

REVIEW OF THE M.A. AND M.S. IN COMMUNICATION

Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code: 09.0101

Communication, General

OVERVIEW

The M.A., M.S. in Communication program at Illinois State University is housed within the School of Communication in the College of Arts and Sciences. The School offers a master's degree program alongside undergraduate programs in Communication Studies, Mass Media, Journalism, and Public Relations. The graduate program is generalist in nature, integrating the fields of communication education, communication studies, journalism, media, and public relations. It is grounded in a collaborative culture that blends scholarship and practice, providing students with a robust foundation in theory, research, and application. Students may choose either a Master of Arts or Master of Science degree and are encouraged to engage in applied experiences such as internships, teaching, and faculty-led research. The program supports diverse career trajectories in both academia and industry, drawing students from the U.S. and abroad. Graduate students also participate in co-curricular opportunities including conference presentations, student organizations, and colloquia.

Enrollment and Degrees Conferred by Plan of Study, Fall Census Day, 2017-2024

M.A., M.S. in Communication, Illinois State University

First Majors Only

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Enrollments	86	81	78	71	49	54	55	44
Degrees	28	42	35	23	44	19	20	25

Table notes:

Graduating Fiscal Year consists of summer, fall, and spring terms, in that order. For example, Graduating Fiscal Year 2024 consists of the following terms: summer 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Self-study process

The School of Communication (COM) at Illinois State University (ISU) had several undergraduate programs and a graduate program undergoing the self-study process for program review during the 2023-24 academic year, with the due date of fall 2024. This program review is the result of a collective, collaborative effort. The incoming and outgoing graduation program coordinators, assisted by the director of COM, through multiple means, obtained and utilized all necessary documentation and data from internal and external stakeholders relevant for this program review over the fall 2023 and spring, and summer 2024 semesters. Concerted efforts were made to collect information and gather feedback from current (including graduating) students, alumni, colleagues, community partners, federal and state higher education agencies, and peer-institutions for this self-study. Much of the needed information, as described above, was also made available by the School of Communication and the College of Arts and Sciences. Many recommendations from the previous program reviews have been considered, implemented, and/or evaluated.

The graduate program's mission, aligned with the values and goals of Educate·Connect·Elevate and the mission and goals of the School of Communication and consistent with the liberal arts education model in the College in the College of Arts and Sciences, is to provide rigorous critical, theoretical and practical breadth and depth across the convergent fields of communication education, communication studies, journalism, media, and public relations. Through a culture of collaboration and collegiality, we strike a dynamic balance linking the scholarship and practice of communication. Our community of students and faculty develops relevant professional and scholarly skills,

empowering us to be leaders in industry and academia, thriving in globally competitive and culturally diverse environments. We are a recognized leader in civic engagement, creative productivity, scholarship, and teacher training. The program develops professionals, scholars, and teachers, while promoting a passion for intellectual and theoretical discovery that transcends and heightens career objectives and program expectations.

Since the last program review, the graduate program has experienced a decrease in enrolled students. This trend is being experienced by similar programs at other institutions as both COVID-19 and the strong economy post-COVID have impacted enrollment. The fall 2023 Academic Program Profile, prepared by ISU Planning, Research, and Policy Analysis (PRPA) shows data covering eight years of students enrolled in our program. While University enrollment has remained relatively stable over the previous eight years—including the pandemic years—the master’s program shows a decline in enrollment during the pandemic, stabilizing at around 55 students post-COVID. We would like to improve our recruiting to attain a manageable number in the high 60s.

The School of Communication’s recruitment and retention strategies for the graduate program are the responsibility of both the Graduate School and the COM graduate program coordinator assisted by the School’s advising team, specifically the Director of Advising, Elizebeth Chupp. Our primary objective is to target highly talented and diverse students for the graduate program via a variety of strategies, including: Graduate school events and outreach; Graduate Coordinator communication; and academic conferences.

