

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

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to describe findings that emerged from the assessment of the Master's in Applied Communication Theory and Methodology and to discuss implications for curricular growth and change that can be implemented next year. The report draws on an assessment procedure developed five years ago that employs multiple methods to evaluate program goals. Assessment, at its best, generates critical insights that can be used to improve the quality of an academic program, and we offer a variety of research-based conclusions in the final section of this report.

*Description of Program.* The Master's of Applied Communication Theory Methodology provides advanced instruction in the fundamental knowledge of the discipline and in the major research skills used by communication scholars and practitioners in public and private contexts. The program is designed to provide knowledge and skills for students pursuing different paths, helping them apply communication research strategies to conceptual domains and real-world problems. One of the oldest social science-based Masters at Cleveland State, the Communication program introduces students to the heuristic powers of theory, the essential role methodology plays in research, and the excitement of applying research to real-world communication problems.

A Master's degree student must complete 32 or 38 credit hours, depending on the choice of exit options. All students are required to take Communication 501, Seminar in Communication, and Communication 512, Communication Research Methods (both core courses), as well as eight credits of communication theory, an additional four credits of research methods, four credits in a cognate course, and electives. Upon satisfactory

completion of coursework, the student is allowed to select an exit option appropriate to his or her career goals. The options are: (1) writing a thesis; (2) completing an applied project that brings research to bear on a communication problem; (3) taking additional coursework and successfully passing a comprehensive examination; or (4) successfully completing a collaborative research project, in which students turn in a final individual paper based on research conducted by the group.

One of the hallmarks of the Master's program is its emphasis on introducing graduate students to the intellectual traditions of the field. Over the years, our students have presented papers at regional and national academic conferences, stimulated by faculty role models. They attend conferences like the International Communication Association and the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research. They meet scholars from all over the country. The intellectual ferment engages them cognitively and stimulates them to think about ways to integrate research into their own lives. Our convention-attending students have, as a consequence, obtained their Ph.D.s or adopted a research approach in their jobs in Northeast Ohio companies.

### **Goals**

The overarching goals of the Master's program are to ensure that students: (1) have acquired the cognitive capacity to identify communication problems and apply appropriate conceptual frameworks for investigation and problem solving; (2) understand the conceptual frameworks of communication based on the academic literature produced by the discipline; (3) adequately comprehend basic procedures for conducting basic and applied communication research; and (4) have acquired the ability to conduct and report professional-quality communication research.

Faculty members are involved in the realization of these goals through teaching courses, advising students, and serving on the Graduate Committee. The committee consists of faculty representatives from major areas of the program and the Graduate Director. This committee makes recommendations for changes and modifications in the program to the faculty. The director of the school is also consulted on policy matters and reviews committee actions.

Goals were adopted in 2002 after the Graduate Committee, under the leadership of the Graduate Director, proposed a series of goals that flowed from assessment guidelines. Faculty discussed goals thoroughly and approved them. The four goals were reaffirmed at the 2004 retreat, indicating that faculty members maintained the same philosophical approach to the graduate program in the school as they did when the program was part of the department.

### **Outcomes**

Students who successfully complete the program are expected to be able to demonstrate competence in: **(1) clearly formulating communication problems; (2) explicating communication theories; (3) understanding methodological procedures; (4) conducting basic/applied research; and (5) professionally reporting research findings.** Outcomes were developed through the same deliberative process as were goals: development of a draft by the Graduate Committee, faculty discussion, and approval by the entire faculty in 2002. The outcomes were also reaffirmed at the 2004 faculty retreat. Outcomes were assessed in the same fashion this year as in 2005 and 2006.

## **Research Methods**

Evaluation of the program in accordance with School-wide goals and outcomes is performed by the Graduate Director, in concert with other members of the Graduate Committee. The School Director coordinates the project. There are several parts to assessment.

The Graduate Director convenes regular evaluative reviews during the academic year. The director meets with teaching and research assistants at several times during the semester to explore curricular and teaching issues. Since this is not a summative assessment, it is not discussed formally in this report.

