Mission Statement

Communication Studies has the mission of providing doctoral education second to none and of providing national and international leadership in research and knowledge dissemination in communication theory. The graduate program is primarily a doctoral program. At the graduate level the Department focuses on the study of communication as a social practice. Our faculty and graduate students engage in scholarship and teaching that center on the role that communication plays in the construction, maintenance, and transformation of social life. The program embraces both humanistic and social scientific perspectives and methods. The graduate program has three complementary areas of specialization that cohere around the common concern of understanding and explaining how different modes and media of communication shape people’s everyday lives: Interpersonal Communication and Relationships, Media Studies, and Rhetoric and Public Advocacy. Students are encouraged to draw liberally on intellectual resources throughout the Department and related departments in the University.

Admission Processes and Criteria

The admissions process is administered by the Graduate Affairs Committee, composed of at least three faculty members. This Committee uses two criteria in making admissions decisions: academic potential and fit with the program and its faculty. About half of the students who earn the doctorate in Communication Studies enter with a master’s degree, whereas the other half receives the master’s degree along the way. The Department recruits through its national reputation, its extensive network of alumni who are both visible in the profession and loyal to the Department, a recruitment fair and reception at its national professional meeting, emails from faculty and current graduate students to admitted students, and on-campus visitations.

The Department competes with other programs nationally and manages to get a good share of the very best students. Penn State, the University of Texas-Austin, Northwestern, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the University of California (Santa Barbara and Berkeley), the University of Wisconsin, the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, and the University of Minnesota are often our closest competitors. From 2004-2008, we received from 100-150 graduate applications annually, admitting an average of 28% for doctoral work and yielding an average of 41% of those admitted.

The traditional markers of academic potential indicate the excellence of our entering students. From 2004-2007, the average GPA of our entering students was 3.50 (compared to 3.54 for UI Humanities and 3.45 for all UI graduate programs). During the same time frame, GRE scores (V + Q) were 1235, 48 points higher than the average for UI Humanities programs in general, 94 points higher than the average for all UI graduate programs, and 234 points higher than the national average for all communication programs.

Our program attracts slightly more female than male students. Of the 69 entering doctoral students from 2004 through fall, 2009, 25% have been international students, and 15% have been from domestically underrepresented groups.

Graduate students in the Department typically are supported financially in one of two ways: as .5 TAs in the Department or as .5 TAs elsewhere, usually the Rhetoric Department. The goal of the Department is to provide a range of experiences for its graduate students. In general, we strive to have graduate students funded for two years in Rhetoric and two years in Communication Studies. Graduate students enrolled in the PhD program are typically funded for four years if they arrive with an MA and for five years if they arrive with a BA.

The Department also funds its entering students through competitive fellowship opportunities supported by the Graduate College. From 2004 to 2008, the Graduate College has offered our entering doctoral students 8 Dean’s Graduate Fellowships, ranking us third among UI Humanities programs. These offers represent 80% of those nominated by the Department, equal to the percentage in UI Humanities programs.

1 The time frames referenced throughout this report vary depending on the availability of data.
programs overall. During the same period, the Department has received 17 Presidential Graduate Fellowships, ranking us second among UI Humanities programs. These offers represent 77% of those nominated by the Department, compared to 65% for UI Humanities overall. Our yield for the Dean’s Graduate Fellowships has been 50%, compared to 55% for UI Humanities programs. Our yield on Presidential Fellows has been 29%, compared to the overall 39% yield for UI Humanities.

Program Outcomes

The data on degree completion and time-to-degree suggest a highly efficient graduate program. Of the 72 students in Communication Studies who entered from 1996 to 2000, 56% completed the degree, compared to 51% in UI Humanities programs overall. Of the 56 Communication Studies students awarded the Ph.D. degree from 2003 to 2008, the median time to degree was 5.3 years, compared to 7.3 years for UI Humanities programs overall and 5.9 years for all UI doctoral programs.

Several features of the Communication Studies graduate program contribute to the efficiency of our doctoral program: (1) a Plan of Study Committee system that guides students through appropriate coursework and training in their areas of specialization; (2) faculty and peer mentoring that encourages scholarly excellence and timely progress; and (3) a policy of providing complete 4-5 year funding packages to students who receive funding.

Data on doctoral student participation in CLAS and University funding opportunities also indicate a competitive graduate program in addition to the two types of recruitment fellowships discussed above. For 2004-2008, the Department received 14 Graduate College summer fellowships, ranking us third among Humanities programs. Communication Studies students have also received Seashore/Ballard Dissertation Fellowships (5 for 2008/09 and 2009/10, ranking us first among Humanities programs), Cleary International Dissertation Research Fellowships (7 for 2008/09 and 2009/10, ranking us first among Humanities programs), and other internal awards. Room for improvement exists in the pursuit of external funding opportunities (although some students have been successful with Fulbright and Jacob K. Javits Fellowships).

