

**ASSESSMENT REPORT OF THE UNDERGRADUATE
PROGRAM IN THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION:
2006-2007**

Introduction

Communication scholars are fond of noting that you cannot understand the effects of communication unless you appreciate the processes by which people communicate. Researchers frequently emphasize the dynamics of the human communication process. Interestingly enough, the same mantra guides assessment. Academic assessment puts a premium on process – that is, on building assessment into the day-to-day business of course development. Academic assessors emphasize that there should be a dialectical, give-and-take relationship among overarching goals that guide assessment, findings, feedback from assessment, changes in curricular content, and even revision of goals in light of information learned from the overall evaluation.

Mindful of some of the commonalities between the fields of communication and assessment, the School of Communication Assessment Committee and Director embarked upon a multi-faceted evaluation of the undergraduate program. The report that follows reflects faculty synthesis of goals, outcomes, findings, and strategies for change.

Goals

The goals of the undergraduate program are to ensure that students: (1) understand basic processes of communication; (2) are conversant in basic research methods commonly utilized in communication and understand how to apply them in various contexts; (3) display a theoretical understanding of communication; and (4) demonstrate satisfactory knowledge of applied communication skills needed for entry into relevant career fields.

The goals were developed by the Undergraduate Committee, under the guidance of the Undergraduate Director, in 2002. They were extensively discussed and approved by the entire faculty. Goals were subsequently approved by the University Assessment Committee prior to the first assessment. These goals were discussed and reaffirmed at the August, 2004 faculty retreat. The goals collectively reflect the faculty's commitment to teaching students the social scientific underpinnings of communication – concepts that shed light on the nature of communication and methods for determining what is true. They also display a commitment to complementing social science coursework with career-relevant training in journalism, communication management, and media arts and technology. The goals have remained the same over the course of the past two years of faculty discussions.

Outcomes

Outcomes are derived from goals. As program evaluators have noted, outcomes can be thought of as operational objectives that can be measured empirically. In our case, there are four outcomes that correspond to each of the aforementioned goals. Outcomes consist of: (1) demonstrated student mastery of basic communication processes; (2) documented knowledge of, and basic competence in, the application of commonly-used communication research methods; (3) documented theoretical understanding of communication processes; and (4) documented applied communication skills (i.e., news and public relations writing; application of communication management principles; film and digital media production; application of media studies principles). Student exams and papers completed in Communication 101 (Principles of Communication) address the first outcome listed above (demonstrated mastery of basic communication processes). Major

exams and papers from Communication 303 (Communication Inquiry) address the second outcome (competence in communication research methodologies). Upper-level capstone courses address the third and fourth outcomes pertaining to theoretical understanding and development of career-related skills. By aggregating student materials in these ways, we are able to make judgments about the extent to which the program fulfills program goals.

Program outcomes were crafted at the same time as goals were developed, in 2002. They have been reaffirmed at School faculty meetings. After the considerable discussion of assessment that followed a committee report, faculty reaffirmed the outcomes, arguing that they continue to reflect the School's emphasis on social science education and skills training. The process by which goals and outcomes were adopted was democratic in that it involved all faculty and deliberative, with the focus on faculty discussion, debate, and revision.

Research Methods

Undergraduate program assessment is coordinated by the director of the School of Communication and directors of the three School divisions. The School Director, working with faculty, requested Communication 101 exams, Communication 303 papers, and capstone papers throughout the fall and spring semesters. Directors of the School divisions reviewed capstone courses from their respective divisions, and a director who has long taught the methods course reviewed materials from this course. With assessment calling on diverse faculty expertise in different areas of the School, the process was thorough and broad-based.

The 2006-2007 assessment has two major components: (a) analysis of Communication 101, Communication 303, and capstone papers by a faculty team; (b) a survey of graduating seniors to assess their perceptions of program strengths and areas in need of improvement. Each offers a different window on assessment. Content analysis of materials provides an indication of the extent to which student work measures up to program goals. Survey data offer bottom-up evidence of student satisfaction and perceptions. It is important to note that student satisfaction cannot logically or pedagogically prove that the program is achieving stated goals. This is achieved by faculty analysis of student work. By the same token, if we focus only on faculty evaluations we miss the bottom-up reactions of those we hope to teach. One would not expect students to love every outcome measure, particularly those assessing challenging academic goals. Yet if students are deeply dissatisfied with the curriculum, we are doing something wrong somewhere. Student survey data provide two pieces of information. First, they tell us how those we seek to educate experience our program. Second, they suggest ways to better connect program goals to our core constituents: students.

