

Department of Communication

Undergraduate Programs

Faculty Response to Program Review Evaluation Team Report

May 15, 2020

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in consultation with the faculty and staff of the Department of Communication

As part of the Weber State University five-year academic program review, a review panel was selected by the Communication faculty. The three members made a daylong visit on Feb. 21, 2020. Reviewers included:

- Dr. Lawrence J. Mullen, professor of public policy and leadership at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, who chaired the review team
- Dr. Louise Moulding, professor of Teacher Education at Weber State University
- Dr. Todd Norton, associate professor and department head of Communication & Media at Boise State University

Below are key commendations and recommendations. They are followed by the faculty response and action plans. A faculty meeting to discuss the report was held on April 23, 2020, via Zoom as the university was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All faculty read the report and participated in the online discussion.

Standard A—Mission Statement

Commendations

The review team complimented the department's updated mission statement that acknowledges the importance of communication in an ever-changing communication landscape and seeks to deliver a mix of theory and praxis. The review team said, "The free exchange of ideas, inclusivity, equity, and diversity and the continuation of a high level of knowledge, proficiency, and talent in research and practice are strengths of the department's mission." The reviewers were impressed by the multi-faceted and well-defined learning objectives that were updated during the program review process. They complimented the faculty's ability to teach students to excel in a complex world and the ability to graduate students in a timely manner.

Recommendations

The review team said that to improve on the delivery of a top-quality education, the department needs more faculty lines, especially to help teach General Education classes that are mostly taught by adjunct instructors. The reviewers also noted the need for updated equipment in faculty offices, labs, and media production facilities. They recommended an on-site broadcast engineer who could be used in the radio station and audio-video production studio. They also saw a need for an outreach program to improve diversity of the student population, especially the Latinx population in Ogden.

Response

We appreciate the compliment regarding the mission statement and learning objectives since these were updated since the last program review. We agree with the need of full-time faculty to teach General

Education classes and a broadcast engineer. More than 50% of General Education classes, sometimes upwards of 75%, are taught by adjunct instructors so this is critical. The need for a broadcast engineer is something we realize we may not get and are lucky enough to have assistance from a college IT employee. Outreach into local Latinx community may be done by faculty as part of the service requirement because we realize a position for this is likely out of reach financially currently but possibly in the future.

Action Plan

- Present an argument to the dean and provost for an additional instructor line to specialize in General Education.
- Encourage interested faculty members to make outreach into the local Latinx community to recruit students as part of service or incorporate this outreach into courses that already include a service component (CCEL designation).

Standard B—Curriculum

Commendations

The review team called the curriculum “broad and diverse” and said it equips students for the ever-changing world of communication. Reviewers liked the emphasis on writing and other core skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and conflict management that are lifelong skills. They observed small classes that meet individual student needs and learned that alumni and other professionals are often invited into classes as visiting lecturers or even adjunct instructors to expose students to real-world experiences. They emphasized that “experiential learning is a strength of the Department of Communication” with many outlets such as co-curriculars and required internships to apply the concepts learned in class. Of the internships, they pointed out that they are an important transition from academia to the workplace for many students.

Recommendations

Reviewers believe it is “a good time for a systemic assessment to find small but important ways to update the curriculum,” with a discussion to examine whether adjustments need to be made in the required and elective courses in the seven emphasis areas. They suggested that this discussion happen in consultation with alumni working in the various areas associated with each emphasis area. One recommended update throughout the curriculum are “mini-internships” or “micro-experiences” that can help students choose career paths. Finally, they noted the department philosophy that professors do not “own” classes with a rotated assignment of courses, especially upper-division ones, but pointed out that this means some students may repeatedly take classes from the same professors and that teachers may have too many course preps.

Response

We wholeheartedly agree that we have a strong curriculum. We are extremely proud about the experiential learning that happens in all classes with experiences in co-curricular organizations and internships. We are open to a discussion about “mini-internships” or “micro-experiences” and already began this discussion during the review meeting. These could complement our invitation of alumni and experts to class who are helpful to showing students how they can apply what they learn in the classroom. While there is widespread agreement that our curriculum can always be updated (and constantly is), we do have different opinions about the content in various emphasis areas and have had discussions. Inviting in professionals at the top of their fields in various areas will help us determine what classes should be

required and what classes should be options as electives. Many faculty members enjoy the opportunity to teach a wide variety of classes, but some believe that having too many preps can be a burden. Letting faculty regularly teach classes they are especially adept at is worth a discussion.