Doctoral students in Communication Studies are encouraged to disseminate their scholarship during their doctoral work. An informal poll of current doctoral students (12 of 66 students replied) revealed that these dozen students alone have presented 71 papers at professional conferences and authored or co-authored 15 journal articles or book chapters from 2004 to 2009. These dozen students have earned 8 professional honors outside of the university, including 5 “top paper” honors from professional associations. Several have won internally competitive teaching awards, and 4 have won professional association teaching awards.

The Department is quite successful in placing its graduate students; the unreported/unemployed rate for the 2003-2008 period was only 4%, compared to 5% reported overall for UI Humanities programs. The typical graduate from our program moves into a college/university teaching position; 88% did so during the 2003-2008 period, which compares to 82% overall for UI Humanities programs. Among Humanities programs, our Department ranks first in the percentage of its graduates who occupy tenure-track posts (73% compared to 46% overall). These initial placement figures are sustained with respect to current positions; for the 2003-2008 period, 86% of our graduates occupied positions in college/university teaching (compared to 78% for UI Humanities overall), with 77% in tenured/tenure-track positions (compared to 55% overall for UI Humanities programs). A smaller percentage of our graduates move into (4%), or currently occupy (7%), positions in academic research or administration, comparable to the UI Humanities profile in general. Non-academic positions are occupied by a minority of our doctoral graduates (6% for the 2003-2008 period). Post-docs are uncommon in Communication Studies as a discipline, although one of our recent graduates has recently received a research post-doc from the Veterans Administration. Few of our graduates take on initial (4%, compared to 17% for UI Humanities overall) or current (4%, compared to 11% for UI Humanities overall; 2003-2008 data) employment in Iowa, reflecting the low number of academic posts in Communication Studies available in institutions of higher education in the state.
Program Characteristics

The Department currently has 14.25 faculty FTE, with one 0% appointment in the College of Public Health. The Department thus has a target ceiling of enrolling one graduate student annually for each FTE, producing a maximum incoming class of 14 students each year. Given the time-to-degree of 5.3 years, this would suggest a maximum graduate population of 70 students. Our current graduate program size is 66, which is acceptable once faculty leaves are considered. We have intentionally reduced the size of our graduate program from 94 students in 2004 to its current size, allowing us to fund almost all of them as TAs.

The graduate students in Communication Studies contribute significantly to the Department’s undergraduate teaching mission. Based on 2008-09 data, the ratio of undergraduate majors to faculty FTE in Communication Studies is 75:1 (the 3 other largest CLAS departments have ratios that range from 19:1 (English), to 23:1 (Biology), to 37:1 (Psychology)). The graduate students thus allow the Department to offer seats to majors and nonmajors alike. From fall, 2004 through spring, 2009, TAs have offered a total of 55% of all instructional seats in the Department. Recent changes to the structure of our undergraduate major assume a continued connection between our graduate and undergraduate numbers. We maintain year-round training and supervision for our TAs to support them in this aspect of their professional development.

The Communication Studies graduate program is regarded in the field as one of the top graduate programs nationally, as shown in the 2004 Doctoral Reputation Study by the National Communication Association. The Department’s specialization in interpersonal communication was ranked 5th of 39 doctoral programs offering this specialty; our Department’s specialization in media studies was ranked 12th of 33 doctoral programs; and our Department’s specialization in rhetorical studies was ranked 6th of 36 doctoral programs.

The Department’s strongest resource is its people: This program manages to do a great deal with little thanks to the energy, dedication, and imagination of its faculty, staff, and students. Nationally, communication is still a growth field, and our doctoral graduates gain employment with ease. The primary challenge facing the program is one of scarce and dwindling resources; at least one of the three emphases in the program is compromised significantly because of too few faculty.

Recruiting of graduate students is challenged by the timing of our TA offers; our top prospects often have offers in hand from competitors a month earlier. They often receive better funding offers than we can provide. Our recruitment of international students is hampered by the fact that the only support we can offer them is teaching, requiring them to pass the English competency test after they have arrived on campus. The Department also needs to recruit more students from domestically underrepresented groups; although our faculty is reasonably gender balanced, it lacks ethnic and racial diversity which handicaps efforts to recruit such students.

The education of our graduate students could be improved if cognate departments coordinated more carefully the offering of research methods courses, both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methods training often crosses disciplinary lines for humanities and social sciences, but curricular planning tends to reside largely at the departmental level.

Conclusions

The Department has a very strong tradition of producing exciting and innovative teacher-scholars who ask challenging questions about the role of communication in the larger world. Our alumni have a record of success that reflects positively on the program. The faculty is productive and enthusiastic, and the students are of very high quality. Given the continued growth in the Communication Studies field and the dedication of the Department’s faculty, staff, alumni and graduate students, the outlook for the future of our graduate program is bright, contingent on continued University support for our mission.