There are several student success initiatives the School has implemented to work towards achieving our goals as related to the graduate program in particular, including: preseminar; Graduate Coordinator weekly email and Canvas site; pre-conference colloquia, Graduate Student Association, and credit-earning internship opportunities. Some challenges related to equity and access include recruitment/diversity of cohort members and creating and sustaining a climate of belonging. These challenges are also interrelated yet differ for international and domestic graduate students. International student representation has increased in the graduate program, yet we continue to strive for better integration – sense of belonging – for international students in the School and program. We are also working toward being more successful in recruiting and retaining BIPOC domestic graduate students. Overall, the program is committed to following the School’s objectives and employing the School’s resources regarding equity and access. Our strengths of research, communication, education, and community building will continue to be vital in making improvements in inclusion and belonging, to ensure equitable and just experiences.

The graduate program’s goals of linking the scholarship and practice of communication, developing relevant professional and scholarly skills, empowering us to be leaders in industry and academia, thriving in globally competitive and culturally diverse environments” (see full Mission Statement) works in tandem with School of Communication efforts to create learning experiences outside the classroom that integrate concept and content with experiential activities and practices. The School of Communication houses six Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) and other co-curricular opportunities that provide graduate students with the necessary resources and experiences to develop and advance their communication knowledge, motivation, and skills. These graduate student-welcoming RSOs include Black Communication Association (BCA), Central Illinois Communication Association (CICA; formerly Association for Women in Communication), Graduate Student Association (GSA), Lambda Pi Eta (LPH, the National Communication Association honor society), Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), and WZND. All graduate students in the School are encouraged to participate in these RSOs.

The School also has a tradition of helping graduate students hone their scholarship and begin their professional careers before they complete their degrees through professional-practice opportunities. Depending on a faculty member’s course design, students may develop research or creative works that fulfill course learning objectives that also may be worthy of submission to a public forum or publication. In addition, numerous faculty have collaborated with students on research projects or creative works, and we recently added COM 455 Research Practicum for students to earn credit for significant involvement in a research project. Since the last program review, 92 disseminated research/creative products have been created with graduate students as co-authors.

The MS/MA program currently requires between 32-39 course credits and a culminating project (thesis, documentary thesis, or master’s project). One major curriculum change has been a shift from “39-hour project” to “master’s project” as a degree completion option. Faculty had become aware of a disparity in workload for those completing projects and additional course credits (39 total) as compared to those completing a traditional thesis

(and 32 course credits). The primary change, implemented with the Fall 2022 incoming cohort, addresses this disparity by reducing workload, integrating three credits of independent study that allow for work on the project (COM 450) rather than an additional three-credit traditional seminar course.

The graduate program coordinator of the master's program is responsible for assessment. This was Dr. K. Meyer from 2015-2020 and Dr. A. Miller-Ott from 2020-2023. The revised/current assessment plan, designed by A. Miller-Ott, was faculty-approved and went into effect in Spring 2022. Each objective is measured every four years. The graduate coordinator disseminates the required surveys/reports, with faculty reporting on the number of students who completed the thesis or project and those who had papers and proposals accepted to conferences and/or journals.

Program-level student learning outcomes/objectives include:

- (1) students gain a greater understanding of the depth and breadth of knowledge of the communication discipline;
- (2) students are able to conceptualize and conduct independent communication research;
- (3) students understand how to apply communication content to real world contexts;
- (4) students are competent in communicating results of their own and others' research in written and/or oral forms;
- (5) students critically examine their own personal beliefs, attitudes, and biases about historically marginalized people, groups, and ideas.

Assessment data indicate: many electives help students achieve Outcome #1; some electives help students achieve Outcome #2; faculty report attending to diversity and difference (Outcome #5). Student exit survey data indicate: students want the program to make workload consistent across the two sections of the required quantitative class; faculty are committed to their students; the GTA program is strong, supportive, and helpful; program/course content is relevant; students want a longer timeline for selecting a committee.

