

PRAC Assessment Grant Report

Integrating Departmental Programmatic Assessment Needs with Pedagogical Objectives in Select Communication Studies Courses July 2005-June 2006

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Summary of Project

This project was a pilot test of a plan to integrate the department's programmatic assessment needs with the pedagogical objectives of select Communication Studies courses, to provide students with the opportunity to learn course content by applying relevant concepts and theories in the collection and analysis of data that could then be used by the department for assessment. The specific courses that were selected for this pilot test were COMM-C228 (Discussion and Group Methods), COMM-C299 (Communication Research Methods), and COMM-C501 (Applied Communication Research Methods). These courses were chosen because of the natural linkages between their course content and assessment procedures. For example, in C228, students learn about focus groups and the communication skills involved in facilitating them. With the support of the grant, students enrolled in the course in Fall 2005 were given the opportunity to apply their knowledge by actually facilitating focus groups of students for assessment purposes. C299 has similar logical linkages to assessment. In this class, students learn to design survey instruments and conduct research interviews, and with the support of this grant, these assignments were modified so the students could apply their research skills by surveying and interviewing students and alumni in Communication Studies in support of the department's assessment needs. By linking the teaching of these methods to the assessment needs of the department, students were given real-world experience in utilizing the methods. In turn, the data provided through these initiatives provide valuable information about how the students served by the department assess us.

The project was carried out in three stages: In Summer 2005, the project directors collaboratively modified assignments in the chosen classes so the assignments would continue to meet the pedagogical objectives of the classes and simultaneously provide useful assessment data for the Department of Communication Studies, which is preparing for a program review in 2007. The second stage of the project was completed in Fall 2005, when students in Group Communication (C228) were taught to facilitate focus groups and then actually conducted focus groups with groups of students and alumni. Likewise, students in Research Methods (C299) were taught fundamentals of survey design and then were asked to design and distribute assessment surveys. In addition, C299 students were taught to conduct research interviews and then given the opportunity to practice this skill by interviewing students and alumni. Finally, in Stage 3,

the data gathered by undergraduate students in the fall were analyzed by students in a graduate research methods class.

All in all, the pilot was a success. Some of the benefits observed include:

- Students in the chosen classes were given practical, real-world, applied learning opportunities
- The department was provided with useful assessment data
- The data provided a useful complement to the assessment data provided by IMIR. Issues emerging in the IMIR data could be explored in more depth in focus groups and interviews.
- The results (particularly in the focus groups and interviews) are most likely more reliable than if they had been collected by faculty interviewers/facilitators, since students were talking with other students

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Three separate populations were sampled for this project: current undergraduate Communication Studies majors, current graduate students in Applied Communication, and alumni with undergraduate degrees from our Department. A combination of surveys, interviews and focus groups were used to collect data from these populations. All research instruments (i.e., surveys, interview schedules, focus group protocols) were designed by students enrolled in the classes identified above. In addition, all data collection was completed by these students.

- Surveys were distributed to 259 currently-enrolled students with a declared major in Communication Studies (50 usable surveys were returned).
- Interviews were conducted with 72 undergraduate majors.
- Surveys were distributed to 33 graduate students (27 usable surveys were returned)
- Interviews were conducted with 21 graduate students.
- Surveys were mailed to 170 alumni who graduated between 1995 and 2005 (39 completed surveys were returned).
- Three focus groups were conducted (n=32)

The data were analyzed by students enrolled in a graduate level applied communication research methods course, as described previously, using thematic content analytical methods. The following section provides a summary of key findings.

Findings

Analysis of Data from Undergraduate Majors

Table 1 provides a summary of the positive and negative themes emerging from this analysis.

Themes Related to Curriculum: Overall students responded favorably to the major offered by the department. 86% of the students surveyed report that they see the degree as having “considerable value,” and 70% of the respondents are confident that they will find a job in their field upon graduation. This response is reinforced in the data from the interviews, with the interviewees unanimously reporting positive feelings about their decision to major in Communication Studies and choosing adjectives such as “challenging,” “insightful,” and “useful” to describe the major. A recurring positive theme in the surveys and interviews was an appreciation of the diversity of classes offered within the major and the flexibility offered students in choosing electives. This was coupled in many students’ responses with a recognition of the value of “making” students take classes in all of the areas of the discipline (media, theater, rhetoric, and organizational/interpersonal communication).

On the other hand, several students reported frustration at being forced to take classes that they did not see as useful. One student, for example, reported, “I don’t like the fact that when you actually get into the major and have to start choosing Communication classes, you must pick from all 4 or 5 categories. I know exactly what I want to do with my degree, and I just wish I could take all the classes I wanted instead of having to take classes from specific categories. I just think you should be able to select the classes you want and that you feel would be best for you, instead of having to make sure you fulfill all the categories.”

Themes Related to Faculty: Nearly all of the comments made about faculty in the interviews and focus groups were positive, with faculty as well as staff being described as “well-qualified” and “very helpful.” The only negative comments made in the interviews about faculty were focused specifically on advising. These data suggest that there is a clearly defined split, with students either being quite satisfied or quite dissatisfied with the academic advising they receive in the department. 64% of the students surveyed report being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with academic advising. A couple of possible explanations exist for this variance in experience: One is that the preferences of individual students may vary, which would explain why student response to the Department’s “way of advising” might vary. Evidence that this may, in part, explain this finding is the split reported in the interviews between those students who would prefer a more directive approach to advising (i.e., where the advisor tells students what to take) and those who would prefer more control over their own course selection. Another possible explanation is that because all faculty members in the Department serve as academic advisors, students are not all receiving the same quality of academic advising.

