



Cyclical Program Review of the B.A. & M.A. in Communication Studies

Final Assessment Report

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Part 1: Synthesis of Review Documents

a. Summary of Self-Study

The last review of the undergraduate Communication Studies program took place in 2005-2006. The MA program started in 2007 and in 2008, it was classified by OCGS as “good quality,” noting that two issues to be attended to in the next cyclical review were the hiring of senior faculty members to support the fields offered, as well as a sufficiency of program electives. Since the last cyclical review, the Department notes that the CS program has become the largest and fastest-growing program within the Faculty of Arts. Many of the suggestions made by the external reviewers during the last cyclical review have been implemented, such as the creation of a graduate program, growth in the full-time faculty complement, additional administrative staff, and the addition of a Media Analysis Lab. The Department has clearly articulated learning objectives for students at each level of the undergraduate program and stated goals for the two core courses in the MA program.

Throughout the Self-Study, the Department highlights the following strengths and challenges:

- That the current admission requirements for the BA program are not conducive to students meeting the program learning outcomes
- Class sizes in the undergraduate program need to be monitored as the Department currently has the largest faculty: student ratio in the faculty
- The Department has identified courses that could be removed as well as new courses that may be needed in order to reflect recent developments in the discipline; a review of undergraduate program electives is recognized as necessary
- There are no “twinned” undergraduate and graduate courses; all courses offered to graduate students are at a graduate level
- Recent curriculum changes at the undergraduate level include increasing admission and progression requirements, introducing a Research Specialization Option and the development of a CS Residence Life Community, all of which were designed to help students better meet program learning outcomes and increase student satisfaction with the program
- The Department notes several innovative program practices, such as:
 - Supplemental Instruction
 - Residence Learning Community

- Instructional Assistants
- As well as the inclusion of innovative practices at the course level, at the graduate level, innovative practices focus on preparing students for their thesis defence and providing self-directed learning opportunities
- The service function provided by CS100 and CS101 creates more demand for CS majors than the Department can currently accommodate
- Teaching evaluations at both the undergraduate and graduate level are consistent with or exceed Faculty and University averages
- Students in both programs have access to program-specific academic advising, but at the undergraduate level, “the structure of advising is woefully inadequate” (p.55)
- There are useful synergies in the relationship between the undergraduate and graduate program such as through curricular ties and the provision of TAs for graduate students in undergraduate courses
- A variety of discipline-based assessment methodologies are applied in the undergraduate program, which is considered to be writing-intensive; at the graduate level, the Department is pleased with the quality of MA student MRPs and theses
- The Department has a strategic plan in place that focuses on managing growth, admission standards, possible post-graduate certificate partnerships with Conestoga College, enhancing the research culture of the Department, enhancing community ties, establishing a PhD program and envisioning possible organizational restructuring
- The Department notes that distinguishing features of the WLU programs against their comparators include:
 - Explicit incorporation of theory through core theory and methods courses
 - Interdisciplinarity and breadth of focus
 - Emphasis on Visual Communication
 - At the graduate level, the unique field of Visual Communication and Culture along with a focus on breadth of study in the discipline and relatively small cohort size
- With regard to faculty resources, the Department notes that “our teaching resources are barely sufficient to the tasks at hand” (p.68) and that adding a PhD program would require additional faculty resources
- In terms of service, there is “considerable depth and breadth to the contribution that faculty members make to the profession, discipline and community” (p.75)

- Since the last periodic review, there has been a substantial increase in research funding awarded to members of the Department (p. 76)
- The research profiles of Department members serve to strengthen the programs' curricula and foster innovation within the programs
- Student survey data indicated that students in the undergraduate program valued the critical thinking and writing skills that they developed as a result of the program, along with the small class sizes, currency of materials, student-professor relationships and practical skills; weaknesses of the program acknowledged included redundancy in course content, large class sizes and theory courses. Students' recommendations included higher entrance averages, smaller class sizes and more course variety
- The Department feels that the current curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate level allows students to demonstrate achievement of both the program learning outcomes and the degree level expectations; achievement of these benchmarks is current evaluated through the use of capstone experiences at the undergraduate level and through opportunities for presentation of research at the graduate level
- In a 2011 survey administered by the Career Centre, 95% of BA graduates were either pursuing further education or were employed; the Department notes that due to the skill set developed in graduates, alumni were employed in a variety of different fields.

Overall, the Self-Study suggests that both the BA and MA program are functioning effectively, but that they are at capacity in terms of resource management within the faculty complement.

b. Summary of External Reviewer's Report and Recommendations

The external review of this department was conducted on April 4th and 5th (2013) by Dr. Alison Beale, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University; by Dr. Line Grenier, Département de Communication, Université de Montréal; and by Dr. Dana Sawchuk, Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University.

