theory-informed and research-based knowledge to extend research on a communication issue in the form of a thesis, or complete a theory-informed comprehensive exam that shows competence in research application.

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 a master's thesis, capstone project, or comprehensive exams. The first two 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 third option requires students to show competence in a specific theory, methodology, and to apply that knowledge to a specific context. 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. The third exit option, the comprehensive exam, was briefly discontinued around 2018 but redesigned by the graduate faculty during the 2021-2022 academic year and made available to students again 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 2023 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 2024 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content.
- AM #3. Graduate students successfully complete a master's thesis, capstone project, or comprehensive exam. These numbers have been fairly consistent year to year. 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. Between Summer 2022 and Summer 2023 (a slightly extended period of assessment), six students defended their thesis, six defended capstones, and two defended the comprehensive exam. Between Fall 2023 and Spring 2024, two students defended their thesis, two defended capstones, and six defended the comprehensive exam.

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 restarted for the 2021-2022 academic year and has been completed ever since.
5. Goal #3 is assessed at the end of a graduate student's final semester through their completion of an M.A. thesis, capstone project, or comprehensive exam. 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). Finally, comprehensive exams for students who select the option are completed in their final semester; the exams consist of three questions covering theory, methods, and a particular research context. A committee of three faculty members assesses whether the student passes on all questions.

The information below is from the 2023-2024 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 5183.

In **COMM 5163 (Paradigms)**, which was taught in Fall 2022, 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. The first learning objective, focusing on understanding of the history and boundaries of the communication field, was assessed through two sets of reading responses. All students scored an A. 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; the median score for the position paper was a 92 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. The median score for the position paper was 93 percent. The fourth learning objective, focused on designing communication research, was assessed through two position papers. The median scores for the position papers were 85 percent and 93 percent. Overall, the instructor for COMM 5163 assessed student learning in the course as positive, suggesting that students learned and the class accomplished its goals. Performance was consistent with previous years. Again, 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.

COMM 5173 (Qualitative Methods) was taught and assessed by a new instructor for the 2022-2023 academic year; there was no assessment the year before as there was nobody in the department who could teach the class. The new professor teaching the class in Spring 2023 redesigned the course and created more specific Learning Objectives (see below) and methods of assessment. Spring 2024 marked the second time they were teaching the class.

Goal 1 is largely assessed by in-class engagement/participation and a formal exam. Paradigmatic approaches to qualitative research are introduced in Week 2 of the class and continue to be a recurring topic throughout the semester. Students also had the opportunity to reflect on their paradigmatic preferences, among other topics, in the Self-Reflexivity Assignment. Knowledge and application of post-positivist and interpretive epistemologies are also assessed through the semester-long Qualitative Research Proposal assignment, particularly in early phases (Proposed Research Questions, Rationale, and Proposed Method).

Goal 2 addresses an important topic in this course, given that strategies for improving qualitative quality are key to demonstrating credibility and rigor in qualitative research. Strategies are introduced early in the course (Weeks 2 and 3). Goal 2 is assessed at multiple points in the Qualitative Research Proposal, particularly in later phases (Outline, Rough Draft, and Final Paper). In the final paper, a required section covers Qualitative Quality, where students must critically assess and describe how their proposed research demonstrates rigor. Students must demonstrate an understanding of the eight strategies of qualitative quality (also known as the Big Tent criteria).

Goal 3 is assessed through in-class participation for active learning activities in the classroom, the exam, the fieldnotes assignment, and multiple phases in the Qualitative Research Proposal. Regarding interviewing, students complete required readings and participate in class activities such as crafting interview questions, role-playing common interview challenges, and participating in and deconstructing an arts-based focus-group. Regarding ethnography, students also complete required readings and participate in class activities where they practice making observations in real time. Students also complete a graded fieldnotes assignment, where they complete at least 1 hour of ethnographic observation, take raw records, and transform notes into formal fieldnotes following best practices in qualitative research. The exam contains essay-based questions assessing understanding of interviewing and ethnography concepts. For the Qualitative Research Proposal, starting in Phase 3 until the final paper, students must create either an interview protocol or describe another method in detail (e.g., ethnography).

