

Final Assessment Report for the 2020-2021 Cyclical Program Review of Communication Studies

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Laurier's Institutional Quality Assurance Procedures ([Policy 2.1](#)), this Final Assessment Report provides a summary of the review process for the Department of Communication Studies prepared by the Quality Assurance Office, along with an identification of strengths of the program(s) under review authored by the Dean of Arts and Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. All recommendations made by the external review committee are listed in order, followed by a summary of the department's response, and the relevant decanal responses. Recommendations not approved for implementation have been identified, and those that have been prioritized are listed in the Implementation Plan.

The Final Assessment Report is reviewed and approved by the Vice-Provost: Teaching and Learning and the Provost and Vice-President: Academic. Following completion of the Final Assessment Report, it is approved by the Program Review Sub-Committee and Senate Academic Planning Committee. Approval dates are listed at the end of this report. Final Assessment Reports are submitted to Senate as part of an annual report on cyclical reviews, and to the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance for information. Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Reports are posted on the public-facing page of the [Quality Assurance Office](#) website.

The Implementation Plan for the recommendations prioritized in the Final Assessment Report can be found at the end of this report. Units will submit their first Implementation Report two years following approval of the Final Assessment Report at Senate. The Implementation Report will include comments from the unit on actions taken toward the completion of recommendations, comments from the relevant Dean(s) related to the progress made, and comments from the Program Review Sub-Committee, which is responsible for approving the Implementation Report and deciding if further reports are required. The Senate Academic Planning Committee will also approve the Implementation Report.

SUMMARY OF REVIEW PROCESS

The Department of Communication Studies offers a BA in Communication Studies, a BA in Cultural Studies, and an MA in Communication Studies. The Communication Studies programs were last reviewed in 2012-2013. The BA in Communication Studies was last reviewed in 2016-2017, prior to its merger with the department, but was included with this review to keep it in the same schedule as the Communication Studies programs.

The Self-Study was authored by Dr. Peter Urquhart, Chair of the Department of Communication Studies during the time that the Self-Study was being prepared, with input and feedback from the current Chair, Dr. Judith Nicholson, and department faculty. In addition to the Self-Study (Volume I), the department also submitted a

copy of faculty curricula vita (Volume II), a volume of course syllabi, and a list of proposed external reviewers (Volume III). A draft of the Self-Study was reviewed by the Quality Assurance Office, the Dean of Arts, and the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies prior to submission of the final version.

As per Laurier's IQAP, the external review committee for the review consisted of two external reviewers from outside the university, and one internal reviewer from Laurier but outside of the department. The review committee was selected by the Program Review Sub-Committee on October 6, 2020, and a virtual external review was scheduled by the Quality Assurance Office for the week of December 14-18, 2020.

The review committee consisted of Dr. Andrea Brown from the Department of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier, Dr. Faiza Hirji from the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University, and Dr. Anne MacLennan from the Department of Communication Studies at York University. During the virtual external review, the review committee met with the following individuals and groups:

- Dr. Anthony Vannelli, Provost and Vice-President: Academic and Dr. Mary Wilson, Vice-Provost: Teaching and Learning
- Dr. Gavin Brockett, Interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts
- Dr. Douglas Deutschman, Associate Vice-President and Dean, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
- Dr. Judith Nicholson, Chair of the Department of Communication Studies
- Full-time Faculty in the Department of Communication Studies
- Contract Teaching Faculty in the Department of Communication Studies
- Undergraduate and Graduate students from the Communications Studies and Cultural Studies programs
- Dr. Jonathan Finn, Undergraduate Officer, and Dr. Jeremy Hunsinger, Graduate Program Coordinator
- Ms. Sylvia Hoang, Ms. Colleen Ginn, and Ms. Bev Bagley, Administrative Staff in the Department of Communication Studies
- Ms. Mary Scott, Associate Director: e-Learning and Ms. Susan Alisat, Manager, Instructional Design and e-Learning
- Ms. Charlotte Innerd, Head of Collections and Acquisitions, and Mr. Peter Genzinger, Liaison Librarian

The review committee submitted their completed report on March 12, 2021. The executive summary from the report is provided below.