At the end of their visit, the reviewers were very favorably impressed with the department. The following remarks, taken from their report, convey this clearly:

The objectives of the undergraduate and graduate programs . . . are clear and aligned with . . . Wilfrid Laurier University's mission and Academic plan. (p. 1)

The undergraduate program is unique in Canada and not only among the Ontario universities discussed in the self-study.

There are coherent curricular links between undergraduate and graduate programs

There are enough graduate courses to meet the requirement that two-thirds of the candidates course be at this level, and to ensure the very good completion rates in the one year MA program.

The department of Communication studies compares very favorably to other communication departments of a similar size and mandate in Ontario and Canada . . . Faculty members have different disciplinary backgrounds and training . . . This assemblage of knowledge and expertise appears to function as a collective resource upon which the department's approach to communication studies as a field is defined.

If the contribution of faculty members to the organization of both the profession and the discipline is impressive, their contribution to the creative work through which the profession and the field are defined is too.

We would like to draw attention to the high level of collegiality and camaraderie that exists in the department.

In summary, then, it seems clear that the reviewers were very favorably impressed with (1) the research achievements of the faculty, (2) the quality of the undergraduate program, (3) the integration of the undergraduate and graduate programs, and (4) the level of solidarity among members of the department.

On the other hand, the reviewers did note some problematic issues:

- Although the reviewers had praise for the year by year degree level expectations developed by the department, they also noted - at several points (see p. 2, p. 5 and p. 6) - that students, at least in the early years of the program, did not have a clear sense of what "communication studies" was all about, and that the shared vision held in common by faculty members could be better communicated to students
- Despite the fact that a few faculty have developed a variety of in-class learning techniques, the delivery of the program seems "to be relatively conventional (lectures complemented by tutorials)"; the reviewers see access to larger and better equipped labs as they key to developing more interactive learning strategies.

- Staff support in the Communications Studies Office is not sufficient
- Online communication studies courses are scarce
- Several areas of the department's Self-Study seemed underdeveloped, including the university's multi-campus strategy and the role of the department in that strategy; natural partnerships with journalism at Brantford and with Conestoga; the building of community links for research, dissemination and community based experiential learning; and a review of the consultation and coordination between the department and other levels of governance in the university.

In the end, the reviewers made nine recommendations:

1. that the staff complement in the departmental office be increased to two year round appointments
2. that the department initiate a conversation with the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies about the establishment of a PhD program, which the reviewers see as a crucial component for a research intensive department
3. that the department investigate the potential the development of Laurier as a multi-campus university may have for the creation of additional undergraduate courses or themes
4. the department should initiate opportunities for advancement in aid of student scholarships, and new initiatives, equipment and facilities for teaching and research
5. the department should assess its existing relationships with local and regional communities and develop a strategy, in collaboration with university units responsible for outreach, to foster research partnerships, service opportunities , student placements, and recruitment
6. the department should ensure that detailed information about the undergraduate and graduate programs reaches a national audience, and that the information available to WLU students is comprehensive enough to ensure that they have an informed understanding of the degree structure and academic focus.
7. the department should actively consider the potential of online courses both for pedagogical reasons and to manage enrollments

8. the department should routinely review its list of elective courses for suitability
9. the department should foster peer mentoring for incoming students, the participation of students in governance and their potential as future alumni

c. Summary of Unit Response

The Department's response to the External Reviewer's Report offered no corrections to that report and for the most part indicated the department's willingness to embrace the recommendations made. Departmental responses to particular recommendations, and our comment on both the original recommendations and the departmental responses are discussed in the next section.

Part 2: Executive Response

Communications Studies is undeniably the single most popular program in the Faculty of Arts, and indeed, one of the most popular single programs in the entire University. Table A6 of the Registrar's Report for Winter 2013, for instance, indicates that Communications Studies has 953 Majors. Comparable figures for other popular majors in Arts are Geography/Environmental Studies, 331; English, 457; History, 426; and Sociology, 530. For comparison: the number of majors in selected programs selected programs in other Faculties are: Biology, 667; Chemistry, 195; Economics, 718.

It is gratifying then, given the importance of Communications studies to the Faculty of Arts and to the University, that the reviewers found that the program was distinctive; that it compared favorably with other Communications departments of similar size; and that the full time faculty in the department were "undeniably committed, dedicated, innovative and productive researchers."

In this context, the recommendations made by the reviewers must be considered as suggestions designed to make a very good program even better.

Still, although Communications Studies has the largest number of Majors in the Faculty, we would like to note that enrollments in Communications Studies courses have actually declined a bit over the last five years, mainly because the program has installed progression standards that are higher than other programs in Arts. Data from the Office of Institutional Research make clear, as well, that the average class size in Communications Studies is well below the Faculty average.

