

Examining Undergraduate Communication Degree Programs: Mission Statements, Assessment Plans, and Assessment Evaluations

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One hundred undergraduate communication programs listed in the NCA directory were examined in this investigation. The process involved gathering the university mission statement, departmental mission statement, program assessment plan, and program assessment evaluations. Results demonstrate that 98 institutions utilized mission statements, 81 departments provided mission statements, 18 departments made assessment plans available and the researchers obtained 4 assessment evaluations.

Higher education focuses on the establishment of learning objectives for courses and degree programs coupled with the development of assessment plans to evaluate progress towards those objectives. The Higher Education Associations (American Association of Community Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education, Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities) and the Regional Accrediting Commissions (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges-Commission on Institutions of Higher Learning, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Higher Learning Commission, Northwest Communication Colleges and Universities, Western Association of Schools and Colleges-Accrediting for Communication and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges-Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) adopted standards to evaluate the requirements employed for the assessment of student achievement (2013, July). The commitment by associations and accreditation agencies involves creating and evaluating, with transparent and demonstrable data, assurances about the nature of the ability of educational organizations to meet stated objectives. The commitment reflects demands of legislators and students for accountability by higher education in meeting stated objectives. The requirement to justify the funding of programs involves the need to provide hard evidence of effectiveness.

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One element in the development of assessment criteria involves the requirement that the learning objectives not simply reflect something measured by a grade or test within a course. While student evaluation requires assessment of achievement, the goals of the program operate at a more macro level. The University of Connecticut web site (2015) encapsulates this view: “Goals are statements about general aims or purposes of education that are broad, long-range intended outcomes and concepts.” The scheme displayed by the University of Connecticut suggests that course outcomes are simply limited local examples of contributions to the larger set of outcomes and goals sought by the program embedded within the school/college, which supports the overall university mission. PrØitz (2010) provides evidence of the diversity and difficulty of defining learning outcomes for members of the academy. The results of surveys revealed a lack of attention or understanding by many faculty and administrators of overlapping mission statements and learning outcomes.

Program assessment entails a process of evaluation involving an ongoing discussion intended to evaluate and improve the quality of education practices. The assessment of a program constitutes a process, not a product. Appropriate assessment involves discussion and reflection about the state of the program and efforts at improvement based on cycles of evaluation. The outcome of any single cycle of assessment and evaluation generates a snapshot of the current program’s education. The collection of these cycles of assessment and evaluation provides a documented process towards a goal through a process of dynamic evaluation and reevaluation.

Course grades focus on the achievement of individual students with regard to some metric of evaluation whereas the focus of program evaluation should involve the ability of degree completion to meet broader institutional goals. The focus on outcome-based evaluation reflects the increased desire by stakeholders to improve accountability of educational institutions to make good on promises offered to incoming students. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association for Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Learning requires a process of self-assessment and the development of concrete plans of action (North Central Association, 2014). The requirements set forth an Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) that, in part, requires ongoing assessment of the educational process, requiring constant adaptation and evaluation.

The process of assessment and evaluation provides the institution and students an ongoing report card on the ability of the organization to fulfill the goals presented in the mission plan. Accountability requires a clearly articulated and transparent process that permits everyone an opportunity to find out how well the organization performs. A healthy educational organization meets difficult goals and objectives using a dynamic and emergent process of constant review. The expectation of transparency demands that the results of the process and evaluation be visible to members of the academy as well as other stakeholders. The question of transparency requires some consideration about what parts of the process or outcome should be known.

This study examines 100 undergraduate communication program web pages to determine the fidelity to the process of assessment in both the completeness and transparency of the assessment evaluations. One feature is determining the existence and fidelity to the process that ought to be evident throughout the institution as organizations seek to comply with accreditation standards existing for almost a decade in many instances (the general lifecycle of the review process).

