

## Department of Communication University of Arkansas

### Assessment of Master's Program

**Background:** For over 60 years the Department of Communication's M.A. graduates have gone on to succeed in educational, for profit, and nonprofit settings. Following the most recent external program review the evaluators concluded, "At the graduate level, masters' students seem to be placed well and there appears to be demand from industry and academe." In 2014, the Department of Communication faculty began a process of reflection which led to major curriculum changes centered around the idea of civic engagement. In 2015, the faculty developed and ran a pilot test on a new Paradigms in Communication class for incoming M.A. students which introduced students to the discipline. In 2016, the faculty designed or redesigned three research methods classes, developed a new exit option for M.A. students (i.e., the Capstone in Communication course), raised the required hours from 30 to 33, and hired three faculty members whose backgrounds complemented the new graduate focus. Graduate students admitted in the Fall of 2016 are the first to experience these changes. The data included here are partial since no students have completed our 2-year degree under the new requirements.

**Program Goal:** 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, nation and/or world.

1. **Learning Goals and Objectives:** Upon graduation M.A. students will:
  - a. Understand the historical, theoretical and methodological foundations of and differences in the discipline of communication and identify an area of interest to them (Goal #1).
  - b. Understand the major research methodologies used in our field and demonstrate some proficiency in using them (Goal #2).
  - c. Apply research-based, theory-informed knowledge to identify and address real-life civic engagement communication issues (Goal #3).
2. **Learning Processes:** In order to achieve these learning goals and objectives:
  - a. Graduate students complete the Paradigms in Communication course (Goal #1).
    - i. Class offered in Fall 2015 (pilot), 2016, and 2017. All graduate students after August 2015 have taken this class.
  - b. Graduate students complete two methods classes (Goal #2).
    - i. All graduate students historically took two methods classes. Redesigned classes offered in Spring 2017.
  - c. Graduate students complete either a master's thesis or a capstone project (Goal #3). 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, and create a tangible product (i.e., thesis, capstone project).
    - i. The Department of Communication has long offered the thesis option.
    - ii. The new Capstone in Communication course will be pilot tested in Spring 2018. Faculty and current graduate students provided input into the course design in 2017.
3. **Assessment Methods:** In order to know students are achieving these goals and objectives:

- a. 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 (Goal #1).
  - i. Final grades in Fall 2015 and 2016 indicate students sufficiently mastered the course content.
  - ii. Students completed surveys reflecting on course content and design in Fall 2015 and Fall 2016 which influenced redesigns for Fall 2016 and 2017.
- b. Graduate students successfully complete assignments in two research methods classes which help them demonstrate their knowledge of various research methodologies (Goal #2).
  - i. Final grades in Spring 2017 indicate students sufficiently mastered the course content.
  - ii. Faculty are planning student-input assessment tools for use in Spring 2018.
- c. Graduate students successfully complete either a master's thesis or a capstone project. (Goal #3 and Goal #4)
  - i. In Spring 2017 four students completed M.A. theses and nine students wrote comprehensive exams. The first class with the capstone option graduates in Spring 2018.

**4. Assessment Processes: When and Who**

- a. 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.
- b. 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.
- c. 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.
  - i. This was conducted in Spring 2017. Identified problems were discussed with the relevant faculty members.
- d. 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. The Capstone Advisor grades 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 or theory and research. Students must receive a minimum grade of a B in the capstone course to graduate. A Master's Record of Progress form is completed and sent to the Graduate School. Goals #3 also will be assessed by asking students to complete the Capstone Student Feedback Form (Indirect Assessment).

**5. Status, Outcomes and Results:**

- a. The Graduate Director will share the results of the assessment process with members of the Graduate Committee and the department's Administrative Committee to identify

whether or not any changes are needed. Recommendations for improvement areas will be discussed by the full faculty at the first faculty meeting of the Fall semester.