The first formal assessment method is a survey of graduate students, conducted to probe perceptions of the program. The survey included items from last year that probed the perceived effectiveness of the program in meeting core objectives. The questionnaire was expanded to include items exploring preferred foci of the graduate program, social environment of the graduate program, and career counseling.

Second and in a related fashion, a focus group is conducted among graduate students. The focus group probes the extent to which outcomes have been met. It also solicits criticisms and feedback. Students are assured that responses will be kept confidential.

Third, graduate student research activity outside the classroom, at conventions, and in theses is described as an indication of students' motivation and ability to conduct professional research.

Fourth, it is important to consider direct measures of student learning. Student work in theses and collaborative projects is carefully examined in light of faculty-determined School rubrics.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were thus employed. The results of assessment are subsequently shared with the graduate committee and School faculty.

### **Findings**

In the spring, 2007 semester there were 20 full time, 11 part-time, and five non-degree students enrolled in the program. Surveys were completed by six first-year students and five second-year students, selected from classes, non-randomly but so as to make certain that students from both the first- and second-year were represented. The survey contained questions probing beliefs about the program's effectiveness, items tapping satisfaction with different aspects of the program, such as advising and conversations with professors, and perceptions of different facets of the communication graduate program.

The survey, pegged to program outcomes, included nine questions probing beliefs about the effectiveness of the graduate program. These included: understanding communication theories, learning how to conduct research, assisting students in clearly formulating communication problems, learning to write professional research papers, and gaining practical knowledge of communication careers. Other questions asked students to indicate satisfaction with communication classes, conversations with professors, advising, job preparation, and classroom facilities. All items were measured on 5-point scales where 5 represented the highest, most favorable response. Appendix A lists the

first- and second-year students' averages on key items; the discussion below summarizes the means across all students.

Respondents gave the program above average marks for helping them formulate communication problems (M=3.75; Outcome #1). They rated the program as effective in teaching them competence in explicating communication theories (Outcome #2). Specifically, they gave the program favorable evaluations on helping them appreciate communication principles (M=4.1) and communication theories (M=4.1).

Students also rated the program positively on helping them understand methodological procedures, in line with the third outcome. In particular, they gave the program above average marks on helping them critically evaluate research (M=3.75) and higher marks on helping them appreciate the value of social science research (M=4.25). In concert with the fourth outcome regarding conducting basic/applied research, respondents said the program helped them learn to conduct research (M=4.0) and improve research skills (M=4.0). They also gave above average evaluations of the program's effectiveness in helping them see practical applications of research (M=3.5) and somewhat stronger ratings of writing professional papers (M=3.85; Outcome #5). Interestingly, students felt that the graduate program made them feel a part of the Communication School (M=4.05).

Other questions tapped beliefs about different aspects of the program. Students gave the overall program experience a good rating (M=3.95), positively evaluated conversations with professors, the academic bulwark of a graduate program, (M=4.45) and evaluated the overall quality of instruction favorably (M=4.15). Students were critical of advising (M=3.0), career counseling (2.45), and preparation for jobs (M=2.3).

Interesting as these auxiliary findings are, it is not clear that they represents a valid criticism of the program in terms of the match between performance and outcomes, since career-related training is not an explicit goal of the graduate program. Nonetheless, they suggest some areas where we could serve students better.

In sum and in line with last year's results, survey responses revealed satisfaction with academic aspects of the program, offering evidence the program is achieving its stated goals. One interesting trend in this year's data was the striking differences between first-year students, who evidenced considerable satisfaction with the program, and the lower scores of second-year students. Usually, it is the other way around, the more academically acclimated second-year students who evidence more positive responses. This year's results could be due to: (a) a particularly academically-oriented group of first-year students; (b) a couple of outliers in the second-year sample; (c) the small n, in which extreme responses can make an empirical difference; or (d) experiences over the course of the second year that changed second-year students' attitudes. It is possible, but, we believe, unlikely that the latter possibility is true, in view of the fact that second-year students have traditionally been very positive toward the program, and students completing the collaborative option in exemplary fashion seemed to evidence this positivity. However, we do take note of this, as well as the general pattern of favorable results, and discuss implications later in the report in the context of concerns about application.

