

Master of Professional Communication (MPC)
Department of Communication
Faculty Response to Program Review Evaluation Team Report
April 29, 2020

Prepared by Anne Bialowas (MPC Program Director Spring 2020, while Sarah Steimel on sabbatical) and Sarah Steimel (MPC Program Director)

As part of the Weber State University five-year academic program review, a review evaluation team was selected by MPC faculty. Dr. Jared Colton is Director of Graduate Studies (English Department) at Utah State University. Dr. Donna Davis is Director of Strategic Communication Master's Program at University of Oregon. Dr. Shaun Hansen is Director of MBA Program at Weber State University. A site visit was made on February 27, 2020. Below are key commendations and recommendations, followed by faculty response and action plans.

Standard A—Mission Statement

Review team acknowledged that the mission statement generally represents the program, while asking us to reflect on being more direct with the critical thinking and cultural competence goals of the program.

Response: We appreciate the recommendation as we agree that critical thinking and cultural competence are fundamental communication skills. As a faculty, we did review the mission statement. The current mission statement mentions how students will learn how to conduct research and interpret research findings, which inherently involves critical thinking skills. Furthermore, the mission statement notes that students will learn communication skills to succeed in career fields. Again, the term “cultural competence” is implied as one of the communication skills more broadly. However, at an initial meeting as a faculty we agree that we can refine the statement to make these outcomes more explicit rather than implicit.

Action Plan:

- Discuss at a future MPC meeting (Fall 2020) a sentence to make explicit the goal of critical thinking and cultural competence in the mission statement.

Standard B—Curriculum

Commendations by the review team acknowledged the flexibility and nimbleness to adapt to changing industry and student feedback. They did ask us to reflect on critical thinking and cultural competence being more clearly described in the curriculum and also consistency of rigor across the curriculum.

Response: We do feel like our courses engage critical thinking and cultural competence outcomes. However, we could do a better job communicating this in course descriptions, as they note. In response to the review team report, faculty already discussed in a Spring 2020

meeting how diversity is a topic that is covered in course readings and many courses. For example, it may not be obvious to outsiders based on the course description that MPC 6100 Team Building and Facilitation might cover cultural competence, but it was noted that course readings do cover this area. This means that the course description and the syllabus may not be as explicit making it clear that these topics are covered.

Action Plan:

- Discuss at a future meeting syllabi, course titles, and course learning outcomes to more explicitly connect them to critical thinking and cultural competence. One idea already suggested was faculty including a statement on the syllabus how the course meets critical thinking and cultural competence.
- Discuss at a future MPC meeting the rigor and consistency across courses with regard to not only syllabi, but also how faculty interpret the hybrid nature of the program. We have already begun to discuss how faculty interpret and describe hybrid in syllabi in a shared google doc. This discussion will continue.
- Deliberate ethics as a concept currently implicitly incorporated into courses. Reflect on ways to clarify when ethics is already in a course, like in MPC 6700 Research Methods for Professional Communication (required) and other courses. Investigate feasibility of a stand alone required ethics class if, as a result of these discussions, ethics is not fully covered in other courses. Perhaps, it can be offered as a special topics MPC 6500 first.
- Reflect on the course title New Media in Professional Communication and more so the term “new media.” As noted, technology terms continue to change and this course title could be updated.

Standard C—Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Review team noted that the 5 learning outcomes covering a broad foundation is a strength of the program, but further details could be included about completed thesis projects and community/engaged learning connections and those details could be shared more widely with stakeholders. They also note that while assessment practices are working relatively well, assessment is something programs can and should continually refine. The reviewers recognized the value of curriculum updates in the service of helping students better meet outcomes. They recommend we closely follow the currently in-process changes to research methods to determine if they help better reach student learning goals.

Response: A current database of completed theses is compiled by the program director. Additionally, completed thesis projects are generally available digitally through the WSU Library for any student (or interested community member) who wishes to read them. Faculty currently are working with real clients and organizations in their courses and this engaged learning is a strength of the program. However, this particular project information may not always be systematically shared with the program director. The Department of Communication chair sends out a monthly newsletter and often MPC accomplishments are noted in the newsletter and student thesis projects, presentations, and community accomplishments are frequently

reported on the MPC social media platforms as well. However, the faculty agree that this information could be shared even more widely, perhaps with a new section on the MPC website so that theses, completed projects, and other engaged learning that is already happening could be made more visible. We also agree strongly that assessment is important and allows for continuous improvement. We look forward to refining research methods (and other teaching & assessment practices as the data indicate) to continue to strengthen the program.