Communication Studies, in other words, is very much an elite program within the faculty and one that – aside from the matter of undergraduate advising – is not overly stressed when it comes to resources.

On the graduate side, enrollments have remained relatively modest with some decline for the current academic year:

2010 - 16
2011 - 17
2012 - 18
2013 – 14

We feel there is capacity for growth in this program which would also provide additional teaching assistance for the undergraduate program.

Recommendation #1: Administrative Staff

The reviewers recommended that the staff complement be increased to two full time positions. In their response the department noted that the Dean's Office has already increased the hours associated with the second staff position significantly, with the result that the department already has close to two full time positions. The department, however, then goes beyond the reviewer's recommendation to argue for a third staff position, mainly to help with advising.

Two things should be noted here. First, the increased hours associated with the second staff position is relatively recent and so the effect of these increased hours on workload is not yet clear. Second, given the very large number of Majors in this program, the Dean's Office has agreed – starting this year (2013-14) - for its own advisors to take up some of the front line advising for Communications Studies Majors. In light of these two initiatives, it is premature to discuss adding new staff to the Communications Studies office. At the end of this academic year, the issue can be assessed again in light of departmental needs and Faculty resources.

Recommendation #2: Expansion of the Graduate Program

The Department is quite willing to consider expanding the MA program and/or establishing a PhD program and has begun discussions with the dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies on this issue. The Department notes, however, that moving forward with regard to these options would require extra resources in order to ensure that full time faculty could take on additional graduate supervision without compromising the quality of undergraduate instruction. The

department's response does not indicate the nature of these extra resources, but presumably they would consist of additional full time faculty and/or additional CAS stipends.

Communications Studies does certainly have a claim on additional resources. Nevertheless, since no new resources are likely to come into the Faculty in the immediate future, this would mean shifting resources from other units in the Faculty. For that reason, it is important that the Department – in consultation with Dean of the FGPS and the Dean of Arts – start a discussion of R#2 with a view to establishing just what additional resources would be needed if a new PhD program were to be put in place and whether those resources would be available over the next few years. Only after that discussion has taken place can a decision be made on whether to move forward with a PhD program. It should also be noted that the addition of doctoral programs such as this will depend on the addition of funded spots to the university's current allocation by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and University.

The program would also benefit from a larger applicant pool for the MA program. Numbers have been modest over the last few years, and this has had an impact on the number of available TAs (see Recommendation #9 below). It is possible that a doctoral program would enhance recruitment efforts into the Master's by providing the option of an advanced degree to prospective students.

Recommendation #3: Explore the potential of a multi-campus University

The department's response suggests that a "School of Communications Studies" could be the home for other programs on the Waterloo campus and also serve as the "incubator" for other possible programs at Brantford and Milton.

While a "School of Communications Studies" may someday be a viable administrative option, the departmental response here does not tie such a School to multi-campus programming in any precise way. We suggest, then, that for the moment the department build a multi-campus presence by focusing on concrete steps to establish ties with existing programs. There seems a natural affinity, for example, between Communication Studies and the Journalism program at Brantford, and so we urge faculty in both programs to enter into discussions with a view of developing new programming that is mutually beneficial.

Recommendation #4: Fund-raising

The department notes that fund-raising efforts in the past have not been particularly successful, likely in large part due to the young age of the program and

so the fact that alumni of the program are not yet at a career stage where they contribute large sums of money. Even so, the department will continue its efforts to work with Development and Alumni Relations to raise money. The department also suggests that hiring a part-time support person devoted to fundraising and community relations would be useful

We appreciate the department's continuing commitment to working with Alumni Relations and Development on fundraising and would ask that the department prepare an annual report, to be sent to the Dean of Arts, outlining its initiatives in this area. For the moment, however, hiring additional staff – who are not part of Alumni Relations and Development – seems unnecessary duplication.

Recommendation #5: Enhancing community relations

While the department embraces the general goal of forging new links to enhance student opportunities, the only specific initiative offered is to again ask for a part-time staff position to pursue this general goal.

It is our view that forging the sort of links envisioned by the external reviewers will only be successful if such an initiative is led by one or more of the full time faculty in the department, who can serve as liaison with Career Development and Co-Op Education.

Recommendation #6: Recruitment

The department acknowledges that one of the main findings of the external review is that undergraduate students, incoming students in particular, don't have as clear an understanding of what the Communications Studies Major is as would be desired. Accordingly, the department commits itself to reviewing and revising its orientation materials (for both undergraduate and graduate students), and reviewing its relationship with the Office of Recruitment and Admissions.