Analysis of student work. Faculty evaluators assessed student performance by employing a coding scheme the faculty developed in 2002. Exams and papers were evaluated on a 3-point scale (exemplary, satisfactory, or marginal/unsatisfactory). As an example, the criteria for assessing student knowledge of communication research methods appear below:

Exemplary: Demonstrates a clear understanding of relevant social science methodologies used in communication research projects. Such methodologies include surveys, basic statistical analysis, qualitative analysis, experimental

design, and others. Demonstrates a clear understanding of how research methods can be applied in the design of studies, the collection of data, and the analysis of data.

Satisfactory: Demonstrates a basic understanding of relevant social science methodologies and when and how to apply the methodologies in research design, data collection, and data analysis.

Unacceptable/unsatisfactory: Demonstrates a lack of understanding of social science methodologies and how to apply them in the design of studies, the collection of data, and the analysis of data.

Student material validly tapped the exams/papers from the courses in question. Tests and materials from Communication 101 and Communication 303 constituted the population for review of outcomes 1 and 2. Student work is selected by asking instructors to gather as much of the population of student work as they can over the course of both semesters. Division directors and relevant faculty read this material.

Papers from diverse capstone courses across divisions were read by division directors and a former division director knowledgeable about capstones in his division. Papers were categorized as to whether they fell into one of the three areas described above, with evaluators making certain that they read enough papers in each category to render a clear judgment. These assisted in assessment of the third and fourth outcomes.

The instruments used to assess student performance in communication classes were the same as those used last year. The survey used to assess students' perceptions and satisfaction was the same as last year's. Methodologies were thus qualitative and

quantitative and assessed outcomes over the course of the academic year.

Findings

Outcome #1: Students demonstrate mastery of basic communication processes.

Review of Student Work in COM 101 to Assess Outcome #1

Syllabi, study guides, and tests materials overwhelmingly demonstrated the breadth of knowledge about communication that students learned in this course. Students are exposed to major research fields and principles in interpersonal, organizational, and applied communication contexts. The course did a commendable job in helping students establish communication-based career goals. Assignments such as “resume” and “career reports” effectively guide students into different majors that the School of Communication offers and toward potential communication career tracks. The “initiating relationship report,” one assignment in the course, is a very good example of students applying communication principles, exercising critical thinking, and practicing empirical observation skills.

More generally, Communication 101 papers are relatively thorough in subject matter covered and in exploration of interpersonal, organizational and mass communication. Exemplary papers showed thorough understanding of concepts and ability to communicate them clearly. As an example, one paper exploring the promotional communication areas of marketing and advertising demonstrated strong application of concepts related to persuasive communication. The student showed clear understanding of both positioning and target demographics. This and other exemplary papers continued to display high-quality reasoning, abstract understanding and excellent writing.

Satisfactory papers dealt competently with concepts, but lacked the depth of understanding demonstrated in exemplary papers. Satisfactory papers continued to show good understanding of concepts, but some were marred by writing problems.

As in previous years, unsatisfactory papers were noteworthy for poor writing and bad grammar. This problem still needs to be addressed by future instructors of the course. This may be mitigated somewhat in the future by higher CSU admission standards.

Not all student work was up to snuff, which is part and parcel of the teaching experience. Viewed more broadly, the detailed analysis of student papers that fell into the two highest categories indicates that the principles course has accomplished its curricular objective of helping students grasp communication concepts, principles and processes.

Outcome #2: Students demonstrate knowledge of, and competence in, the application of commonly-used communication research methods.

Review of Student Work in Communication 303 to Assess Outcome #2

Student research reports revealed an ability to comprehend scientific knowledge in communication. Students were able to identify and utilize quality scientific knowledge for the purpose of conceptualizing and conducting research. Students were exposed to a variety of social science research methods commonly applied in communication research. The syllabi, exams, and assignments clearly reflected this. In addition, COM 303 offered students an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in conducting communication research on a variety of topics. This is reflected in work reviewed on major student projects.

Outcome #3: Students demonstrate a theoretical understanding of communication processes.

Review of Student Work in Capstones to Assess Outcome #3

The first portion of the assessment is based on materials from the communication management capstone course, COM 475. The goal of this course is to ensure that students “display a theoretical understanding of communication” and “demonstrate satisfactory knowledge of applied communication skills needed for entry into relevant career fields.”

