2019 External Program Review Report of the Communication Media Department

Division of Arts and Sciences
Fitchburg State University

Submitted by

Simon Tarr, MFA, PhD
Professor of Media Arts,
University of South Carolina

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Introduction and Overview

As part of regular assessment and quality enhancement process, the Communications Media Department at Fitchburg State University conducted a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of its programs in 2019, five years after the previous evaluation in 2014. This process entailed a thorough internal self-study, followed by a site visit by an external reviewer. I was invited to be that external reviewer and issue this report.

This report will enumerate the methods of collecting input during the site visit, highlight trends and opportunities that emerged during the site visit and related study of materials, and make recommendations based on evidence collected.

There are several general findings:

1. The Communications Media programs are vibrant and vital to Fitchburg State University. The faculty are a committed confederation of engaged scholars who are completely devoted to designing a high-impact, high-value experience for students.
2. Communications Media faces some significant challenges that if left unattended could adversely affect its success in the long-term,
3. Communications Media would benefit from additional hires and increased program budget, but needs to develop a realistic roadmap to achieve this goal,
4. There are likely ways within current operational constraints to make holistic progress toward achieving increased budget and hiring while simultaneously addressing the program's challenges provided the entire unit can agree on those goals, and,
5. The success of Communications Media is critical to the health and success of the university as a whole.

Thanks to the thoroughness, thoughtfulness and candor on the part of the faculty, administration, and students, this report is detailed and specific. I describe and attempt to synthesize issues across all stakeholders that I encountered. In this report I have tried to shed light on the concerns of those stakeholders as truly intertwined and interdependent.

All of my interactions during this review process have been friendly, collegial, and illuminating. There was a distinct sense of wanting to communicate accurately as many perspectives as possible, and a desire from all stakeholders to continually move the program forward. I hope to bring that same spirit of thoroughness, thoughtfulness, and candor to this

report. I hope that this external perspective will be useful as the faculty and administration move forward to develop a productive and fulfilling action plan for the years to come.

Methods

This section details the series of interactions that took place to gather information during my site visit. The results of these interactions will be described and analyzed in subsequent sections.

I visited campus from April 30 through May 2, 2019. In advance of my visit, department chair Prof. Mary Baker provided me with several documents: the Communications Media Program Review of April 2019, the program's previous self study from 2014, and the previous external review report from 2014. The 2014 documents were useful in providing some historical context, but the 2019 self-study was the primary source of background information and context. It was thorough, wide-ranging, and gave a candid assessment of the institution's perceptions of its own standing, challenges and opportunities. It also contained an internal action plan and report of actions since the 2014 evaluation. I will refer to this self study, including the fair amount of raw data that it included, throughout this report. In addition to the provided documents, I had access to FSU's website, which I studied to gain an layperson's outside overview of the program prior to my arrival.

During and after the visit I had the opportunity to speak with stakeholders at all levels and collect their perspectives, experiences, and insights. The night of my arrival, I had dinner with several members of the Communications Media faculty to informally begin gathering input.

On the main day of my site visit, I began with a meeting with Provost Cardelle and Dean Barricelli for a brief half-hour introductory discussion. From there I spent over an hour meeting with nine members of the Communications Media faculty across most disciplinary concentrations, including theater, photography, film/video, professional communication, communication studies, and the internship coordinator.

Several faculty from that meeting accompanied me on an extensive tour of all Communications Media facilities in Conlon Hall, where I captured 360-degree images of the production spaces available for students professional work. During the tour I also spoke with faculty from the technical theater concentration and several staff members that oversee functions of the Communications Media facilities.

The tour moved to a nearby dining hall where seven members of the faculty joined for lunch and continuing conversations that began in the morning meeting. This session featured a large contingent from the communications studies area who were not available at the earlier meeting time.

Touring continued after lunch with a visit to this year's annual "Visions" student exhibition of artworks across disciplines. The work on display was primarily print-based, with the majority of gallery space taken up with examples of photography, with additional examples from professional communication. There were only a few examples of graphic design work at this instance of the exhibition, so the graphic design concentration curated a separate display of examples of student work from several years in a nearby lab. The only screen-based example on display at the gallery during my visit were from the game design program (which was not a part of this evaluation), so I contacted the chair in the following weeks to request access to samples of student work form the film/video concentration.

Students remained in focus after the tour of work. I met for over two hours with a group of five undergraduates. Because it was the end of the semester, it was difficult to convince hard-working students to sacrifice valuable hours during their crunch time. The students who attended represented graphic design, film/video, photography and professional communication concentrations, and took particular care to represent the positions of their absent peers while pointing out when their opinions were individual and perhaps idiosyncratic. Their responses were rich and and well-reasoned.