In the graduate program, our alumni have gained employment in varied roles in domestic and international organizations, such as for-profit, not-for-profit, corporate, small business, governmental, municipal, and educational across various industries, including health care, higher and K-12 education, business, hospitality, professional and college sports, retail, sales, training and consulting, civic, entertainment, law, politics, and many others. Some of our alumni are successful entrepreneurs who have established their own communication businesses. Those graduating with master's degrees have also sought additional education opportunities, including pursuing doctoral degrees, including earning terminal degrees at top communication doctoral programs such as Michigan State University, the Pennsylvania State University, Rutgers University, and the University of Iowa.

We have identified six interrelated areas of programmatic strengths and areas of improvement. Strengths include:

- (1) Tailoring and Diversifying Offerings (as a generalist program with highly trained and invested faculty, we are able to respond to students' needs. We can quickly revise curricula via special topics courses, and faculty engage in and implement professional development efforts/trainings to ensure that course content/assessments are able to assist in moving students toward their academic and post-degree goals. We laud our internationalization and equity/justice [EDIA] efforts and achievements, as numerous faculty tailor class sessions, courses, and plans of study toward broadening experiences and understandings, allowing our graduates to excel in communication with diverse populations in a breadth of environments);
- (2) Scholarship: Student Research and Faculty Productivity (our graduate faculty produce research and creative works of high quality and quantity. Active research programs ensure that faculty are up-to-date on current topics and findings in their areas, ensuring relevant course content. Faculty regularly publish with [graduate] students, and graduate students present and/or publish original research/creative scholarship. This prepares students to research on their own or in post-program work teams and enhances students' likelihood of acceptance degree programs, for those pursuing further academic experience);
- (3) Diversity in Student Population (a large portion of our cohorts are international students from a variety of countries. Diversity/breadth of backgrounds/experiences enhances organizations, including our program. International and domestic students alike typically finish the program and do so within two calendar years of start date.

Areas of improvement include:

- (1) Interdisciplinary Offerings/Options (one way of ensuring breadth of content is to better network with other departments on campus to increase awareness of course offerings across campus that might be of interest to our students. In turn, increasing graduate course enrollments by encouraging students from other programs to learn in the School of Communication exposes students/faculty to interdisciplinary viewpoints and possible collaborations and ensures that we have the enrollment to continue offering a broad range of courses;
- (2) Support for (Emerging) Scholarship (ongoing and/or additional resources for conducting and disseminating research will improve faculty and student scholarship, in both quantity and quality. In particular, and especially given the School's investment in emerging/digital media and technologies, funding that allows us to stay current with new technologies is imperative to maintaining our ability to research and teach the most up-to-date and pressing facets of communication);
- (3) Recruitment and Belonging (we see the benefits of our growth in recruiting and retaining a diverse student population, particularly via international students, but we are also aware that we can continue to improve in several intertwined ways. Thus, we aim to enhance recruitment of domestic students, we aim to improve our recruitment of diverse faculty pools, and we strive to ensure that our program is one in which all students, faculty, and staff feel they belong and are supported.

In light of this review, we have four explicit initiatives and plans moving forward:

1. Continued Efforts to Maintain and Improve Relevance of Program – The master's program must continually update curriculum while maintaining the rigor and broad approach it is known for. Integrating courses that reflect current technological advancements is essential, including: digital and social media analytics, AI applications and communication, and other new and emerging technologies. Providing hands-on experience with the latest tools and platforms will appeal to students who are eager to engage with cutting-edge technologies and digital storytelling methods. In addition, the program should continue to emphasize critical thinking skills and intercultural competence by incorporating courses on global communication, diversity and inclusion, and ethical considerations in media. By fostering an environment that values diverse perspectives and encourages critical thinking, the program can attract students from various cultural and professional backgrounds.
2. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access/Accountability Learning Community – One major School-wide initiative with components reliant upon Graduate Program participation is the EDIA Learning Community program/certificate. The program was developed by members of the School's ASC Committee, in conjunction with graduate student input and assistantship. The program has received startup funds/grants from the School and CIPD and will pilot in Fall 2024.
3. Interdisciplinary Offerings – Given the overlap and connection with other programs on campus, there are opportunities to develop interdisciplinary programmatic offerings (e.g., with Politics and Government, Sociology and Anthropology, Health Sciences, and Family and Consumer Sciences). We will explore certificate programs and opportunities for students to take courses outside of COM to develop a broader understanding of how communication intersects with other majors and programs.
4. Student Needs Analysis – As the School of Communication continues to develop our graduate program, it will be important to understand what students are looking for in a graduate program in communication. We may need to investigate what our competitor programs are offering and whether their enrollments are climbing or decreasing as ours has in recent years since COVID.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

