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Graduate Program Assessment of Student Satisfaction: A Method for Merging University and Department Outcomes

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In recent years American public universities have come under increased pressure to be accountable to taxpayers. The level of scrutiny of universities by the public, state legislatures, governing bodies and coordinating commissions has led university administrators to evaluate and prioritize programs (Arneson & Arnett, 1998). Some major journalism and mass communication programs have been eliminated (Fedler, Carey, & Counts, 1998). Many communication departments have been pushed to measure outcomes of classroom instruction as part of the assessment movement (Parker & Drummond-Reeves, 1992).

Assessment can be a positive force in educational reform (Diez, 1997). Strickland and Strickland (1998) suggest that assessment of student learning is a process that is more involved than simple grading and evaluation:

> *Assessment* refers to a collection of data, information that enlightens the teacher and the learner, information that drives instruction . . . Good teachers assess and adjust their teaching based on their assessments . . . Assessment is ongoing and is a collection of information—*data*, facts that help teachers put the pieces together (p. 19).

Individual teachers may collect assessment data from their classes. Additionally, it is possible for departments to establish program and assessment goals through ongoing meetings of groups of instructors. Communication administrators must guide the planning exercise by assisting faculty to see the issues involved in assessment:

> Assessment in communication education from the basic courses through our most advanced studies is necessary. By working to meet this responsibility, communication educators can provide the quality of

education their constituencies expect in order to educate students to become citizens who will find both satisfaction and success on the career paths they choose to follow (Makay, 1997, p. 62).

It has been more common for universities to survey alumni satisfaction, primarily for fund-raising purposes. The purpose of this study was to evaluate a communication graduate program based upon the perceptions of M.A. alumni satisfaction. The department's assessment plan was utilized to measure their perceived knowledge of theory and research, as well as feelings about career preparation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are at least three rationales for the need for academic program assessment: 1) institutional effectiveness in meeting program goals; 2) fiscal accountability; and 3) improving decisions about resource allocation (Lewis, 1988). Social science and liberal arts-based disciplines have been viewed as most vulnerable to being examined by university administrators and state legislators (Parker & Drummond-Reeves, 1992).

Historically, communication programs were evaluated outside the context of the assessment movement (Trott, Barker, & Barker, 1988). Issues arose such as the value of communication theory in a professional school setting (Vocate, 1997). There has been some recent interest in measuring outcomes of undergraduate core curriculum (King, 1998). In one study, upper-level students did not share the core beliefs of mass communication faculty: "Before journalism and mass communication education rushes to examine its role in the 21st century, it should aim to identify a core of knowledge that helps define an educated person in the field" (Brock, 1996, pp. 13-14).

Christ and Hynes (1997) examined mission statements and purposes, as well as program assessment procedures. Some mission statements "frame their role in terms of outcomes" (p. 81). For example, one school had as one of its goals to graduate students ready for jobs in the field. However, the importance of career preparation at the M.A. level is not clear.

From annual surveys of journalism and mass communication, we know that graduate education at the master's level is an important area. In the most recent data, there were 9,999 graduate students enrolled in master's programs, and 3,434 degrees granted (Becker & Kosicki, 1997, pp. 66-67). However, no research has been published that reports communication graduate alumni satisfaction. In the journalism and mass communication field, alumni surveys typically address fund-raising (Parsons & Wethington, 1996), rather than program assessment.

Outside of mass communication, alumni fund-raising research has also been of interest (Melchiori, 1988). However, the assessment movement has led researchers to broader questions. Once departmental educational goals have been developed, a departmental assessment plan should be devised (Mentkowski & Loacker, 1985). In general, faculty must meet to agree upon outcome goals. Alumni are both a source of data for determining outcomes and a resource to measure effectiveness. In particular, alumni may be able to provide to faculty measures of satisfaction with the department/university and perceptions of assessment goals.

Follow-up studies of graduates and former students "provide one form of outcomes measurement that can be used to address issues of accountability, program review, community relations, and marketing" (Stevenson, Walleri, & Japely, 1985, p. 81). Survey data show a relationship between alumni satisfaction with program and post-graduation work experiences (Pike, 1993).

The present study was the outgrowth of a university-wide assessment movement that led a communication department to develop a plan. This research focused on graduate alumni satisfaction and the departmental assessment measures. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: How satisfied were graduates of the program with the quality, flexibility and facilities in the department and the university?

RQ2: Do alumni think the graduate program fulfilled its stated goals?

METHODOLOGY

Graduates of a communication Master of Arts degree program at an urban midwestern university were surveyed in the spring of 1998. The 23-year old program was the product of a merger between speech and journalism departments. The program currently enrolls about 110 students, and in recent years has graduated as many as 18 in one year. Since 1992, Master of Arts degree candidates have been required to complete four core courses, including a foundation seminar in mass communication, a foundation seminar in speech communication, a qualitative research seminar, and a quantitative research seminar. Most graduate students currently are employed in public relations, journalism, broadcasting or business communication.

