

To: Gary Sandefur  
Dean, College of Letters and Science  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

From: Stephen Lucas  
Director of Undergraduate Studies  
Department of Communication Arts

Re: Report on Assessment of the Undergraduate Major, May 2006

At the undergraduate level, the Department of Communication Arts spans a wide range of approaches and perspectives, but is unified by its common concern with human communication in its verbal and visual forms. Interpersonal and small-group communication, public address, radio, television, and film all involve the creation of meaning through human action expressed as words and images. The Communication Arts major is designed to lead students to an understanding of the complex processes of communication, from broad concepts and basic analytical tools to the specific concerns, techniques, and settings that will help them become better producers and consumers of communication. At the same time, the major aims to foster the critical thinking skills that are vital to every endeavor of life in contemporary society. The number of majors in Communication Arts holds steady at around 700 per year, with more than 250 degrees being conferred annually.

In December 1996 the department submitted an assessment plan that was approved by the College of Letters and Science. In September 2000 we submitted to L&S a formal assessment conducted in accordance with that plan, and in May 2001 we returned the Survey and Report of Departmental Assessment Practices. Since that time we have continued to follow our original assessment plan when conducting internal examinations of various aspects of the major. During the 2006-2007 academic year we will submit to L&S another formal assessment, which will focus on the five areas set forth in our 1996 plan. Each of those areas is discussed below, along with an explanation of the method(s) used for assessment in each area.

**1. Progress through a well-designed and organized curriculum.** We have designed our curriculum so that students progress through four levels of courses:

*Fundamentals* courses that introduce students to broad concepts and basic analytical tools.

*Core* courses that develop knowledge in key areas central to the field.

*Applied Skills* courses that apply subject knowledge and analytical tools to practice.

*Theory-History-Criticism* courses that expand and deepen theoretical and critical knowledge, encourage students to apply critical thinking to their own research/creative projects, and provide opportunities for students to engage with the critical, social scientific, and/or aesthetic traditions of specific subareas in the communication discipline.

Although students do not move in lock-step as they advance through specific courses, the curriculum is designed so that students must perform acceptably at each level of the major before proceeding to the next.

Assessment method: The Communication Arts advising office keeps track of students' progress through the curriculum by annually reviewing the DARS reports of students at various points in the major. The Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Undergraduate Advisor examine a representative sample of students' progress and report to the Department's Undergraduate Committee, which takes note of exceptions to normal academic progress and explores whether the curriculum, or individual course offerings, need to be adjusted accordingly. This assessment is an ongoing process that occurs each academic year and will be included in our 2006-2007 report to the College.

**2. Mastery of a body of knowledge in Communication Arts expressed through applied communication skills.** In addition to learning about communication, the Comm Arts major seeks to help students develop the ability to communicate effectively--in oral, written, and media forms. By the end of their senior year, students should be able not only to demonstrate their knowledge of a body of communication knowledge but to effectively mobilize this knowledge in clear, coherent, even elegant form.

Assessment method: Periodically the Undergraduate Committee reviews a selected body of work by senior majors--papers, exams, and/or film and video productions--to assess the level of performance after the students have completed most of the Communication Arts curriculum. Such a review was last conducted in September 2000, when the Department filed its most recent report on undergraduate assessment. It will be conducted again during the 2006-2007 academic year.

**3. Responding to students' expressed needs and interests.** One gauge of an academic program is the extent to which it is responsive to the expressed needs and interests of the students who invest a significant amount of their time and effort at the university into completing requirements for the major. Thus our assessment procedures include surveying the perception of students about the effectiveness of the curriculum, the availability of classes, the quality of instruction, and the preparation they receive for careers after graduation.

Assessment method: Each year the department's Undergraduate Advisor conducts a brief survey of graduating seniors to determine their degree of satisfaction with the Communication Arts major. This survey is distributed via e-mail and yields 40-50 responses per year. The Undergraduate Advisor and the Director of Undergraduate Studies review the responses. While responses to the survey generally indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the major, they also help us identify specific curricular and instructional issues that might require attention. The Undergraduate Advisor has complete records of responses to the senior survey dating back to the 1990s. In the assessment we conduct during 2006-2007, we will focus on survey results from the past three years.

**4. Outside evaluation of students' preparation skills.** It is important to receive outside assessment of the skill level and communication abilities of our majors. We have an excellent

source of such assessment in the 60-70 evaluation forms we receive each year from the businesses, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the like that supervise professional internships for Comm Arts majors who elect to participate in them.

Assessment method: Before a student can receive an internship grade, the organization supervising the internship must submit an evaluation of the student's work. That evaluation includes questions about the student's preparation for the internship, as well as about the student's performance as an intern. These evaluations are reviewed by individual faculty members before assigning internship grades, and copies of the evaluations are kept on file by the department's Undergraduate Advisor. They are reviewed annually to make sure the sponsoring organizations find our majors well prepared for their internships, and to help us determine whether the sponsoring organizations are satisfied with our majors' work as interns. The assessment we conduct in 2006-2007 will include data gleaned from internship evaluations across the past three years.

**5. Post-graduate experiences and perceptions.** In addition to getting evaluations of the major from graduating seniors, the assessment plan devised in 1966 included a provision for ascertaining the opinions of Communication Arts alumni about their experiences as majors and the ways they have used, after graduation, the training they received in the department.

Assessment method: Our original plan was to include a brief survey in the department newsletter that we send to alumni twice each year. The response rate, however, was so low that we have not been able to generate useful data from this survey. Consequently, we have submitted a proposal for funding to support a DOIT Web Survey of our approximately 7,500 alumni. If we were to receive 150-200 responses from a Web survey, it would have the potential to yield important information about the manner in which Comm Arts alums evaluate their experience as majors with the perspective afforded by the passage of time and growing professional development. In addition, we receive input from Friends of Communication Arts, a national alumni group that usually meets once a year and that is active in sharing its opinions and suggestions with the department.