External Reviewers' Report Executive Summary

Overall, the programs reviewed appear to be extremely strong, led by very capable faculty and staff, demonstrating a quality that is affirmed by the consistently high number of applicants each year. Given the low staff and faculty levels relative to the number of students, the department should be commended for what it has done with minimal resources. The changes that have been undertaken since the last cyclical review appear to have been positive ones for the department and the future seems very promising in a number of ways.

There are, of course, a number of issues with the current situation, some of which are hardly unique to this department or even this university. We summarize some of these below and in our recommendations, but overall, we see these programs as strong contributors to the university, viewed positively by students, and with excellent outcomes for graduates.

1. Given the relatively low number of faculty compared to the number of students, there is a high degree of dependence on contract faculty, some of whom are sometimes asked to step in at the last minute. This is obviously not ideal for a number of reasons, including precarious and stressful conditions for part-time faculty and consistent delivery of content. When students wish to make connections and secure reference letters or mentorship, this can be an issue as well, if they are interacting as frequently or more frequently with contract faculty.
2. Overall students appear to be happy with the program and to secure employment in a timely fashion following graduation, which is an excellent metric both for recruitment and for maintaining satisfaction after graduation. There was an ongoing concern voiced about the dissonance between the perception of the undergraduate Communication Studies program (which is often presented to potential students as a more professional, marketing-type program) and the reality of the program, which is much more academic in nature and in line with most communication studies programs in Canada. It is common to have some confusion in this regard—many university students enter Communication Studies hoping to attain some “practical,” vocational training. In the case of this program, the issue seems to be exacerbated by the fact that university representatives are presenting the program to potential recruits as a marketing/professional program. In all of our conversations, it was evident that this dichotomy was known throughout the university, but no one felt that they had the power to place a curb on this promotional strategy. While the attempt at promoting the program in this way appears to be entirely well-meaning and with no desire to mislead students, the ultimate outcome is that students are indeed misled and this can create some dissatisfaction with the program, simply because they did not know what to expect. Again, to some extent, this is almost always true of communication studies programs in Canada, but here the recruitment strategy is accentuating the problem and should be modified.
3. There is an outstanding recommendation from the last cyclical review in terms of increasing the staffing, and we support that recommendation strongly. The current situation is not sustainable and poses risk to the department.

Our recommendations note the potential to make minor changes to curriculum and to keep students better informed in terms of their academic options. In general, however, we find that the curriculum revisions undertaken since the last cyclical review have been very successful and that the options offered to students are diverse, innovative, engaging, and appropriate to the field.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES

The External Reviewers' Report included six recommendations, which have been listed verbatim below, followed by a summary of the department's response, and the relevant decanal responses.

Recommendation #1: The six areas of concentration implemented in the last program review are successful. The students recognize the areas and their usefulness. This is a success; this organization of the program should continue. To enhance undergraduate recognition of and awareness of the concentrations, a webpage with more information is recommended. This webpage would also assist with student navigation through the program.

Unit Response: The Department has been planning to make changes to the website but was awaiting the reviewers' report. Where permissible and possible, changes will be made to clarify the program structure and requirements, foreground the Concentrations, and provide a list of essential information and FAQs on the main page. The goal is to have this completed in advance of the Fall 2021 term.

FOA Decanal Response: I concur with the Department's response on this matter.

Recommendation #2: A greater linkage in the methods course to the qualitative methods used in the program and a reciprocal mention/emphasis on these methods in the third- and fourth-year courses would reinforce learning in the program.

Unit Response: At the direction of the Department, the Curriculum Committee will begin, in spring 2021, to examine its methods course, CS235, with an eye to updating the course to reflect current approaches. The Committee and Department can then consider what further recommendations could be made to reinforce these methods in order to continue to meet program requirements and learning outcomes.

FOA Decanal Response: I encourage the Department to continue to explore this important matter. Students benefit from seeing a direct connection between methods and course content. If we are training students to be capable researchers, then applying what they learn in the methods course later in their program will only contribute to this important outcome.

Recommendation #3: There was a suggestion made that the first-year courses, while effective and informative, could do a better job of foreshadowing the concepts that will be examined in later years. It appears that there may, at present, be a slight disconnect between first-year content and the subject matter of subsequent courses.