University Mission Statements

Universities across the United States develop and implement programs reflecting a mission statement. The mission statement serves as the basis for any institutional assessment plan. A mission statement may reflect past university administrators developing a plan and leaving the institution but should involve a commitment on the part of the institution rather than any particular administration or administrator. Some universities offer mission statements with a foundational view of education. The foundational view may involve some statement about encouraging the search for knowledge and critical thinking by students matriculating from the institution. The challenge for a university mission statement requires providing both a statement of philosophy and expectation but then also providing elements that produce measurable outcomes. A mission statement may reflect the religious values of a private institution, the search for particular contributions to a geographic region (improving the economy, often articulated by a public state funded institution), or reflect a specific mission expectation (e.g., training teachers, creating agricultural employees). Atkinson (2008) finds that university mission statements provide “ideational indicators of group solidarity, shared beliefs, and human agreement” (p. 361). The functional feature of university mission statements provides a way of representing unification of the elements of the institution around publicized statements of agreement across the organization.

Despite what should be viewed as an important element of establishing the goal and role of the institution, most members of the institution fail to give mission statements much respect (Kiley, 2011). The challenge is that mission statements typically lack day-to-day advice concerning the conduct of the university. Instead the statements establish a kind of role or image in the minds of individuals about the institution. Universities can exist for a long time without a mission statement. For example, the University of Rochester existed for more than 160 years before creating a university mission statement (Kiley, 2011). The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in developing standards for evaluation of assessment has a simple question early in the process that an institution should ask: “Are we doing the right things to achieve our mission and goals?” (2014, p. 3). An institution without a mission statement may have difficulty answering this question because one outcome of establishing a mission statement should be an agreement by members of the organization, particularly the administration, that identifies the outcomes sought.

Department Mission Statements

In theory, a departmental mission statement should be subordinate to the larger, more inclusive, university mission statement (e.g., Arnett, 2002). The department mission statement more often focuses on what the departmental member hopes the world outside of academia views about the training of students in a specific discipline. In short, the departmental mission statement should, in some way, provide a direct connection and contribution to the university’s mission statement in terms of the specifics of the departmental goals (e.g., Fritz & Sawicki, 2006). Philipps (2013), in an analysis of German research institutes, points out how the unit mission statement is sometimes at odds with the general institutional mission and creates tensions between the goals of the institute and the larger university goals.

The question of the degree of connection and the explicitness of that connection or contribution may differ greatly. Part of the level of connection between the university mission and departmental mission reflects the specificity of the university mission statement. The magnitude of colleges and universities can appear overwhelming to high school seniors as they try to decide to embark on the journey in higher education. Similarly, parents want to

make sure the institution where they send a child possesses a reputation of a program that provides training in the skills needed to succeed after graduation. Materials posted on the web pages are usually the starting point in an institutional search. Each institution should have a mission statement about the goals and what skills are developed by students. Velcoff and Ferrari (2006), in a survey of senior administrators, find that faculty are engaged in mission-driven activities, but those may not reflect the identity of the university.

Minimally, the departmental mission statement should not be inconsistent with the university's mission statement. Most departments display mission statements specifying exactly the goals for students at a more refined level. Moreover, the clarity of meaning of mission statements is debatable. For departments of communication the goals typically involve some training in communication skills, critical thinking, and approach to understanding (methodology) the process of communication. The distinctions are often over the degree of emphasis on methods, critical thinking, and communication skills, but few departments would not involve some combination of these elements.

The question is how such a departmental mission fits into the university's mission statement. Usually, university mission statements discuss students' training for life beyond the campus. Increasing communication skills and improving critical thinking provides a powerful platform for participation by the matriculating student in the world outside of campus. Many institutions with a religious or evangelical focus should find communication skills important for creating the ability to "testify" on behalf of the faith. In some respects, private religious institutions may find the training in persuasion and argument offered by communication departments consistent with the university mission.

Research Question One: What level of consistency exists between university and departmental mission statements?

Assessment Plans

The format and purpose of the assessment plan should be related to the mission statements of the university and department. At a molar level, assessments should target the ability to evaluate whether the department fulfills the mission set forth. Assessment evaluations of programs therefore provide valuable tools for incoming students, their parents, and current students about the state and quality of undergraduate programs. Kreber and Mhina (2005), in reviewing Canadian Universities, point out that a demonstration of the commitment to the mission statement becomes the issue of evaluating the achievement of those goals.