Goal 4 is assessed by in-class participation, the exam, and multiple phases in the Qualitative Research Proposal. Analytic methods are the focus of the second half of the course, including: grounded theory, constant comparative analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis,

narrative analysis, and the phronetic iterative approach. In addition to completing required readings, students received hands-on opportunities in the classroom to practice these analytic techniques. These activities are graded for in-class engagement-participation to create safe opportunities for students to practice these techniques, make mistakes, and correct and improve their techniques. Later, Goal 4 is assessed more formally through both the exam and final paper. Multiple questions on the exam address these analytic methods in essay-based questions. For the final paper, students must describe an analytic method that appropriately matches their research question(s) in abundant detail.

Goal 5 is directly assessed through the Qualitative Research Proposal. This assignment, which contains six phases, is intentionally designed to be completed in pieces throughout the semester. As students build their qualitative toolbox over the course of this semester, they are required to make meaningful progress towards the final paper. These phases allow students to think strategically about what they are building, and they also provide the opportunity for feedback and dialogue with the professor. Phases of the Qualitative Research Proposal include:

- Proposed Research Questions: Propose research questions that will ultimately drive the project's design and direction.
- Rationale: The rationale is essentially the opening of the final paper. For the rationale, students justify the focus of their study with clear arguments.
- Proposed Method: The proposed method will focus on data collection method. Students do one of the following: create a protocol for an interview or focus group, create a mixed-method survey, or detail another data capture method.
- Outline: This outline is the first step to a rough draft where students highlight the most important points and citations they plan to make in each section of the final paper.
- Rough Draft: The rough draft is a more complete but ongoing representation of progress towards the final paper.
- Final Paper: The final paper is a brief research proposal. This document is about 15 pages in length (double spaced) and includes an abstract, rationale embedded within a brief literature review, research question(s), and a comprehensively argued qualitative method (in terms of both data collection and analysis) for answering the research question(s).

In addition to the information above, students also complete an assignment called Discussion Assistant at some point during the semester, providing an additional data point for assessment. Once per semester, students serve as the "discussion assistant" of the week, where they are responsible for:

- Thoroughly immersing themselves in the week's readings,
- Preparing a 10-minute synthesis of points they thought were most compelling and present these in a dynamic way,
- Providing students with a handout summarizing these points, and
- Facilitating class discussion and/or one class activity for ~30-40 minutes to help students understand one or more of the main points of the readings.

The final grade distribution included 16 As and 2 Bs. At the end of the semester, students provided feedback that they particularly enjoyed (1) hands-on activities/workshops, (2) the discussion assistant assignment, and (3) the accessible textbook written by Sarah Tracy.

The instructor listed a few areas where the course needs to be improved. First, they suggest students would greatly benefit from the opportunity to practice qualitative coding on NVivo software, given the rise of computer-assisted qualitative analysis. Due to cost barriers, this was not possible during this semester. Partnering with the CCR to install NVivo on lab computers and/or seeking a Teaching grant would be a great option for the future. Second, the instructor suggested the department may want to consider a follow up to the course, something like “Advanced Qualitative Methods,” especially because the larger class size meant there was limited time to work on a full length project; many students were also collecting data over the summer, which would be a good way of offering the course naturally.

COMM 5173 Course Goals

1. Understand the differences between post-positivist and interpretive epistemologies.
2. Know strategies for improving the quality of qualitative research.
3. Be primed for apprenticing in interview and ethnography collection methods.
4. Be able to apply a variety of analytic methods to interpret qualitative data.
5. Be primed to design a qualitative study, obtain access to a research site, and obtain IRB approval.

COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods) was taught and assessed by a new instructor for the 2022-2023 academic year; there was no assessment the year before due to the faculty member leaving for another position and never submitting an assessment. The new professor teaching the class in Spring 2023 redesigned the course and created more specific Learning Objectives (see below) and methods of assessment. They taught the course again in Spring 2024.

The first learning objective targets students’ ability to conceptualize a research question appropriate for quantitative, social scientific research in communication using existing literature and observations of communication phenomena. This skill was assessed and heavily discussed each week for the first half of the semester. However, this was not graded during this period. In week 2, students brought in quantitative research articles. The class used these articles to 1) talk about the value and uses of quantitative research (the need for this research), how to identify research questions from observed social issues, and articulating in the introduction the need for a study to the audience (Week 2 & 3) and 2) developing and justifying hypotheses using existing literature (Week 4 & 5). Throughout the process of learning how others did these things, students formed groups and began conceptualizing their own studies.