Unit Response: The Department examined its 100-level courses several years ago and recognizes the potential benefits in doing so again. As with Recommendation #2, the Curriculum Committee will begin this process in Spring 2021. If changes are proposed, these would go forward during the 2021-2022 academic year.

FOA Decanal Response: I encourage the Department to examine this for the benefit of their students.

Recommendation #4: The merger of Women and Gender Studies into the Communications program would be challenging, and a curriculum benefit is not easily identifiable. The experience with Cultural Studies indicates that the resulting loss of staff and support, especially for advising, has diminished the impact of the program. It appears that the only gain to be realized by merging Women's Studies with Communications would be a burden on the staff and reduced support to that program, putting a further strain on Communications. There are some curricular benefits, but they may be realized without the merger.

Unit Response: A final decision on the possibility of a CS/WGS merger will be made by Fall 2021. The Department is awaiting a subcommittee's proposal (due in May 2021) that will consider curriculum and resource implications for CS and for WGS. If a merger does not proceed in light of the proposal, the Department may decide to explore whether curricular benefits could be realized without a merger.

FOA Decanal Response: The Department is correct to await the recommendation of the subcommittee and then to decide whether to move forward on this important matter.

Recommendation #5: The MA program could be promoted by emphasizing the core strengths within the program, crystallized in the undergraduate program with the six areas of concentration as well as in the distinctive research specialties of the faculty members of the department. The faculty members of the department have a very active research practice. Their work should also be highlighted to promote the MA program, as potentials supervisors, committee members, employers of research assistants, and primarily as specialists in their field.

Unit Response: The Department will continue to promote the program and its faculty and students, as we have since its inception, with research colloquia, invited guest speakers (including alumni of the program), etc. We will continue to encourage our fourth-year majors with strong GPAs to apply to the program, and we will continue to advertise the program through national and international associations and list-serves. The Department welcomes any suggestions from FGPS or elsewhere about further promotional strategies.

FOA Decanal Response: I concur with the Department's response.

FGPS Decanal Response: The department has outlined excellent strategies for recruitment. FGPS encourages the Graduate Coordinator to reach out to our new Communications Coordinator, once hired, to assist with this and developing other program advertising initiatives. I will add that the 'What Graduates are Saying' page on the departmental website is excellent, and perhaps could be referenced in communications with prospective applicants. A possible addition to this page would be to list the supervisor for each former student, so that prospective applicants and current students have a better idea of which faculty members that they may want to work with. Perhaps this could help expedite this process, which was identified as taking longer than desired by graduate students in the External Reviewers Report.

Recommendation #6: Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University is a highly successful Department from the standpoint of student success, the high-quality faculty research, and teaching achievements of the faculty members. The Department is a successful component of the university, overall. To assure this continued success, it is recommended that four new full-time faculty positions be created. This action would help to alleviate some strains in the department, support the graduate program, increase the ratio of full-time professors

teaching courses, and allow for some of the projects such as designing additional information pages to come to fruition.

Unit Response: The lack of sufficient faculty complement has been a long-standing issue in Communication Studies. After receiving a series of hires in the early 2000s, the Department has been largely frozen out of hires, despite its very large numbers of students and despite the success of both its graduate and undergraduate programs as noted in this cyclical review. Until recently, there had been no replacements for faculty that have left the Department or retired. The Department has received one tenure-track hire for July 2021.

In addition, the Department continues to have one full-time staff member, and one part-time staff member, despite the recommendation in this cyclical review, and in the last, that the number of full-time staff members be increased to two so that workload demands of our large department can be shared.

Data from the IPRM exercise found that the Department yields the University \$3-5 million in profit annually. By any and all accounts, the Department is very successful and yet cannot grow, adapt or innovate given the demand on the relatively small number of active faculty. At the time of this response, there are 900+ majors and 13 active faculty, with a student to faculty ratio of 70:1. That ratio is far beyond most programs in the Faculty of Arts and at the University. The reviewers have recommended faculty renewal to “bring the ratio of courses taught by full-time faculty to a minimum of 50%.”