Assessing education provides some form of quality assurance. The university mission statement offers a goal sought by the institution and a promise made to students about the goals of the process. Assessment in many respects provides the report card of the degree to which the institution fulfills that mission. If a department of communication states as a goal a mission of improving the critical thinking ability of a student, what evidence can the department offer in support of achieving that goal? How does the department document achievement of the goal by graduating students? There exists a variety of conceptualizations of what is meant by critical thinking (Brookfield, 2002) as well as a number of means of making such an assessment (Allen, Berkowitz, & Loudon, 1999). Articulating and choosing a means of measuring and evaluating the educational outcomes operates at the heart of educational assessment.

Assessment of degree outcomes is not the same as assessment of faculty, often done on the basis of research by the faculty (Allen, et al., 2013, Allen, Maier, & Grimes, 2012; Altanopoulou, Dontsidou, & Tselios, 2012). The typical assumption in graduate education that exceptional research faculty create top-tier doctoral programs may or may not hold for undergraduate institutions. Faculty with stronger research records are significantly associated with higher teaching evaluations, according to one meta-analysis (Allen, 1996), but the question of faculty responsibilities involves a fundamental identification of objectives sought by the institution and program.

Assessment involves the articulation of objective and demonstrable means of evaluation. If a goal cannot be measured in any meaningful manner, then the department faces the difficulty of finding a means to measure improvement or achievement of that goal. A goal that cannot be assessed implies the inability to provide any evidence that the goal is ever met. For example, arguing that no assessment exists to measure critical thinking means the inability to generate evidence in support of achieving the goal.

Assessment Evaluation

An assessment plan should involve the collection and evaluation of a set of information designed to determine the degree of achievement of a goal. Many institutions have developed documents to guide programs in the establishment of student learning outcomes and the means to assess those outcomes (University of Central Florida, 2008). Moreover, these assessment plans need to be made easily available for individuals to utilize them. The transparency in the process should provide a means for proof such that any person can examine how well the institution meets the objectives sought.

The information and evaluations generated should be used as a basis for discussion and reaction by the unit (department). The goal should be a type of self-evaluation or study that provides the ability for the unit to generate possibilities of action for future improvement. The evaluation report provides a documented history of how the unit is focused on educational improvement and takes the input of students seriously.

The report should explore the problems, limitations, or failures as well as celebrate and recognize the success of the unit. Evaluations can indicate success of the unit in achieving goals. A good assessment evaluation will refer back to the mission statements and indicate how successful evaluation of the program advances the goals of the university and the department.

Research Question Two: How evident is the connection between mission and assessment plan?

The challenge of transparency becomes one measured in degrees and levels of reporting of information. The least transparent would be the recognition of an in place process but with no details provided about the method or outcome of assessment evaluation. The requirement for transparency varies from no requirement/expectation at a private college to complete disclosure of all materials that may be required by sunshine laws for state supported institutions.

Research Question Three: How transparent or available are the measurement and process of assessment and evaluation?

Methods

Selection of Programs for Review

The website for the National Communication Association (NCA) was selected as the source of communication programs for this analysis. One hundred programs, selected at random, were included in this analysis. The goal was to include a variety of institutions across the country with varied and diverse missions, faculty, funding, and goals. This choice should provide a strong and holistic sense of the communication discipline. The choice of the NCA site was to include departments that had faculty self-selecting an affiliation with communication as a discipline and chose to be members of an identifiable organization (See National Communication Association URL listing for membership directory). The selection should provide for no ambiguity about whether the faculty in the department describe the department (despite the label used) as one fitting within the broad designation of communication.

Materials Gathered for the Review

The web pages for each university were examined for a mission statement (all universities and departments had web pages accessible to the public). Such mission statements are easily located with titles including “mission” or “goals” for the institution. Often there exists a “kernel” statement or set of sentences followed by a longer articulation of how those are manifested or the anticipated enactment by the institution.

The web pages were examined for a mission statement of communication departments. The inclusion of departments is always a bit challenging since alternative titles or combinations for titles exist (Speech Communication, Journalism and Communication, Speech Communication and Theatre, etc.). Identification of the particular department was based on the NCA member’s statement of departmental affiliation and provided a great deal of ability to identify which specific program should be included.

Assessment plans and evaluations were sought on the respective departmental web page. If one was not available, an electronic message was sent to the chair of the department requesting a copy or directions to the plan. In the case of no reply, one follow-up message was sent making the request for information. After two such requests with no information provided, the information was considered unavailable.

