

Program Review Report

1. **Reporting Institution:** Eastern Illinois University
2. **Program Reviewed:** M.A. in Communication Studies
3. **Date:** January 14, 2019
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5. Overview

The Master of Arts in Communication Studies offers a program in advanced scholarship that reflects the development of historical and contemporary influences on communication theory and practice. We offer three concentrations— Media and Critical Studies, Interpersonal Communication Process, and Strategic Communication, all of which are grounded in a rigorous theoretical base that informs communication practices and prepares students to enter into academic and workplace environments. We also offer a Communication Pedagogy option, which prepares students for teaching communication courses at the collegiate level through a combination of theoretical and applied experiences.

The program's coursework pays particular attention to the analytical, methodological, and theoretical approaches of communication across multiple contexts. It provides students opportunities to pursue graduate assistantships and internships, as well as to conduct research with accomplished faculty. These approaches support EIU's mission to "learn the methods and results of free and rigorous inquiry ... guided by a faculty known for its excellence in teaching, research, creative activity, and service." The Master's program addresses the mission of the Graduate School through recruiting a diverse student body and by offering opportunities for career specialization, professional development, and advanced scholarship. Section 6 below summarizes significant programmatic changes since the last IBHE review.

The following are the learning objectives adopted by the Department of Communication Studies: (1) Students will demonstrate strong disciplinary knowledge of communication; (2) Students will be able to understand, critique, and apply appropriate research methods in a broad range of situations and contexts; (3) Students will be able to write effectively; (4) Students will be able to speak effectively; (5) Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills. Implementation of these learning objectives occurs in coursework, independent studies, and research or creative projects in each of our program's concentration areas.

Our program has experienced tremendous growth over the past five years, increasing enrollment by more than 60% from 2014 to 2018. Our current student body remains diverse, with 20% being minority students and more than 10% being international. Student success continues to be a hallmark of the Department. Our students have been awarded state and national scholarships, research and creative activity grants, and distinctions for their teaching as graduate assistants, and also have secured admission to Communication Studies Ph.D. programs. Graduates of the M.A. program have also been successful in entering career paths upon graduation. According to the EIU Career Services *2017 Annual Report*, 100% of students graduating with an M.A. in Communication Studies were employed within 6 months of graduation. The job placement rate at teaching institutions and the success of the pedagogy training and internship program are other major strengths of the program.

Our online program is the only online M.A. in Communication Studies program offered in the state of Illinois. We are also unique in comparison to our peer institutions in that our online program focuses on communication skills necessary for leadership in a variety of organizational and interpersonal communication contexts. No other university in our peer group or in the state of Illinois offers such a program. The Department is also the only program offering an online Graduate Certificate program in Communication Processes in the state of Illinois and in our peer institution group. We are experiencing a high interest (inquiry) rate from high school teachers in Illinois for this certificate program. Finally, we have the only Communication Pedagogy option available to graduate students in the state of Illinois and in our peer institution group. This program trains and equips students with the pedagogical skills necessary to teach in higher education settings. Students in the pedagogy option learn these skills as graduate assistants and/or in the pedagogy program, which focuses

predominantly on teaching students how to teach Communication Studies curricula. This has resulted in many of our graduates obtaining employment at 2-year and 4-year colleges upon graduation. We have also had several students in this program receive recognition at the MAGS (Midwestern Association of Graduate Schools) Excellence in Teaching award competition for their teaching abilities. These achievements set our program apart from all others in the state and in our peer institution group.

Finally, we have 12 graduate faculty members who are actively engaged at all levels of teaching and service. Faculty have completed and achieved distinction in a variety of research and creative activities, from the creation of documentary films and musical compositions to the publication of research articles, book chapters, and single and co-authored books. Faculty have also received university grants (e.g., Redden), achievement and contribution awards, and national awards, such as the Fulbright. Furthermore, Communication Studies faculty also have demonstrated sustained commitment to a variety of service opportunities at the departmental, university, professional, and community levels. Examples of this include chairing the University's undergraduate curriculum committee (CAA), vice-chairing the University's graduate curriculum committee (CGS), and serving as member of governing bodies such as the Aging Studies Advisory Board, the Dual-Credit Committee, the Apportionment Board, the Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning (CASL), the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Student Standards Board, the Grade Appeals Committee, the WEIU Advisory Board, and the Electronic Writing Portfolio Review Committee.

6. Major Findings and Recommendations

6.a. Description and assessment of any major changes in the program [e.g., (a) changes in the overall discipline or field; (b) student demand; (c) societal needs; (d) institutional context for offering the degree; and (e) other elements appropriate to the discipline in question.]

Changes in the Discipline: Over the last decade, our discipline has embraced increasingly diverse methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches. The curricular changes outlined here reflect these ongoing dynamic developments in the field, especially in the areas of public relations, media studies, communication ethics, small group and team communication, and leadership communication. This notably includes an increase in our online presence.