After reviewing capstone papers, we concluded that the use of case analyses offers students the opportunity to integrate their theoretical knowledge and effectively apply it to concrete interpersonal and organizational contexts. The capstone project papers showed that students are able to synthesize their previous coursework, develop coherent arguments, and perform in-depth analysis of a specific subject area.

Work completed for capstone courses in the Media Arts and Technology Division showed an exemplary understanding of the major processes and mass communication theories relevant to message production in the relevant context. Three capstone courses were measured this year, as opposed to one last year. Most students proved exemplary in their demonstration of theory and technical knowledge. Importantly, no students evidenced knowledge of applications that were judged unsatisfactory, an endorsement of these capstone courses.

Outcome #4: Students demonstrate applied communication skills.

Review of Student Work in Capstones to Assess Outcome #

The focus of this part of the review is on coursework in the Journalism and Promotional Communication Division, which has a strong emphasis on applied

communication skills in the journalism and promotional media industries. A course-by-course description follows.

COM 427 (Managing a Laboratory Newspaper): This course serves as a capstone course for all journalism majors. Since the course is responsible for the production of the laboratory newspaper, *The Cleveland Stater*, on a continuing basis, it is offered every semester. The paper published seven issues in fall, six in spring and four in summer. Over the course of the academic year, the paper reduced typographical and other copyediting errors significantly, in part owing to the introduction of a “local rule” that modified the generic AP Style. **It never missed the deadline.** It even scored a couple of scoops like the story on the university’s hiring of a safety director. Students worked on the Virginia Tech reaction stories as if they were reporters for a daily newspaper. What made this possible were improvements in the online version of the paper.

The paper continues to suffer from the low-quality black-and-white photo printing, but this shortcoming is largely a consequence of the printing cost. Students learn that publishing and managing a paper is often a cost-benefit balance and compromise between ideals and constraints.

The course blended teaching and production with activities of the university’s student chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, thus making it a truly culminating experience of the journalism-bound students. Many students in the course served as leaders in the chapter operation.

COM 455 (Communication Campaigns)—This serves as the capstone course for Public Relations and Advertising sequence students. Since the course revolves

around executing group projects, students learned to work in teams focused on actual campaigns for goal-driven institutions. Projects included Cleveland State's student retention campaign and Honda's introduction of a new model.

A particularly notable accomplishment came from an idea conceived in the course that evolved into an entry project of the Cleveland State Advertising Association for the year's national collegiate competition sponsored by the American Advertising Federation (AAF). Students enrolled in course helped to shape the project's orientation. **As a result of the collective student work, they won the fourth-place recognition in the AAF regional competition late in April.** The award is meritorious in itself, of course, but more significant is the students' experience in participating, interacting and competing in a regional setting of professional relevance.

Students enrolled in media arts and technology capstones (COM 401, 414 & 470) demonstrated applied communication skills, as they developed films and DVDs, taking them from concept origination through execution. Clear examples were provided by students in the COM 414 film sequence capstone course. Film projects transferred to DVD showed a grasp of film theory and application. COM 470, DVD & Emerging Media, is always a challenge for students. Yet no students finished with a grade lower than C, and it was gratifying to see how many papers were of exemplary quality.

Based on the review discussed above, most students in capstone courses are at the "satisfactory" level with a notable group at the "exemplary" level. However, one concern for all but the "exemplary" work is a weakness in writing skills, making it difficult, in some cases, to be certain of students' level of knowledge.

Turning to **comparisons from last year**, we find that capstone evaluations continue to be strong both years, particularly in applied courses. On the other hand, writing concerns emerged over the course of both this and last year's assessments.

Findings from Student Survey

In this section we discuss results from a student survey conducted at the end of the academic year. A sample of 15 graduating seniors, recruited by professors from classes, completed surveys. . Instructors asked graduating seniors to complete the exit survey and return them to the main office. The sample was not randomly selected from the population. Instead, it reflected a subset of the population taken from a variety of classes. The survey, the same as the one used last year, tapped perceptions of different aspects of undergraduate coursework. Perceptions were assessed on 1-5 scales, with 5 indicating the most positive response.