Analysis of Materials

Analysis of the materials involved examining the themes evident in the overall university mission statement and the connection to elements of the departmental mission statements. Conceptually, a university mission statement would be an overall statement about the goals or responsibilities set forth by the institution. A department should contribute to the achievement of at least some of those goals. The connection between a university mission and departmental mission statement should reflect some common vocabulary or sense of targets and outcomes. The key is that some sense of shared responsibility for the university mission statement should be evident in the departmental mission statement. A departmental mission statement may not adopt every goal because the focus of the department may not be able to embrace all aspects of the university mission. At the same time, the department, as part of the larger institution, should be identified by the

contribution made towards the overall mission of the university as identified by the specific goals established by the unit.

Each mission statement was read by multiple persons, who discussed the various approaches. The themes emerged as elements of the mission statements were grouped into categories. The designation of the categories reflects the broader sense of mission and the enactment of self-descriptive vocabulary used by most institutions fitting within the assessment rubrics provided by the regional and national accreditation associations.

Results

Description of Available Information

University Mission Statements. A total of 98 of the 100 institutions had identifiable university mission statements. The universities examined all had clearly labeled mission statements that were found either on the home page or under the “About Us” tab on the university home page. While all of the missions varied in their wording, the following three topics were included in every mission statement: *teaching*, *research*, and *service*. These three themes provided values held by the institution used to describe the quality of the program because the university at large was focused on integrating all of the areas into the education students would receive. Furthermore, mission statements frequently described that focusing on these three areas would produce well-rounded graduates that could make a difference in the world. In other words, when reading these mission statements, descriptions of the excellence of teaching, research applicable to societal issues, and service to the community were offered as evidence for how the institution provided a high-quality experience. Another theme described by all of the institutions in their mission statements was how the university had contributed, or was focused on contributing, to the local community and the state in which it was located, and the world by extension. The process of reviewing these mission statements revealed that it seemed important to the universities to emphasize that they were accomplishing something besides providing a high-quality educational experience; they were, in addition, serving as permanent fixtures in the community and benefiting society. For students, the mission statements focused on not just what they would accomplish while enrolled, but their continued contributions on a macro level after graduation.

Interestingly, many institutions included vision statements along with the mission statements. Sometimes, the vision statements were less clear than the missions, focusing more on idealized future goals. For example, several of the universities focused on attracting a high caliber of students in the future, or as one institution described it, the “best students.” The actual focus behind these vision statements seemed to be the value of leadership, and expanding leadership of students through a focus on research and producing projects to benefit society. Some institutions had vision statements that were very refined and direct, one stating a focus on healthcare for the local community and state, whereas another institution focused more broadly on the role of technology to help solve societal problems.

The length of the actual mission statements was similar for most institutions, approximately one paragraph. Generally, the mission and vision statements were easy to follow, but seemed focused on idealistic concerns. At times, the institutions included a listing of goals or objectives that would help to fulfill the mission statements. For the most part, the goals provided more straightforward and specific language than the mission statement. However, one institution included 19 goals that were worded as values that were often very vague and difficult to understand.

To summarize, university mission statements range from single sentence statements of purpose to more detailed lists of specific sets of outcomes. The common features deal with the role of the university and reflect the nature of the funding or historical origins. Some universities are relatively young (less than 50 years old) and some institutions have hundreds of years of history for traditions from which to draw. For example, DePaul University in Chicago has a short, simple statement:

DePaul pursues the preservation, enrichment, and transmission of knowledge and culture across a broad scope of academic disciplines. It treasures its deep roots in the wisdom nourished in Catholic universities from medieval times. The principal distinguishing marks of the university are its Catholic, Vincentian, and urban character. (DePaul, 2014)

Prior to this statement is a prelude that talks about what the mission statement embodies about DePaul. The short statement is followed by pages of text that distinguish between: (a) Central Purposes, (b) Students and Faculty, and then (c) Distinguishing Marks. The statement provides an overall view typical of many private religious institutions that contain an explicit statement about the centrality of religious faith. The explicitness and requirements of that faith vary from what the institution strives towards to the expectations of what behavioral standards faculty and students should ascribe to. DePaul's statement highlights the tension between the need to give a simple view of the goal of the university and the pressure to articulate, in a more detailed fashion, the particulars of the institution, because some units have a broad mission and others a precise mission.