Action Plan

- Organize discussions with small groups of professionals successful in their fields to update curriculum and determine what classes should be listed as required and in the electives list before making changes.
- Discuss integrating “micro-internships” or “micro-experiences” into the curriculum.
- Discuss course rotation at an upcoming faculty meeting.

Standard C—Student Learning Outcomes & Assessments

Commendations

The review team noted the growth 3.3% year-upon-year growth in the department in the last five years. At the time of this review, about 450 majors are actively pursuing a Communication degree while about 75 more have signed up to complete the two new associate’s degrees. They noted the student experience is “overwhelmingly positive” as evidenced by the “dozens of students” who showed up to talk to reviewers. Those reviewers reported that students appreciate the faculty and staff, saying they challenge them academically and accommodate their individual needs. As to assessment, reviewers pointed to the internship survey that employers fill out and the exit survey that students complete. They appreciate the requirement of student ePortfolios that are compiled throughout the undergraduate experience and polished and then assessed in the Senior Seminar course, pointing out that professionals may soon review these ePortfolios as well.

Recommendations

Reviewers said students expressed that they are interested in assignments that better meet their needs while fulfilling the academic requirements of individual classes. Reviewers said that while co-curriculars and the internship allow students opportunities to apply what they learn in classes, students told them that they “crave more real-life experiences.” Students pointed out that they believe some co-curriculars have inadequate resources. Debate students spoke out, but public relations and digital media students likely wholeheartedly agree. They noted that the graduation rate has “ticked up” since the last review (actually 44%), but there is still room for improvement. After graduation, there needs to be a systematic method to track students. Finally, the educational experience could benefit by a diversification of the student body, especially with the local Latinx population and out-of-state students, but that scholarships for these constituencies are critical.

Response

It was heart-warming for us to hear that students thought the student experience was so positive, and even more rewarding when we saw so many of them show up on a Friday afternoon to talk to the reviewers. We believe we offer a valuable educational experience and are very student-centric. We revised our student learning outcomes during the program review process, and we work hard to ensure we get assessment data from our internship providers and graduating seniors. Our next step is to get the Advisory Board and other professional more involved in actively reviewing ePortfolios. We do what we can to attract students into our program but find marketing efforts challenging to accomplish on top of our demanding teaching, scholarship and service responsibilities. We probably could find time to do more with recruiting diverse students from the local populations such as faculty speaking to schools and

community groups and maybe even having some information in Spanish on the department website. Faculty members suggested that we need to sell/tell potential students why attending college and majoring in Communication will be beneficial in their lives. One faculty member put it this way: “We need to show them the path and how to manage effectively.”

Action Plan

- Continue working on assignments that connect to real-life experiences. Dedicate time at the back-to-school faculty retreat on having faculty brainstorm ideas to share before the semester starts.
- Get professionals to review ePortfolios in Senior Seminar class.
- Work on improving graduation rate by exploring what resources are currently used on campus for retention. Partner with already established techniques and adopt to best fit our students.
- Continue fighting for resources for co-curricular organizations.
- Come up with a way to track students after graduation by working with the alumni center and sharing resources when available.
- Take steps to recruit diverse students by discussing how it can be incorporated into faculty service or even curriculum.
- Better communicate why a college degree is critical and why a Communication major is a good choice with information on website and available as handouts.

Standard D—Academic Advising

Commendations

The review team gave the department’s academic advising high praise. They noted that the advising strategy is “clearly defined” with all majors and minors assigned to a faculty member in their area and referred to the college’s academic advisors for assistance with the General Education requirements and associate’s degrees. Students report that their advisors are very helpful, providing one-on-one assistance whenever it’s needed. They also noted the exceptional advising that the internship coordinator provides with that process. Complete advising and internship information is posted on the department website and augmented with print materials in the department office. CatTracks is useful to help students track their progress and aligns with the advising checklists provided to students.

Recommendations

Reviewers noted that the downside of the excellent academic advising provided by the faculty is that it is time-consuming, especially around registration and graduation. They recommended establishing a dedicated advisor for the department.

