

Communication Arts Undergraduate Major  
Assessment Report 2012-2013

**Contact Information**

Q2.1. If we have questions about the responses provided, it would be useful to be able to discuss them with you. Whom should we contact?

Marie-Louise Mares

Q2.2. Address: Dept of Communication Arts, 821 University Ave

Q2.3. e-mail contact: mares@wisc.edu

Q2.4. Telephone: 263-2350

**Program Information Validation**

Q3.1. Communication Arts undergraduate major

Q3.2. Are the names and levels of the programs, as you understand them, consistent with the official lists?

- Yes
- No
- Academic program not listed
- Academic program should not be listed

**Assessment Plan**

Q4.1. Please review the assessment plan on file for your program(s).

- L&S Department and Program Assessment Plans:  
<https://kb.wisc.edu/ls/page.php?id=23837>

Is it current?

- Yes
- No

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**Purpose**

Assessment of learning outcomes for the undergraduate major in Communication Arts

**Learning Objectives Assessed**

- A. The learning objectives for the Com Arts curriculum are that students should develop
  - a. mastery of a body of knowledge of communication processes
  - b. communication and digital literacy skills in order to become competent producers and consumers of communication
  - c. a capacity for critical appraisal and reflection

The Com Arts assessment plan also lays out the following additional criteria for evaluating the undergraduate major.

- B. Students' progress through a well-designed and organized curriculum.
- C. The program's ability to respond to students' expressed needs and interests.

**Assessment Strategies**

A. Assessment of Learning Outcomes:

- 1. Direct measures of student learning:
  - a. Undergraduate Committee evaluations of student artifacts. Four faculty members (two from each track within the major) assessed approximately 50 exemplars of work (papers, exams, film scripts, and audiovisual projects) produced by Com Arts seniors in their Com Arts courses. For each course, the work was assessed by one faculty member in that track, and one outside that track. The criteria used are laid out in Tables 1 and 2.
  - b. Evaluations by Internship Supervisors. In addition, we have external, independent assessment of our students in the form of their evaluations by their internship supervisors.
  - c. GPA of Com Arts majors. The current assessment provides summary data on the GPA of Com Arts majors across all their coursework. The Undergraduate Committee is examining whether, in future assessments, it would also be possible to extract data about the grades earned by Com Arts majors in Com Arts classes. This would provide additional information about the range of learning outcomes observed by faculty most qualified to assess mastery in that specific area.

2. Indirect measure of student learning: Alumni surveys

Alumni were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of their Com Arts classes in helping them master the core learning outcomes. The survey was emailed to over 5000 alumni with valid email accounts in March 2013. Over 600 responses were received, of which 51% were from students who had graduated in 2000 or later.

B & C. Assessment of students' progress through a well-designed and organized curriculum and responsiveness of the program to students' needs.

1. Enrollment patterns, advisers' feedback from advising sessions & examination of DARS reports
2. Time to degree of Com Arts majors
3. Senior surveys: Since 1998, Com Arts seniors have been asked to report on their judgments of the quality of the instruction in Com Arts courses, the curriculum, and the facilities. Summary data for the past five years are presented in this report.

## Key Findings and Impact

### A. Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

1. Findings from direct assessment.

*a. Undergraduate Committee evaluation of student work.* Samples of work produced by Com Arts seniors were gathered from 17 courses across the two tracks in the major. The criterion and results are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1: Undergraduate Committee Evaluation of Seniors' Papers and Exams*

<i>Papers and Exams (N = 45)</i> <i>Com Science and Rhetoric track n= 23; Radio-TV-Film track n= 22</i>	% of decisions: "yes"
Does the paper or exam exhibit appropriate command of the subject matter for the level of the course?	90.7
Does the paper or exam demonstrate an understanding of the relevant communicative process?	94.8
Is the paper or exam organized in a clear, effective way?	76.0
Does the paper or exam exhibit command of writing mechanics, including grammar, spelling and punctuation?	79.4
Are claims supported as necessary with evidence and other source material?	89.0
Does the work indicate an appropriate level of critical appraisal and reflection?	82.5
Overall Assessment: Did work demonstrate mastery of learning objectives?	90.7

