

**Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving
Student Learning in Degree Programs**

Unit: Department of Communication

Unit Head approval: _____
Barbara J. Wilson

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SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Brief description of changes or improvements made in your unit as the result of assessment results since 2000.

We have made a number of significant changes in the department's structure and to its undergraduate (B.A.) and graduate programs (M.A. & Ph.D.) over the past 8 years, based on important feedback we received through various assessment strategies. These changes include the following:

- (a) Changed our department name from *Speech Communication* to *Communication*.** Our department was one of the last in the country to use the name "Speech" Communication. That label no longer accurately describes the range of teaching, service, and research activities carried out by the department – therefore it was confusing for our students and for the campus community. We do teach several public speaking courses, but these skill-oriented classes serve undergraduate students from all over the campus and constitute a very small component of our course offerings. Our undergraduate and graduate programs focus more broadly on the humanistic and social scientific study of messages, some of which are spoken, but many of which are not. We also include the study of nonverbal communication, written communication, computer-mediated communication, and even communication that is mediated through technologies like television. In essence, our curriculum examines the production, dissemination, and effects of messages in a variety of contexts--in families, in the workplace, in health care, in intercultural settings, in the media, and in politics. Our goal is to teach students to become critical thinkers about the process of communication, avid consumers of information, and effective problem solvers in the 21st century.
- (b) Added new content areas (and new courses) in the department to reflect a more contemporary state of the discipline.** Our discipline has evolved with new content areas in the past decade that complement our current strengths. Since 2000, we have added strength in health communication, political and rhetorical studies, communication technology, organizational communication, media research, and relational/interpersonal communication. These are all areas that have exciting connections to the campus strategic plan, and/or other strong campus units. They also contribute to career opportunities for undergraduate and

graduate students.

- (c) Changed our undergraduate curriculum to represent more theoretically and practically meaningful categories.** We revamped the undergraduate curriculum based on feedback from students and in comparison to programs at peer institutions. In the new bachelor's degree curriculum, the Department of Communication offers six specializations: (a) Communication and Culture, (b) Communication and Health, (c) Communication and Organizations, (d) Interpersonal Communication, (e) Mediated Communication and Technology, and (f) Rhetoric and Public Communication. Students now are allowed to specialize within an area (or areas) or they can select a "generalist" option. These new specializations provide more current category labels for our specializations that conform to our disciplinary norms and that are likely to be understood by undergraduates and their potential employers. The revised specializations help undergraduates organize the major in ways that are coherent and applicable to their liberal arts and sciences educational and career goals. Although students are encouraged to acquire a broad understanding of communication theory, research, and practices through their coursework, these specializations contain coursework that allows students to develop competence in a particular area. We also added a requirement that students take a public speaking course and a course in communication theory and research as foundational experiences for the major.
- (d) Added an undergraduate minor.** Many students from other disciplines take courses in Communication as electives and have asked about having a minor to formalize their studies in our department. In the most recent DMI data, 76% of undergraduate IUs in Communication are from students majoring in other units/departments. Because the study of communication intersects with many other social scientific and humanistic disciplines, the addition of a minor is a significant benefit to those students. The minor is designed to provide an overview of the field of Communication and to complement coursework in a variety of disciplines (e.g., Journalism, Advertising, Business, Community Health, Computer Science, Media Studies, Psychology, Sociology, and Political Science).
- (e) Developed career advisory activities.** In the past five years, we have begun holding career awareness activities, including having panels of alums talking with undergraduate and graduate students about careers in business, nonprofit organizations, and academe. These events have been hosted by Professor John Lammers (Director of the Applied Master's Program) and also recently by our Communication Leaders organization (see below).
- (f) Expanded our undergraduate advising office.** Our undergraduate major has grown significantly and the advising office was understaffed. We added a .50 FTE advisor to increase the number of hours available for student appointments, but also added undergraduate student receptionists who are Communication majors, so that they can talk with waiting students about their own experiences in the

major. We have found that this is a valuable socialization process for new and continuing students.