In addition to the barrier of transitioning from an overarching research question to specific, testable hypotheses (consistent with last year), students had a harder time differentiating independent and dependent variables and other basic concepts taught in our 2333 undergrad class. Overall, this class seemed to have a lower understanding of basic communication research concepts. This required purposeful, and time-consuming review each week. Because some students were able to understand quicker than others, some students looked bored while others

were still confused. This resulted in a challenging first few weeks, but through 1 vs. 1 or small group meetings, the class was able to overcome this. Next year, the instructor says he will do a better job at providing additional resources (some from the undergrad Communication Research course and also some YouTube videos) for students that need the extra help.

The second learning objective was focused on students' ability to understand the different types of experiments and surveys. This ability was developed through the middle weeks of the course. In discussions of research questions and hypotheses posed by students, each student would then be asked to develop a study design to test the hypotheses. Though this was the primary focus of Weeks 6-8, I began to introduce these concepts from the very beginning of the semester, so the class could get the semester projects to IRB sooner. This resulted in students knowing these concepts pretty well by the time we hit the weeks assigned to cover them. As a result, the class able to review the conceptualization and lit review a little more during this time. However, IRB was terribly slow this semester, negating the intended benefit of getting them submitted earlier in the semester. Two of the five groups required revisions (which also took a very long time) and were not able to collect data this semester. They were still able to write a research proposal, which was the requirement for the semester research project but IRB provided a lot of frustration. This skill was assessed through the weekly discussions and graded in the evaluation of research project/final paper. In the end, two experiments (one online and one in lab) and one online survey were used by students to collect data for their projects. Of the two studies that were not able to collect data, there was one survey and one experiment.

The third learning objective was focused on students' ability to know which statistical test to run and how to run in with SPSS. This objective was focused on students' ability to know which statistical test to run and how to run in with SPSS. Though assigned to a different building, the class met in Kimpel so students could have access to laptops equipped with SPSS. Two worksheets, with hypotheses and research questions, tested the students' ability to identify which test to run (with the help of a flow chart) based on the variable in the hypothesis or research question. Students did remarkably well. The virtual desktop, which most students used, worked much better than it did last year. This was necessary as the department does not have enough laptops equipped with SPSS for all the students to use without sharing. This skill was assessed through a practice final exam and then graded with the actual final exam. For each exam, students were given a dataset and a list of hypotheses. They had to construct variables, identify which test to run, and correctly report results. The final exam accounted for 50% of the grade. Students demonstrated sufficient mastery of this skill. The practice final, given two weeks before the actual final proved to be extremely useful in ascertaining where students still needed work. The class covered those areas thoroughly the next week, and students improved significantly on the actual final.

Finally, the fourth learning objective focused on the students' ability to write an article. This learning objective focused on the students' ability to write an article. Different sections of the paper were due throughout the second half of the semester, beginning with the literature review, then the introduction, then the method, followed by the results and discussion sections. It was assessed when each section was turned in and feedback was given. It was graded when the final paper (40% of grade) was submitted. Less time was dedicated to this learning objective, and it would be the one that requires the most work going forward in their education. Students were

able to understand what information went in which area of the paper. All sections of the paper, except the literature review, were at a fairly high level. The literature review, for some, struggled with flow and the building of arguments to justify hypotheses. However, while the students were a little slower than last semester in other areas, the writing was better. This could have been because they were better writers, or it could have been increasing the number of submission dates, so that first drafts were submitted and then final drafts of different sections.

Overall, the instructor found that students who had taken Paradigms performed better in the class. The instructor also found that students struggled with technology and recommended holding the class in Kimpel Hall near the department's lab and computer resources. The instructor also found that it was too time consuming to grade final papers, but that every student selected the option over a proposal and seemed to learn a lot.

COMM 5123 Learning Objectives (altered by new instructor in Spring 2019):

1. Identifying research problems and asking research questions & applying theory and existing literature in developing and justifying hypotheses;
2. Conceptualizing and designing strategies to test these hypotheses & creating instruments and executing data collection;
3. Knowing which statistical test to utilize and analyzing data & interpreting results and identifying implications;
4. Organization and writing skills to best articulate the importance of the research.

Unfortunately, **COMM 5183 (Interpretive Research Methods)** was not assessed for the 2023-2024 academic year. A second-year professor had taken over the course after a previous instructor completed a three-year cycle. However, the new instructor never completed the assessment during their first year and did not respond to multiple requests to submit a report. They then announced in their second year that they were leaving for another position and never completed assessments. The department will work with the instructor who takes over the course to complete the assessment next year, by both providing early reminders and issuing a reminder from the Chair. The learning objectives that will likely be assessed, include:

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;