As can be seen from Table 1, the results of the evaluation were positive. Student papers and exams were considered to reflect a command of the subject matter, an understanding of communicative processes, to be supported by relevant source material, and to demonstrate critical reflection. With regard to writing, the substantial majority of exemplars were considered to display appropriate grasp of writing mechanics and organizational structure. However, as observed in previous reports, there was variability in writing skill levels, with some outstanding work and some that needed improvement.

In addition, the faculty evaluated six creative projects produced by Com Arts seniors. These projects were considered to show overall mastery of the learning objectives, and to demonstrate strong production values or writing skills. Some of the projects were outstanding in the degree to which they demonstrated creativity and ambition.

With regard to the overall judgment of students' mastery of the core learning objectives, 90% of evaluation judgments were positive. Thus, the Undergraduate Committee's evaluation of work by senior Com Arts majors indicates that students are graduating with an appropriate body of knowledge and skills.

*b. External evaluation of our students by internship supervisors.* It is important to have some outside assessment of the skill level and communication abilities of our majors. We have an excellent source of such assessment in the evaluation forms we receive each year from the businesses, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the like that supervise professional internships for Com Arts majors. Beginning in 1997, we implemented a standardized evaluation form in which students were assessed on five criteria, using a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Table 2 shows the results, aggregated across the 330 evaluations we received for the years 2007-2012.

*Table 2. External assessment of majors participating in internships 2007-2012*

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Average Rating (out of 5)</b>
Preparation and basic skills	4.57
Ability to contribute in a professional setting	4.64
Judgment and competence	4.62
Ability to build on skills and knowledge	4.76
Attitude and willingness to learn	4.86

As can be seen from Table 2, the evaluations of our students by their supervisors in these non-academic, "real world" encounters are very positive. The fact that these and other businesses, government, and non-profit organizations respond so favorably to our interns – and continue to provide internships for Com Arts majors on a regular basis – is an encouraging indicator of the quality of our majors and the education they are receiving.

c. *GPA*. Data from the past ten years indicate that Com Arts majors have an average GPA of over 3.2 across all their university coursework. Thus, they appear to be doing well across the range of the university curriculum.

2. *Findings from an indirect measure of student learning: Alumni Survey*

Over 600 alumni responded to our online survey. Examination of their responses to open-ended questions in which they were asked to reflect on positive or negative aspects of their experience as Com Arts majors revealed several themes:

- Appreciation of the quality of instruction offered by faculty and teaching assistants in Com Arts
- The value of the major for their personal and professional lives

but also...

- The need for more internships and career advising
- The need to improve the facilities in Vilas Hall

Summary data of their responses to close-ended questions are presented in Tables 3 and 4. A substantial majority of alumni reported that their Com Arts coursework had been very effective or effective at helping them develop mastery in oral and written communication and critical analysis. In addition, alumni reported using the skills they had learned in Com Arts courses in their work and their daily interactions.

*Table 3. Alumni perceptions of effectiveness of Com Arts with regard to learning objectives*

<b>How effective was your Com Arts education in helping you master the following skills:</b>			
	<b>Oral Communication</b>	<b>Written Communication</b>	<b>Critical Analysis</b>
<b>Very Effective</b>	18	24	29
<b>Effective</b>	50	52	46
<b>Neutral</b>	22	17	16
<b>Ineffective</b>	5	1	4
<b>Very Ineffective</b>	5	6	5

*Table 4. Alumni reports: Use of skills or knowledge from Com Arts classes.*

<b>To what extent do you use skills or knowledge gained from your Com Arts courses?</b>		
	<b>In your work (%)</b>	<b>In your daily interactions (%)</b>
<b>Often</b>	56	43
<b>Occasionally</b>	33	43
<b>Rarely</b>	9	11
<b>Never</b>	2	2

**Conclusion and impact of assessment of learning outcomes.** Across this variety of direct and indirect measures of student learning, the results are very encouraging. Students are judged by the faculty and by outside, work-place supervisors to display mastery and competence. On average, they perform well in the full range of their university classes. They themselves perceive their Com Arts education to be effective and to have ongoing utility in their work and daily interactions.