The curricular changes made since the last program review:

- We added two new core classes, CMN 5020 - Communication Theory and CMN 5040 - Communication Research to the curriculum. These classes provide a foundation critical for the development of disciplinary knowledge for graduate students across all our option areas and help us teach students multiple methodologies and theoretical perspectives.
- The “Human Communication Processes” option area was renamed “Interpersonal Communication Processes,” and “Critical and Cultural Studies” was renamed “Media and Critical Studies”— both to reflect current trends in the field.
- We increased the number of required concentration classes from 12 hours to 18 hours. This increase allows students to take more classes in their concentration area and creates greater flexibility for students to tailor their graduate program to their individual academic and career needs.
- We added an online option in Communication and Leadership and a Graduate Certificate in Communication Processes. Our departmental strategic planning efforts in 2015 clearly demonstrated that students wanted more online options, especially working professionals wishing to continue their education while working full time. The development of the online certificate program was in direct response to the university's undergraduate partnering with dual credit CMN 1310 – Introduction to Speech Communication offerings. This led to an increased demand for high school teachers certified to teach dual-credit public speaking classes at the high school level. Our online certificate program allows working teachers to take online classes in Communication Studies (18 hours minimum) to meet the

requirements in place to teach dual-credit courses.

- The new online degree options led to the development of four new courses: CMN5015 - Communication Ethics, CMN5190 - Communication Leadership, CMN5650 - Digital Communication, and CMN5740 - Small Group and Team Communication. These changes have increased overall enrollment, added flexibility to our program, and addressed developments in the field.
- We recently developed and approved an accelerated graduate program for qualified undergraduate students interested in gaining early admission to the graduate program. Accelerated admission is available to students in the undergraduate majors in Communication Studies, Health Communication, Public Relations, and TV & Video Production. Admission and enrollment through the new accelerated graduate program will begin in Fall 2019.

Student Demand: Enrollment in the program continues to grow. In 2011, at the time of our last program review, enrollment was at 28 students. We have had steady increases each year since then, growing to our current enrollment of 50 students in 2018. Prior to the creation of our online options beginning in fall of 2018, our enrollment showed a steady increase (from 28 to 38 students) from 2011 to 2017. Our enrollment increased again in 2018 by more than 30% with the start of our online programs. We expect continued enrollment increases in 2019 since program applications have also increased over the last three semesters, particularly in our online programs. Program growth since 2011 compares favorably to other graduate programs at Eastern Illinois University where we have seen graduate education trending upwards for the past five years.

Societal Needs: One of the stronger trends in student demand is that approximately 50% of new program applications for our on-campus program express a strong interest in the Communication Studies Pedagogy option. New student applications, as well as exit interviews, show that students are particularly interested in a focused program that allows them to specialize in a well-defined area, such as teaching in higher education. We have also increased our online presence due to the high demand for professionals who wish to continue or advance their education while working full-time. More than 50% of our current online student population consists of full-time teachers earning professional development credit and/or dual-credit certification to teach public speaking classes as a dual-credit option for high school students. The other 50% are working professionals wishing to advance their careers with a degree in our Communication and Leadership program. It is also noteworthy to mention that we offer one of the only online M.A. degrees in Communication Studies in the state of Illinois, making our program in high demand for working professionals across multiple states. Graduate placement also remains strong. According to the EIU Career Service *2017 Annual Report*, the career outcome rates (secured employment six months after graduation) with a degree in Communication Studies and the Communication Pedagogy option are extremely high (100%).

Institutional Context: Our M.A. in Communication Studies program works with several other departments across campus. For example, we have partnered with the M.A. in Health Promotion and Leadership and the Aging Studies programs in an effort to help students across all three master's programs enhance their learning, skills, and knowledge in their respective fields. Students in our program who may be interested in how communication impacts health, for example, may take courses in both the Health Promotion and Leadership and Aging Studies programs. We also offer an Environmental Communication course in the Sustainable Energy program. Students in Communication Studies and the Sustainable Energy program benefit from this partnership. We also have several non-majors (e.g., Family and Consumer Sciences, Psychology, English, and Political Science) taking courses in our program to enhance their overall graduate learning experience in communication-related contexts.

6.b. Description of major findings and recommendations, including evidence of learning outcomes and identification of opportunities for program improvement.

The Department of Communication Studies performs a comprehensive annual assessment program that involves collecting quantitative data on disciplinary knowledge in all of our option areas and measuring student

growth through the use of critical thinking, writing, and speaking rubrics in our graduate courses. Assessment on thesis writing and comprehensive exams are also key tools and are completed by faculty advisors and evaluators at the completion of thesis work or comprehensive exams. Current scores from all rubrics evaluate student work as either “competent” or “highly competent.” These scores and pass rates met program expectations in all areas.

