

**Department of Communication
Assessment of COMMMA Report
2018**

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 were the first to experience these changes. In Spring 2018 six students completed our 2-year degree under the new requirements. The remaining two graduate students admitted in Fall 2016 are scheduled to complete in Fall 2018.

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 was offered in Fall 2015 (pilot), 2016, and 2017. 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 during Spring 2018.
- 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 new Capstone in Communication course was pilot tested in Spring 2018. Faculty and current graduate students provided input into the course design in 2017.

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 2015, 2016 and 2017 indicated students sufficiently mastered the course content. Students completed surveys reflecting on course content and design in Fall 2015 and Fall 2016 which influenced redesigns for Fall 2016 and 2017.
- 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 2017 indicate students sufficiently mastered the course content. Faculty are planning student-input assessment tools for use in Spring 2018.
- AM #3. Graduate students successfully complete either a master's thesis or a capstone project. In Spring 2017 four students completed M.A. theses and nine students wrote comprehensive exams. The first class with the capstone option graduated in Spring 2018. 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.

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 was conducted in Spring 2017 and Spring 2018. Identified problems were discussed with the relevant faculty members.
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 receive a minimum grade of a B in the capstone course to graduate. A Master's Record of Progress form is completed for each capstone student and sent to the Graduate School. Goals #3 also will be assessed by asking students to complete the Capstone Student Feedback Form (Indirect Assessment).

The information below is from the 2018 reports for COMM 5163 (Paradigms), COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods), and COMM 5183 (Interpretive Methods). Assessment of COMM 5173 (Qualitative Methods) will begin spring 2019.

In COMM 5163 (Paradigms) the instructor looked at the distribution of grades associated with individual assignments related to the following three course goals. The overall average student grades for the assignments ranged from A to B. Looking at the assignment where students scored lowest (i.e., the synthesis paper designed to address Goal 3 below), the instructor has designed two new activities to improve student learning in 2019.

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; and
3. Sketch the professional landscape, including its organizational structures

The COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods) instructor wrote: “The benefits of students taking the Paradigms course prior to their methods courses is significant, in my opinion. Eleven students had already investigated a research topic prior to this semester, and it showed in their ability to identify and review relevant research literature. The one student who had not completed the Paradigms course struggled significantly with these issues throughout the semester.”

In COMM 5123 (Quantitative Methods) the instructor evaluated student success in meeting the first learning objective (see below) assessing their work product at four points during the semester. All final proposals showed appropriately conceptualized questions. To assess the second learning objective, two objective tests were used with an average score in the mid-80% range on each. To assess the third learning objective, two assignments were used: the literature review and the final research proposal. Student skills improved noticeably by the final research proposals. To assess the last learning objective, students’ scores on the component parts of their initial research proposals (the problem statement, literature review, and methods papers) were compared to their final research proposals (i.e., revisions of each part written together as one complete document). All students improved.

COMM 5123 Learning Objectives:

1. Help understand the characteristics of important questions and how to ask them;
2. Explain the purposes and problems of various methods of communication research;
3. Develop skills in reviewing and evaluating communication research; and
4. Strengthen the organizational, argumentation, and writing skills necessary for theoretical and applied communication research

In COMM 5183 (Interpretive Methods) the instructor designed a series of assignments to reinforce the learning objectives identified below. He assessed student performance at the level of “Pre-Skill,” “Emerging,” “Basic,” “Proficient,” or “Exemplary.” Beside each learning objective below, information on how many students reached the level of proficient or better is provided. Next year, the instructor plans to have students read more exemplary studies earlier in the semester and write a one-page plan at the end of semester detailing: 1) How their final paper demonstrated civic engagement; and 2) How they will continue their projects to make sure they are presented in the following year.

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;