There continue to be areas for improvement. As observed in the previous assessment report, students' writing, although mostly competent, varied in quality. The Committee recommends that

1. students are routinely encouraged to make use of the Writing Center, not just in those cases of substantial deficiencies but also in instances where the work is competent but could use further polish.
2. students are encouraged to take more Com B courses or other courses that offer opportunities for development and revision of oral or written work.

### **B. & C. Students' progress through the curriculum & responsiveness of program to students' needs**

**Issues raised in the 2007 Assessment Report.** In the last Assessment Report, a variety of issues were identified with regard to the structure of the curriculum and students' ability to take courses in a coherent, timely sequence. These issues are summarized below.

1. Students had difficulty getting into courses they needed, including fundamentals and applied communication courses.
2. Students expressed concern about overlap among various courses, particularly three series of courses in the Radio-TV-Film track.
3. Students wanted to take more courses with faculty members rather than with adjunct staff or graduate students.
4. Students and alumni repeatedly commented on the Department's lack of career advising services.
5. Students and alumni noted (vigorously) that facilities in Vilas Hall were outdated, in poor repair, and instructionally inadequate.

#### **Issues Addressed From 2007 Report.**

1-2. With regard to both enrollment bottlenecks and course overlap, the situation has improved considerably. Over the past five years there have been ongoing adjustments to the enrollment capacity of classes and the structure of prerequisites for course sequences. Moreover, based on the last assessment report, faculty in courses where students identified overlap engaged in extensive coordination and revision of class content to avoid this problem. Ongoing monitoring of enrollment data, taken together with the thousands of individual advising sessions conducted by our undergraduate advisors, suggest that these problems are largely ameliorated and the curriculum is currently working smoothly and coherently.

3. With regard to the availability of faculty to cover courses, the situation has also improved. In the past five years, the department was able to make a number of important hires which have greatly strengthened the faculty and the breadth and depth of the curriculum.
  - a. These hires have allowed us to have faculty teach courses that previously were not taught or were routinely taught by adjunct faculty. These courses include: CA 250 Survey of Radio-TV-Film as Mass Media, CA 262 Argumentation and Debate, CA 266 Theory and Practice of Group Discussion, CA 272 Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, CA 346 Critical Internet Studies, CA 350 Introduction to Film, CA 351 Introduction to Television, CA 451 Television Criticism, CA 459 New Media and Society, CA 472 Rhetoric and Technology, and CA 557 Contemporary Media Industries.
  - b. These hires have also allowed us to develop new, cutting-edge courses. Examples of courses developed over the past five years include CA 448 Media and National Identity, CA 540 Television Genres, and CA 577 Dynamics of Online Relationships. In addition, the faculty have offered topics courses in Digital Game Cultures (now CA 547), Franchising in the Media Industry, Gender Sexuality and Media, Rhetoric of Health, Limit of the Human, Queer Migration Rhetoric, Rhetoric and Queer Theory, Rhetoric of Globalization, Rhetoric of Social Movements.

However, as noted in the Departmental Review this year, we are vulnerable to the imminent retirement of senior faculty members. Thus, although faculty shortage is not currently a pressing issue, we note that it will inevitably arise again in the near future.

The other issues identified above remain a concern and are included in the next section.

### **Current assessment of students' progress through the curriculum & responsiveness of program to students' needs**

1. *Enrollment patterns, advisers' feedback from advising sessions & examination of DARS reports.* Evidence from these three sources suggests that the curriculum is currently operating successfully. The undergraduate advisors report that the students are generally able to take the courses they need in a coherent, appropriate sequence.

