Outcomes Assessment B. A. in Communication Spring 2007

Department Mission (relevant to the B. A. in Communication)

Upper division courses focus on helping majors and minors develop the abilities necessary to make informed, critical analyses of their own and others' communicative acts, and to apply their knowledge in creating effective and ethical communication in social situations characterized by any form of diversity of difference....[and] providing students with an understanding of human communication that will help them develop the communication skills necessary for successful interaction in professional and personal situations where diversity is a component.

Program Objectives:

Preparing graduates to use their knowledge and skills in professional positions.

Preparing students to continue in higher education.

Preparing students for ethical and knowledgeable communication in social relationships.

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Students taking Communication classes, minors in our discipline, and undergraduate majors all come to Communication classes for a variety of reasons, and whatever those reasons, all students find rigorous and research-driven content courses. Students who succumb to the myth that Communication classes must be easy because "everyone communicates" often find that our classes are more rigorous than they have anticipated, and withdraw. Students who stay find both theory grounded and practical information.

The Department of Communication has been assessing its CORE Curriculum service courses since 1996. During that time we have demonstrated with both quantitative and qualitative assessments that there is a strong and steady learning curve throughout both the service courses. The Department offers sixteen sections of the service courses each semester (providing learning for 382 students per semester at capacity). We also provide two to four classes in each of the six week summer sessions. All students in six classes are video taped for assessment and every student score on every assignment is recorded and tabulated in our assessment process. Faculty members and Teaching Assistants regularly share in Inter-Rater Reliability Training in order to assure evenness in evaluation across all sections of the service courses. Every TA who teaches a service course must attend COMM661, Teaching the Communication Service Courses. In that course, TAs are mentored by a different faculty person each semester in the matters of teaching Communication and specifically in how to facilitate the basic Communication course.

Since the course was first updated at the request of a Provost, it has undergone a constant process of assessment and improvement. Along the way we increased the matter of

cultural content, increased group content in COMM131X, and increased actual speaking practices in COMM141X. Because it is a University-wide requirement, students sometimes come into those classes resistant to the learning available. Still, assessment has consistently shown a steady learning curve across all sections of the courses. Student videotaped presentations, randomly selected for observation in assessment, very often show "night and day" differences in student abilities to prepare and give public presentations. The Assessment Committee continues to "tweak" the courses, but generally speaking, the basic Communication courses in the CORE Curriculum are operating very successfully.

The B. A. in Communication regularly enrolls between 30 and 50 students. Assessing the degree program is extraordinarily difficult in that declared majors come to the degree in many ways and at many points in their careers. The least ordinary major is one who declares as a true freshman, beginning an academic career at UAF. More often we get transfer students and students who are declared in another discipline and find in taking our classes that our discipline offers a more practical route toward their goals. More often than not, our majors do not begin their major career in our introductory course. That means that the student comes into the major at the upper division level and often gets to Communication Theory prior to satisfying the entry level requirement. Because the Banner system will not stop out such enrollments it is not unusual for our faculty members to find themselves advising students who have never come to the Department for advisement, but who are within a year of graduating. Quite often we must accommodate students who have advanced to senior level classes but have never taken the entry level class. We do not pressure students to study Communication Theories at a level lower than they have already had. The accommodation is to take another theory driven senior level course and to petition the Department requirement. When we do find in assessment that we have entry and exit information (before and after), we find a satisfying level of learning both in speaking skills and in disciplinary content. Our undergraduates who have been with us throughout their undergraduate careers demonstrate in our capstone course that they have accumulated the learning package that is intended in the degree plan. While there are considerable levels of learning demonstrated by other majors, we cannot clearly claim to know that our classes have created that learning. The Assessment Committee regularly ponders this dilemma by discussing our "good students" outside the regular procedures of assessment. When we can, we recall the courses they have had from our faculty and determine if most or all have been as our students. If this anecdotal assessment is given credence, our program is doing well indeed. While we do not formally track our graduates into employment we know many of our students who go on for more education and others who we hear from who are employed on career paths with which they are pleased.

Discussion of Program

Discussions by the Program Assessment Committee (our full faculty) have determined two major areas in which the program could be improved. First, we began increasing the cultural content of all our courses. Alaska's position as a Pacific Rim and Northern latitudes university means that we have considerable diversity in our classes. The ability

to communicate across cultural boundaries without allowing them to become barriers is clearly a twenty-first century skill, and our program adjustment meets this growing need. Unfortunately, we find that the conservative pundits have co-opted the concept of political correctness in opposition to our constitutional democracy. Thus, in recent history if one expresses the right of everyone as deserving equal treatment under the law, common language practice makes it fashionable to dismiss the idea as "political correctness." If we allow constitutional democracy to be silenced by those who use the term political correctness as a pejorative, we abdicate our responsibility as citizens first and teachers second. The Department of Communication chooses not to do so. We have chosen rather to increase the culture content and continue making diversity a regularly discussed topic in all our classes.

Another area in which our Assessments have shown a need for curricular change is the matter of communication ethics. Anyone who reads a newspaper or watches a television news program finds strong evidence that the matter of ethics is in an era of breakdown in our society. Because face-to-face human contact is the primary component of society, the matter of ethics begins there and our Department has chosen to increase the discussion of ethics across all major classes.

As we find our economy shifting from an industrial base to a service base, the matter of human communication moves directly to the center of all that we do. When we advise students and they consider that fact, it is easy to argue that what they learn from our classes will make a difference in their lives.

B. A. in Communication Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

The Bachelor of Arts in Communication is structured as a general degree as is the expectation of many, if not most, of such degrees as offered across American universities. It is intended to prepare graduates for entry level employment, primarily in an organizational setting, but not skewed toward any particular organizational type. At UAF the degree is supported by a faculty with extensive teaching experience. Three of the four faculty members are Excellence in Teaching Award winners in the College of Liberal Arts. SOI averages for most classes are 4.0 or above. The cohort of majors is between 36 and 50 according to the most current figures available which means that majors to faculty ratios are low in a department that encourages student closeness to the department. The department maintains a dedicated computer for undergraduate use and also maintains a small library of disciplinary texts and journals. Courses in the major have been adjusted to the circumstances of the society so that matters of culture and ethics have been increased in classes across the degree. The greatest strength is the openness of the dialogue available to majors between them and their major professors.

Weaknesses

The most significant weakness of the degree stems from lack of college support. Because the faculty is small in a growing major, students can find major classes being taught by carefully selected Adjunct faculty. While such adjunct teaching is good, it is not what the Department wants the education of its majors to be. Because the faculty in the Department is also responsible for a high profile graduate degree, class rotation beyond the core major requirements is irregular. Majors looking for Communication electives often do not see catalog courses rotate in the advertised frequency. A final weakness is the program's lack of an organized internship program. While the Department has had such a program in its planning for over five years, faculty members are stretched to capacity and internships are only available when outside interests come to the Department seeking interns.