Departmental Mission Statements. A total of 81 of the 100 departments' web sites displayed identifiable mission statements. No department provided a mission statement in the absence of a university mission statement. The mission statements varied, but some common themes emerged. Over fifty percent of the mission statements incorporate career preparation, skills development, and references to integrating practice with theory. Some departments reflected local manifestations of those themes. The University of Hawaii-Manoa Communication department's mission was to "[d]emonstrate global awareness, including an awareness of cultures in the Hawaii-Pacific region and issues related to cross-cultural communication."

There are several unique features among the various communication department mission statements. One university adamantly focused on the balance of research and teaching, stating, "The department has long avoided choosing between teaching and research." Many of the university mission statements mentioned the importance of research; however, this particular university values both teaching and research equally. This same department mission statement encourages both social scientific and humanistic approaches. The unique feature of this specific department's mission statement is the aim for balance in teaching and research, theoretical approaches, and theory and practice.

To summarize, not all departments had mission statements on their web pages. An email to the chair of the department asking for a mission statement elicited no additional mission statements. Two chairs responded that the program was developing a mission statement. The length of departmental mission statements varied, and was more distinctive compared to the university mission statements, which tended to be similar in format and content across institutions. Several of the communication departments had mission statements that were one sentence long; in essence, they were actual statements. Other

departments contained mission statements that were a paragraph long, other departments had mission statements that were two paragraphs long, and yet other communication departments had mission statements that were close to four paragraphs long.

Available Assessment Plans. A total of 18 departments had available assessment plans. All assessment plans but one came from departments that had mission statements (one department had an assessment plan but no mission statement). In short, assessment plans were a relatively infrequent occurrence but seem to reflect the existence of a mission statement. Furthermore, when assessment evaluations for undergraduates were sought on the websites of communication departments, none were readily available. The majority of departmental chairs of various programs were emailed requesting this information. While over 50% of departmental chairs responded to the email requests, their responses varied in detail. Several departmental chairs described that undergraduates completed a capstone course as a method of evaluation. Further, of those departmental chairs, one gave further detail stating, “In the professional sequences, we use mandatory internships, hiring rates, and admission to graduate programs as assessment tools” as a way to evaluate undergraduate success. Another departmental chair described that an online survey was used as a method of evaluation. One departmental chair responded that only the provost had access to that information. Finally, one departmental chair was unwilling to look for the information, responding, “Sorry. Bad time of the semester. Very busy. In fact, too busy to go digging through my files looking for this information.” Clearly, direct evaluation plans were extremely difficult to obtain.

Available Assessment Evaluations. A total of four complete assessment evaluations were made available to this investigation. The evaluations received, in general, provided a complete set of information and a score card on the programs. The set of four evaluations were generally reflective of mission statements and provided clear data. All reports generated a list of issues for future consideration and improvement in the process. Basically, the programs were fulfilling the expectations of what could be considered a desirable approach to assessment of the educational practices of the institution. Email messages sent to departmental chairs did not add any additional assessment evaluation documents. Most messages received no reply to either the original message or the second request. Some of the responses received were interesting. For example, one chair replied that evaluation data were collected by the provost and not shared with the departments. One chair responded that at a private college, such information was considered confidential and distribution not permitted since personnel issues were involved.

At times there seemed to be an attitude of suspicion and concern regarding the request for assessment evaluations. The most frequent response was simply not to respond and ignore the communication. Even the follow up message did not solicit a response. Only in a very few cases (five) did the response indicate that the requested documents simply did not exist. Such admissions may be something that many institutions wish not to make.

Research Question One

The majority of departmental mission statements (64) contained at least one clear phrase or theme that provided a direct connection between the university mission and the department mission. For example, several of the religious institutions incorporated Christian faith and learning in both the institution and department mission statements. Another

private institution emphasized the integration of theory and practice evident in both mission statements. The indication of consistency provides considerable evidence of how departments fit within the context of the overall university mission.