Although majors choose one of the two tracks (Rhetoric and Communication Science or Radio-TV-Film) and follow the sequence of courses laid out for each, there is considerable flexibility built into the system. Among the current Com Arts majors graduating in 2012 or 2013, a third of students in each track had taken two classes from the other track, and almost 20% had taken more than two classes. Thus, students are graduating with expertise in one of the two tracks but also a grounding in the other.

In addition to these positive outcomes, feedback from the advisers indicates three issues that have emerged.

- a. Some students expressed a desire for more varied courses, particularly more hands-on, skill based courses that would prepare them for their careers.

- b. On a related note, students want career advising in the major.
  - c. There are currently very few students taking Honors in the Major. With the substantial turnover in faculty, classes that had been designated for Honors in the Major have not been offered regularly.
2. *Time to degree of Com Arts majors.* Further evidence that the program is working well is provided by examination of the time to degree of Com Arts majors. Data from 2011-2012 indicates that the average time to first undergraduate degree among the 256 Com Arts majors graduating that year was 4.1 years. Students took an average of 130 credits to degree. Thus students currently appear to be moving through the program in a timely manner.
  3. *Senior surveys.* The past five years of survey data from Com Arts seniors are summarized in Table 5. As can be seen from the table, seniors have been very positive about the quality of education in Communication Arts. Examination of their open-ended comments also finds evidence of their enthusiasm for the faculty and teaching assistants.

*Table 5. Com Arts seniors' evaluation of the major*

Average Rating Given by Com Arts Seniors (out of 5)					
	Quality of Instruction	Range & Depth of Curriculum	Curriculum Sequence	Facilities: Classroom	Facilities: Production
07-08	4.15	3.90	3.94	3.62	3.89
08-09	4.29	3.76	4.12	3.52	3.94
09-10	4.49	3.82	4.07	3.62	4.08
10-11	4.27	3.82	4.08	3.67	3.85
11-12	4.40	3.84	3.88	3.67	3.90

In addition, students are positive about the range, depth, and sequence of the curriculum. The slightly lower scores on these items may reflect their requests for more skills-based courses.

Students are less enthused about the classroom facilities, echoing the concerns expressed in the alumni survey about the lack of basic instructional equipment and the shabby state of rooms.

### **Conclusion and impact of assessment of student progress and program responsiveness.**

The five years since the last assessment report have yielded many significant improvements. Issues of enrollment bottlenecks and curriculum overlap have been addressed. Recent hires have substantially strengthened the faculty, allowing us to teach our core courses better and to develop new, cutting-edge courses that increase the social relevance and significance of the program. These changes are reflected in the strong, positive responses given by Com Arts seniors.



There remain some items for further action.

1. Students want more help parlaying their Com Arts experiences into a related career. The Undergraduate Committee does not recommend that the curriculum change but suggests that this help might take the form of
  - a. continuing to develop our already strong internship program and to seek scholarship funding for internships so that more students can take advantage of these opportunities.
  - b. funding a career advisor (possibly shared with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication) who could help students identify and pursue relevant career opportunities. We have one full-time advisor and one part-time academic advisor who are fully occupied with the academic functioning of the program.
  - c. encouraging students to capitalize on those course offerings that are relevant to their career interests, including those in the recently created Digital Studies certificate, housed in Communication Arts
2. Students have difficulty completing Honors in the Major. The Undergraduate Committee has discussed the issue, and plans to begin working with the faculty in the fall, to discuss options for revitalizing this program.
3. There remains a strong and urgent need for improved instructional facilities. We cannot continue to achieve our core learning objective without adequate equipment and support resources.

Members of the Undergraduate Committee

Karma Chavez

Derek Johnson

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Ben Singer

Lyn van Swol

Undergraduate Advisors

Mary Rossa

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