After **carefully** comparing this year's results to **last year's**, we find that last year's means were higher on outcomes measures (for example, helping students formulate communication problems and appreciate communication principles and

theories). The n was over twice as high last year, suggesting the problem was method-based not program-based. A suggestion for next year emerges here: The sample size of graduate student respondents needs to be larger.

### **Focus Group Analyses**

The focus group sessions this year were divided into two groups. The first group was comprised of five students who were first year students; all were enrolled in either a communication theory and/or methodology course during the spring semester of 2007. The second group consisted of eight students who anticipated graduating from the program in May 2007. Participants consisted of graduate assistants, student working part-time, and students working full-time outside of the university. Focus group responses are organized in terms of how they relate to the five program outcomes.

#### **Outcome 1: Formulating Communication Problems**

Students noted that just obtaining a Master's degree, regardless of discipline, is beneficial to a person's career by opening up more opportunities professionally and economically. Students also agreed that one of the most beneficial aspects of the program is the degree to which it intellectually challenged students. "You are able to take tools from the classes and use them in real life," one student said. Others agreed that learning to deal with stress, time management, and conducting real-world project were valuable learning experiences. Several students mentioned how the program showed them how to be more critical thinkers and apply these skills to workplace problems.

#### **Outcome 2: Explicating Communication Theories**

Participants showed interest in diverse communication theories operating on different levels of analysis. A number of students identified persuasion theories as having

the greatest impact on their lives. One student remarked how cultivation was useful in understanding the impact of media on society. Yet another student commented that exposure to all the communication theories was invigorating and useful. Other students identified diffusion of innovations, uses and gratification, media dependency theory, and systems theory as useful bridges to Ph.D. studies. Unlike the 2006 group, the 2007 cohort indicated that mass communication theories were the most useful to them.

### **Outcome 3: Understanding Methodological Procedures**

The majority of students shared views about their involvement in communication research. They had conducted research for a class project, with a faculty member, or on their own. Overall, students felt positively about the process of using research methods. The methods employed in their studies varied and included focus groups, surveys, interviews, and experiments.

### **Outcome 4: Conducting Basic/Applied Research**

Students noted that the modal research in which they participated was basic research on communication effects. Several students, who were working on research projects with faculty, remarked that they found these experiences academically valuable.

Other students were involved in applied communication research projects, including ones for the Cuyahoga County Republican Party, WKYC Channel 3, private corporations, and a health campaign on kidney disease in the Latino community. Students expressed feelings of pride when discussing how the results of their study were received. Students felt these “real world” applications were useful and helped them see how communication theories can inform their day-to-day problem solving. All students who

participated in the projects agreed that these applied research experiences gave them an opportunity to apply what they had learned in communication courses.

### **Outcome 5: Professionally Reporting Research Findings**

None of the students had presented their research at a conference, but several had submitted research reports to journals and were waiting to hear if their papers were accepted. Others indicated a desire to submit research conducted during the spring semester.

### **Summary and Suggestions**

The results of the focus groups demonstrate that the students enrolled in the graduate program are satisfied with the program. The results of the 2007 focus group are consistent with earlier years and with the nature of the program since its inception: *It is an academically-oriented Master's program oriented around theory, methods, and research.* Students recognized that their coursework provided valued training in such areas as understanding statistics, analytical thinking, developing a questioning mind, doing research, and presenting difficult concepts in a comprehensible fashion. While students expressed overall satisfaction with the program, they proffered suggestions. They suggested the program offer more areas of study, create specific tracks and interdisciplinary courses, offer courses frequently (especially the core courses), provide accessible advising, offer more weekend courses, and be attentive to part-time graduate students' needs.