Students perceived the program was effective in broadening their intellectual interests (M=4.40), helping them appreciate diverse points of view (M=4.23) and teaching them to respect different points of view (M=4.33). This suggest that the first outcome – students demonstrating mastery of basic communication processes – was, at least in students' eyes, attained over the course of last year. The second outcome concerned demonstrated knowledge and competence in research methods. Respondents indicated they appreciated research methods (M=3.80). As noted below, this does not indicate competence in understanding research methods -- an ability better tapped by the analysis of Communication 303 materials.

The third outcome is demonstrated theoretical understanding of communication processes. Students indicated the program is effective in helping them understand

communication principles (M=4.67) and in understanding communication theories (M=4.33). The fourth outcome concerns demonstrated applied communication skills. Respondents indicated they felt more comfortable speaking in public (M=4.21), using communication technology effectively (M=3.87) and writing clearly (M=4.6). As noted earlier, one would hope students would be satisfied with the majority of their courses, even hard ones; the survey data must be taken in concert with the more objective analysis of student work to obtain a complete understanding of undergraduate student performance.

Auxiliary survey questions probed other student beliefs about the undergraduate program. Students reported being highly satisfied with their communication classes (M=4.60), conversations with professors (M=4.80) and their overall education in the School (M=4.53). They gave above average scores to advising (M=3.93), an increase over last year's mean of 3.6, perhaps because of increased attention to this issue in the School. They were less positive to career counseling (M=3.3) and more favorable on the topic of School preparation for jobs (M=3.87). (See Appendix A).

Making a **longitudinal comparison** with last year's survey, one finds that scores were relatively high both years, with no substantial differences, in the main. It was noteworthy that students surveyed this year evidenced more favorable reactions on advising-related matters, such as preparation for jobs (3.87 versus 3.09 last year), perhaps in part due to greater attention to advising in the School, although this remains speculative.

Review

The assessment procedure was systematic and broad-based. Division directors (who are elected by faculty in their respective divisions) coordinated assessment. Results of the student surveys and assessment were shared with the faculty at the annual faculty retreat, where assessment was assigned a prominent place in the agenda. Students were consulted as participants in the annual survey. The School Curriculum Committee, with representatives from School divisions and the graduate program, coordinated efforts to implement recommendations from assessment, recommendations that were then fed back to the faculty for discussion and approval.

Assessment review occurred at the faculty retreat, held at the beginning of the fall semester, and proposals emanating from assessment are discussed at faculty meetings (in fall term in particular in 2006-2007). Materials were gathered throughout the year. As an example, last year's assessment recommended exploration of improving advising. The School Steering Committee discussed this, and the matter came up at two faculty meetings, resulting in a comprehensive plan of action (see below).

Actions

A. Advising

The 2005-2006 assessment recommended that advising be placed on the faculty agenda, in the wake of college and university concern about upgrading advising to aid recruitment and retention, as well as comments emerging from last year's assessment.

Action Taken: Responding to last year's assessment, the School Steering Committee and faculty discussed an advising plan at several meetings. As a result of faculty deliberation, advising was strengthened. (See Appendix B for proposal presented

and eventually passed by faculty). The new policy included the following: (1) development of a procedure whereby students receive a letter from their respective division director that welcomes them to the school and invites them to meet faculty to discuss interests; (2) focus on a personal contact between a faculty member and a student; (3) encouragement of subsequent contact between students and faculty; and (4) holding two “meet and greet” sessions with faculty, where information pertinent to major requirements is shared. Two “meet and greet” meetings were held last year (in fall and spring), with faculty in all divisions busy answering students’ questions about majors. Advising was also strengthened through the presence of a 20-hour-a-week graduate adviser who communicated by letter to all students and was available everyday to answer student questions.

B. Communication 101

The 2005-2006 report suggested that faculty revisit the breadth of Communication 101 to determine if it adequately dealt with content from all three divisions in the School.

Action Taken: The issue was discussed at the fall retreat and possibilities included provision of a week’s worth of content for each major and offering more focus on methodology to ease anxieties about Communication 303. The course was discussed at a fall faculty meeting, and faculty members were satisfied with the breadth of the course.

C. Capstones

The 2005-2006 report recommended that divisions review capstones with an eye toward rigor, benchmarks, and other factors.

Action Taken: The Journalism and Promotional Communication Division reviewed a key capstone – COM 455, Communication and Campaigns – and suggested that the pre-requisite be changed to increase rigor. The pre-req had allowed students to take COM 360, Advertising, a course that does not provide adequate preparation for COM 455. The division, faculty and ultimately college curriculum committee agreed that the pre-req should be changed so that COM 357 (which offers more background in campaign conceptualization and writing skills) became a necessary pre-requisite for the course, and COM 360 was no longer appropriate. This change should enable instructors to teach the course at an appropriately rigorous level.

