

Preparing for an External Program Review: A Handbook for Department Chairs

National Communication Association (revised April 2016)

Preparing for an External Program Review

Introduction

As the largest national organization serving the academic discipline of communication, the National Communication Association (NCA) has a commitment to excellence in teaching, research, and service at all levels. Moreover, NCA seeks to provide its individual and departmental members with needed services and programs as they pursue professional excellence on their home campuses.

Because many of our members are involved in teaching at the undergraduate level, and because almost all higher education institutions in this country have undergraduate courses in communication, the NCA National Office receives frequent requests for assistance in evaluating undergraduate curricula and developing new academic programs. Indeed, assistance with the processes of program evaluation, whether for internal reviews, protection of existing programs, or development of new programs, is a frequently requested services from NCA. Until recently, NCA has had no official guidelines to help our members address the challenge of assessing undergraduate education in communication.

NCA's Guidelines for Undergraduate Programs in Communication is comprised of seven areas of evaluation that provide clear guidance and direction for faculty and administrators who face the challenge of assessing undergraduate communication programs. Built on the assumption that programs differ in mission, focus, and implementation, the standards provide general guidelines that particular programs can implement in a variety of ways. The seven standards may be used to assess any communication curriculum, regardless of how it is structured: free standing as a department, as a school of communication, or embedded in a division or composite department.

It is our goal in this document to provide an outline of what department chairs can expect from a program review and to provide a checklist of things to do to prepare for the program review process. Program reviews provide an excellent opportunity for your department to receive constructive and valuable feedback from experienced teacher/scholars in our discipline. You should expect to receive a written report from your reviewer(s) in which they provide an evaluation of each of the seven standards listed in the NCA's Standards for Undergraduate Communication Programs. When done well, program review (specifically the written report and the reviewers' exit interviews with your Dean or Provost) also provides an excellent opportunity to promote both your department in particular and the discipline of communication in general.

Using NCA's Undergraduate Guidelines for Communication Programs

In 2005 NCA developed an initial set of standards for program review (see Appendix A), which were approved by the Legislative Assembly in that year. In 2009, a Presidential Task Force on Program Review and Evaluation was charged with reviewing and revising the

Guidelines and developing materials to accompany their use by department chairs. The Guidelines (and all other information referenced in this handbook) can be found on the NCA website in the “Guidelines for Program Review and Assessment” and “Institutional Data” sections of the Chairs’ Corner (<http://www.natcom.org/chairscorner>). In some cases the guidelines identified by NCA are more rigorous than some regional guidelines; in other cases, they are not. We direct you to a chart depicting a comparison of NCA’s Guidelines with those of each regional accrediting agency, which can be found at both links mentioned above.

The Guidelines are simply a guide for organizing your review, as well as a template for reviewers to use when writing their evaluation. Your institution may require that you provide additional information and tables not required in the NCA Guidelines. These Guidelines were not developed for accreditation purposes; rather, they serve as a common standard by which departments of communication can be assessed.

Preparing the Self Study

Ideally, the Guidelines should serve as the template or organizational structure for preparing your departmental self-study. Certainly you must also include any information that is required by your institution. To make the most of your review, and to provide a context for both your reviewers and the administrators who will read your review, it is strongly suggested that you include the following information:

- ✓ Introduction and overview to the document
- ✓ History of the Communication program
- ✓ Faculty biographies or *curriculum vitae*
- ✓ Departmental mission and goals
- ✓ Curriculum components and rationale, including learning outcomes
- ✓ Departmental assessment plan
- ✓ Summary of department strengths and areas for improvement
- ✓ Commentary on department strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Locating Comparative Data

Hopefully, your office of Academic Affairs or Office of Institutional Research will assist with your review and will provide you specific data. If not, you might wish to request data on the number of majors in your department, your FTE, Student Credit Hour Production, and other standard data. A checklist of the type of data that might be relevant to your program review is found in Appendix A. You might also wish to review data from your institutional peers so that you can discuss your program in light of departments of communication at similar institutions.

NCA also has data that have been compiled from department chairs about communication programs across the country. A sample of the questionnaire as well as survey results and comparable data can be found on the NCA website by viewing the “Guidelines for Program Review and Assessment” section of the Chairs’ Corner.

Locating and Hosting External Reviewers

Qualified program reviewers can promote growth and development of a communication program by celebrating the successes a department achieves in meeting its mission and student learning outcomes while also identifying where improvements to the program can be made. Reviewers assume responsibility for being fair and objective and committed to the overall improvement of teaching, learning and researching in the communication discipline.