(g) Added an Alumni Advisory Board. We developed an alumni advisory board to also help us with issues related to career opportunities for our students and to enhance financial support for the department. Our inaugural board contains successful individuals involved in a variety of occupations including consultants, motivational speakers, attorneys, and business owners and leaders:

- **Norm Bilsbury**, Management Consultant & Trainer.
- **Michael Brandwein**, Professional Speaker.
- **Al Brennan**, Young Innovations, Inc.
- **Ben Haglund**, Pitney Hardin.
- **Jerome Jenkins**, Business Owner.
- **Brad Kolar**, University of Chicago Hospitals.
- **Paul Lisnek**, Speaker & Consultant.
- **JD Miller**, Lexis Nexis, Inc.
- **Michael Novy**, Centerra Wine Company.
- **Deborah Parker**, McDonald's Corporation.
- **Cindy Raymond**, Entertainment Marketing & PR.
- **Lloyd Richards**, Director of Football Operations, Houston Texans, NFL.
- **David Rittof**, Modern Management, Inc.
- **John Wright**, Goodwin Wright Agency.

(h) Reinstated alumni newsletter. As we have continued to explore ways in which alumni can help us shape important curricular and career advising, we also revived our alumni newsletter. The newsletter provides information about changes in the department, research and teaching activities of faculty and graduate students, and awards and honors. It is sent to over 5000 alumni of our program, and alumni have in turn provided us with concrete ideas about ways in which the communication degree facilitated their success, and ways in which the program can be enhanced.

(i) Added an undergraduate leader's organization and an undergraduate honor society. Our undergraduates formerly had few opportunities to connect to the department in meaningful ways beyond the classroom, and they reported that increased participation could benefit themselves and the department. The recently formed Communication Leaders group has assisted with a number of activities, including the *Career and Internship Night* and the *Get to Know Your Major Fair*. The undergraduate honor society (Lambda Pi Eta, a registered student organization and an affiliate of the National Communication Association) allows us to recognize outstanding performance among our undergraduate majors. Our plan is to follow with a third general Communication Student Association, which can allow a larger number of our undergraduates to develop and implement service projects, and to learn more about our department and discipline.

- (j) **Separated Associate Head and Director of Graduate Studies duties.** We formerly had a single position that covered areas of curriculum development and maintenance, TA staffing, and graduate studies (including recruiting, admission, and management of the graduate program). As our department has grown in faculty and student numbers, it was critical to separate these positions so that undergraduate and graduate curriculum, TA development, and the graduate program could have sustained and focused attention.
- (k) **Developed Ruth Anne Clark Student Scholar fund for undergraduate and graduate research opportunities.** One area that needed further enhancement in the department was undergraduate participation in research. Similarly, our graduate students often need funds for dissertation or thesis research. We therefore established a research fund for undergraduate and graduate students in the name of Professor Emeritus Ruth Anne Clark, who touched the lives of many of our undergraduates and graduate students through her research and teaching.

SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

- (a) **PROCESS: Brief description of the process followed to develop or revise this assessment plan.**

The work to develop assessment has been the combined effort of the Head (Barbara Wilson), Associate Head and Outcomes Assessment Coordinator (Dale Brashers), Director of Graduate Studies (David Tewksbury), Advisory Committee (elected each year from among the faculty), and Graduate Admission and Financial Aid Committee (appointed each year from among the faculty).

- (b) **STUDENT OUTCOMES: List unit's student learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes).**

Overview: The goal for students in the Communication course of study is to learn about the nature of effective communication across domains, develop effective communication skills, and gain knowledge of how to help others improve their skills. Students gain theoretical and practical knowledge of public advocacy and debate and the critical capacity to evaluate the face-to-face and mediated political and cultural information. Communication courses also enable students to develop a familiarity with past and present communication concerns, to ask meaningful questions about the processes of communication and their consequences, to analyze the subtle and explicit significance of communication practices, and to understand and speak to the importance of national and global communication.

