

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY
MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

<http://www.shsu.edu/programs/master-of-arts-in-communication-studies/index.html>

EXTERNAL PROGRAM REVIEW – SPRING 2016

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My overall view of this program is that it is an excellent program being taught by stellar faculty members. Since it is an online degree, this can be hard to administer, and I believe their faculty director, Dr. Frances Brandau, does an excellent job of administering the program. She is also assisted by some stellar faculty members who seem excited and invested in the degree program. She is in a supportive department where her chairperson, Dr. Terry Thibodeaux, supports the program with resources as well as moral support. Allow me to elaborate.

Initially, a reviewer should look at the program offerings, including the quality of the courses, as well as the availability of those courses. The description of the program on their website presents a good rationale for their courses: “[The degree] focuses on advanced topics in the field, including conflict resolution, gendered communication, organizational communication, and interpersonal and family communication. These areas of study are important topics in communication research, and the Department of Communication Studies offers a useful and insightful combination of the topics in its online master's degree.”

One positive aspect of this program is that it is not only geared for Communication students; it is actually an eclectic program that lends itself well to being a program for all professionals, in addition to those who plan to pursue an academic career in the Communication discipline. As the website description reports: “The program is designed for aspiring doctoral students in communication studies as well as professionals wishing to advance their career. It is also an attractive option for graduate students in Psychology, Education, Sociology, and Criminal Justice who are searching for a complementary minor. For some who aspire to a Ph.D. in one of these fields, an M.A. in Communication Studies can serve as a useful stepping stone.” This should be a positive point for the SHSU graduate admissions office, since it is geared for students who might be working in a career that needs a better handle on Communication skills that are needed in today’s society, as well as students who are just trying to extend their undergraduate experience in the discipline. Research has shown that most employers are looking for employees who have exemplary communication skills. SHSU’s Communication Studies Masters provides education in both skills and theory designed to help the persons pursuing careers to improve their status within a company based on good communication knowledge and skill.

Clearly, this program meets its objectives. They further the education of the students beyond the undergraduate level; they establish the social sciences as the foundation for studying communication; they reach into the community to help the broader community understand the importance of good communication skills; they appeal to a wide diversity of students. Their desire is to help professionals advance in their careers, or for students who wish to pursue a higher degree (Ph. D.) to do so; they accomplished this and then some.

I was especially struck by their course offerings, and the flexibility of those course offerings. The specified courses of Research Methods, Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication, Health Communication, Sex and Gender Communication are areas of study that suit any student well, thus making this degree program an excellent choice for many, not just students who have an undergraduate degree in Communication Studies. The courses that are offered as “Selected Topics” also add a great deal of interest into the program. These special topics courses allow the faculty to sharpen the skills and knowledge the students may need some assistance with, and also allows the faculty to pursue topics of interest to themselves.

When comparing this Master of Arts in Communication Studies to peer institutions, the SHSU program is similar to all of these (the department document compares it to some of its peer institutions - Western Kentucky University, Texas State University, University of Texas at Arlington, Minnesota State University – Mankato, and University of Alabama – Birmingham). The course offerings are similar, the hours required are similar, and the rigor, at least on the surface, appears commensurate.

This program accepts high quality students into it, and that is evidenced by test scores and average GPAs of its enrollees. The acceptance process is flexible, accepting GRE scores, or 3-5 years professional work combined with an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 or better. This makes the program more attractive to students who might want to further their education but taking the GRE is not easily completed (I also note that the Graduate School at SHSU has a process to follow in situations such as this).

In a discussion with the faculty, one of the things I noted was that perhaps they need to reconsider a few of their admission practices. First, I suggested perhaps considering the Miller Analogy Test for entrance, as it measures the analytical abilities of the test taker. Although not as common, some students may prefer that entrance exam. Many universities use this in addition to other admissions exams.

One area where I made a suggestion was in the area of how many courses to accept for the program (of courses already taken at the Masters level). At present time the program shows that they will only accept 6 hours from another graduate institution. My suggestion was to alter that, due to the numerous “Graduate Certificates” being offered across the country. The suggestion was to accept up to 1/3 of the required coursework. This would, in their case, mean up to 12 hours. They would specify that these courses should come from a Graduate Certificate program.