In selecting reviewers, program administrators are encouraged to explore reviewers' qualifications in the following areas:

- ✓ Tenure in a communication program at a regionally accredited institution
- ✓ Experience with departmental review process at home department and/or with conducting reviews of other communication departments
- ✓ Commitment to student learning outcomes assessment
- ✓ Experience teaching in a program similar to the program being reviewed;
- ✓ Scholarly activity (e.g., publication, active conference participation, and Association service)
- ✓ Knowledge of regional accreditation standards
- ✓ Experience with program administration as a program or department chair; and
- ✓ Expertise and understanding in the field of communication in general

Helpful Materials for Reviewers

To make the most of their visit, please make sure that you send the following information to reviewers at least two weeks prior to their visit:

- ✓ Catalogue (hard copy or url)
- ✓ C.V.'s of all faculty
- ✓ Appropriate student data (#majors, FTE, SCH, etc.)
- ✓ Departmental recognition (press clippings, etc.)
- ✓ The department self study

Scheduling the Visit

Depending upon the size of your department, expect to schedule 1.5 – 2.5 days for the visit. It is also helpful if you can entertain the reviewer(s) for meals and perhaps schedule a reception where the reviewer(s) can meet informally with students and faculty. Reviewers will typically expect to meet with the following people:

- ✓ Department chair
- ✓ Tenured and tenure track faculty in 1:1 meetings
- ✓ Adjunct faculty
- ✓ Graduate students (in small groups)
- ✓ Undergraduate students (in small groups)

- ✓ Dean
- ✓ Chief Academic Officer.

In addition, if using a review team, it is helpful to provide a room as well as scheduled time for the review team to work together on their final report. Reviewers also appreciate a campus tour at the beginning of their visit to get acquainted with the institution and its resources.

Local Arrangements for External Reviewer(s)

The following checklist is provided to aid in hosting your external reviewer(s). The host institution should provide:

- ✓ accommodations, meals, transportation to and from the institution, and stipend (if possible)
- ✓ meeting space for the external review team
- ✓ internet access
- ✓ contact person who can access files, data and other materials the reviewers deem necessary as the review progresses

What to do After the Review

A program review is an opportunity to create an enhanced vision for the program, secure necessary resources for program development, revise curricula, and to secure the position and role of the program within the larger institution. It is important that the process not end with the reviewers' report, but rather that the reviewers' report be the beginning of a strategic planning process to implement recommendations and to enhance the communication program.

NCA offers the following suggestions for helping your program realize the greatest possible benefit from the program review process:

- ✓ Review the report prepared by your external reviewer with your faculty, staff and relevant constituencies
- ✓ Organize an internal review session with the dean, chief academic officer, department or program chair, and other key stakeholders to review the recommendations
- ✓ Develop a strategic plan for the implementation of recommendations
- ✓ Develop an action plan and timeline, in consultation with the dean and CAO, to prioritize and implement recommendations
- ✓ Seize the impetus of the program review process to make connections and develop joint programs with other departments within your institution and with other departments, people and resources external to your institution
- ✓ Utilize positive reviewer evaluations for program publicity (e.g., webpage, publications)
- ✓ Utilize reviewer responses in proposals to secure new faculty and staff, equipment, technology, facilities, curriculum expansion, and increases in program budget.

Appendix A: Suggestions for Data to Include in Self-Study

FTE faculty (5-yr data) for communication program FTE faculty as % of college/university faculty
% of full time faculty by rank
% of student credit hours taught by full-time tenured/tt faculty % of student credit hours taught by temporary faculty % of student credit hours taught by part-time faculty
Total SCH (student credit hours) for communication program SCH for major/minor courses vs. SCH for general elective courses taught by department SCH/FTE for program; compare with college/university average and average for academic division
Student FTE (total department SCH/full-time semester load hours) Student FTE as % of college/university and % of academic division Student/faculty ratio
Cost per credit hour for department (total credit hours for program/total cost for program) Average cost per credit hour for college/university
Financial Faculty FTE (total department faculty salaries/average institutional faculty salary)
Program operational budget (5-yr data) Average operational budget for academic programs of comparable size in institution
Number of majors (5-yr data) Number of minors (5-yr data) Number of majors/minors as % of college/university (5-yr data) Course enrollment data (5-yr data): include # of sections and total enrollment by year
Release time for chair/other (5-yr data)