Outcome 1. Students will demonstrate competence in oral and written communication skills, including public speaking, argumentation and reasoning, decision-making discussion, and media analysis and critique.

Outcome 2. Students will (a) have broad knowledge of communication research and theory and (b) understand how to apply theoretical concepts in practical settings.

Outcome 3. Students will achieve a sophisticated understanding of the political and social import of communication on all aspects of public and private life, from public policy and health care to cultural norms, personal interactions, and notions of race, class, gender, and sexual identity.

Outcome 4. Students will obtain employment that is satisfying to them, and that provides opportunities to use their skills and knowledge.

(c) MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES:

1. Students will successfully complete CMN 101 (Public Speaking) or CMN 111/112 (Oral and Written Communication). This is a new requirement in the major as of Fall 2008. Faculty members teaching upper-level courses also will assess student communication skills (oral and written) as adequate or outstanding through performance in their classes. We will seek feedback from faculty members annually about perceived strengths and weaknesses in communication performance by our students.
2. Students will successfully complete CMN 102 (Communication Theory and Research). This is a new requirement in the major as of Fall 2008. Students also will successfully complete a track of courses in which communication principles are applied to social, political, and cultural phenomena.
3. Most undergraduates also will have had the opportunity to apply communication theory through a capstone experience of (a) research with a faculty member, (b) senior honors thesis, (c) sponsored internship, (d) service learning opportunities, or (e) student portfolio. We will begin tracking this with our own senior survey, which we plan to place online in the coming year, and through advising data.
4. Most undergraduates and applied master's degree students will have employment immediately after graduation. Through our exit survey at graduation, we have found that most (but not all) of our students have obtained employment upon graduation. These include careers at many top businesses, including Acacia Technologies Group; Accenture; Allstate Financial Marketing; American Airlines; American Express; American Flyers; Ameritech Cellular; Archway Marketing Service; Bank One; Blue Cross and Blue Shield; Campbell-Edwards Advertising; Carle Clinic; Carson Pirie Scott & Company; Caterpillar; Chicago Bears; Chicago Bulls; Chicago Sun Times; Chicago Tribune; Chicago Yacht Club; Chicagoist Entertainment; Choice

Hotels International; Citibank; Comcast Sports Network; Compaq Computer Corporation; Culligan International Company; John Deere & Company; Deloitte & Touche LLP; ESPN; Exelon; Express Personnel Services; Foote, Cone, & Belding Communications; Fuchs Lubricants Co.; GE Telemundo Chicago; General Electric Capital Solutions; General Mills; Great Lakes Bank Corporation; Google; Harris Trust and Savings Bank; Holmes, Murphy, & Associates; Hyatt Hotels; IBM; Illinois Attorney General's Office; Insight Insurance Services; ISG Corporation; Johnson & Johnson Co., Keebler Company; Kraft Foods; Lakeland Newspapers; Laminar Film Productions; LaSalle Bank; Liberty Mutual Insurance Company; Los Angeles Times; Loyola University; Macy's; Marriott International; Massachusetts Mutual; McDonald's Corporation; Merck Pharmaceuticals; Merrill Lynch; Millikin University; Motorola; Nagle & Higgins P.C.; National City Bank; NBC Television; NBC Universal; Nextel Communications; Northwest Airlines; Chicago O'Hare Airport; Procter & Gamble; Quaker Oats Company; Quill Corporations; Radisson Suite Hotel; Rogers and Holland's Jewelers; Rotary International; Seaworld Public Relations; Skyy Spirits LLC; Southern Illinois University; Southern Pacific Telephone Company; Southern Wine & Spirits; Southwestern Bell; St. Jude Midwest Affiliate; State Farm Insurance; Stenson Bauer Communications; Target; Teach for America; Tektronix Inc; The Beverly Review; The Northern Trust Company; The Pampered Chef; Travel Technology Group; United Airlines; University of Colorado; University of Illinois; UNUM Life Insurance Co. of America; US Bioscience; US Surgical; Walk Disney World; Wal-Mart Stores; Waterman Broadcasting; WCMH-NBC; Wells Fargo Financial; Williams Sonoma; Wolbrink Insurance Agency; Xerox; Yahoo! Search Marketing; YMCA; and Youth Works.

