

2021-2022 Academic Assessment Report
Bachelor of Arts in Communication (COMMBA)
June 27, 2022

The Department of Communication is committed to excellence in scholarship, instruction, and expression of human communication. We nurture a thriving intellectual community by bridging the humanities and social sciences. Discovery, learning, diversity, and engagement are the hallmarks of this community. The Department of Communication strives to enhance its national reputation for a diverse undergraduate curriculum, and innovative online learning.

Classes are grouped into five emphasis areas: Film Studies, Interpersonal Communication, Mediated Communication, Organizations & Communities, and Public Communication. Although students are not required to declare or complete an emphasis area, they are encouraged to tailor their course selections to areas that best fit their academic interests and career goals. Across this curriculum, the department's undergraduate courses generated 33,862 student semester credit hours (SSCH) from Summer of 2021 to Spring of 2022 (a slight increase over the previous year).

The program experienced a small decline (4-5%) in the number of total majors, though our online degree program increased to 178 majors by Spring 2022 (according to records from UA Global Campus). Over 900 unique students were enrolled in the program (according to the UA Office of Institutional Research), keeping the program's total student count relatively stable compared to the previous year. The department also serves 123 students in the COMM-M minor, and another 50 students who include the COMM minor in their Interdisciplinary Studies major.

Despite a small decline in the number of total majors, the program achieved a significant increase in degree productivity. A total of 252 BA degrees were granted in calendar year 2021 – a 14.7% increase over 2020. This makes the COMMBA degree the 4th most degree-productive program on the UA campus, with a double-digit increase in graduation rate from 70% to 81.5% in the past year.

Student Learning Outcomes

Each of the learning outcomes listed below includes levels of student achievement appropriate to lower- and upper-level courses. With this as a framework, the faculty can use these learning outcomes to assess both the curriculum and individual courses. Students completing the BA in Communication should be able to:

- LO1. Employ communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts.
- LO2. Engage in communication inquiry by interpreting, evaluating, applying, and formulating communication scholarship.
- LO3. Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context through:
 - developing excellent oral and written communication skills;
 - locating and using information relevant to the goals, audiences, purposes and contexts;
 - selecting creative, appropriate modalities and technologies to accomplish communicative goals;
 - adapting messages to the diverse needs of individuals, groups and contexts;

- presenting messages in multiple communication modalities and contexts;
 - adjusting messages while in the process of communicating; and
 - critically reflecting on one's own messages after the communication event.
- LO4. Critically analyze messages by
- identifying embedded meanings,
 - articulating message characteristics in a variety of mediated and non-mediated channels,
 - recognizing the influence of messages, and
 - enacting mindful responses to messages.
- LO5. Utilize communication to embrace differences by
- articulating the connection between communication and culture;
 - appreciating, articulating cultural similarities and differences;
 - respecting diverse perspectives and the ways they influence communication;
 - articulating one's own cultural standpoint and its effects on communication and world view; and
 - adapting one's communication in diverse cultural contexts.
- LO6. Influence public discourse by:
- explaining the importance of communication in civic life.
 - identifying the challenges facing communities and the role of communication in resolving them.
 - framing, evaluating, and using communication to respond to local, national and global issues.
- LO7. From a communication perspective, advocate a course of action to
- address local, national, and global issues.
 - empower individuals to promote human rights, dignity, and freedom.

Assessing Methods and Findings

The department's Vice-Chair coordinates the assessment of the BA program in collaboration with other faculty. They jointly develop the assessment methods, procedures, and data collection. The department employs four methods of assessment (below). The Undergraduate Committee reviews and analyzes the data. They discuss their findings and observations with the Vice-Chair and Director of Undergraduate Studies. Their recommendations and this report are shared with the faculty.

Placement and Salary Data from the Career Development Center

Recent graduates' professional activities are one way to gauge the value of the knowledge and skills taught in the COMMBA program on the job market. Data on student career outcomes was taken from the UA Career Development Center's *Class of 2021 Career Outcomes Report* (the most recent report available). Data were available for 67.5% of total graduates for the year (n = 168). Of those students, 63.1% were entering employment, 20.8% were entering graduate or professional degree programs, and 1.1% were joining volunteer service organizations. This is a total placement rate of 85%.

