Program Evaluation Team Report

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Program Evaluation Team Members

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Introduction

The team met on February 27, 2020, with the following from the Master of Professional Communication:

- Anne Bialowas, acting MPC director; Sarah Steimel, MPC director [on sabbatical]
- Tenured and Tenure-Track faculty
- MPC Students (current and alumni)
- Associate Dean, Amanda Sowerby, College of Arts & Humanities
- Department of Communication Chair, Sheree Josephson
- Program Support Staff: Shari Love, Admin for MPC Program & Sare Gardner, Admin for Department of Communication

Overview

The review team (hereafter referred to as "we" or "the team") believes that the Master of Professional Communication program in Weber State University's Department of Communication has continued to grow in its first years to become a flourishing program. It represents not only a solid and stable graduate program, but one that has been nimble in its design to address the needs of both the student population and the changing industry.

Among the program's many strengths is the flexibility of the hybrid (part f2f, part online) course offerings. The students like the block options and possibility of focusing on one course at

a time. We applaud the decision to change the methods course to two courses and your ability to be flexible in meeting the needs/demands of the students.

Regarding resources, the program seems to be in good shape, including outstanding support from the dean's office and university. Of note, students see Dr. Sarah Steimel as an ideal director of the program; we were also very impressed with Dr. Anne Bialowas, the acting director. Students remarked on the accessibility of the faculty, and our impressions of the faculty were strong. The faculty members appear to be very collegial and supportive of one another. Additionally, it was refreshing to find a faculty where, seemingly across the board, everyone pulls their weight in service (perhaps sometimes to a fault!). Senior faculty and leadership were very supportive and encouraging of junior faculty to protect their time prior to tenure.

In the report that follows, we will continue to note the strengths of the program, as well as some possible concerns and opportunities for improvement—most of which are minor— including the following key areas:

- Consistency in rigor, especially within the context of hybrid classes
- Better representation of critical thinking and cultural competence (ethics, diversity, etc.) in both the mission statement and the curriculum titles, descriptions, and course content
- More clarity in assessment

While not an immediate concern of the program, please stay aware of the push for online-only courses. The time may come when you are heavily pressured to shift to a stronger online presence. Examine delivery trends in other MPC programs to make sure you are competitive, but keep in mind that the current and past students love the f2f element. We suggest performing a long-term analysis that considers generational shift in attitudes and demand for online-only courses. Similarly, consider the use of term "new media." As technology continues to radically transform the way communications professionals work, what is new today is legacy or obsolete in a very brief time.

Overall, we are very impressed with the Weber State University Master of Professional Communication Program, and we hope this report helps you continue to build on the excellent trajectory of your program.

Standard A: Mission Statement

Good
The mission statement is clearly defined and generally represents the curriculum and goals of the program.

Concern
The statement does not directly reflect the critical thinking and cultural competence elements of the program's goals. This could be better reflected in the mission statement.

Suggestion
We suggest the addition of a line that addresses the goal of cultivating professionals who can think critically, who are grounded ethically, and who are culturally aware. You may find that different language more appropriately accomplishes this goal: "ethical," "diverse," etc.

Standard B. Curriculum

Good
The curriculum clearly focuses on the working professional as the target audience, and it represents the flexibility needed for the diverse nature of student strengths and interests. The curriculum also represents a nimbleness to adapt to changing industry drivers and feedback from your students. Splitting the research methods course into two courses, qualitative and quantitative research, is a smart decision.

Concern
As stated above, the curriculum as currently described does not reflect the critical thinking and cultural competence outcomes of the program's goals. Nothing we found in the foundational course or core course titles and descriptions represents these goals. Special topics and elements within courses may address critical thinking and cultural competence components, but this could be better reflected and represented in a specific new course and/or a renaming of a course where critical thinking (e.g., ethics) is a primary focus. Additionally, since only one of the two research methods classes will be required, it will be important to track impacts on learning outcomes, especially among students who are taking the thesis track. Perhaps research-focused students may be required to take both courses?

The consistency of rigor across the MPC curriculum was also questioned by both faculty and students. As an example, we heard consistently that in the block classes, the *expectation* of online engagement is consistent, but measurement or confirmation of the online hours is weak. As a result, some students may take up to three classes in one block to get through more quickly, but it is not clear what effect this has on the quality of their work. This is where assessment can also play an important role in closer evaluation of both consistent required effort and learning outcomes. Additional concerns came from the student feedback where, in one case, students said that in the entire term they had received no feedback on assignments. These assignments were building blocks on which they couldn't build without that feedback.

Suggestion
Public relations industry research and surveys of professional communication programs consistently recommend that ethics courses should be required in curricula. Consider reviewing course titles, descriptions, and content to better reflect and represent what appears to be already happening in your courses but isn't being communicated. Continue to respond to changing curricular design based upon student feedback for flexibility. Regarding the splitting of the research methods course, be sure to make the expectations of the two classes are very clear and distinct for both the students taking the classes and the instructors teaching the classes.

Regarding the rigor across the MPC curriculum, we suggest that you hold a meeting with the faculty teaching in the MPC program in which you will compare syllabi and discuss ways to

make the rigor more consistent and balanced, including a standard for providing feedback to students in a timely manner. Instructor autonomy is important, but too much disparity among courses can cause confusion and frustration with regard to students' expectations.