Review Outcome. The Academic Planning Committee finds the M.A. and M.S. in Communication to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee commends the graduate programs in Communication for their comprehensive and reflective self-study. The report provides a well-documented analysis of program strengths and challenges, demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement, faculty engagement, and student success. The program

has taken steps to maintain curricular relevance, support graduate student development, and respond to shifts within the discipline. Despite some challenges, including enrollment declines and data tracking limitations, the program remains strong and well-positioned for future growth.

Enrollment in the M.A. and M.S. in Communication programs has declined over the review period, mirroring national trends in communication graduate education. However, in recent years, enrollment appears to have stabilized, with the program actively working to increase numbers to the high 60s. The program benefits from a significant proportion of international students, who currently make up approximately 50% of the graduate student program. This reflects its global appeal and the strength of its academic offerings.

While the program's overall enrollment stability is commendable, it has seen a slight decline in the percentage of students from underrepresented domestic populations, particularly BIPOC students. This gap remains an area of concern, and the program has acknowledged the need for more intentional recruitment and retention efforts. Additionally, the program's student demographics indicate that 40% of enrolled students are over the age of 25, reinforcing the importance of strategies that support non-traditional students. The program has taken steps to analyze its enrollment trends relative to peer institutions, finding that its patterns are consistent with broader disciplinary shifts. However, there is an opportunity to further refine and formalize recruitment strategies to sustain and enhance enrollment. A clearer enrollment management plan, including targeted outreach, expanded financial support, and partnerships with minority-serving institutions, could strengthen the program's ability to attract a diverse and robust applicant pool.

The program provides a strong framework of student support initiatives designed to enhance academic success, professional development, and career readiness. One of the most significant strengths is the support structure for graduate assistants (GAs), who play an essential role in the program's instructional delivery. GAs benefit from a structured two-week training program, followed by ongoing mentorship and professional development meetings. This level of support ensures that graduate assistants are well-prepared for their instructional responsibilities while also developing valuable teaching and communication skills. Beyond GA support, the program has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at fostering student success. A pre-seminar series provides new students with an introduction to the program's expectations, resources, and faculty mentorship opportunities. The Career COM-petency program further enhances professional development by connecting students with industry networks, career workshops, and alumni mentorship. The program has also developed a centralized Canvas resource site, offering easy access to academic guidelines, funding opportunities, and administrative support. Alumni engagement is another strength, with former students actively involved in mentoring, networking, and advisory board discussions. Additionally, graduate students have strong opportunities for research and creative activity, with 92 research and creative projects completed during the review period. Conference participation is also encouraged, with students receiving support to present their work at academic and professional events. While these initiatives demonstrate a commitment to student success, the program lacks systematic data tracking on retention and time-to-degree. The committee recommends implementing a structured system for monitoring these metrics to assess the long-term effectiveness of student support efforts.

The graduate programs in Communication benefit from a strong faculty who are engaged in research, professional development, and student mentorship. The curriculum remains current with evolving trends in the discipline, and recent program updates, including the transition from a 39-hour to a 36-hour master's project option; this reflects an effort to address workload disparities among students. The program's commitment to research and creative activity is evident in the significant number of student-led projects and faculty collaborations.

