

# External Review Report Communication Department Western Carolina University February 2012

I. Introduction. This regular academic program review was conducted five years after the formation of the Communication Department in its current structure. As such, the 2012 review team focused on, not only the goal of maintaining high quality programs, but also growing new and emerging areas of emphasis in a changing media landscape.

a. Description of visit length. Drs. Jeremy Lipschultz (external reviewer, University of Nebraska at Omaha School of Communication) and Julie Johnson-Busbin (Marketing) comprised the academic program team for the site visit on Feb. 1-3, 2012. Dr. Lipschultz served as a consultant five years before and made recommendations on the department's new structure.

b. Summary and description of meetings conducted by the review team. The team held meetings with the interim provost, the department head, communication faculty, current program majors and student media leaders, the interim dean and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, communication alumni, as well as an exit interview with various administrators at Western Carolina University (WCU).

## II. Analysis of program.

a. Undergraduate program. Provide a brief synopsis of: the curriculum (Is it appropriate for WCU's student body? Can students make adequate progress to degree? Are the prerequisites/required courses appropriate to the curriculum?)

i. Communication faculty made great strides in focusing and modernizing the curriculum. Current degree offerings meet changing industry needs in public relations, journalism, and broadcasting. The Broadcast Sales area experienced a recession-related dip in enrollment; however, indicators suggest that the concentration and minor appear to be in the initial stages of recovery. At the same time, it and other concentrations need to continue to align the curriculum with rapidly changing developments in the industry. For example, while the department now is teaching social media skills in various courses and media experiences, there is high employer demand for students to possess skills in this area, and future graduates need to be able to adapt to evolving platforms. Communication has a 120-hour, flexible degree program, which allows the students to major and still have as many as 40 remaining hours. The students use these hours to double-major, minor or take a dual-concentration. Additionally, students may develop an approved program in conjunction with their academic adviser, including an international study program. The team heard from students who are very positive about the options. Communication majors praised the department for its excellent academic advising, which encourages students to progress quickly to degree completion. Majors do not appear to have problems with prerequisites or availability of required classes. However, the required liberal studies communication course is backlogged about 675 seats. This will be addressed under section III. b., as a resource issue.

ii. The student body (Is the faculty/student ratio appropriate? Is the student body representative of the region, mission, goals/objectives of the program?) WCU Communication has a generally appropriate faculty/student ratio given the nature and content of the skills courses found in such program around the nation. Some courses have low enrollment that is dictated by sound pedagogy and national norms. At the same time, however, the WCU department may have some opportunities to provide select large enrollment classes to offset the needed lower student credit hour production in skills courses. The ethnic composition of the student body in the department also appears to be consistent with the larger campus, however, both the department and campus should prioritize a more aggressive recruitment program utilizing alumni located in such nearby cities at Atlanta and Charlotte. Likewise, distance education offerings in select courses could assist recruitment and grow enrollment.

iii. The planning and assessment strategies (Can the program document student learning? Are the goals/outcomes appropriate? Do all faculty have an opportunity to participate in planning and assessment activities?) Faculty is assessing student-learning outcomes through the QEP process and a continuous improvement process seems to be in place. The site visit meeting with faculty revealed that they have a much improved culture of collegial meetings from the dysfunction found five years ago. The department chair is praised for his excellent work to bring the faculty together around a common purpose of student focus. At the same time, the team learned that the self-study was written across several departmental meetings rather than a focused retreat. Faculty expressed an interest and desire to conduct strategic planning sessions in order to focus the departmental mission and vision. The team recommends that a professional consultant lead these sessions in linking assessment data to strategic planning.

b. Graduate program. Provide a brief synopsis of: Currently there are no graduate programs to assess. However, the Communication Department should explore the viability of adding a Master's Program in the future. One area that should be considered is Health Communication. The region has growing needs in the health science area, and Communication could contribute to economic development and community stability. At the same time, creation of graduate teaching assistants in Communication is an excellent way to increase course offerings while helping an extremely small and stretched group of senior faculty members.

i. The curriculum. (Is it appropriate given faculty interests/qualifications? Is the focus well-defined and appropriate to the mission of the program and needs of the discipline? Are the prerequisites/required courses appropriate to the curriculum? Is it of sufficient academic rigor?); n/a

ii. The student body (Are the qualifications and mix of students appropriate to the program? Does the program offer adequate support for students admitted to the program? Is the student body representative of the region, mission, goals/objectives of the program?) n/a

iii. The planning and assessment strategies (Can the program document student learning? Are the goals/outcomes appropriate? Do all faculty have an opportunity to participate in planning and assessment activities?) n/a

