Re: Task Force on Graduate Education Selective Excellence evaluation of the professional master's program (MAP) and Ph.D. program in Mass Communications

We agree with your assessment. Your evaluation mirrors our own internal one.

MAP
The performance of the MAP was considered “strong,” and most students we have surveyed in the program are satisfied with its high level of professional training. We feel, however, that it requires several additional steps to improve its value for students, the School, and the University. In light of the many changes in the world of media, including the evolution of the profession of journalism and the vast expansion of careers in strategic communication, we must question the current generalized emphasis in journalism training. We will undertake a curriculum review to determine whether we should expand into or emphasize more other professional training tracks. We will identify our target audience for the program. Right now, we tend to get students recently out of college or between jobs, not, as some programs do, professionals who want advanced training.

Also, in part because of our location, we are having difficulty filling an incoming class with enough students to subsequently fill grad courses at the new minimum. Do we need to offer a specialized area of study that is not readily available at other schools of JMC, such as for example health communication? Moreover, most current students matriculating in the program have expectations of funding, but if there are continuing cutbacks in TA lines, we will need to shift those lines to the Ph.D. program. Can our MAP sustain itself with tuition payers rather than semi-funded students?

Ph.D.
The doctoral program is performing excellently on several metrics. Our time to degree—about 4.7 years—is among the best in the College and perhaps in the University. Our drop-out rate is extremely low. Students do stay in the program and finish. The quality of students is improving. But we do not feel we are attracting a caliber of student on par with that of our peer institutions, nor are we placing our students, when they graduate, in those same schools.

The program, as well, has a precarious funding base, relying on TA lines because relatively few of our faculty are bringing in RA-ships via grants. Because of the small number of our faculty (16 ½ FTE), many students cannot fill out a full committee with people interested or qualified in their research topics. Our response will be:

- An evaluation of the required curriculum to fit the new graduate student course minimums.
- A review of the curriculum to determine whether we need to specialize in areas where we have strong faculty intellectual support, such as health communication and international communication.
- Specifically targeting future hiring of TT faculty to include people who can be supportive in terms of grants and intellectual guidance.

Most important of all, we feel that we need to build bridges, alliances, and even consider merging our doctoral program with that of other programs, like Communication Studies. Many of our current students fill out the latter's committees with faculty from both units; many research topics find cross-over to the Comm. Studies concentrations in Media Studies, Rhetoric, and Interpersonal/Organizational. We think it would reduce redundancy, improve efficiency, make both programs much more attractive to top students, and produce more attractively employable graduates if we worked closely with our sister unit as a fourth area, Mass Communications, to add to theirs. I should add that, when this was discussed at a recent SJMC faculty meeting and the option of merger of the two doctoral programs was brought up, there was no opposition.

We will focus our internal planning and our meetings with Comm. Studies in spring 2010 on these options.

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