With regard to recruitment into the MA program, the graduate has begun an informal dialogue with the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies on initiatives related to marketing and recruitment. Further, FGPS is developing a graduate recruitment and marketing strategy which includes best practices for all graduate programs. These will be shared with the Communication Studies graduate coordinator.

We applaud the department's willingness to address this issue, and ask that the department provide a report to the Dean of Arts at the end of this Academic Year, detailing what changes have been made in this area.

Recommendation #7: On-line Courses

In response to the reviewers' recommendation that the department offer more on-line courses, the department notes in the past discussions about online courses have foundered on two issues, the first being concerns about intellectual property and the second being concerns about the functionality of the MyLearningSpace platform. Nevertheless, they are willing to make the development of a model online course a priority for their curriculum committee this upcoming year. Their stated goal is that such a course would be taught by a FT faculty member and would reflect the pedagogical values of the department. They also suggest that this model course would be designed specifically for online learning "rather than an online version of a regular course offering."

Given the government's emphasis on increasing the number of online courses available to Ontario students, we welcome the department's willingness to confront this issue again. In order to move forward in a way that provides flexibility to students, however, it is important that more than a single course be involved and also important that courses equivalent to some of the department's core courses be put online. Indeed, this seems to be exactly what the external reviewers were suggesting, in the body of their report, when they indicated that "intramural offerings could perhaps be complemented by on-line courses" (p. 7).

We would therefore ask that the department, in consultation with the Dean of Arts, commit to developing a set number (at least two) of on-line courses every year for the next 3 years, and that at least some of these courses be courses required for the Communications Studies Major.

Recommendation #8

The Reviewers recommended that the department routinely review its list of elective courses, to ensure the suitability of these courses, and the department indicates that will develop a process to do just this.

Conducting a periodic review of a program's elective courses, with a view to identifying which courses might be deleted or added, is good practice for all programs. We therefore welcome the department's willingness to do this. We request that by the end of this academic year the department send a report to the Dean of Arts indicating what elective courses were reviewed (and by whom), and what elective courses were retained, deleted or added. We also recommend that this sort of review occur at least every two years.

Recommendation #9: Partnerships with students

The reviewers recommend that the department establish a peer mentorship program for incoming students, allow for student participation governance, and recognize the potential of current students as future alumni. In their reply, the department lists a variety of activities – already in place – that foster positive relationships with student outside the classroom. These include the fact that this year the department is running a Residence Learning Community; that upper year students serve as Instructional Assistants in lower level CS courses; that the department organizes an annual alumni event; that the program has an active Communications Association that sponsors a number of events; and that both graduate and undergraduate students are represented on the Communication Studies Department in Council.

We recognize the many and varied ways that the department promotes positive relationships with its students. In many ways, this department could serve as a model for other departments in this regard. We do however have one concern: using upper level students as Instructional Assistants in a course is not really the same as providing peer mentors who can provide programmatic guidance to incoming students, nor is it the same as providing graduate student teaching assistants in this context. Given that the reviewers found that many students were initially unclear about what “communication studies” meant, we would recommend that the department consider establishing a true peer mentoring system. Further, better recruitment efforts will provide a larger number of master’s students who can act as TAs in undergraduate classes. We would further ask that at the end of this academic year, the department provide the Dean of Arts with a summary of their discussion on this issue, and why they did or did not proceed with such peer mentoring.

Conclusion

We can only conclude as we began: Both the undergraduate and graduate Communications Studies programs are clearly of good quality, and the suggestions made by the reviewers will only make this program even better.

Part 3: Implementation Plan

Recommendation to be Implemented	Responsibility for Implementation	Implementation Date	Additional Notes
RR#2: discuss resource implications of an expansion of the MA program and the establishment of a PhD program.	Department, in consultation with the Dean of Arts and the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.	September 2014	
RR#3: expand Department's multi-campus presence through discussions with Brantford programs, Journalism in particular	Department	June 2014	Provide Dean of Arts with written account of discussions.
RR#4: discuss possible expansion of fund-raising initiatives.	Department, in consultation with Development and Alumni Relations.	June 2014	Provide written report to the Dean of Arts.
RR#6: revise undergraduate orientation materials and expand initiatives in the areas of marketing and recruitment for the graduate program.	Department, in consultation with Recruitment and Admissions and FGPS.	June 2014	Provide written report to the Dean of Arts.
RR#7: develop at least two online courses per year for the next three years.	Department, in consultation with the Dean of Arts.	September 2014	Some courses should be courses required for CS majors. Interim report on progress to Dean of Arts by June 2014.
RR#8: review of elective courses offerings.	Department	June 2014	Provide written report to the Dean of Arts.
RR#9: discuss establishment of a peer mentoring program.	Department	June 2014	Provide summary of conversations to the Dean of Arts.