### III. Analysis of Faculty.

a. Qualifications. Provide a brief analysis of faculty qualifications (i.e., Does the faculty have the requisite degrees and credentials appropriate to the program?). The Communication Department currently has seven tenure or tenure track faculty and seven contract, term appointment faculty. Of the seven tenure/tenure track faculty, only four hold terminal degrees (Ph.D.). None of the contract faculty hold terminal degrees. This creates long-term issues with regard to establishing credibility of the program both on campus and among peer institutions. The review team strongly recommends that the department seek resources over time to convert term appointments to tenure track lines. The team recommends that the highest priority should be placed on hiring additional tenure-track faculty members in the growing area of public relations and social media. Additionally, the team recommends that the department continue its excellent efforts in collaboration with other departments, such as Marketing and Political Science.

b. Resources and support. Provide a brief analysis of program and institutional support for faculty (i.e., Does the program have adequate and appropriate processes and procedures for rank, tenure and promotion decisions? Is faculty compensation appropriate and adequate? Are library holdings and access adequate? Does faculty have access to adequate lab space, technological resources?). The department follows the CRC process set forth by Western Carolina University for tenure, rank and promotion decisions.

Compensation for contract faculty appears to be slightly under market levels, particularly for senior professors. Additionally, course overloads for contract faculty continues to be an inadequate means to supplement historically low salaries. The consultant report emphasized five years ago that the department should avoid utilizing overloads as a means to cover unfunded needs. In the long-term, this strategy is detrimental to faculty and students. Library holdings and access appear to be adequate, although the absence of a graduate program and the limited number of professors combined to limit review of this concern. Further, the Communication Department has several deficiencies in lab space and inadequate funding to keep pace with rapid industry changes. Many of the labs have technology that is at the end of their useful life, and stable sources of funding are needed for ongoing maintenance and updating in order to remain current. Specifically, WCU needs to fund the television studio upgrade to high definition and the expansion of new social media labs for journalism and broadcasting. Ideally, a renovated building would offer the opportunity to create dedicated space for a convergence newsroom and public relations firm office suite.

c. Teaching, research/creative activity, and service. Provide a brief analysis of faculty participation in teaching, research/creative activity, and service (i.e., Does the faculty sustain an adequate publication record or its creative equivalent? Does the faculty pursue and obtain an adequate amount of external funding? Are the program faculty recognized by their peers for scholarly contributions to their discipline?). Faculty are willing to update curriculum in important new areas such as online journalism, social media, applied public relations, and athletic, arts and other video production. In the area of research/creative activity, faculty have demonstrated the ability to produce high quality publications and productions. However, additional resources need to be identified to support faculty research, including travel to conferences. Mentors should be provided for all tenure track faculty members. At the same time, the lack of tenure/tenure track faculty, the focus on

applied undergraduate education and the severe resource constraints naturally has limited the quantity of output. With so few tenure track faculty members, the service burden is inappropriately distributed among too few given the number of the students in the major. The faculty has opportunities to seek external funding in the future, including grants and fund raising. Program faculty members currently are more likely to be recognized in the industry than academic circles, but the review team recommends a balance.

#### Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget.

a. Does the program have adequate facilities to meet their educational mission? WCU needs to allocate approximately \$2 million to bring broadcasting, journalism and public relations facilities and technologies to state of the art levels, and this includes the needed high definition television facilities, as well as computer labs and software.

b. Does the program have adequate budget to meet their educational mission? Clearly, the program is generating significant amounts of student credit hours through the major and liberal studies offerings, but inadequate funding continues to force too much utilization of paid and unpaid overloads. For example, a contract M.A. faculty member rather than a tenure/tenure track faculty member serves as coordinator for the liberal studies COMM 201 course. This is unacceptable. Additionally, servicing the Liberal Studies COMM 201 requirement with non-tenure tracked instructors creates a quality issue university-wide.

#### IV. Summary of program strengths and areas for improvement.

a. What is your general impression of the program? The Communication Department has thrived despite WCU's period of draconian budget cuts. At the same time, the department has managed to position itself as leader on campus without consistent support from an administration that is sadly in a constant state of flux. Hopefully, WCU will make stable its leadership team and budget during the next five-year period. The team cannot emphasize enough the department's need for additional tenure/tenure track faculty lines that shift liberal studies emphases away from the current model of contract instructors and unhealthy overloads. The liberal studies backlog needs to be solved by supporting required course needs.

