

Academic Program Review Final Report

Department of Communication & Journalism

University of New Mexico

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Introduction

This report was produced in response to an invitation from the University of New Mexico's Office of Academic Affairs. Dr. Pamela Cheek, Associate Provost for Student Success, in consultation with Dr. David Weiss, Chair of the Department of Communication & Journalism, asked that we review the Department and provide a report on its strengths and shortcomings.

To undertake this task, the review team read a thorough self-study and then visited the UNM campus on November 1-2, 2021. During that time, we met with department, college, and university leaders, faculty of all ranks, staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students. We also toured various facilities.

We appreciate the hospitality and candor we experienced throughout our visit, and wish to especially thank Dr. Weiss and Sam Hatch, Academic Program Review Specialist, for orchestrating everything so smoothly.

At the conclusion of our visit, we presented our initial findings to department, college, and university leaders, following the criteria we had been given. In the pages that follow, we extend those initial findings.

Report Summary

The department is doing well amid severe financial constraints. Throughout the report, our recommendations are intended to maximize opportunities within the difficult financial realities.

The department has an incredibly diverse faculty and student body, reflecting the intellectual breadth of the Communication discipline. Its devoted faculty and staff are clearly interested in serving students and the broader community. It also has an exciting group of talented assistant professors. These professors have dynamic research programs, are engaged in innovative teaching, and feel well supported by the Chair and senior faculty. Senior faculty recognize the excellence of this group. The department has a strong emphasis on quality teaching—for both faculty and graduate student instructors. Their experience and expertise in online teaching, in particular, can serve as a model for other units on campus.

More generally, there is a renewed spirit of collegiality and collaboration in the department after difficulties arising from Covid and past departmental conflicts. Maintaining and further building this spirit is a crucial task moving forward. The department Chair, and other leaders, are creating a collaborative culture, well poised to address existing challenges and move the department forward on a positive course. The department Chair in particular should be commended for helping to move the department forward after a period of tumult several years ago.

At the same time, there are a number of things that could be improved as the department capitalizes on this new momentum. The department would benefit greatly from focusing explicitly on its core identity or mission. Having some deeper sense of this would allow the department to start thinking more systematically about how its current practices, decisions and norms relate to their mission. This initiative could be launched through a retreat in which faculty lay the groundwork for a set of conversations over the course of the year. This collaborative process would go a long way toward establishing a shared investment in the department's mission and collective "buy in" to any strategic plan that emerges from this process. The Department Chair is encouraged to dedicate some time thinking about this, leaving narrower, administrative matters to the capable staff the department has hired. The department will also need to consider mission-relevant strategic objectives.

The department's practice of using graduate students to teach introductory courses provides numerous opportunities for graduate students to hone their pedagogy. This, however, comes at the expense of opportunities to hone research skills by working with faculty. We recommend that the department consider a different model of funding graduate students, one that reduces the amount of teaching they do, in an effort to provide more research opportunities. One possibility is to consider having regular faculty teach fewer, but larger, sections of Intro to Public Speaking, and use students to manage smaller sections devoted to the performance aspect of these courses. A change of this sort would put more experienced faculty directly into the classroom at the lower levels, which may have the added benefit of drawing more students into the major. It would also, in theory, affect the research trajectory of the department as faculty get the research assistance they seek, and graduate students gain the experience they need in a competitive job market. This might also lessen the work burden on graduate students, who are severely overtaxed in terms of

their time. Junior faculty, especially Assistant Professors, need support to move their research agendas forward. Having more GA support would help, as would getting the needed software and hardware they need to do their jobs.

The department should re-consider the service load it expects faculty to carry. There is always a balance between effective faculty governance and excessive faculty involvement in department matters. It is our view that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of faculty involvement. It would be in the department's interest to consider restructuring its committee system to lessen the service burden on existing faculty. All faculty, but especially Associate Professors, need relief from excessive service demands.

This discussion might be wrapped into the suggested discussion about the department's mission and focus. It might also be important to include a discussion about the undergraduate program's relatively large number of degree tracks, some of which have only a few students. Now is an ideal time to consider reforms that would more tightly connect the department's mission to the curriculum, to graduate training, and to the research productivity of faculty.

Criterion 1: Introductory Background

Overall Findings: Exceeds

Findings on strengths:

- The department produced an extremely thorough self-study that benefited the review team's understanding.
- In all cases, the review team found their meetings productive and engaging.

Findings on shortcomings: N/A

No recommendations.

Criterion 2: Teaching & Learning: Curriculum

Overall Findings: Met

Findings on strengths:

- The department rightly prides itself on teaching, and delivers an interesting and diverse curriculum.
- The public speaking courses provide a major service to the university as a general education requirement.
- The graduate students who complete the program emerge with remarkable teaching portfolio—that is, having taught a wider range of stand-alone courses than many others with whom they might be competing for academic jobs.