The remaining institutions (17) had department mission statements that seemed disconnected from institutional mission statements. All the departments existed as part of a state supported public university system. One institution's mission statement focused on putting theory into practice, while the department's mission statement focused on critical thinking, writing, speaking, and cultural influence. Another institution's mission emphasized excellence in research, teaching, creative work, service, lifelong learning and global society. The department's mission statement, in contrast, emphasized understanding communication in various contexts and the development of personal and professional skills. Another institution's mission statement incorporated student-centered learning and innovation, while the department's mission statement incorporated cultural awareness, civic-mindedness and leadership preparation. While some connections could be inferred in most of the examples, the alignment of the two missions was not always clear. Part of the coordination would simply require some shared vocabulary or way of maintaining a sense of consistency between the two articulated visions. Put another way, the connection between the institutional and departmental mission statement was not obvious.

Research Question Two

Many departments set out a system of learning outcomes for the major. A set of learning outcomes or goals is not the same as a plan to assess the ability of students to achieve those goals. The focus becomes assessment for the classroom (Angelo & Cross, 1992) rather than the entire degree program. For example, stating that a learning outcome sought is “effective public presentational skills” identifies a desirable outcome. Departments that failed to specify a means of assessing the degree to which students met that goal were evaluated as lacking an assessment plan. The reliance on the student passing a capstone course provides evidence of success in a course but fails to articulate which specific goals were achieved and to what degree.

The question of whether or not the assessment plans reflected an ability to evaluate the fulfillment of a mission statement was largely unclear and uncertain for most programs. The problem of the lack of details makes the connection unclear in most instances. With only four complete evaluations available (and three of them essentially confidential), the correspondence becomes difficult to assess meaningfully.

Research Question Three

Although little departmental assessment information was available, approximately 50% of the institutions did have student-learning outcomes available on departmental websites. In some cases, these learning outcomes helped to clarify a connection between university and department missions. For example, one institution's communication department had no reference to global society as emphasized in the university's mission statement, but globalization was incorporated into one of the department's learning outcomes for the undergraduate major. However, these learning outcomes did not provide any indication of how departments or institutions assessed students' ability to meet them. The indication implied the existence of a learning outcome but there were no means provided to determine how successful the department's effort were in meeting those goals.

Interestingly, two universities that made the assessment plans public shared similar format and structure. Both universities provided a detailed summary of each concentration, including the required credits as well as the type of classes needed to declare a major or minor in that particular communication division. One university provided the goals and outcomes of the programs. These goals consisted of “understanding the discipline, creative and critical thinking, performance skills, and personal and professional identity.” Each of the goals was accompanied by related outcomes, detailing what specific tasks must be completed to reach the goal. The two universities that provided the plans sent a dense amount of information concerning the school’s assessment plan for both graduate and undergraduate students. Both university representatives asked that the details of the information be kept private and be used only for this investigation. While both plans were detailed and clear, the transparency for the process was lacking. The implication of the position becomes that the department conducts assessment but the results are internally held and not shared with the larger community.

Finally, only one of the universities provided an assessment that specified how the assessment and goals related to the university and department’s mission statement. This university provided a detailed analysis of how its assessment matched the components of the department’s mission statement. Within this document, the department “underlined parenthetical numbers and added to the mission statement to cross-reference the matching assessment objectives.” This was the only university that connected the mission statement of the department to the goals and assessment. The other universities used general wording that did not specify whether or not it pertained to the mission statement of the department or university at large. Lack of transparency may indicate that many departments use assessment plans not linked directly to program mission statements.

Email messages sent to chairs to request mission statements received no additional documents. In one case the request, by a graduate student, was referred back to a faculty member to verify that this request was legitimate and not some subterfuge. What happened is that the commitment to transparency of the process was lacking in various ways. While the process may be ongoing, valuable information and commitment by the institutions to an open and documented process was less forthcoming. In three of the cases the response to the request asked the authors not to share the particulars of the information since the reports were considered internal and not for public distribution. The only institution that provided a complete and public set of documents was Illinois State University. In some respects, the full set of documents represents a “best practice.” The entire set of documents provided a link to mission statements, clearly articulated assessment criteria, and then a full set of information about the process.

The overall conclusion was that limited transparency exists. The limits seem to involve both institutional expectations for privacy and proprietary information as well as lack of specificity. While the process of the evaluation may be kept private, most of the institutions keep the results of the evaluation private as well. The statement that various outcomes are assessed provides a statement about evaluation but no indication of whether the evaluations took place or what the outcome of the evaluation indicated. The challenge becomes difficult in establishing what constitutes the minimal informational requirements for “transparency.”