Action Plan:

- To better track engaged learning, we have created a google doc in which faculty can share, after a course is completed, what community partner they worked with and other deliverables like conference research presentations. This is already in process as part of overall university assessment goals for graduate programs.
- Department of Communication newsletter already exists with the following sections: What's Happening, Student News, Announcements, Alumni Achievements, Faculty Accomplishments, and Get Involved (with directors and contact information). Periodic mentions of MPC accomplishments may be included under Alumni Achievements or Student News. A separate MPC category or mention of the MPC program with the Program Director and contact could be added in the "Get Involved" section.
- We will continue to post MPC accomplishments/projects/conference presentations/etc. on the MPC social media channels and will consider adding a website page in consultation with University Marketing & Communications.
- Continue to reflect on assessment during future meeting (Spring 2021) and discuss results of separating research methods content into two courses. Fall 2020 will be the first time that research methods will be separated to discuss quantitative and qualitative methods in two courses.
- Continue to work with the office of Institutional Effectiveness to refine assessment practices and improve our measurement of student learning outcomes.

Standard D—Academic Advising

Review team noted that this is one of the strongest areas of the program. An established system is in place where the director sends out advising email overviews before each semester registration time period. Follow up appointments are conducted to help students plan for their courses. No weakness was identified.

Action Plan:

- Continue to send out advising overview emails to students before each semester.
- Create an even more explicit course projection advising guide so students can predict which classes are likely offered in Fall, Spring, or Summer.

Standard E—Faculty

Review team commended the strength of faculty energy and engagement with strong growth since the last review. No weakness was identified.

Action Plan:

- Continue to identify diverse talent as a priority as hiring continues.
- Continue to monitor service workload and course rotations for faculty members in the department.

Standard F—Support

Review team commended the strong support staff with loyalty to the program. We also value the expertise and energy of both the MPC and Department of Communication support staff. Recommendations were made to clarify the admissions process and put the application process in Box.

Action Plan:

- Parts of the admissions process is beyond our control as the application is hosted by the university admissions office. A meeting was conducted between the support staff and director to clarify the challenges to solve for the future with the application process being fully online now. As a result, we will follow up on the required materials needed for the application.
- Applicants for Fall 2020 were coordinated using Box folder and the meeting occurred via Zoom. The files were accessible to all and could easily be shared on the screen during the meeting as well. We will continue to revisit the process, but feedback from support staff found this process beneficial.

Standard G—Relationships with External Communities

Benefits of engaging in real world projects was noted as good by the review committee. A suggestion was made to increase mentorship from industry experts by perhaps forming an advisory board.

Response: We currently have an advisory board for the Department of Communication, though they have chosen to focus most intensively on the undergraduate program. The review team may not have been aware of this as it did not come up in the meeting with the director or during the campus visit. We will investigate expanding the scope of the existing board or facilitating a second board as appropriate.

Action Plan:

- The current department advisory board could also be used as a resource for the MPC program so not to create two separate boards, but just one advisory board. Some

people on the current advisory board are MPC alumni and they can be noted more explicitly as a resource for the MPC program.

- Explore and discuss the idea of graduate students completing internships as part of the MPC 6900 project class. Currently, students have not regularly expressed a desire to complete an internship as part of their educational program. However, students do regularly engage in applied projects with community partners in the 6900 class. We are happy to discuss what an appropriate internship might look like that might meet similar learning outcomes going forward.

Standard H—Results of Previous Reviews

Challenge 1: Continue to work on assessment as noted above.

Challenge 2 & 3: Still no recruitment coordinator beyond the support staff and director. Continue to explore recruitment opportunities and resources on campus.

Challenge 4: No evidence of problematic overlap.

Closing

Overall, the program review process is beneficial to reflect on the program by first preparing the initial report. The campus visit and review team report will allow us to continue to improve in areas like consistency and being more explicit in our mission and continuing to refine assessment. We do agree with the review team that the flexibility of the hybrid courses is a strength of the program. As noted, we will continue to reflect and examine delivery trends. We thank the review team for their insights, comments, and time. The feedback will be helpful as we move forward with our action plan informed by the review evaluation team.