Findings on shortcomings:

- The number of undergraduate curricular tracks within the Communication major appears to be more than is necessary to serve student needs.
- Given how much graduate students teach, there should be an even stronger emphasis on training and pedagogy. A much more robust infrastructure (e.g., syllabus/materials bank) is needed.
- The emphasis on graduate teaching potentially detracts from the kind of training in research that would benefit both graduate students and faculty (e.g., via research support and research groups, as is the norm at R1 universities).

Recommendations:

- We recommend that the department consider reducing the number of undergraduate curricular tracks. The department should consider streamlining/consolidating into 3-4 key areas, weighing student interest and current faculty expertise. Ideally, this would be linked to what the department decides about its mission (or perhaps data on students in each track could inform the department's sense of its mission).
- The department should consider a required pedagogy seminar and/or more consistent mentoring from faculty course directors (the latter appears to vary widely at the moment, with some graduate instructors getting little formal guidance in courses other than Public Speaking).
- The department and college should seek creative funding solutions that allow graduate students to periodically reduce their teaching load to focus on research. We recommend that the department reconsider how it delivers lower-level undergraduate courses in an effort to reduce the teaching burden on newly matriculated graduate students. Shifting the balance of teaching and research tasks for graduate students will benefit both graduate students and faculty alike.

- Amid the clear utility of public speaking courses, the department should consider what other (General Education) courses might serve the university and best showcase the breadth of the department and the discipline.

Criterion 3: Teaching & Learning: Assessment

Overall Findings: Exceeds

Findings on strengths:

- The department clearly has a robust system for assessing Student Learning Outcomes—a system that compares favorably with peer institutions.

Findings on shortcomings: N/A

No recommendation.

Criterion 4: Students

Overall Findings: Met

Findings on strengths:

- The student body, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, is very diverse and inclusive. This appears to be an understandable point of pride within the department community.
- The graduate students we met with generally feel well supported by faculty and staff, and are impressed by the caliber of research being conducted by the faculty.
- The undergraduate students we met with generally find their coursework interesting and applicable to real-world contexts, which is a testament to the strengths of the curriculum and instruction.

Findings on shortcomings:

- The department, like other units in the college, has experienced considerable declines in undergraduate enrollment over the past several years. This is a challenge that should be faced head on, and creates an opportunity for the department to better showcase its curricular offerings in ways that might generate student interest in the major.
- Among undergraduates, there were complaints that the content of online offerings needs to be updated before courses start. Instructor communication about online courses also needs to be improved.
- Some students complained that the curriculum could be communicated and delivered more effectively and efficiently.
- Graduate students expressed the desire for more consistent opportunities for research collaborations with faculty. They also expressed a desire for more money to attend conferences (\$250 is not sufficient for conference travel, and puts the cost of funding travel onto already financially stressed students).

Recommendations:

- The department should consider structural changes to eliminate constraints that might dampen student interest in the major, such as the relatively high number of credits hours and GPA requirement, and criteria for completing Communication & Journalism as a “second major.” Similarly, the department should review the prerequisite system, with an eye toward reducing and/or clarifying what prerequisite courses are needed to enroll in a given course.
- The department prides itself on having a rigorous program; that is to be applauded. What we are suggesting is not decreasing the rigor of the material, but rather streamlining requirements and organizational mechanisms in ways that make the major more attractive

to students. This would be consistent with peer institutions, many of which have large enrollments in Communication courses/majors.

- Engaging graduate students in research should lead to gains in funded research that would lead to more student travel and conference opportunities. Short of that, the department should consider seeking creative ways to increase travel support for graduate students.

Criterion 5: Faculty

Overall Findings: Met

Findings on strengths:

- The department's faculty are being resourceful and innovative to realize their research goals in a climate of extremely scarce resources.
- The department's talented cohort of assistant professors provides an excellent foundation for future success. We encourage the department and college to prioritize retention of junior faculty.
- The department is emerging as a national leader in the area of critical cultural studies (particularly critical intercultural communication), and these perspectives are crucial to a thriving and equitable democratic society.
- Amid decreases in faculty size, the department has focused on a few key areas in which they can shine.

Findings on shortcomings:

- The size of the current faculty is much smaller than is common at peer R1 institutions (cf. the University of Washington and the University of Utah, which have roughly twice the number of full-time faculty). This creates myriad issues: faculty overload, decreased curriculum delivery, and a weakened national reputation, for example. These problems are likely to hurt retention efforts.
- We recognize that hiring new faculty is not viable in the current budget climate, so we suggest ensuring (via retention and support) that the current number of faculty does not decrease any further. If the financial circumstances in the college change in the future, the Department of Communication & Journalism should be prioritized in allocation of new faculty lines.
- Lack of resources for hiring creates a powerful disincentive for faculty to engage in the process of creating hiring linked to strategic objectives. Faculty also complained about lack of resources for salaries and for research.