A total of 75 graduates out of about 100 since 1985 were identified for the mailing list. Prior to 1990, records for graduates were incomplete, and addresses for some alumni were not known. A cover letter, survey booklet and business reply envelope were sent to each of the graduates on the list. The overall response rate was 58.6 percent (N=44), and the sample appeared to be representative of the population based upon demographic data.

Respondents completed a self-administered four-page survey booklet. The questionnaire was based upon literature found about program assessment (McKenna, 1983; Parker & Drummond-Reeves, 1992), educational satisfaction, and demographics. There were fifteen department and five university items measuring alumni satisfaction with the quality, flexibility and facilities. In addition, alumni offered their perceptions on three departmental assessment goals related to instruction in theory, research and career preparation. A five-point Likert scale was employed on assessment and satisfaction items.

For alumni satisfaction items, frequency analysis was performed. Means were calculated for alumni perceptions of departmental assessment goals. A multiple regression utilized department and university satisfaction items as predictors of alumni perceptions about career preparation.

Additionally, respondents offered qualitative comments in open-ended questions in all areas. While there were a limited number of substantive comments, the comments made focused on the practicality of a graduate program emphasizing theory and research, and the issue of career preparation.

RESULTS

The typical respondent was a 38-year-old white female who began taking graduate courses in 1991, completed her last graduate course in 1994, selected the thesis option, and received the M.A. degree in 1995. Respondents were evenly divided between program emphasis in mass communication and speech communication. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were employed as either managers or educators.

Satisfaction with quality, flexibility and facilities

   The first research question asked alumni their level of satisfaction with the program quality, flexibility and facilities in the Department of Communication and the university at-large. Overall, respondents were satisfied with the department's graduate program (40.9% very satisfied, 52.3% satisfied).

TABLE 1

Alumni Satisfaction with Department and University Quality, Flexibility and Facilities

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Department item	% Very satisfied /satisfied	% Neutral	%Very dissatisfied /dissatisfied
Program of study	97.7	2.3	0.0
Class size	97.7	2.3	0.0
Program in general	93.2	6.8	0.0
Instructional quality	93.0	4.7	2.3
Respect for students	86.4	11.4	2.2
Faculty availability	86.0	7.0	7.0
Concern for individual	84.1	11.4	4.5
Flexible requirements	83.7	11.6	4.7
Course scheduling	83.7	9.3	7.0
Nontraditional students	72.1	20.9	7.0
Academic advising	70.5	18.2	11.3
Course variety	69.8	25.6	4.6
Computer facilities	56.1	34.1	9.8
Practical experiences	35.7	52.4	11.9
University item	% Very satisfied /satisfied	% Neutral	%Very dissatisfied /dissatisfied
Library resources	93.2	6.8	0.0
Transfer of credits	35.0	57.5	7.5
Career planning	25.6	64.1	10.2
Student orientation	23.1	66.7	10.2
Financial aid	22.0	73.2	4.9
Job placement	7.7	71.8	20.5

The twenty items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1=very satisfied, 2=satisfied, 3=neutral, 4=dissatisfied, 5=very dissatisfied). The forty-four respondents were surveyed in Spring 1998.

The highest departmental ratings were for program and faculty items. The lowest departmental ratings were for advising, course variety, computer facilities and practical work experiences. The highest university ratings were for library resources. Areas such as career planning, orientation, financial aid and job placement services received the lowest ratings.

Alumni evaluation based upon departmental assessment measures

   The second research question asked for alumni opinion on whether the graduate program fulfilled its stated goals. The department's assessment plan identified three measures of effectiveness:

   1) A broad theoretical knowledge of communication as a discipline;
   2) The ability to conduct original research on communication topics; and
   3) Increased preparation for employment in the communication field.

The survey instrument asked alumni for their perceptions of whether the graduate program met the assessment goals. Overall, respondents agreed that the program met all three goals.

TABLE 2

Alumni Perceptions of Departmental Assessment Goals

Department item	Mean	Standard Deviation
I obtained a broad theoretical knowledge of communication as a discipline (mass communication, speech communication, and research methods).	1.43	0.59
I am able to conduct original research on communication topics (critical, qualitative or quantitative) including reviewing pertinent literature, designing and conducting the research and writing the final thesis/report.	1.61	0.81
I feel the M.A. program provides increased preparation for employment in the field.	2.09	0.86

The three items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree). The forty-four respondents were surveyed in Spring 1998.

The third assessment goal, which asked for perceptions about whether the graduate program provides increased preparation for employment, was used as a dependent variable in a Listwise regression analysis. The twenty satisfaction items found in Table 1 were tested as predictors. Eight items were statistically significant.