### **Graduate Student Activities and Scholarship**

Displaying their commitments to research, several graduate students attended or presented papers at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass

Communication in August, 2006, the International Workshop on Presence in August 2006, and the 2006 Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research conference. Papers focused on political communication, organizational communication, and indecency on television. The students who worked on these papers expect to submit them to academic journals.

Another positive indication of success of the program is the number of research-based theses that were completed in the time period covered in this assessment (June, 2006- May, 2007). These consisted of theses exploring stages of relationship development, “metrosexuals” and the media, the prevalence of indecent content on television, intercultural communication and advertising, and empirical testing of auteur theory via content analysis.

### **Exit Option Evaluations: Theses**

Theses, projects, and collaborative research of graduating students are evaluated on a 3-point scale (exemplary-satisfactory-unsatisfactory), using specific criteria developed and approved by the faculty as a whole in 2002. Five students completed theses and 16 students completed collaborative research projects from May 2006 through May 2007. The outcome-based criteria for evaluating student work appear below:

*Exemplary:* Demonstrates in thesis/project/collaborative project that communication processes are relevant to either: (a) theoretical development, or (b) solving problem of a client in an interpersonal, organizational, or mass communication context.

*Satisfactory:* Identifies communication processes as relevant to theoretical development of client’s problem, but inappropriately frames research questions for project.

*Unsatisfactory:* Fails to state relevant communication processes or selects inappropriate processes relevant to the stated theoretical development of client's problem solving.

***\*\*\*EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENT EVALUATIONS PROVIDED HERE HAS BEEN DELETED TO ENSURE STUDENT DATA CONFIDENTIALITY.\*\*\****

*Summary.* The evaluation of students' work indicates that students are mastering core research outcomes. These students display understanding of a range of theories, ranging from diffusion of innovations to interpersonal communication apprehension approaches, understand diverse research methods (from surveys to content analyses), know how to test hypotheses with quantitative techniques, and report results in keeping with APA standards. The thesis and collaborative options are very different, yet, for the most part, students undertaking both options perform in ways consistent with the five assessment outcomes.

**Review**

Graduate program assessment is broad-based, with participation from faculty, the graduate committee, and graduate students. General directions are provided by the faculty in line with faculty-approved guidelines. The graduate director refined the survey instrument and administered the survey. Graduate students participated in the survey and the focus group, offering ideas from their vantage point in the program. This ensured that it was not a top-down process. The Graduate Director, in concert with the School Director, reviewed the final report and formulated action proposals for consideration by the Graduate Committee and faculty as a whole.

The 2006 graduate assessment report was shared with every member of the faculty. The faculty discussed graduate issues at the 2006 faculty retreat. It also examined specific aspects at meetings during the academic year. Throughout the year, the graduate committee – which consists of faculty elected to help coordinate the graduate program -- participated in informal formative exploration, discussing issues emerging from the previous year's assessment, as well as other graduate program matters. Thus, faculty, the faculty member administrating the graduate program, and students are involved in the assessment and in discussing proposals that are contained in the assessment report.

### **Actions**

The 2006 assessment recommended that faculty reexamine the graduate program and consider a new track. Headway was made at a special retreat session devoted to this issue. A concept for a 4+1 program in strategic communication research was presented at the retreat. The graduate committee is reviewing possible changes and considering modifications, planning to submit a plan early in the fall semester.

Other recommendations from last year were to strengthen advising among part-time students and consider students' concern about providing a stronger bridge between classes and careers. These were discussed, and the following actions were taken:

(1) a mass media technology course was scheduled for fall, 2007 explicitly to serve graduate interest in media applications; (2) a course in communication and violence course was offered this past year in an effort to meet the interest in theory application; and (3) the graduate director is obtaining feedback on a plan to replace required cognate courses with courses focused more directly on theory application.

A third recommendation concerned creatively scheduling courses to fit graduate students' needs more closely. Faculty addressed this by scheduling classes during the 5-7 p.m. period in spring semester.