The department is a leader in campus and community collaboration, and these efforts have produced well-prepared graduates who find jobs even in a difficult economy. As public relations blur media lines, the department is in an excellent position to work with other departments on exciting new projects. Regional engagement on critical issues, such as health care, opens the door to external funding opportunities.

As the department and campus advance with strategic planning, there is a need for an analysis of retention and graduate rates, which are general WCU concerns. The department may have better than average numbers due to extremely high levels of engagement with students. Further, the department's enrollment numbers demonstrate relatively efficient cost-per-student numbers for media education. The department has an opportunity to improve credit hour production by expanding large lecture offerings to the campus in areas such as media theory, media literacy, social media principles, and digital media applications.

Department faculty members have many excellent ideas for future development. The redesign of the COMM 201 course is an excellent example of progressive curricular design and pedagogy. As a group, faculty members recognize a “sense of momentum” in recent years, as the department emerges as a leader in engaged teaching and learning. While the lost line in Organizational Communication was a setback for the department, strategic planning should produce a clear vision of priorities going forward. The loss of three tenure-track “heavy hitters” must be addressed soon.

Catamount Communications and the Dillsboro project is a model for the department and campus. Identify more projects that bring students and faculty together across majors within the department and across other allied fields. The program review team identified many opportunities to grow the Public Relations Student Society (PRSSA) chapter and the firm in the service of all majors, the campus and region. In the same way, the Western Carolina Journalist site is an exciting new opportunity for everyone at WCU to lead not only in the region, but also in international programs. The department needs to begin by telling its story to majors, the campus and community through new online media. The department currently under-utilizes Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media platforms to connect with current students, the campus, alumni and the region. On the other hand, Power 90.5 radio, Catamount Communications, and television work with athletics are very positive developments.

Current students were overwhelmingly positive about the department. In fact, the team felt they could produce advertisements for WCU. Students love the faculty and appreciate their availability outside the classroom for advising and mentoring. They also appreciate the use of email to keep them informed about scheduling changes and other departmental information. The students perceive that faculty members demand rigor, yet always are available to help struggling students succeed. Transfer students within WCU and from other campuses rate the department as superior compared to previous experiences. The department has improved its overall grade point average to 2.9 because of passionate professors and numerous “real world” opportunities, such as newsroom and PR firm work. The single most important shortcoming is the lack of travel funds for students and faculty members to attend professional meetings and tour media operations in nearby major cities of Asheville, Charlotte and Atlanta.

The team spoke with alumni working in these cities, and they stand ready to make campus visits ad guest lecturers, as well as hosting students on field trips. The alumni were discouraged that more students are not experiencing meetings of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). The department needs to reach out to alumni, communicate needs, and cultivate funding and other support for these opportunities. The campus needs to assist the department by providing regular travel funding to professional and academic conferences. On campus, alumni felt that there remained too many obstacles to collaboration between student media, such as TV 62, and the academic programs. If this has improved in recent years, then the department needs to communicate this change to alumni. They also felt that while students are enthusiastic about new social media, they might not be as focused on foundations, such as how to write a news release. As new media continue to develop, it is a fact that old media will continue to have a place for many years ahead.

b. Overall, what are the areas of strength? Overall, the department is blessed to have enthusiastic and talented students and faculty. The team believes this is a wonderful foundation to build a dynamic and growing department.

c. Overall, in what areas could the program make improvements? Without a doubt, the largest challenge is adequate funding needed to grow the number of tenure/tenure track faculty members, renovate central and adequate space, and offer travel necessary travel opportunities for professional engagement.

#### V. Summary of Recommendations

The team offers the following summary: 1) Schedule strategic planning sessions to clarify the department's mission, vision, goals, and objectives; 2) Seek funding for multiple new tenure/track lines targeted at growing area; 3) Develop a plan to transition instructor lines to tenure/tenure track lines, eliminate overloads, and assign a professor to coordinate liberal studies; 4) Seek support to move to a renovated or new facility to house all or most of the department's activities; 5) Obtain funding to modernize media technologies; 6) Seek funding from campus and alumni for travel to professional meetings and media outlets; 7) communicate more clearly to students, alumni and other stakeholders the progress of the department; and 8) Relieve stress on senior professors through funding, scheduling, and efficient workload assignments.