Additionally, the program maintains a strong emphasis on career preparation, integrating professional development into coursework and extracurricular activities. The Career COM-petency program, in particular, positions students for success in both academic and industry-related careers. The program's investment in alumni engagement also ensures that graduates remain connected and contribute to the ongoing development of current students.

Despite its strengths, the program faces several challenges that require attention. Enrollment, while stabilizing, remains lower than in previous years. The program would benefit from a more structured recruitment strategy that includes targeted outreach towards BIPOC students and explores new pathways, such as 4+1 programs or expanded scholarship opportunities. Additionally, while the transition to a 36-hour master's project option was intended to

address workload concerns, the distinction between the master's project and a traditional thesis is not well defined. Further clarification is needed regarding the expectations, assessment criteria, and overall rigor of the master's project. The program should evaluate how this change has impacted student outcomes and whether additional curricular refinements are needed. Elective course selection is another area requiring further analysis. While the program provides flexibility, it is unclear how students navigate elective choices and whether they primarily enroll in courses within the School of Communication or seek interdisciplinary options. Conducting a formal review of elective trends would provide valuable insight into student pathways and ensure that elective offerings align with academic and career goals. Finally, the lack of detailed data tracking on student retention, time-to-degree, and post-graduation outcomes remains a concern. Given increasing institutional and external expectations for retention metrics, the program should work with the graduate school to develop a more systematic approach to collecting and analyzing student success data.

Follow-up report.

Comparator Programs Analysis.

The committee commends the program for acknowledging external models but encourages a deeper, more action-oriented analysis. The comparator and aspirational analyses lacked depth. The program should conduct a more substantive benchmarking analysis, identifying ISU's niche and identify specific strategies or structures used by comparators that can be adapted to strengthen our program. By October 1, 2026, the program should submit a revised comparator analysis to the Office of the Provost, detailing how insights from comparator programs will inform strategic decisions, curriculum updates, and recruitment initiatives.

Recommendations

The Academic Planning Committee appreciates the efforts of the Communication faculty and staff in developing a thorough self-study. In addition to commending the program's current strengths and accomplishments, the committee provides the following recommendations to be addressed within the next review cycle. A detailed analysis of actions taken and outcomes should be included in the subsequent self-study report. Details describing the actions and outcomes associated with each of the committee's recommendations should be included in the next program review self-study report that is tentatively due October 1, 2032.

Develop a Formalized Enrollment Management Strategy. While the program has identified enrollment trends consistent with national patterns, a more structured approach to recruitment and retention is necessary. The program should explore targeted outreach to domestic BIPOC students, potential scholarship expansion, and strategic partnerships with institutions that serve underrepresented populations.

Clarify the Role and Scope of the Master's Project. The shift from a 39-hour to a 36-hour master's project option was intended to improve equity in workload, but its expectations remain unclear. The program should define the scope, assessment standards, and faculty oversight for the project to ensure its rigor and comparability to a thesis-based capstone experience.

Enhance Data Collection on Retention and Time-to-Degree. The program lacks systematic tracking of student retention and time-to-degree. Implementing a structured approach to collecting and analyzing these metrics will provide valuable insights into student success and inform future program improvements.

Assess Elective Course Enrollment and Faculty Workload. A review of elective course selection patterns would help determine whether students are utilizing interdisciplinary opportunities or primarily enrolling in communication courses. Additionally, faculty workload concerns, particularly in quantitative courses, should be evaluated to ensure sustainable teaching assignments.

Continue collaborations with Milner Library. Build upon a strong existing relationship to evaluate and maintain resource availability. Consider expanding digital resources, integrating information fluency outcomes and

assessment into the curriculum, and integrating library tools into assessment plans. Such efforts ensure that both faculty and students have ongoing access to the information and skills needed for effective scholarship.

Further Alumni and Stakeholder Engagement. Strengthen ties with alumni and external stakeholders to remain current with industry trends and job market needs. Regular alumni surveys, advisory boards, and panels can inform curriculum updates and highlight career pathways for prospective and current students, enhancing the program's relevance and attractiveness.