The last recommendation from last year -- developing a communication track, in the Urban Studies Ph.D. -- was (we can say with pride) accomplished! Working with faculty in the school, college, Graduate Council and Faculty Senate, a proposal was developed, revised, refashioned and ultimately approved. Three new courses, with 700-sections for Ph.D. students, were approved. This is a major accomplishment of which all can be proud.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Next Year**

The Master's in Applied Communication Theory and Methodology, now in its second quarter-century, continues to stimulate research-oriented graduate students. The program is achieving our goals and meeting the five outcomes reasonably well, in some cases exceptionally well. As was the case last year, the survey findings, focus group results, and graduate student research activity at conferences attest to the success of the program in providing a high-quality education in communication research. More impressively, the theses and exit options display theoretical and methodological sophistication, in keeping with the goals and outcomes of the program.

The perennial issue is – and always has been – serving Master's students' penchant for application and their (pesky!) desire to translate research skills into real-world jobs. The job of the program is to provide training in theory, methods, and research. We seem to be doing that pretty well. By the same token, when you ask students their views in an assessment, sometimes you gain information outside the

purview of the assessment goals that can help you do a better job meeting student needs. This year's assessment survey findings suggest that more attention could be paid to advising and the knotty matter of career preparation. Students also said they want more application. These, along with other matters on the horizon, are factors we will consider over the course of next year.

2007-2008 goals, flowing from assessment results, are to:

1. Make progress on possible development of a plan for an accelerated program on strategic communication research to meet assessment-documented application interests of students.
2. Task the Graduate Committee with exploring concrete ways to address student concern about application in ways that do not compromise the basic research orientation of the program. Tracks, course requirements, part-time student advising, and relevant matters will be considered.
3. Evaluate the program's exit options, possibly resuscitating the comprehensive exam option.
4. Begin preparing for recruitment for the Ph.D. and readying the doctoral track for fall.
5. Establish more cross campus collaboration with other programs and colleges across the university to examine linkages on graduate issues.

## Appendix A: Assessment Survey Results

Items	First Year	Second Year
My overall experience in the Communication Graduate Program has been satisfying.	4.5	3.4
Being in the graduate program made me feel like part of the School of Communication	4.5	3.6
I think that more classes should be offered on weeknights rather than afternoon	2.6	3.6
In general, I was pleased with the courses that were offered.	3.6	2.2
In general, I think the Communication Graduate courses that I took will be helpful in my future plans.	4.6	3.0
<b>How effective has the graduate program in Communication been in assisting you in:</b>		
...Understanding communication principles	4.6	3.6
...Understanding communication theories	4.6	3.6
...Learning how to conduct research	4.2	3.8
...Improving your research skills	4.2	3.8
...Appreciating how to apply communication research	3.8	3.2
...Critically evaluating existing research	4.3	3.2
...Appreciating the value of social science research	4.7	3.8
...Assisting you in clearly formulating communication problems	4.3	3.2
...Learning to write professional research papers	4.3	3.4
...Gaining practical knowledge of communication careers	3.6	2.8
<b>How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of the graduate program in Communication?</b>		
Your communication classes	4.5	2.8
Conversations with professors	4.5	4.4
Interactions with fellow graduate students	4.5	3.8
Advising	3.6	2.4
Preparation for jobs	2.8	1.8
Career counseling	3.3	1.6
Classroom facilities	4.0	2.6
Experiences as a teaching or research assistant	4.0 (n=5)	5.0 (n=2)
Preparations for the exit options	4.0	2.8
Your overall graduate education in Communication at Cleveland State University	4.8	3.6
<b>My overall opinion of the quality of <u>instruction</u> in the Communication Graduate Program.</b>	4.5	3.8
<b>My overall opinion of the quality of <u>advising</u> in the Communication Graduate Program.</b>	4.3	2.8
<b>Please indicate the exit option you will choose upon graduation:</b>		
Collaborative project (COM 589)	17%	100%

Comprehensive exam (COM 597)	n/a	n/a
Individual project (COM 598)	n/a	n/a
Thesis (COM 599)	83%	n/a