

PROGRAM REVIEW
Master of Professional Communication
Weber State University

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Review Team

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Overview

Normally when an academic department wishes to initiate a new Masters program, one of the first considerations is that it find a unique niche—that it not duplicate existing programs in the region. The review team (hereafter referred to as “we” or “the team”) believes that in the Master of Professional Communication program, the Department of Communication has found an extremely valuable niche and one that offers a sorely needed resource to professionals in the program’s target area.

While the program is still in its infancy (this is the first 5-year review), the team believes that it has already evolved in a highly successful manner through an insightful process of assessment and change. As a result, the team rates the program as exhibiting “strengths” in the majority of categories reviewed. Ironically, most of the review categories that were rated as “concerns” or “weakness” were the result of external factors that impacted the program. The internal core of the program appears to be on an incredibly strong foundation, especially at this early stage of its development.

Standard A—Mission Statement

The mission statement was viewed as an overall strength with the exception of the “process by which accomplishments are determined and periodically assessed based upon the constituencies served by the program.” The team felt that priority in assessment was given to academic presentations by students at conferences and to theses (which are no longer required). These are measures that are used by more traditional Masters programs. While the team did not wish to discount the importance of these measures, it felt that more professionally-oriented measures should be given priority. One recommendation is that since a thesis is no longer required, the learning outcomes need to be adapted to reflect this.

Standard B—Curriculum

Every area of the curriculum was rated as a strength. Insight viewed by the team as especially meaningful include:

- Adaptations that have already been made to the program are extremely successful and appear to be based on the recognized needs of the students. These include eliminating the thesis as a requirement and lowering the number of required credits. Student feedback indicated they are pleased with the changes.
- The program has developed a good model for incorporating existing course load plus additional pay to faculty who teach in the program. Not only does the model allow for effective delivery of courses, but the faculty also appears to approve of it.
- The program director is doing a very good job of program planning as evidenced by course sequencing and graduation rates. Students were pleased with the fact that the course offerings and program guidelines allowed them to accelerate if they chose.

Standard C—Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

A. The extent to which the program has clearly defined outcomes

The team felt that the three elements in this category were all strengths. The only comment was that the program already has a good assessment plan.

B. The effectiveness of the assessment process

The team had one concern in this area: the program needs to move forward in developing measures to assess the newly implemented 3-course option in lieu of a thesis. Because these measures are not yet adopted they obviously could not be used in a systematic manner.

The team was especially impressed with the manner in which assessment has been used to implement logical improvements to the program, especially with the timely manner in which it was done at this early stage of the program’s development.

Standard D—Academic Advising

Advising for students appears to be very well planned in that there is a basic overall strategy and students appear to get good assistance in planning their individual programs of study. Students echoed this and felt very connected to the program. One identified weakness that appears to result from external factors and was identified by both administrators and students is that career planning at the university level is very weak. In response, the department would like to add its own career planning. Given this weakness at a higher level, the team felt that the program director is going beyond expectations in career advising and doing a great job.

Standard E—Faculty

The team considers the faculty to be a major strength of the program. Comments by the team members regarding faculty include:

- We are very pleased to see that a plan is already in place for a growth in faculty size and that the faculty has already enjoyed substantial growth.
- From a professional development perspective, we are pleased to see that the program has an advisory committee.
- Discussions with the majority of faculty members teaching in the program indicate that they are highly energized.
- The requirements to ensure that contract/adjunct faculty are qualified appear substantial.
- Diversity of the faculty reflects the Communication/Journalism field. This is noteworthy because it is especially difficult to attract non-white/non-male faculty to a conservative state like Utah, but the program has done a good job.
- Faculty members indicate that they are pleased with the mentoring they receive. One potential problem is learning to teach in the program's unique 8-week block, but the program director does a good job of mentoring them in this specialty.
- The monitoring of service workloads is apparently effective, and faculty members indicated that they were appreciative of the program's change away from the thesis requirement as it severely increased their workloads.

Standard F—Program Support

The adequacy of the support staff to meet the program's objectives was rated as a concern. While the members of the current support staff do a very good job of what they are supposed to do, additional support staff is needed. One idea that was expressed in a number of different sessions is that the program needs a larger applicant pool. To achieve this, the program director indicated that the program would benefit from additional support staff to specifically help with recruiting. The program appears to have adequate ability to recruit students from academics but would like to increase its ability to recruit working professionals. Recruitment of working professionals would fall outside the normal recruitment activities for a Masters program and would require new ideas and energies that go well beyond the time constraints of the program director.

Standard G—Relationships with External Communities

The team rated the relationship between the program and external communities as adequate. While these relationships exist, they appear to be more informal than formal and take the form of community professionals serving as guest speakers and of students completing a capstone project by working with clients in the community. Students did place a high value on these guest speakers. The program did establish an advisory board in the past year, and this is one type of formal relationship that will prove valuable. A recruiting coordinator who can work directly with professionals would also help.

The contributions to the program by outside constituencies was rated as a concern because more formal relationships need to be established so that company managers would be aware of and send their employees to the program. Once again, a recruiting coordinator could help establish these relationships.

Since the implementation of an external advisory committee is new, information on its activities was not available. By the next program review, evidence of the group's contributions needs to be presented.

Standard H—Program Summary

A. Additional Considerations

The team suggests that additional resources be allocated for student travel.

The team suggests that additional resources be allocated for professional conferences that would assist faculty in staying current in their fields and teaching courses for communication practitioners. We feel this is especially important with the growth of new media. Given the professional nature of this program, we believe it is important to view the value of conferences to faculty in ways other than research presentations.

The team sees a threat to the program from other new Masters programs, particularly in Leadership. This could create overlap, drain enrollments, and decrease the program applicant pool.

B. Summary of Greatest Challenges

Since this is a specialized Masters program, it might be expected that forces could inadvertently direct it toward conformity with more traditional Masters programs. Examples might include a greater emphasis on conference presentations than professional activities in assessment or an increase in incoming students from academic rather than professional areas. The program has discovered an especially important niche and needs to continually keep its eye on its mission.

Recruitment of professionals is a continuing challenge and a recruiting coordinator who could work with employers in professional fields would be an especially valuable resource.

Career planning at the university level is apparently weak. Program administrators expressed a desire to bring it closer to home.

Other new Masters programs, especially in Leadership, could serve to weaken the viability of the Master of Professional Communication because it encroaches on the potential students due to significant overlap.

C. Summary of Greatest Strengths

The program has found an important and greatly needed niche, especially considering the geographical concentration of working professionals along the northern Wasatch Range. Evidence was provided by the fact that the program's enrollment goals were reached by its third year of existence and that it continues to function at capacity.

The program's administration. We believe the Dean, the Department Head, and the Program Director have all played major roles in the obvious success of the program in a very short time. The Dean has made an important financial commitment to the program, and the Department Head and Program Director are good curriculum managers, advisors, and mentors.

The ability of the program to assess the needs of its students and to change the curriculum to better meet their needs in a timely manner (within the first three years of the program's existence).

A faculty that is committed to the program and willing to adapt to the program's unique teaching requirements.

D. One Sentence Program Summary

The Master of Professional Communication Program sought a niche, found it, and has tweaked it effectively.