Standard C. Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

Good
The Measurable Learning Outcomes are a strength of the program. The 5 outcomes cover a broad foundation and a nice balance among research and theory, writing and presentation skills, collaboration and technology. You have increased course activities that should generate the results in your outcomes. Salary data and exit survey data demonstrate that your graduates are indeed increasing salaries and job opportunities as a result of their training in the program.

Concern
While strong work is being done and progress is being made, it is still not clear that you're capturing measurable learning outcomes with specific details linked to courses. It's one thing to say "our students are regularly accepting new jobs, new promotions, and/or new responsibilities as a result of their MPC degrees."; it's another to be able to point to specific courses resulting in new skills and knowledge applied to either continued research or new professional opportunities.

Suggestion
In addition to the excellent data already being collected, assessment can be strengthened with small but effective steps. For example, consider creating a database with student publications, presentations, and industry feedback of student projects and career accomplishments, as feasible. These may include conference presentations, white papers, and coursework with community organizations—applied work with real clients and organizations. Keeping track of such work can provide excellent data points for assessment. Continue to discuss ways in which student work can be celebrated and recognized by encouraging them to submit their successes to the department for inclusion in newsletters and social media.

Standard D. Academic Advising

Strength
We believe this is one of the strongest areas of the program. We heard from the students that faculty is accessible, caring, and that the director was an incredible asset ("a great advocate and communicator"). There was 100% agreement from all students present. We also heard from the faculty that they spend a good bit of time advising their students and this appeared to be a labor of love. We commend the faculty for their efforts in advising.

Standard E. Faculty

Strength
The faculty represents another strength of this program. This is consistent with the last review:
- Faculty growth has remained strong.
- Faculty energy remains high.

- The self-report identified a value in diversity and a desire to increase male representation. Otherwise, the faculty diversity and a drive to identify new and diverse talent is a priority. We celebrate this priority and hope it continues.
- The monitoring of service workloads is also important as it appears this faculty has a strong desire to engage in service, possibly beyond their capacity.

We applaud the hiring practices that have secured such an engaged group of people and hope the MPC program will continue in these efforts.

Standard F. Support (Staff, Administration, Facilities, Equipment, and Library)

Strength
Similar to faculty observation, the support staff indicated an admirable level of energy and loyalty to the program. They have been with the program for several years and indicated it was where they wanted to be (meaning, they had served in other areas across campus and are very grateful for their positions at the MPC). They pointed to the many changes that are taking place, such as in the admissions process, that creates both new challenges and opportunities.

Concern
Though not intending to be critical, the support staff did mention the challenge of communication and inconsistent direction with regard to the scholarship and application processes. Regarding the latter, they noted the challenge of printing and collating all the application materials, particularly if an item (e.g., a letter of recommendation) comes in late.

Suggestion
Put a process in place in which staff know who to communicate with if the primary decision makers are unavailable and a decision is time-sensitive. Regarding the application process, one possibility might be to use a file sharing program such as Box.com for the distribution and evaluation of applications. That way, instead of needing to print and file all the materials—or perhaps even track down admissions committee members—staff will be able to upload a late item to a Box folder, where members of the committee will be able to access it immediately for review. It was our understanding that this program is already available. Simply establishing consistent expectations of use is recommended.

Standard G. Relationships with the External Communities

Good
Many students mentioned the benefits of engaging in real world projects with their local community. They appreciate that this especially made the course work relevant and current.

Concern
Students did express a desire for mentorship from industry experts.

Suggestion
One possibility is to form an advisory board comprised of industry experts representative of popular career paths who could serve as mentors, give guest lectures (something you're already doing), and/or provide internship opportunities. We know that getting such an advisory board up and running can require considerable labor on the person leading such an effort, so we recommend modest goals to start this process.

Standard H. Results of Previous Program Reviews

The previous review noted four challenges and recommendations:

- Challenge 1 - A graduate program with a professional emphasis may face pressure towards conformity with more traditional Masters programs
Previous Report Recommendation 1 - Give priority to professionally oriented measures of assessment, rather than theses and academic presentations by students at conferences.

- Challenge 1 (same as 1 above, but with a second recommendation)
Previous Report Recommendation 2 - Develop measures to assess the newly implemented coursework option in lieu of a thesis or project.

- Challenge 2. The need to add a recruiting coordinator to work with employers in professional fields

- Challenge 3. The need for career placement and advising at the university level
Previous Report Recommendation for 2 & 3 - Recruit a larger applicant pool. When resources become available for additional staff positions, hire a professional staff member to help with recruiting.

- Challenge 4 - The need to work with faculty in other/emerging WSU Masters' programs to ensure that there is not too much overlap between the programs

Our Evaluation

- Challenge 1: Recommendation 1: You've done excellent work focusing on professional capstone projects and coursework and less emphasis on more traditional theses and academic work. However, some students did mention interest in the thesis option. Caution should be exercised in encouraging academic theses in the program unless adequate support and rigor can be provided that can successfully prepare students for continued higher academic pursuit. As recommended previously, consider ways to capture outcomes from capstone classes and projects (number of organizations served, number of audiences served, outcome measures from those campaigns that can be recorded, etc.)

Recommendation 2: The self-report indicated this is still a work in progress. Continue to use indirect measures and see our suggestion in Standard C above.

- Challenges 2 & 3: There is still no recruitment coordinator per se. However, much of this work is done by the program director with the support of the administrative assistant. Continue to seek additional funding support to augment the excellent recruiting efforts being done by administrative support.

- Challenge 4: We saw no evidence of problematic overlap or cannibalization. In fact, there was strong evidence of interdisciplinary collaboration that is strongly supported and recognized by University leadership.