Most doctoral students will have obtained employment at outstanding research universities, liberal arts institutions, or teaching colleges upon graduation. In the past 8 years, our students have had impressive placement (e.g., California Polytechnic University, University of California at Santa Cruz, Carnegie Mellon University, Indiana University, State University of New York at Buffalo, Ohio University, The Ohio State University, University of Oklahoma, North Carolina State University, Purdue University, University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, Valdosta State University). We will continue to monitor their success in obtaining jobs that fulfill their career goals.

We will continue to survey students about their employment and add information about their level of satisfaction with employment as a set of important outcomes. We will develop an online implementation to capture students who do not attend graduation (at which we typically have conducted our survey).

We will also implement interviews with alumni about their experiences in their careers, and what communication skills and knowledge was or would

have been useful to them. We will ask them to describe what they thought was important in their education, and what recommendations they have for current students. We plan to video record these interviews and make them available on the website for undergraduates to view.

5. We also will continue to use assessments tools that have been useful to us in the past few years:
 - Chancellor's Senior Survey
 - Focus Group Interviews with Communication Leaders
 - Department of Communication Senior Survey (to be adapted online)
 - National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
 - Instructor and Course Evaluation System (ICES)
 - Peer Review of Teaching for Faculty
 - Peer and Teaching Supervisor Review of Teaching Assistants
 - Division of Management of Information (DMI) Data
 - Demographic profile of department
 - Semesters to graduation
 - Number of applicants to graduate program
 - Number of admissions to graduate program
 - Student to faculty ratios
 - Section sizes
 - Comprehensive Examinations for Master's Degree Students
 - Preliminary Examinations for Doctoral Degree Students
 - Departmental, College, and University Awards for Research and Teaching

SECTION 3: PLANS FOR USING RESULTS

(a) PLANS: Brief description of plans to use assessment results for program improvement.

We will monitor and evaluate our success in meeting the objectives of the development and use of communication skills in coursework and employment. We will use feedback from students, alumni, and faculty members to determine if there are deficiencies to be corrected or points of excellence to be highlighted. If there is need, we will adapt coursework requirements (e.g., adding a new course or courses, changing or adding required courses).

We will monitor the discipline and the marketplace for changes that should be addressed in the curriculum (e.g., the advent of new communication technologies).

Our teaching staff will receive ongoing training and development to ensure high quality teaching that supports our desired outcomes and is challenging, rewarding, and appreciated. We will use ICES evaluations and peer reports to evaluate teaching, to help ensure success of conveying vital information to students.

Our advising program will continue to emphasize a general liberal arts education and a career focus. Advisors will incorporate into the advising experience feedback from current students and alumni that connects students with their individual and long range goals (e.g., career, graduate school). The advising program will be assisted in these endeavors by the ongoing career fair and information sessions about the major that we have recently developed and implemented (see previous sections).

Our graduate program will maintain high academic and professional standards. In addition to information above, we will use two forms of assessment to determine our graduate program's external reputation. First, the National Communication Association ranks doctoral programs. Our most recent ranking overall was 6th in the nation, with some areas ranked more highly (e.g., Interpersonal Communication was ranked 2nd, Health Communication was ranked 4th, and so on). The second form of assessment will be from the National Research Council (NRC) ratings. The current ongoing evaluation is the first time that the communication discipline has been evaluated by the NRC, and we look forward to the feedback it will provide about "Student Support and Outcomes" (e.g., fraction of students having full support, time to degree, attrition rate, fraction of students having a position in a relevant field on graduation, and so on) and "Diversity of Academic Environment" (i.e., fraction of students and faculty that are female and minority).

(b) TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

We will develop and implement the new surveys (i.e., the faculty survey, alumni survey, and expanded survey of graduating seniors) over the course of the next year.