We, as a faculty, will need to work at “closing the assessment loop” in regards to this issue, and devise ways to improve academic advising within the department. As we do so, there are a couple of other themes related to advising that are worth noting. One is that generally students report that they would prefer to have an advisor whose specialty matches the student’s area of study. The second is that the primary complaint of students who report negative academic advising experiences is not related to accessibility but rather to the perceived “competence” and/or “caring” of the individual advisor. This might indicate that the solution to improving academic advising throughout the Department may lie in improved training and developing a performance appraisal system that motivates “caring” when it comes to advising.

TABLE 1: Themes Emerging in Surveys and Interviews of Undergraduate Majors

Positive Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive attitude about their decision to major in COMM (seen as providing them with many opportunities academically and found the subject “fun” and “interesting.”• Faculty is very helpful and well-qualified• Likes the intimate class size in comparison to classes offered elsewhere in the university that are much larger and less personal• Diversity of classes offered and flexibility in choosing electives (balanced with appreciation that students “had” to take classes like theater)• Adjectives chosen to describe the department and the major were overwhelmingly positive (“challenging” “insightful” “useful”)• Atmosphere of the department: One respondent stated, “I like the people in the departments, all the professors, students, and advisors they are all top notch, they are all professional and they are very goal oriented with your goals in mind, meaning you tell them what you want to accomplish and they will best help you try to achieve what ever goals you have both personally and professionally within that department.”
Negative Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Broadness of discipline makes it difficult to specialize in any one subject. “The department is too broad. I don’t like the fact that I have to take theater and acting classes because they don’t apply towards my concentration.”• Too many required courses that aren’t seen as useful.• Perception that communication as a discipline lacks a clear definition and is viewed as “less academic” than other disciplines• Academic advising is non-existent or substandard (nearly ½ said this) – responses at undergrad level were split, with half speaking very positively about advising in the department and half speaking pretty negatively about it.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Most responses were positive about the helpfulness of people in the department (““They are ready to lend a hand whenever you are in trouble of any sort. They are very caring in their approach and provide good advice for future preference.”) and accessibility (“I could go in on any given day and see someone.”).○ Concerns seem to center around finding someone who is perceived as competent and caring.• Lack of awareness of resources, such as speaker’s lab, comtech lab.• Concern about whether department/degree will adequately prepare them for professional positions/jobs

Analysis of Data from Graduate Students

The results of the thematic analysis of the graduate student surveys, interviews, and focus groups are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Themes Emerging in Interviews/Surveys of Graduate Students: (n=21 interviews, 27 surveys)

Positive Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty are credible and approachable • Program is seen as applicable to everyday/professional lives (“I’m taking two classes right now and each class period I see real world application.” What I like best about the program is “that it is an applied program and very theoretically grounded.”) • Freedom of course selection/types of classes offered • Partnerships with outside organizations are seen as valuable part of the program (would like more opportunity to participate in them) (“I think the fact that there is a lot of civic engagement on both the students and faculty helps as well.” “I enjoy interaction with the community and civic engagement. I believe these things to be the biggest asset to the program.”) • Respect of individuality from faculty and that they encourage research
Negative Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for more classes during the summer and more frequent offering of classes • Need for better academic advising within the department (Possible solutions vary-- assign advisor upon entry; make it easier for individuals to take charge of their own “advising”) • Desire for more opportunities to interact with faculty outside the classroom • Identification with program is neutral or lacking (“I’m like most students in that I’m part time and work so I don’t feel like I’m part of any group or program.” “It’s just I don’t really identify as a Communication Studies major I guess, unless I really think about it”) • Lack of technological instruction (“frustrated by lack of initial instruction on navigation the computer systems.”) • Concern that the program sees itself as a “terminal master’s program.”

Analysis of Data Collected from Alumni

Table 3 provides a summary of the themes emerging in the surveys of alumni. For the most part, the findings from this survey are consistent with the results of the IMIR alumni surveys. Respondents commented positively on the faculty (both the quality and helpfulness of faculty members), the curriculum, and how well the program prepared them for their career and/or graduate school. The more negative assessments were related to advising, the lack of in-class technology (which is certainly something that has changed since these students would have been attending IUPUI), and the lack of a sense of identification with the department.

TABLE 3: Themes Emerging in Surveys of Communication Studies Alumni (n=39)

Positive Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality of faculty• Helpfulness and experience of the faculty• Career/graduate school preparation provided by the department• Curriculum offered within the department• Department staff, including receptionists and secretaries
Negative Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helpfulness of academic advising (Note: This mirrors findings university wide; not unique to Communication Studies)• In class technology• Helpfulness of the department in class registration• Lack of sense of “belonging” with the department—no sense of identification

Future Directions

This pilot project was so successful, that the Department is planning to use it as a prototype for ongoing assessment. Merging the pedagogical objectives of these classes with the assessment needs of the Department appears to be mutually beneficial: Students are given practical experience in designing surveys, conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, and analyzing data, and the Department is given useful information about how our students and alumni assess our programs.