Discussion

Universities seem to share much in common when providing a mission statement; the various statements, not surprisingly, contain similar themes. Many institutions add to the mission statement the articulation of a vision statement, found in more than half of the universities examined. The vision statement may serve as a source of refinement, or a more tailored articulation that provides an opportunity to describe the ideology and overarching goal of the institution. The net result becomes a much longer and more detailed set of statements that can run for several pages.

Most communication departments made reference to the university goals. The connection of the university to a departmental mission provides a framework for understanding how the program operates to contribute to at least part of the university's mission. Most of the departmental mission statements (64 out of 81) seemed to integrate well with the university mission. The departmental mission statements operating without a clear connection to university mission did not work in contrast or inconsistently with the university but simply fail to articulate a clear connection.

The current investigation indicates that undergraduate communication programs lack a clear, publicly available evaluation of the success of the undergraduate program assessment. The lack of available assessment information makes it impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of communication departments in meeting the departmental and institutional missions. A number of reasons would explain the lack of availability of the information. One option, of course, is that no departmental assessment plan exists. Lack of availability, however, should not be taken as lack of existence. Another is that institutions do not wish to make this information publicly available if not explicitly required to do so (which could be particularly true of private institutions not subject to the same open records laws as public institutions). However, if assessment plans and evaluations exist, no evidence of the success of the program becomes displayed on the departmental web page. One would expect that assessments providing evidence of success would become a central part of the display for the department.

The information found from the university and department mission statements to the assessment plans is of great importance when explaining outcomes, but, nonetheless, does not actually prove that students graduate with the skills or knowledge promised. A likely explanation for this lack of assessment information in many of these cases is that assessment is simply not a priority at the department level. Limited resources make effective evaluation difficult to perform. Assessment may represent a priority at the institutional level, particularly with regard to maintaining accreditation, but faculty members are seldom incentivized to take it on. The failure to provide resources or rewards indicates something that becomes a burden for faculty with few advantages for participation. Moreover, assessment is merely something added to the faculty's existing responsibilities of teaching, research, and service. The latter is becoming particularly problematic in the current higher education climate: with universities relying increasingly more on part-time adjunct faculty to cover teaching responsibilities, the shrinking numbers of tenure-track faculty that remain are spread thinner than ever trying to cover committee work and other department and university service obligations (not to mention, in some cases, needing to provide some supervision of the adjuncts in order to maintain consistency in the curriculum). With all of these other demands placed on time, why would faculty members put much effort into the added task of assessment if no incentive exists and no penalty is exacted for not completing this arduous task? If assessment is truly to become an institutional and departmental priority, universities must find ways to make the process feasible, worthwhile, and necessary

for faculty members to address. Only when faculty and administrators work together can missions, goals, and assessment of outcomes truly become effective.

Palomba (1997), in providing an overview of the successful implementation of an assessment program in the 1990s at Ball State University, points out that to have assessment taken seriously, resources and support must come from the central administration. The requirement of leadership from the university and college is essential for successful assessment. Leadership must be more than the setting of requirements for the process to occur; rather, leadership requires commitment of resources involving support, release time, and clerical and administrative personnel to assist in this process. The lack of public documentation and access may simply reflect a lack of institutional resources devoted to this process.

Another challenge is that accreditation reviews take place typically about ten years apart. The window means a review takes place with recommendations and promises examined ten years later. The problem is that very likely all major administrators will be replaced, not once, but typically twice, before the next review. The lack of continuity in administrative leadership means that any promises, procedures, or outcomes planned in one review may not be sustained by the time the administrators have completely changed over at least twice.

The lifecycle of many evaluation changes is a two-year planning cycle and then a four-year cycle for an incoming class to graduate with the new standards. Essentially, once a decision is made to initiate some change, the process probably takes about six years before the first class is available for full assessment. If one wants five years of assessment evaluations, the full cycle would take more than a decade before meaningful data exist for a full evaluation of the process.