Salary data from this same report indicates that the median salary for recent COMMBA graduates was \$40,000 and the mean salary was \$54,138. Both continue a trend of rising salary

rates among UA COMM graduates and compare favorably to programs across campus and in the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences.

Fulbright Writing Requirement

All Communication majors are required to complete the Fulbright Writing Requirement prior to graduation. These papers are intended to address Student Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 3 in all cases. Depending on the specific course, these papers also address one or more of Learning Outcomes 4, 5, 6, and 7. The department's conditions for the paper are:

- Students must write the paper in a COMM course numbered 3000 or higher.
 - The department has designated upper-level, small-enrollment courses (those with an enrollment cap of 35 students or less) for the FWR.
 - Those courses will either assign a paper that meets the department's conditions for the FWR or will make such a paper an optional assignment. In some cases, the optional paper might be substituted for another assignment; in other cases, it might be used solely to fulfill the FWR and not count toward the student's course grade. This is done at the discretion of the instructor.
- The paper must be researched from materials outside the required course readings. Course instructors may also have additional requirements for the assignment, so students should consult their instructor.
- The paper should be 10 or more pages in length. Again, consult the course instructor for any additional assignment requirements.
- The student's paper must score a grade of "C" or higher to complete the FWR. The final course grade does not fulfill the requirement, only the grade earned on the paper.

At the end of each semester, instructors of FWR-designated courses submit a list of COMM majors who have completed the requirement to the Director of Undergraduate Studies. In total, 213 COMM majors completed the FWR from Summer 2021-Spring 2022. These grades affirm that the students have met Learning Outcomes 1-3, in addition to any course-specific objectives associated with Learning Outcomes 4-7. During the Fall 2022 semester, the department's undergraduate committee will consider conducting a review of randomly selected papers (see Conclusions & Recommendations below).

Student Survey Methods & Procedures

In the 2020-2021 academic year, the department developed a survey for graduating students. This exit survey covered several topics, including satisfaction with COMM courses and the major; satisfaction with COMM instructors and advising; perceived self-efficacy in each set of student learning outcomes; and a set of demographic factors (e.g., gender identification, race/ethnic identification, cumulative GPA) to compare subgroups of students.

After developing and pilot testing the survey in Fall 2021, the department implemented the survey in the Spring 2022 semester. All COMM majors who applied for graduation in Spring or Summer 2022 were contacted weekly (throughout April 2022) via email and asked to complete the BA exit survey online. The department also sponsored a "Senior Send Off" event hosting graduating students for lunch, conversation, and a prize drawing for survey respondents. These

strategies yielded completed surveys (a response rate of 29%). Respondents were mostly female (75%) and White (75.5%), with only a few African American students (7.5%) or other students of color (7.5%). Nearly all respondents (92.3%) reported cumulative GPAs of 3.0 or higher, skewing the sample based on the average GPAs of COMM majors. Nearly half of these respondents reported that they did not choose courses with any one emphasis area of the department (43.4%), while others reported emphasizing interpersonal communication (30.2%), organizations and communities (18.9%), rhetoric (17.0%), film studies (13.2%), and mediated communication (11.3%).

Satisfaction with COMM Major & Courses

Most students were satisfied with the COMM BA program, at least as measured by three items measuring this topic. Nearly all of respondents (90.7%) were satisfied with their educational experience in Communication, and almost as many (86%) either somewhat or strongly agreed that they would recommend the major to other students. Slightly fewer respondents (79.1%) agreed that if they could start college over, they would select the same major.