Response

Again, we were pleased that all the time and attention we put toward academic advising was recognized as excellent by both the reviewers and our students. We do agree that it would be nice to have an academic advisor for majors and minors in the department, but we don’t want to give up a faculty position in order to get it. We prefer dividing these responsibilities among *all* Communication faculty, even though it is very time-consuming. We would also lose the ability to have a specialized advisor in each of our seven emphasis areas. This service does get recognized as a major service contribution during the review process. However, it would be nice to have the opportunity to receive release time on a rotating basis.

Action Plan

- Work with chair and dean to determine whether a faculty member could earn a course release every three years or so as a nod toward the time spent in academic advising.
- Consider a dedicated advisor for the department if the funding becomes available.

Standard E—Faculty

Commendations

The review team listed numerous strengths of the faculty. The reviewers praised the “disciplinary expertise and its contribution to the student experience.” They said faculty have pride in the department and provide high-quality instruction that impacts graduates throughout their careers with its emphasis on concepts such as problem solving, writing well, critical thinking, and decision making. Students pointed out that faculty teach more than academics in also teaching “life skills.” They noted that faculty are “student-centric and care about the student experience,” “really listening” to their concerns. Four new full-time tenure-track faculty positions have been added since the last five-year review to accommodate enrollment growth. These newcomers have joined a “collegial” group. There is ample communication and an egalitarian way of operating. The faculty have become increasingly diverse in recent years in terms of race/ethnicity and various other aspects. While teaching comes first, service second, research is strong. Faculty are very productive, publishing more than 50 journal articles, book chapters and a major book in the last five years. Reviewers also praised the regular review of faculty and the clear tenure and promotion guidelines. They noted that teaching is evaluated every semester via student evaluations read by the chair, a yearly review, and the more rigorous triennial or tenure and promotion reviews. Adjunct faculty are also regularly reviewed. New faculty are assigned mentors who are senior faculty members.

Recommendations

Course assignment was said to involve too much rotation among faculty, leading to too many preps and students having the same professor for several classes. This demand can take away from research and creative output. Because of the high teaching load, reviewers suggested that research production might focus more on pedagogy as a viable option to time management. The reviewers recommended keeping growth at a “slow pace so that faculty cohesiveness is not fractured.” However, the second sentence in their report made the following recommendation: “The faculty is of adequate size but could use more tenure-track lines to replace the many adjunct positions currently teaching adjunct positions.”

Response

The faculty especially appreciate the recognition of their excellence and commitment to teaching and research and creative endeavors. However, a mention of their contribution to service was missing in this category, but perhaps was reflected in other sections of the review. Even though we have been lucky enough to be awarded four additional tenure-track lines in five years, we strongly agree that we need additional tenure-track lines in General Education areas because few full-time faculty members even teach a Gen Ed class. When you look at the number of graduates every semester in Communication compared to the number of faculty members, Communication seems to need more faculty when compared to other departments in the college.

Action Plan

- Keep doing what we are doing to encourage excellence in teaching and student success.
- Make argument for additional tenure-track lines in General Education specialty areas.

- Have a faculty discussion about how to improve course rotation and decrease course preps and repetition for students.
- Do research on pedagogy to combine teaching and research expectations.

Standard F—Program Support

Commendations

The review team said the size of the support staff is adequate, and the department has a strong staff who stays up to date by attending classes and workshops. Professional staff will be regularly reviewed via WSU's Performance Review and Enrichment Program (PREP) beginning at the end of Spring Semester. The Dean's Office maintains excellent lines of communication, and the Provost's Office provides additional instructional wage monies to help meet increased enrollment needs. There is good support for faculty to travel for research presentations between many offices on campus. Elizabeth Hall is modern and comfortable, a good space for faculty work and student learning. The co-curricular organizations have adequate facilities, except for the student-run public relations firm, Ogden Peak Communications, but the Dean's Office is providing funding to renovate a space for this group of students.

Recommendations

Although the size of the office staff is adequate, the reviewers recommended a part-time staffer to help with advising, recruiting and other tasks. They also recommended the addition of a broadcast engineer to help manage the radio station and audio/video studio. The current office staff say there is really not much to change but sometimes feel "under-valued," wanting to be "in the loop" more often on administrative decisions and wanting faculty to provide more information that can be used on the website or social media. They also report that sometimes there is a lack of clarity about whether they are budgetary managers or budgetary technicians in conjunction with co-curricular advisors. While physical space is sufficient for the most part, reviewers asked about the space at the other end of the hall in the third floor of Elizabeth Hall, noting that it could be used to help the Communication Department consolidate space so that its programs are not spread throughout three buildings. Specifically, another computer lab is needed, the space for Ogden Peak Communications is inadequate, and funding for set design and building for the digital media/film and multimedia journalism students is inadequate, according to the review team. Reviewers also noted the serious lack of scholarships for Communication students and recommended partnering with local industry.