Recommendations:

- In light of limited opportunities for faculty hiring and salary increases, faculty should be supported in "softer" ways.
- Seek ways to get junior faculty access to resources that will help them implement their research agendas (e.g., LexisNexis, Qualtrics, SPSS, basic software, computer upgrades, graduate assistants). Improvement on these issues may enhance junior faculty retention efforts.
- Clarify and communicate expectations for tenure and promotion. The substantive diversity of C&J leads to unclear expectations about tenure.

- Address service burdens across faculty ranks to free up time for Associate Professors to pursue their research agendas more aggressively.
- Department leadership should engage faculty in a deep discussion of hiring needs during the annual hiring plan process. The goal should not be to get new hires, but to engage the faculty in a conversation about its direction and strategic objectives.

Criterion 6: Research, Scholarship, & Service

Overall Findings: Met

Findings on strengths:

- The department's faculty is conducting award-winning research in several key areas of the discipline.
- There are impressive cross-campus (and cross-disciplinary) collaborations beginning to emerge (e.g., in computational approaches, in health communication). These have the potential to position the department at the cutting edge of the field.
- The critical cultural faculty are well positioned to lead conversations (within the college, university, and discipline) about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Findings on shortcomings:

- Faculty and graduate students would benefit from having graduate students support their research endeavors in a systematic way.
- The department is well positioned to lead conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion, the department should continue to prioritize these issues at the department level as well. Consider formalizing initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as access, bringing both faculty and student voices into that planning.

Recommendations:

- Meet with College leadership to consider alternatives to the current graduate student funding model (cf. some other units in the college, and at peer institutions). Emphasize the research significance of a shift in priorities.
- Streamline committee service for faculty, to ease the heavy service loads caused by recent faculty reductions. The number of committees and faculty service expectations are too high.
- Engage UNM's Division of Equity and Inclusion to showcase your diverse faculty and student body, and to engage the broader UNM community on these critical issues.

Criterion 7: Peer Comparisons

Overall Findings: Met with Concerns

Findings on strengths:

- The department's use of clear Student Learning Outcomes stacks up favorably with peers.
- The department's emphasis on strategic communication and journalism speaks to a burgeoning area of the field, consistent with student demand. Their innovative AOP strategic communication program is meeting the needs of students in a way that many peer institutions are not.

Findings on shortcomings:

- Financial support in nearly all areas (e.g., salaries, research support, travel, graduate program, undergraduate opportunities) is substantially lower than peer institutions. For example, new assistant professors at some peer institutions (e.g., the University of Washington and the University of Utah) would earn a higher salary than many of the tenured associate professors in the department.
- The size of the faculty is much lower than many peer institutions around the country. In many cases, the department's faculty would be roughly half the size of peer institutions.

No recommendations.

Criterion 8: Resources & Planning

Overall Findings: Met with Concerns

Findings on strengths:

- The department's three staff members are enthusiastic and competent, and report feeling appreciated and supported in their new roles.
- The News Port program provides an excellent opportunity for students and a valuable information resource for local media outlets and citizens statewide.

Findings on shortcomings:

- At present, there is not a strong infrastructure for development and community building beyond the university.
- The department's faculty is under-resourced in some key areas, including in basic tools needed to conduct research (e.g., Qualtrics, SPSS, Lexis-Nexus). Some of these problems have recently been addressed, and the college and university should ensure any remaining issues are handled promptly.

Recommendations:

- The department should consider reviving its dormant advisory board, as part of a broader outreach effort to alumni, professionals, and potential donors.
- The department should consider other possible internal revenue sources, such as a Master's certificate in strategic communication, and potentially an online Master's program in strategic communication.

Criterion 9: Facilities

Overall Findings: Met

Findings on strengths:

- The broadcast studio facility and audiovisual equipment exceed that of many peer institutions.
- The department controls many of the rooms and equipment in its building, which is an advantage in scheduling.

Findings on shortcomings: N/A

No recommendations.

Conclusion: Strategic Planning

Overall Findings: Met with Concerns

Findings on strengths:

- Rather than try to be all things to all people (amid shrinking faculty numbers), the department has chosen to focus on deepening areas of strength (e.g., critical intercultural communication). This is a useful approach.

Findings on shortcomings:

- The department has been, and continues to be, in an era of transition (e.g., Covid, faculty decreases, declining budgets), which creates an opportunity for bigger picture thinking about its future direction.
- This planning process should include strategies for integrating the department more explicitly into the broader university community (e.g., explore additional General Education courses; participation in Grand Challenge research initiatives; research partnership with other units such as public health, computer science, and political science).

Recommendations:

- We recommend the department undergoes a thorough process of creating a strategic plan, including a revised mission statement, online presence, and vision for national reputation. That is, the department should take systematic steps to collectively envision how it can marshal its current strengths to set a course for future success.
- This planning process should include strategies for integrating the department more explicitly into the broader university community (e.g., explore additional General Education courses; participation in Grand Challenge research initiatives; research partnership with other units such as public health, computer science, and political science).
- Whenever possible, the college and university should support these departmental initiatives tangibly, to reward the considerable efforts such initiatives take and to maximize the impact of the results.