Since most Graduate Certificates are 15-18 hours, this would allow some people to discover that they really do want the full Masters Degree, and not have to discard courses they have already taken at the graduate level. This could also expand on topics for special courses, as students who come in with courses from other institutions might spark interest in other Communication Studies topics for these professors.

The faculty is more than qualified. All professors teaching in the program have earned Ph.D.s in the Communication Studies discipline. Drs. Bello, Brandau, Chen, and Zhang not only have the qualifications required to teach graduate courses for SHSU, they have a passion for doing so. All four hold the status of Graduate Faculty within the SHSU campus, as does the department chair, Dr. Thibodeaux. In a discussion with these professors, and the department chair, I discovered that not only were they enthusiastic about the degree, they also would like to see it evolve in to more than what it is today. In particular, all of them would like to see it return to a “seated” program at some time in the future. All are willing to make whatever sacrifices are needed to see that happen, including driving to satellite campuses that are closer to Houston.

The faculty that are involved in this Master program are productive on both a scholarly level and a professional service level. Their publication records speak highly to their level of scholarship, with all of their faculty publishing articles in journals or having scholarly works accepted in peer-reviewed panels for professional organizations. Their faculty regularly presents scholarly works at national, regional, and state professional Communication conferences. They also offer their service to these same organizations, serving in leadership roles (including the top level of leadership in the regional Communication organization). In addition, their faculty has had a hand in submitting grant applications, and some success in obtaining grants. This should continue to improve as the program progresses.

The faculty that teach in this program have also been recognized for many accomplishments. These recognitions include awards for teaching, being recognized for service, being elected to higher offices in professional associations, as well as an overall positive ethos within the Communication discipline. When someone speaks of SHSU and its Communication degree, it is always held in high esteem by the person mentioning it as well as to whomever they are speaking.

The student to faculty ratio is good, and with a new hire, the ratio should improve. The latest statistics were 7.3 students to each professor, but that statistic was with only 3 faculty members. This year they increased their faculty to four faculty members, and next year (2016-17) the number will be five. This will decrease the faculty-student ratio, which will then improve the one-on-one attention students are able to obtain.

The program is effective, as evidenced by their completion rate. The program has produced four to five graduates each year since its inception (except for 2013-14, where the number was two). Since the program turned to an online degree in 2013, it has seen an increase in enrollment,

which will mean that the graduation rate will also increase. This should become evident starting with this year's (2015-16) rate of graduates. The projected number of graduates for 2016 is seven.

In checking with the participating faculty members, they believe that support from the library sources is good, although they are less than happy with the platform used for the online classes. They also receive support for issues such as writing skills and research skills from sources on campus, and believe those to be adequate.

Since the program is online, facilities are not really a question except for office space and space to meet with students should they venture to campus. This should be rectified by their move in 2017 to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences Building.

Impressive to me was the support they have from their Dean, Dr. Abbey Zink. In a discussion with her, I was pleased to find out that Dr. Zink understands the department's value to the university, the hard work these professors put into administering the program, the potential for this program to grow and to remain a leading program for this College's positive academic achievements. This aspect cannot be mentioned enough, as many programs at universities do not have the support of their academic deans such as the Communication Department does at SHSU. This bodes well for this Masters' degree program to continue to grow and to flourish within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

In addition to the support of their college dean, this program enjoys the support of their Graduate School. The Interim Dean, Dr. Mary Robbins, is supportive of this program, feels that it is growing, and that in the future it will continue to be a viable and effective program. Dr. Robbins believes that the new dean, once in place, will also continue to be supportive of all graduate programs. This also bodes well for this Communication Studies degree graduate program to continue to grow and flourish.

The long term and short term goals of this degree program are appropriate. Like all graduate programs, the goal of offering a high quality curriculum, combined with productive scholars and students is easily done with this program. The course offerings in the areas they offer them will help them attain these goals. The focus on human communication skills that cross over many areas of study (interpersonal, family, work, health, nonverbal, etc....) will allow this program to continue to burgeon as these are the skills that everyone needs to be successful in whatever profession they pursue.