Recommendations

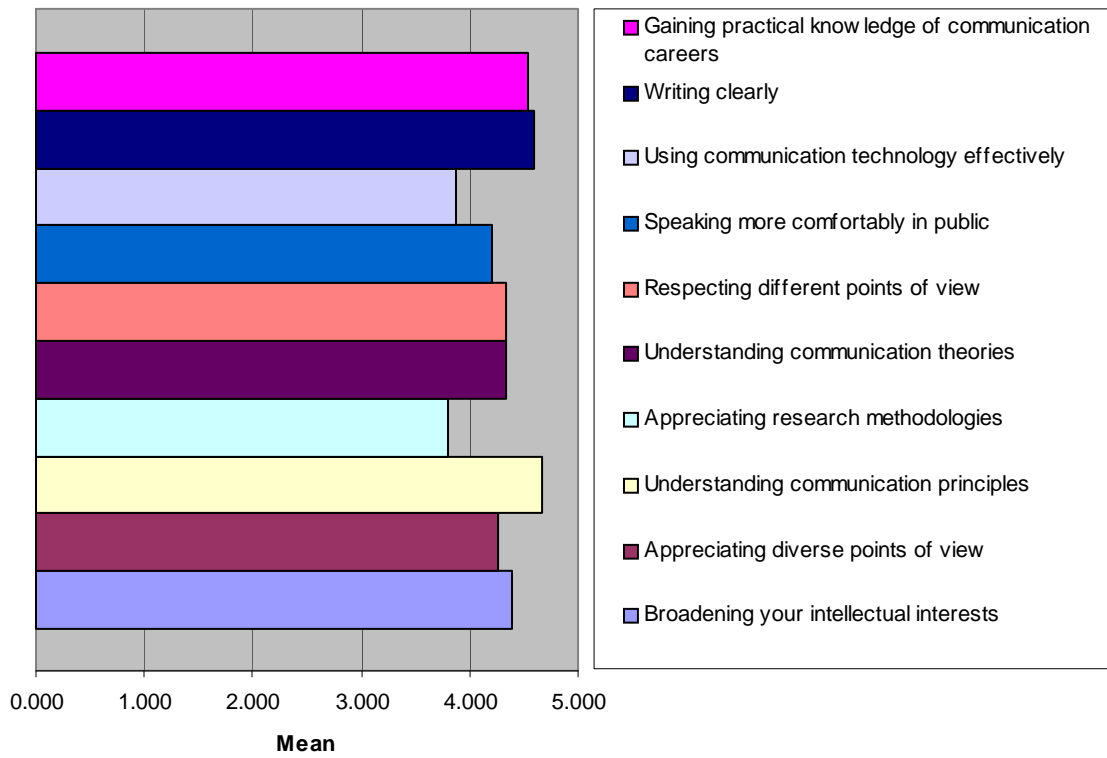
Based on this year's assessment, there should be more attention paid to student writing. Structural or individual-level changes need to be considered to elevate its agenda in the curriculum. This will be presented to faculty as a discussion point in the fall semester.

Second, student concerns in this year's assessment about advising and career applications suggest that the School needs to maintain and upgrade attention to advising. Implementation of the new plan will continue, along with appropriate assessment along the way, hopefully augmented by the presence of a full-time adviser in the School next fall.

