Communication Studies Department: Assessment Report, Spring 2013

For the past academic year, the Communication Studies department has worked toward a feasible assessment model for our undergraduate program that incorporates the four overall learning goals we endorsed in the spring of 2012. In this report, we include a brief review of the learning goal structure as well as the changes we proposed as a department for future assessment.

Background Information

In the last assessment report, the assessment committee explained the departments exploration of the courses in which our faculty members teach our SLOs, and challenges we faced as a department with the assessment of our agreed upon learning goals. Specifically, our courses did not logically map onto our major learning goals and thus, assessment of the program would not be as systematic and egalitarian as we would like.

During the academic year of 2011-2012, we provided specific conceptualizations of each of the learning objectives such that they could be interpreted and applied across multiple courses and breadth areas. Additionally, we attempted to develop a clear assessment plan that would allow us to both signal specific breadth areas that would focus on at least one of the SLO areas (thus identifying courses in which assessment of those areas would take place) and also ensure that we would be meeting our programmatic objectives such that no student could take a path through our major that left them without the opportunity to focus on one or more SLO areas.

At the conclusion of the Fall 2011 semester, we agreed upon the following SLO areas and conceptualizations:

1. **Theory**: Communication Studies majors will be able to articulate and use appropriate theories to analyze communication in a way that is methodologically consistent in paradigm and context.
2. **Ethics**: Communication Studies majors will be able to articulate ethical standards and will be disposed to engage in ethical practice within specific communication contexts.
3. **Application**: Communication Studies majors will apply course material to aspects of their personal life, social life, and/or their local communities (e.g., delivering public speeches, performances, or other community focused discourse, even if that delivery happens only in the classroom).
4. **Scholarship**: Communication Studies majors will be able to read critically and evaluate appropriately original scholarship in the discipline.

The assessment committee then needed to develop a plan for assessment of the SLOs. During the Spring of 2012, the assessment committee conducted a series of interviews with each of the full time faculty to ask about the specific foci that they might take in their most typically taught courses. The objective of this research was to descriptively analyze where we believe we are currently focusing on each of these areas and then identify breadth areas in which we might reasonably assess the SLOs.

However, we were met with a familiar challenge because even though we had minimized our SLO areas to four, we were still unable to find, through our descriptive analysis, a clear mapping of our SLOs onto our eight breadth areas. At the conclusion of the Spring of 2012, we conclude this year's assessment with a clear understanding of our SLOs, but as yet, not a clear understanding of our assessment plan.

Report of Assessment Activities

During the 2012-2013 academic year, our assessment committee explored alternative models of assessment. We discussed the possibilities of assessing our SLOs within a limited number of select courses that are required by all majors such that we could systematically map the results for our program. We found that the challenges to the flexibility of our majors that were inherent in such a plan were met with clear concern and discouragement from the faculty as a whole and thus we explored a different option.

We decided instead to explore the concept of e-Portfolios as a possible avenue for assessment (and also for student capstone experiences). We began in the late fall of 2012 working toward the acquisition of e-portfolios as an option by first meeting with Academic Technology and discussing possible options. Our committee chair presented those options to the faculty in late fall and the faculty agreed to hear more in the spring by inviting Academic Technology to present at a faculty meeting.

For many of the Communication Studies faculty, e-portfolios are a new and unfamiliar tool for student assessment and capstone work. Thus, adopting e-portfolios outright was not a comfortable conclusion for our faculty. However, the assessment committee will move forward with a pilot project of e-portfolios in the 2013-2014 Academic Year in order to explore the usability for our faculty and students and to test multiple options for execution of the e-portfolio. Two options that we will work with include multiple ways that we might deal with the culmination of learning in the eportfolio.

First, we will pilot e-portfolios with students who will assemble work from prior courses of which they are proud, and on which they would frame the pieces in terms of the learning objections and reflect on their learning in those pieces with critical essays that are incorporated into the e-portfolio. The model we would work with in this case is to assess whether the capstone experience could be a 1 or 2 unit experience that creates a culminating project for the students rather than any major new projects.

Second, we will pilot e-portfolios with students who will complete major revisions of work from prior courses in order to include those pieces in their public portfolio. The framing of each piece will discuss its background and learning outcomes and the reflection of each piece will discuss the major changes that were made and the learning outcomes from those changes.

After two semesters of piloting these e-portfolios as "independent projects" for the piloting faculty members, we will review the portfolios and assess the work in committees to determine 1) whether the e-portfolio project will work as an assessment tool for the program, 2) whether the e-portfolio should be a collection of works or a major revision of works throughout the program, and 3) the workload for the faculty managing the e-portfolios. We will also test some rubrics during this collective assessment in order to gauge their utility for random portfolio selections in the future should we adopt this procedure.

At the final spring faculty meeting in 2014, the faculty should reflect on the e-portfolio pilot experience and vote on whether they would like to expand the use of e-portfolios for program assessment and capstone projects. In the fall of 2014, the faculty will meet to either 1) establish the assessment procedure for the newly implemented portfolios or 2) discuss alternate assessment plans for the 2014-2015 Academic Year.