It should be noted that part of their long term goals are to have the degree return to being a seated degree program. Being Communication professionals, this should come as no surprise. Since we believe in the power of human communication skills, it is only natural that these professors would prefer the venue of face-to-face communication with their students. They do realize that this can be a catch twenty-two situation. If they return to a seated program, the numbers may

well decrease, so because of that, they are willing to drive to satellite campuses to offer the seated classes.

Another goal that is more short-term for them is to change the platform used to deliver this degree. They do not like using “Blackboard” as the platform. They believe that it is a counter-intuitive product and makes teaching online harder. Some suggestions they had were to allow them to choose the platform they feel most comfortable with, be it a “Moodle” product, or “Canvas.” They believe that “Blackboard” platform makes teaching – as well as the students’ learning – unnecessarily difficult. Forum discussions are hard to have using this platform. Making contact with either the student or the faculty member is complicated by this platform. They believe that when using the “Blackboard” platform it is very easy to make mistakes. The administration, when discussing this with them, did not feel that this was an issue; indeed, they felt like it is a good platform and that help is available to use it more effectively. As an outside observer, my position would have to be that if it is uncomfortable to use, faculty should be allowed to use what works best for them. This, of course, would mean that the product is available to the faculty members (which may include some financial resources), which might be a little harder to do that just to say it needs to be done.

In looking at SACS requirements for accreditation, I note no shortcomings. Since SACS accreditation was done recently for SHSU, any shortcomings would have arisen at that time. Indeed, it is my belief that this Masters exceeds SACS’ expectations at every level.

Finally, one thing that all faculty members within this degree program believe is necessary is more resources. One of the largest requests that was mentioned to me was the need for more Graduate Assistantships. This would help them administer the program more effectively, in addition to allowing the students who were offered assistantships to be more available to the program, not just class attendees. In a discussion of this with the deans (both of their college and the graduate school), they mentioned that there are scholarships available, including some offering \$1,000 stipends and in-state tuition. Dr. Brandau will pursue this further, but still does not relinquish her (and her colleagues’) request for more assistantships. It is clear that a program runs more effectively when you are afforded more personnel, even in just graduate assistant positions.

In the final meeting with the four faculty members associated with the program, and the department chair, the following were things that stood out to them the most about continuing a high quality Master of Arts in Communication Studies:

- More Graduate Teaching Assistants – this is absolutely critical to their functioning as an effective department. Since the graduate classes need to be covered with faculty, the graduate assistants would be helpful meeting the demands of over-subscribed undergraduate classes as well as allowing them to learn the ins and outs of academia, should the choose that route when their Masters are completed.

- Being able to choose an online platform more conducive to their teaching practices.
 - They especially mention that the “Blackboard” program is not the best platform for teaching Communication classes.
- They would prefer to be a seated class program (face-to-face) so they suggest the following:
 - Begin with a hybrid program – perhaps 75% online and 25% seated to begin with.
 - They presently have adequate faculty to do an online/face-to-face hybrid, especially with the new hire for Fall 2016.
 - They would be willing to use the Woodlands Center (realizing that driving to Huntsville on I-45 is not the most ideal situation to offer a seated program).
- They want the Graduate School and other administrators to realize that the majority of the students who begin the program finish the Masters Degree.
 - They also point out that several of those who have completed the Masters have gone on into Ph.D. programs.

In my final meeting with them, I made the following minor suggestions:

- Consider using other entrance requirements in addition to what they already use – including other testing measures.
 - Miller Analogy Test was one example
- Consider accepting more course hours from students who already have obtained a Graduate Certificate in the Communication Discipline
- Continue doing what they are doing, as it is a fine program and administered by faculty who are accomplished and passionate about what they are doing.

The bottom line is that this is an excellent, well-administered program, and it is my belief that Sam Houston State University should use it as an example to other online Masters programs that they may be considering establishing.