One caveat to the results involves the limitations of size in terms of some departments. Some departments may have one or two faculty that are full time, teaching four classes a semester as well as managing many part-time adjunct faculty. Essentially, the person is a full time instructor with additional administrative duties. The expectation that the one or two person program can then plan and conduct assessment is probably unrealistic. Putting on paper the requirement of assessment within the institution without fundamental commitment to fund the process creates an unfunded mandate with little hope of goal achievement sought by the process. In other words, administrators might create service incentives that motivate faculty to engage actively in departmental assessment. Assessment is an ongoing process of evaluation and adaptation to improve the system, but without the resources necessary to implement the process, many of these efforts will not occur or will be minimally sufficient to “cover” the requirement without fulfilling the goal or the outcome sought by the process.

The National Communication Association has an important role to play in the process of assessment. Providing examples of plans and evaluations tools, as well as offering on site workshops (at a reasonable fee) would improve assessment. The NCA website (National Communication Association, 2015) offers a number of options and assistance for assessment resources, including reports, standards for review, and a plethora of publications to assist departmental faculty. The question of how well utilized or available the existing resources are remains an open question. The issue is not assessment of General Educational Requirements, but rather at the programmatic level, as well as working with the means of establishing assessment plans for individual institutions. In the absence of accreditation standards, the flexibility of programs to set standards and the means to evaluate those standards remains locally empowered but also disconnected from direct association with an

established set of disciplinary norms or expectations. One idea would be to provide some best practices examples, where members of the association have examined and evaluated programs that could be used as exemplars for others to consider. The Commission on English Language Program's web page provides both accreditation standards and examples of best practices in English Writing (CEA, 2015)

Given that the cycle of the review process is more than twice as long as the typical lifecycle of administrators, the challenge to maintain commitment and sustainability of any process requiring resources appears great. Finally, our research suggests that the majority of departments have developed mission statements that align with their respective universities. However, assessment plans and evaluations for communication departments are difficult to find. Departments need to develop assessment outcomes and carry out regular evaluations so that the primary purposes of assessment (i.e. accountability and improvement in teaching and learning) can be achieved.

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Appendix A

List of Universities Included

Anderson University
Arizona State University
Auburn University
Augustana College
Azusa Pacific University
Ball State University
Barry University
Bethel College
Bethune-Cookman University
Boise State University
Bradley University
Bridgewater State University
Butler University
Cal State Polytechnic University-Pomona
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo
California State University -Bakersfield
California State University-Los Angeles
California State University -San Bernardino
California State University -Long Beach
California State University -Northridge
California State University -San Marcos
California State University -Stanislaus
Central Connecticut State University
Chapman University
Colorado State University
Columbus State University
DePaul University
DePauw University
Eastern Connecticut State University
Eastern Illinois University
Eckerd College
Elmhurst College
Emmanuel College
Emerson College
Farmingham State University
Florida State University
Florida International University
Florida Atlantic University
Fort Hayes State University
George Washington University
Georgia Southern University
Georgia State University
Governors State University
Hawaii Pacific University

Howard University
Illinois College
Illinois State University
Indiana University, East
Indiana University -Purdue University, Fort Wayne
Indiana University ,Bloomington
Indiana University -Purdue University, Indianapolis
Indiana University, South Bend
Iowa State University
Kansas State University
Kennesaw State University
Lake Forest College
Lasell College
Louisiana State University
McNeese State University
Monmouth College
Montana State University
Morehead State University
NorthEastern Illinois University
Northern Illinois University
Northern Kentucky University
Northwestern University
Pittsburg State University
Purdue University
Regis University
Saint Leo University
Saint Mary's College
Saint Xavier University
San Diego State University
San Francisco State University
San Jose State University
Santa Clara University
Shorter University
Simmons College
SouthEastern Louisiana University
Southern Connecticut State University
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
Spalding University
State University of New York-New Paltz
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa
University of Alabama, Huntsville
University of Alaska, Anchorage
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
University of Arizona
University of Central Arkansas
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
University of Colorado, Boulder
University of Delaware

University of Denver
University of Connecticut, Storrs
University of Georgia
University of Hawaii, Manoa
University of Iowa
University of Illinois, Chicago
University of Illinois, Urbana
University of Kansas
University of Kentucky
University of Louisiana, Monroe
University of Louisville
University of Massachusetts, Boston
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
University of Mississippi
University of Miami
University of Northern Iowa
University of Northern Colorado
University of San Diego
University of South Florida
University of Southern California
University of Southern Louisiana
University of the Pacific
Vanguard University of Southern California
Washburn University
W. Kentucky University
Young Harris College