TABLE 3

**Alumni Satisfaction with Department and University
Quality, Flexibility and Facilities as Predictors**

Department predictors	p<.05
*Program of study	.010
*Program in general	.008
*Flexible requirements	.000
*Course scheduling	.039
*Course variety	.001
*Practical experiences	.024
University predictors	
*Library resources	.043
*Transfer of credits	.015

*For the dependent variable, "I feel the M.A. program provides increased preparation
for employment in the field," R=.871; Adjusted R Square=.413; Standard Error=.64.*

Alumni comments

Respondents were asked open-ended questions after each section of the survey to attempt to understand why they answered as they did. The most serious concern expressed by alumni was related to their satisfaction with the practicality of a program emphasizing theory and research. Said one graduate who is employed as a vice president and market sales support manager, "The program does not cater very well to the working professional. Courses and content need to be more related to 'real world' and professional experiences. Faculty need to also have an interest in this and have more professional work experience."

The issue of employment preparation was addressed in the third assessment goal, and some respondents felt that the department could do a better job. An advertising agency account manager said, "In regard to question 3, I would like to have had more courses at the graduate level that would have better prepared me for employment. A theoretical approach does not give me the necessary skills except for research methods for my current job."

The majority of respondents perceived that graduate education helped them advance. However, not all employers value the degree equally, according to a director of public relations: "I think so, because it made me a better writer and thinker. However, my employer at the time didn't seem to value it. Although they paid for my tuition, there was no recognition upon obtaining my degree. But, it did seem to make a difference when I changed jobs."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a communication graduate program based upon the perceptions of M.A. alumni satisfaction. The department's assessment plan was utilized to measure their perceived knowledge of theory and research, as well as feelings

about career preparation. The results, as reflected in the regression analysis, indicate that assessment measures related to content taught may be linked to perceptions about quality, flexibility and facilities in a graduate program.

The nagging question for a communication M.A. program seems to be whether or not curriculum should be tightly connected to practical work experiences. It is presumed that a graduate program must teach beyond the professional skills of undergraduate course work. Typically, this leads to greater emphasis on communication theory and research. However, some would respond that such focus fails to adequately prepare the M.A. graduate for employment. Graduate faculty need to be able to demonstrate through the assessment process how communication theory and research help the graduate in career development. If the M.A. program is designed to prepare a student for doctoral study, then the focus on theory and research is appropriate. However, for those students who follow an applied path in the business community, it may be more appropriate to focus graduate studies on the needs of management-level employees. For example, while academic research courses generally relate curriculum to published research, an applied research course might be centered on radio and television ratings, print media circulation, focus groups, consulting, budgeting, and other management issues.

The survey results indicated that M.A. graduates were employed in a wide range of careers. About two-thirds of the respondents said they were in managerial or education positions. Others were media professionals, consultants and free-lance writers. It is difficult to design a single graduate program that meets all needs, and to demonstrate how critical thinking and writing skills advance a career. Faculty need to review curriculum and determine whether it is better to focus on either academic or applied graduate studies, or blend those two traditions. The difficulty in combining academic and applied graduate studies at the M.A. level is the limited time in terms of course hours, the varied undergraduate and professional backgrounds of students, and the expertise of faculty. Most graduate faculty have extensive academic experience publishing in journals, but they may have limited backgrounds in business communication environments. On the other hand, it is difficult to bring in professional adjuncts to teach graduate-level courses. There have been some recent efforts, however, to allow graduate faculty the flexibility to move in and out of industry through either fellowships or business partnerships.

The present study was limited to a one-time mail survey of graduates and their perceptions. This does not address faculty or employer perceptions of the assessment goals. Future research should examine those views, increase sample size and use alternative methods of data collection.

The present data, while limited, offer an exploration into ways that M.A. programs might begin to assess and revise curriculum. The alumni in this study seemed satisfied with department-run classroom experiences, but more than half of respondents raised concerns about applied, practical experiences at the graduate level. Administrators considering changes in M.A. curriculum might urge their faculty to discuss the goals of their program and how applied experiences fit.

Of greater concern should be the low ratings these students gave to the six university-controlled items. Beyond their satisfaction with library resources, the alumni had a rather negative perception of the ability of the university to meet their needs. For administrators, we need to ask whether our departments are doing all we can to communicate with the rest of the university in terms of student services. This highlights the importance we should place on faculty participation in strategic planning, program assessment, and university-wide committee service that allows us to speak about the needs of our students.

Educational outcomes will continue to be an important issue for communication educators. Given the limited resources at American universities, there are no signs that the "era of entrenchment" is fading (Fedler, Carey, & Counts, 1998, p. 31). It is critical that

assessment data be collected, interpreted and used to revise curriculum in order to be responsive to needs. By doing this, communication programs will be more accountable to their constituents.

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