Response

The faculty realize we couldn't do what we do without our two extraordinary administrative assistants who work hard, really know their stuff, are so dependable, and basically hold the place together and are responsible for making us look so good. The department chair didn't realize they wanted more responsibility and input, hesitating at times to ask them to do more because they do so much, but she vowed to better involve them in decisions and give responsibilities commensurate to their capabilities. Even though the reviewers recommended another staff member to do recruiting and marketing, it should be noted that our current staff does a fair amount of this work when they can. Even though it's likely an impossibility, we want to be on the record that it would be nice for the College of Arts & Humanities, and especially the Communication Department, to have all of the space on the third floor of Elizabeth Hall. Three of the college's departments are housed in E-Hall, and we hope the dean might make an argument about getting this space back when the new Engineering Building is completed. Our lack of scholarship support has been a problem for decades. The department chair points out that fewer than five scholarships

have been added since she came to the university almost 25 years ago. We need help from development and dean's office in this regard.

Action Plan

- Empower administrative staff, give them more important tasks, and loop them into more administrative decisions. (It should be noted that as a result of this comment, they were asked to take the lead on the virtual graduation exercise in Spring 2020 and brilliantly rose to the occasion!) Also, a monetary thank you was given as part of administrative assistant day to acknowledge their hard work.
- Evaluate administrative staff using PREP. Schedule follow up meetings to discuss goals for the next year.
- Ask staff to take the lead on updating the cabinet contents on the main floor in Elizabeth Hall.
- Continue working with Development and the Dean's Office on getting scholarships.
- Work with university to try to get out-of-state scholarships for co-curricular students.
- Follow through on renovation of space for Ogden Peak Communications.
- Make argument for space on third floor of Elizabeth Hall.
- Seek out avenues of funding for set design and technology needed by digital media/film and multimedia journalism students.
- Explore possibilities of additional staff such as a part-time staff for recruiting and marketing and a broadcast engineer.

Standard G—Relationships with External Communities

Commendations

The review team pointed out that formal external relationships exist in multiple forms, including the internships, the Concurrent Enrollment classes in local high schools, the Advisory Board, service learning requirements in many classes, and work with actual clients with co-curricular organizations and in upper-division classes. Reviewers especially lauded the “strong element of service” and community advocacy with several faculty members serving on community boards.

Recommendations

In terms of improvement, reviewers noted two things. They said that private scholarships might be garnered if the department engaged local industry more and that the department is not positioned well to keep in contact with alumni even though attempts are made when the chair, administrative assistants or faculty have time.

Response

The department probably does as much as any department with external relationships, yet we desperately need assistance in the two things the reviewers noted: turning these relationships into scholarships or donations and better tracking our alumni.

Action Plans

- Work with Development and Dean's Office on getting scholarships or donations from our external partners and alumni.
- Contact the alumni office and get ideas for what techniques they use. Also ask other departments on campus to learn new strategies.

Standard H—Program Summary

The first paragraph in the program summary from the reviewers stated: “From curriculum, to faculty, and more, this is a strong department. As you can see in each area of this report, the strengths outweigh the areas for improvement. In fact, one person called the Department of Communication the ‘best-kept secret in Utah higher education.’” The department was praised for its progress in the last five years in terms of hiring four additional faculty, graduating more students, updating facilities, publishing many articles, winning many awards, and placing more graduates in communication-related job. Reviewers noted that the curriculum grid was reworked as well as the learning objectives on all classes. The dean said the unit is a “strong department” with “strong student outcomes” and “strong leadership.” There is a distinct enthusiasm for the department from students with appreciation for the faculty, classes, advisors, co-curriculars, and caring environment. Reviewers said “‘amazing’ was a word used more than once.”

Response

THANK YOU!

Main Needs

- More tenure-track faculty lines so that more General Education classes are taught by full-time faculty.
- More funding for student scholarships.
- Sustained and even increased funding for faculty research and travel.
- Updated courses around content areas like social media to better meet student needs.
- Updated technology for the contemporary communication and media environment.
- Better space for Ogden Peak Communications.
- Out-of-state waivers for students in co-curriculars.
- Help for the department in telling its story.