Similar levels of satisfaction were reported with the COMM courses these respondents completed. Most respondents (85.7%) agreed that their COMM courses covered relevant content, covered a broad range of topics (89.8%), and covered topics in depth and detail (85.7%). Nearly all respondents (89.8%) were satisfied overall with their COMM courses. Fewer students agreed that their COMM courses were very difficult (38.7% either somewhat or strongly agreed, 28.6% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 28.6% somewhat disagreed). Finally, about half (51%) of students agreed that the department should offer more diversity-related content in its courses (only 6.1% disagreed and 42.9% had no opinion)

Satisfaction with Instructors & Advising

Students were largely satisfied with their COMM instructors. Nearly all respondents (90.9%) agreed that COMM faculty are committed to academic excellence and that the quality of instruction in the department is excellent (90.3%). Most respondents also agreed that faculty members are supportive (90%), concerned about students' success (77.3%), and available for consultation (93.2%). Finally, most respondents (84.1%) agreed that COMM faculty treat students from diverse backgrounds with respect.

Many respondents were satisfied with the advising they received. Almost two thirds (65.1%) of respondents agreed that their advisors usually had the information they needed to choose courses for their major. The same proportion (65.2%) agreed that the course information they received from their advisors was an accurate picture of the courses offered by the COMM department.

Student Learning Outcomes

A detailed set of survey items measured students' beliefs that their COMM courses helped them develop knowledge and skills in each of the major's intended learning outcomes: theory and research (LO1 and LO2), message creation (LO3) and analysis (LO4), embracing differences when communicating with different people and audiences (LO5), influencing public discourse (LO6), and advocating courses of action (LO7).

Research and theory skills (LO1 and LO2). Three items measured respondents' beliefs about how well their COMM courses prepared them with theory and research skills. Slightly more than half (56.5%) thought they were extremely or very well prepared to understand communication research. When it comes to using communication theories, principles, and concepts, 56.5% of respondents felt extremely or very well prepared. Less than half of respondents (47.8%) felt this level of preparedness when it comes to engaging in communication research themselves.

Message creation skills (LO3). Greater proportions of respondents felt the COMM degree prepared them extremely or very well to create messages appropriate to their audience, purpose, and context. Most believe that they received this level of preparation for critically reflecting on their own messages (83%), adjusting messages during the communication process (80.8%), developing excellent oral/written communication skills (89.1%), locating and using relevant information (87.2%), selecting appropriate channels or technologies to communicate (80.9%), presenting messages in multiple channels and contexts (76.6%), and adapting messages to the diverse needs of the audience and context (80.8%).

Message analysis skills (LO4). Four items measured students' beliefs that their COMM courses prepared them with skills necessary to critically analyze messages. Many believe that they were extremely or very well prepared to recognize the influence of messages (77.8%), articulate message characteristics in a variety of channels (65.3%), provide mindful responses to messages (73.3%), and identify embedded meanings in messages (60.8%).

Embracing communicative differences (LO5). Five items measured students' beliefs that their COMM courses prepared them with skills necessary to embrace differences among people by using specific communication skills. Higher levels of students believe that are extremely or very well prepared to respect the ways that diverse perspectives influence communication (77.3%), explain the connection between communication and culture (81.9%), recognize cultural similarities and differences (79.5%), explain how one's own cultural perspective affect their communication (79.5%), and adapt their communication in diverse cultural contexts (70.5%).

Influencing public discourse (LO6). Three items measured students' beliefs that their COMM courses prepared them with skills necessary to influence public discourse with specific communication skills. More than half of respondents reported feeling extremely or very well prepared to explain the importance of communication in civic life (65.9%); identify the challenges facing communities and the role of communication in resolving them (79.6%); and frame, evaluate, and use communication to respond to challenge facing communities (77.3%).

Advocating for courses of action (LO7). Two items measured students' beliefs that their COMM courses prepared them to advocate for a course of action. Just over half of respondents felt extremely or well prepared to empower other individuals to promote human rights, diversity, and freedom (56.8%) and address local, national, and global issues (59.1%).

Alumni Survey Methods & Procedures

In the summer and fall of 2021, two faculty members began an alumni outreach project to re-engage COMM BA graduates with the department. As part of this effort, we asked department alumni to complete a survey measuring their perceptions of the degree program, their positive or

negative experiences in the program, and their beliefs about whether COMM courses are relevant to their current employment and contributed to their post-graduate endeavors.