Evidence from our most recent assessment period supports this well. Concerning learning objective 1 (“Students will have a strong theoretical knowledge of communication”), 100% of students were rated as “competent” and 75% of those students were rated “highly competent.” We assess learning objective 2 (“Students will be able to understand, critique, and apply appropriate research methods in a broad range of situations and contexts”) through elements 4 (research methodology) and 5 (analysis) on the Graduate Research Paper Writing Rubric. 98% of all students were rated “competent” and 50% were rated “highly competent” on element 4 while 90% were rated “competent” and 48% “highly competent” on element 5. For learning objective 3 (“Students are able to communicate effectively in written form”), students were evaluated using the Graduate Student Research Paper rubric as well as the writing subscales on both the Academic and Creative Thesis Rubrics. Results indicate that student performance in these areas either met expectations (more than 90% rated as “competent” for writing) or exceeded expectations (50% rated “highly competent”). To assess learning objective 4 (“Students are able to communicate effectively in spoken form”), spoken communication was assessed through the Graduate Speech Evaluation rubric during department-wide oral presentations for students’ capstone projects and/or through the oral defense of student theses. Since most of our graduate students have a background in communication, we expect scores on the speech evaluation rubric to be high. Our expectations were met with 100% of students being rated as “competent” and 75% rated as “highly competent.” Finally, learning objective 5 (“Students will demonstrate effective critical thinking skills”) was assessed through the Graduate Student Critical Thinking Rubric and the “findings/conclusions” and “results/conclusions” subscales on the Academic and Creative Thesis rubrics. Results demonstrate that 100% of our students are at least “competent” and 50% of our students are “highly competent” in critical thinking.

The Department of Communication Studies continues to collect all the data outlined above. Students in their final semester of the program demonstrate significantly higher scores in writing and critical thinking skills when compared to those in their first semester. This assessment data has influenced the type of student we are willing to admit to our program. While we only admit students that we feel can be successful, we now realize there are significant positive jumps made by students between their first and final years in the program in both critical thinking and writing quality. These increases are such that we can take risks on borderline students knowing that we will prepare them to successfully complete their capstone project. All students, however, have continued to be rated as at least “competent” across all learning objectives. We are confident we will continue to see significant growth in student writing and critical thinking skills as they move through our program.

As mentioned previously, we also recently developed an online master’s degree option in Communication and Leadership and an online Graduate Certificate in Communication Processes. These additions to our program began in fall 2018 and were born out of ongoing conversations our department has had concerning broader impacts of our program (e.g., employment/Ph.D. preparation and desired graduate school skills). We look forward to acquiring assessment data for our online options areas at the end of the 2018-2019 academic year.

6.c. Description of actions taken since the last review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes.

See curriculum changes noted above.

6.d. Description of actions to be taken as a result of this review, including instructional resources and

practices, and curricular changes.

As a result of this review, the department will continue to implement the goals and recommendations established by our 2015 self-study (strategic planning) report. We will also pay particularly close attention to newer assessment data from our online programs to assess how well we are meeting our learning goals for the online degree option in Communication and Leadership and the Graduate Certificate in Communication Processes. Beyond these actions, we will continue to monitor program impact on student's abilities to create flexible degree options to meet their academic and/or career goals. We have already implemented curricular changes to make our program more flexible for our on-campus students (as noted above). Additionally, we allow our on-campus students to take up to 12 hours of online coursework to accommodate flexible class schedules. We also provide students options in completing their capstone experience. Students may choose between taking comprehensive exams at the end of their graduate coursework, or students can elect to write an academic or creative thesis as part of their capstone experience. These changes give students the opportunity to focus their studies either towards further academic endeavors (e.g., admission to a doctoral program) or finishing their degree and getting their first job.

7. Responses to Institution-Assigned Issues

No institutional questions were assigned.

8. Outcome

8.1 Decision:

- Program in Good Standing
 Program flagged for Priority Review
 Program Enrollment Suspended

8.2 Explanation

On behalf of the office of Academic Affairs, I appreciate the faculty and program's continued emphasis on curricular innovation to meet the needs of students and to separate itself from peer institutions. In particular, the growth relevant to online course delivery is to be commended. Finally, the program's commitment to academic excellence and student success is noteworthy.

Dean's Comments

As a result of Department having made strategic curricular initiatives, the program is positioned to become the leader in Communication Studies online delivery in the State of Illinois. Enrollment growth of the entire M.A. program has been impressive since last review, and evidence abounds of successful pedagogy. Robust and systematic assessment practices are giving the Department clear direction in the refining of their admissions standards and retention strategies for the program. Providing flexible options for students is proving to be a key to success as well. The move of the Communication Studies Department from the basement of the aging Coleman Hall to the above-ground floors of the much newer Buzzard building (as the Communication Studies and Journalism Departments at EIU join together in a new School of Communication and Journalism) is providing this and other programs in Communication Studies with much improved facilities. The outlook for this program, on campus as well as on line, is very positive.