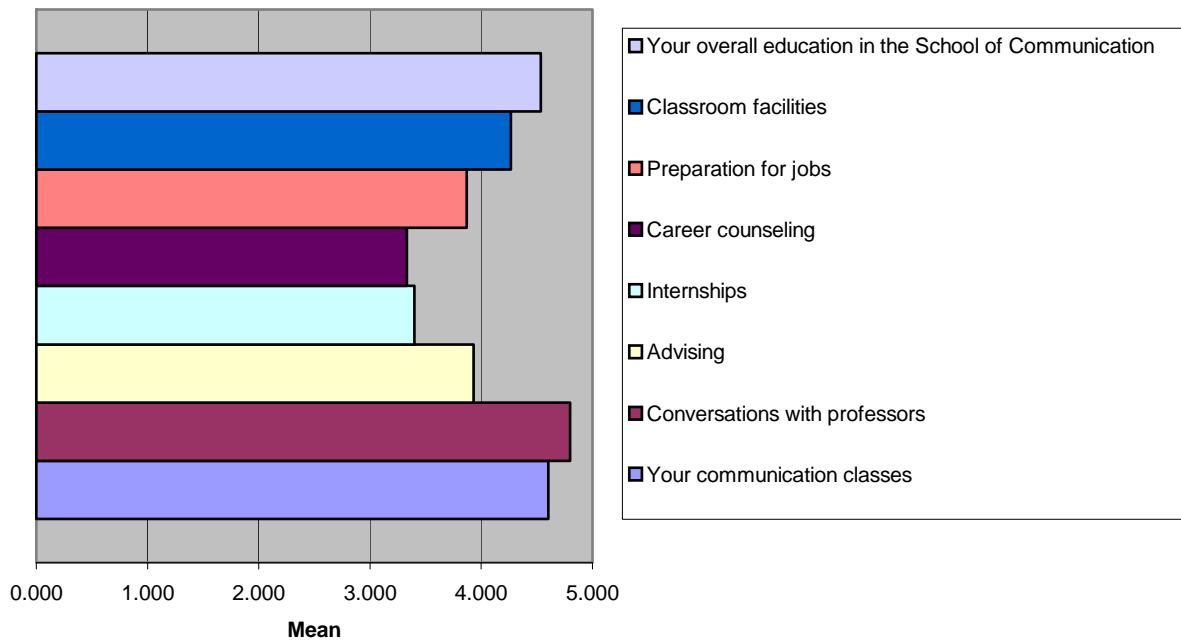
Third, the 2006-2007 assessment-related finding of problems in student writing, along with faculty desire to reexamine the majors, suggests the need for examining major requirements, such as the possibility of upgrading the number of hours required for the communication major.

Appendix A

How effective has your program in Communication been in assisting you in:



How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the School of Communication:



Appendix B

School of Communication

Advising Model: Centralized and Developmental

1. First Contact—Upon declaring their major, students will receive a letter from their respective Division Director that welcomes them to the School of Communication and invites them to meet to discuss their interests and review their next term’s registration. New General Communication majors will be divided among the School Director and the Division Directors (distribution may be determined to balance the number of majors within each Division). The meeting can be in person (preferred) or by phone. This first contact establishes a personal connection between the School and the student. Upon learning about the student’s particular interests, the Division Director/School Director will filter the student to divisional faculty whose expertise are within these areas of interests. The School secretary will create a file on each new student, to be coded by division and stored in a secure, central location accessible to faculty. This first contact will be logged in the file, as will all subsequent advising appointments and advising-related activities. This will establish a paper trail for accountability and future reference.

Upon the implementation of the above procedure, all existing majors will receive a similar letter from their Division Directors/School Director, inviting them to meet. If, in the course of this meeting, it is determined that the student has already established a relationship with a faculty advisor, no other faculty member will be recommended. A student file will be created if one does not already exist.

Issue for Faculty Discussion: Should this first contact meeting be mandatory and serve to complete the declaration of major process, or should it be optional?

2. Subsequent Contact—Students will be encouraged to seek subsequent advising regarding course selection, career guidance and professional/internship opportunities from divisional faculty (including Division Directors and School Director) whose expertise are within their areas of interest. Advising sessions can be done in person, by phone or by e-mail. Each advising appointment or advising-related activity, and what transpired, will be logged in the student’s file.

Issue for Faculty Discussion: Should the School be awarded a part- or full-time advisor, the more rudimentary advising appointments will be absorbed by that individual. We need to discuss how best to supplement these sessions with faculty/student interaction.

3. Orientation—Once a semester or once a year all new majors and students interested in becoming majors will be invited to a “meet and greet” with faculty, where information pertinent to division requirements and School activities are shared. This session should answer many of the questions that typically result in more rudimentary advising appointments. Declaration of Major forms will be made available. The School Director and Division Directors may also visit core courses within their area to introduce

themselves.

4. Graduation—Division Directors are responsible for reviewing all graduation applications and, if requested by students, meet with them prior to the submission of a graduation application to review graduation requirements.

Issue for Faculty Discussion: Should the School be awarded a part- or full-time advisor, these pre-graduation reviews can be conducted by that individual. Should they be? Does the above plan do an adequate job of helping students make connections between themselves and faculty? Should we go with this and not pursue the notion of assigning students to individual faculty? How can careers and internships be made more salient to students?