A total of 128 COMM BA graduates responded to the survey. A majority of these respondents were female (58.5%), and exactly half of the respondents graduated after 2004 (the earliest graduation date among respondents was 1959). Most respondents (84.4%) were employed at the time of the survey, 11% were not seeking employment due to childcare, retirement, or other circumstances (the other respondents did not provide this information).

BA graduates reported working in a wide variety of fields, including advertising/marketing, business consulting, education, entertainment and leisure, financial services, government/public policy, healthcare, retail sales, insurance, legal services, and non-profit work.

Alumni respondents were asked a series of questions regarding how well their communication courses prepared them to perform several skills related to the current student learning outcomes. Answers were reported on a five-point Likert scale of agreement. The majority of respondents either generally or completely agreed that their courses helped them write clearly and effectively (91.2%), speak clearly and effectively (92.5%), understand and apply scholarly research (83.7%), construct and defend a well-reasoned argument (89.1%), work effectively as a team member (85.6%), relate well to diverse people (78.3%), and critique messages (78.1%).

Three survey items asked respondents for global evaluations of their studies in the COMMBA program. The first item asked employed respondents how closely their degree is related to their current position. Among those alumni, 86.3% felt that their current position was either very or somewhat related to the COMM degree. Second, among all respondents, 95.5% were either very or somewhat satisfied with their education in the department. Finally, 80.7% were either very likely or extremely likely to recommend the communication major to a current or future student (another 13.7% were somewhat likely to do so).

When asked what they wished had been emphasized more in their coursework, the most frequently referenced topics were writing, career planning, business communication, and conflict resolution (though only two thirds of respondents answered this question). Other answers mentioned communication with diverse audiences, communication ethics, applied communication, and research skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A general assessment of the BA in Communication indicates that the program is largely successful. Over the past six years, the six-year graduation rate has increased 24% while the department saw significant growth in number of majors and student demand for COMM courses. Over the last two years, the department's faculty have devoted inordinate amounts of time and attention to their teaching as they negotiated transitions between in-person and online instruction (including the delivery of our online degree program). Student placement and salary data continue to indicate that COMM graduates are sought after members of both the private sector and graduate/professional degree programs.

With these successes, of course, are multiple areas where the department's faculty might focus their attention in the next academic year. The following recommendations are therefore offered:

- Under the direction of the Director of Undergraduate Studies, the department should consider developing a series of message strategies intended to help students better understand the five emphasis areas, the role of 2000-level “gateway courses” into the emphasis areas, and the ways in which students can use the emphasis areas to articulate a more specific focus or direction of their major to potential employers and graduate and professional programs. These multi-modal strategies may include:
 - “Welcome to the Major” workshop sessions in October and March ahead of fall and spring course registration
 - A “Welcome to the Major” Blackboard course for students with less than 15-hours in the major. This course will include information about the emphasis areas the FWR, the world language and culture requirement, as well as other relevant information.
 - Short videos highlighting each emphasis area. These videos would supplement the information already available about the emphasis areas on the Department’s website and could be filmed and edited using equipment available in the Center for Communication Research.
 - Consultation with the Foundations Team in Fulbright Advising to revise the current worksheets for COMM BA requirements.
- The department should consider having a faculty committee (most likely the undergraduate committee) review a randomly selected sample of papers submitted for the Fulbright Writing Requirement (FWR). This review would evaluate whether those papers meet the standards expressed in the COMM BA Student Learning Outcomes.
- The faculty might consider ways to identify and explain the COMM student learning outcomes that are addressed in each of their courses. It is likely that some students do not understand how these skills are defined and how they might be of value to potential employers. Clear connections between course assignments and student outcomes might help students track their academic progress and inventory marketable skills for future employment.
- The department should consider coordinating events and other networking opportunities to connect undergraduate students with alumni.
- The department’s Undergraduate Committee and Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should examine the current curriculum’s DEI offerings and make recommendations regarding any changes or additions to those offerings.
- The department should consider addressing the results regarding LO& (above) through smaller course caps in upper-level courses (thereby facilitating more engaged course assignments) and expanded service learning courses in the department.

Submitted by:

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