As a response to the lack of faculty, the Department instituted a series of measures to try and maintain the quality of its programs in the face of increasing student numbers. Chief among these were the introduction of a GPA requirement (6.0) for our two introductory courses (CS 100 and CS 101), a higher major GPA (6.0) for progression and capping the number of CS courses any student can take in a given term (3 courses). This has helped to stabilize the number of undergraduates in the program, but it also means that we only teach courses to our majors. The CS course-build is designed in such a way that we offer the minimum number of courses required to complete the degree, with very little room for flexibility among options or for students to take more than the minimum number of Communication Studies classes. And this also means that we are not able to do any service teaching or participate in inter-department or inter-Faculty Options as we do not have room in any of our classes. As the reviewers noted, “the department is already stretched to its limit serving its own majors and cannot expand beyond this.” This is particularly unfortunate given the centrality and importance of communication and media in contemporary society and the attendant interest in such courses from students outside the discipline. There is tremendous potential to innovate and grow at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in Communication Studies; however, this cannot happen with the existing faculty complement.

We will continue to offer an exceptional program for our students, but without further faculty and staff, we will have to remain in the holding pattern we have been in for more than a decade. While our interdisciplinary programs and courses address shifts in Communication Studies over the past decade, faculty renewal would further permit us to offer new courses and to push the boundaries of the discipline.

Finally, Communication Studies has a large and diverse student body. The reviewers note that, “Diversity appears to be a strength of all three programs though it is highlighted particularly in the self-study with regard to the Cultural Studies program.” Faculty renewal, in conjunction with the University’s Action Plan for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and the Inclusive Excellence Initiative for Indigenous scholars, would support faculty renewal and also yield opportunities to further move Communication Studies and the Faculty of Arts toward reflecting the diversity of our student body in our faculty complement.

FOA Decanal Response: The Department has made the necessary changes to its program to guard against unsustainable growth in the number of majors. The discipline is popular among incoming students, and the Department is right to set performance standards for its majors. The Dean is well aware of the challenges facing the department in light of a high major count, retirements and faculty on leave. As part of the forthcoming Integrated Planning process, it is hoped that the Dean and the Department can develop a plan that will gradually address these concerns while taking into account enrolment trends in the Department. As resources allow, the Dean will be in a position to make the case to the Vice-President: Academic for further full-time, tenure track positions in the Department. A review of Faculty-wide administrative staffing for Departments is recommended to ensure the equitable distribution of limited resources so that Departments with large numbers of majors are able to support faculty and students.

FGPS Decanal Response: FGPS recognizes the strains on the current faculty complement and this perhaps inhibits consideration of how the graduate program could expand and evolve beyond the current 1-yr MA program. The External Reviewers Report raises the idea of developing a PhD program, but comments here do not address this possibility. Given the research strengths of the department, it appears that this would be a desirable direction for growth and perhaps could be used to leverage new faculty positions.

STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAM(S)

Dean of the Faculty of Arts: Communication Studies is the largest Department in the Faculty of Arts. Although it is no longer growing, each year it is the Department that receives the most incoming students. It benefits from the popularity of “communications” among students graduating from high school. The Department has worked hard to manage its high number of majors without a full complement of full-time faculty. The Department is strong and its members work well together. It sets high standards for its students and has developed a set of concentrations that are very popular. Although a substantial number of students do not meet program progression requirements, those that succeed are very proud of their accomplishments and speak very highly of their experiences in the Department. They graduate with strong theoretical knowledge and a strong set of skills related to research, analysis and writing.

Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies: FGPS concurs with the Reviewers’ acknowledgement of the research strengths of the department, especially with respect to grant success and their active publication record, which provides an excellent environment for the training and mentoring of graduate students within its MA program. The co-op option was also cited as an attractive component. Given the demands of the undergraduate program, the department should be commended for its ability to sustain the MA program.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT AND ENHANCEMENT

Dean of the Faculty of Arts: As the largest Department, Communication Studies has the capacity to provide strong leadership in the Faculty of Arts. I encourage it to work closely with the Dean to support Faculty-wide Integrated Planning that enables Communication Studies and the Faculty as a whole to thrive. Inevitably,

questions will be raised about an “applied communication” stream. The potential for this exists, especially for those students who do not progress as majors. Such a stream could be used to develop revenue that could then be used to fund further research-based positions in the Department. The Dean must commit to protecting the strengths of the Communication Studies program as they now exist if this possibility is to be explored in the future. Similarly, the MA program has considerable potential and it is important to examine the resources needed to support it in the years to come.

Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies: In the Additional Comments section of the Unit Response Report, the department identifies FGPS funding as a key constraint that affects recruitment of high-calibre students. Given the strong research profile of faculty in the department, perhaps additional financial support could be offered via faculty-held research grants. Furthermore, promotion of scholarship opportunities (see: <https://students.wlu.ca/registration-and-finances/graduate-funding-and-awards/external-funding.html>), with appropriate mentorship provided by faculty, could also enhance recruitment. The Reviewers’ Report calls for re-consideration of development of a PhD program in the future, which aligns with the research strengths of the department. If considered a short-term goal, perhaps this could be used to leverage additional faculty positions.

SIGNATURES

Dr. Mary Wilson

August 30, 2021



Dr. Anthony Vannelli

August 24, 2021



Approved by Program Review Sub-Committee:

October 20, 2021

Approved by Senate Academic Planning
Committee:

March 22, 2022

Submitted to Senate (for information):

April 11, 2022

Implementation Report Due Date:

April 11, 2024

RECOMMENDATIONS PRIORITIZED FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND ACTION PLAN

The following Implementation Plan was created by the Dean of Arts and Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies as part of the Decanal Response.

Recommendation to be Implemented	Responsibility for Implementation	Responsibility for Resourcing (if applicable)	Anticipated Completion Date	Additional Notes
Recommendation #1: The six areas of concentration implemented in the last program review are successful. The students recognize the areas and their usefulness. This is a success; this organization of the program should continue. To enhance undergraduate recognition of and awareness of the concentrations, a webpage with more information is recommended. This webpage would also assist with student navigation through the program.	Department		September 2021	
Recommendation #2: A greater linkage in the methods course to the qualitative methods used in the program and a reciprocal mention/emphasis on these methods in the third- and fourth-year courses would reinforce learning in the program.	Department		April 2022	
Recommendation #3: There was a suggestion made that the first-year courses, while effective and informative, could do a better job of foreshadowing the concepts	Department		April 2022	

<p>that will be examined in later years. It appears that there may, at present, be a slight disconnect between first-year content and the subject matter of subsequent courses.</p>				
<p>Recommendation #4: The merger of Women and Gender Studies into the Communications program would be challenging, and a curriculum benefit is not easily identifiable. The experience with Cultural Studies indicates that the resulting loss of staff and support, especially for advising, has diminished the impact of the program. It appears that the only gain to be realized by merging Women’s Studies with Communications would be a burden on the staff and reduced support to that program, putting a further strain on Communications. There are some curricular benefits, but they may be realized without the merger.</p>	<p>Department, Dean of Arts</p>		<p>December 2021</p>	
<p>Recommendation #5: The MA program could be promoted by emphasizing the core strengths within the program, crystallized in the undergraduate program with the six areas of concentration as well as in the distinctive research specialties of the faculty members of the department. The faculty members of the department have a very active research practice. Their work should also be</p>	<p>Department, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies</p>		<p>December 2021</p>	<p>Contact FGPS Communications Coordinator for assistance</p>

<p>highlighted to promote the MA program, as potentials supervisors, committee members, employers of research assistants, and primarily as specialists in their field.</p>				
<p>Recommendation #6: Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University is a highly successful Department from the standpoint of student success, the high-quality faculty research, and teaching achievements of the faculty members. The Department is a successful component of the university, overall. To assure this continued success, it is recommended that four new full-time faculty positions be created. This action would help to alleviate some strains in the department, support the graduate program, increase the ratio of full-time professors teaching courses, and allow for some of the projects such as designing additional information pages to come to fruition.</p>	<p>Department, Dean of Arts, Provost and Vice-President: Academic</p>	<p>Faculty of Arts, Provost and Vice-President: Academic</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	