Conversations continued well after the main site visit. The next morning before returning home, I had a second meeting with Provost Cardelle and Dean Barricelli to wrap up and ask questions that stemmed from the previous day's conversations. Due to scheduling conflicts, no members of the graphic design concentration were available to meet with me in person. I was able to have extensive conversations with both members of the graphic design faculty in the days that followed to paint a more complete picture of the program. The graphic design faculty also provided additional examples of student work.

Challenges Presented

In the 2019 self study, and in conversations with the Communications Media faculty, several problems were explicitly described. I will begin with those problems, since they are

interrelated, and I would like to aim this entire report at suggesting some practical solutions from my outside perspective.

Internship and Career Readiness

The first issue explicitly described to me is a perceived problem in readiness as students prepare for their required internship. In the self study and first conversations with faculty, this at first seemed like a matter of normative re-adjustment and possibly additional portfolio review, but further conversations with students and faculty indicate that because the internship process is so wide-reaching and complex that a single solution might not be so simple.

Physical Plant and Budget

Deferred maintenance and repeatedly-discussed-then-not-executed infrastructure updates to the third-floor of Conlon Hall loom large in conversations with faculty. To be sure, virtually every professional program in higher ed has a space problem, but a close analysis of the film/video spaces in particular confirms that this is not a nice-to-have renovation, but a need-to-remedy potential health and safety hazard.

There is also a considerable amount of frustration on the part of the faculty that operational budget allocations (including a looming large cut) seem unfair and unreasonable. Add to this a lack of clarity regarding the collection and then reapportionment of course lab fees, and there is a feeling among the faculty that administration has it out for Communications Media. There is no evidence of any such conspiracy afoot, but the effect on morale is there nonetheless.

Morale/Professional Tensions

Disagreements between management and the faculty union have gone on for several years, and a "work to rule" action has been in effect for that time in which the faculty can do no more than explicitly required. This lingering standoff, with the above-mentioned financial frustrations, exacerbated by enrollment issues described below has created a perfect storm that is sapping faculty morale.

There are also some persistent tensions among the faculty that will need to addressed honestly and comprehensively for the department to be able to move forward effectively. It is common for faculty in any institution to gather around disciplinary affinity groups. However, in my estimation this natural inclination toward peer groups has tipped into factions, a state that is actively undermining the potential of all of the programs. The

ultimate success of each of the concentrations and the whole department will ultimately hinge on the faculty's willingness and ability to untangle this complex knot.

Enrollment Decline

There are simply not enough students enrolling in Communications Media programs and classes. This is acknowledged to a degree in the self study and in conversations with faculty. However, a more nuanced look at the data suggests that current enrollment trends are in fact a grave threat to all of the programs. Perhaps because the scope and scale of this problem are not obvious, its causes are largely misattributed and previously suggested potential solutions are too limited.

At the risk of alarming readers of this report, I cannot overstate the importance of mitigating this enrollment issue methodically and comprehensively. However, I am confident that not only are solutions in reach, but the cascading effects solving this problem will have strong positive effects on the other challenges Communications Media faces.

As I believe it is the most important puzzle to solve, and is the key to addressing many other issues, I will begin the main section of this report laying out the story that the enrollment data tell, and proceed to recommend how solving that puzzle can lead to solutions to other challenges.

The Bean Counting Problem

The artist and scholar in me bristles at blunt discussion of enrollment trends. I remember railing against what I considered "bean counting" and "corporatization" when confronted with my first program's shortfalls as a professor. My natural reaction was "let me teach and do research, the rest is the administration's problem." This opinion evolved when I inherited direct responsibility for the administration of my own program with severe economic problems.

Faculty and administration often speak different languages from different vantage points; synthesizing those differing perspectives is always key to fostering a better partnership between stakeholders. My perspective from simultaneous roles as faculty and administration informs my analysis; I have been where Communications Media is. This section may seem cold and calculating, that will make ultimate success feel all the better.

University, Departmental, and Concentration Trends

Fitchburg State University enrollments are in decline. Looking at raw numbers, it seems like only a modest decrease, but over the last five years total day school student numbers have gone down 3% (down 4.5% from a peak in 2015). This is not good; it is manageable occasionally, but troubling over a five-year span. One may speculate many external reasons (demographics, regional statistics, etc.) as to why they would be continually declining. Hard evidence on this is sparse. I advise against over-attributing large trends on such external data because it leads to inaction when action is most needed.

Over that same five year period, Communications Media (excluding the Game Design major) has seen an 11% decline in majors. While this should be alarming, this is not the biggest red flag. Communications Media majors are declining at a faster rate than the university headcount decrease, and each year Communications Media students make up a smaller and smaller percentage of the total university population. There are many possible reasons that are likely contributing to this trend, but regardless of reasons this trend cannot continue.

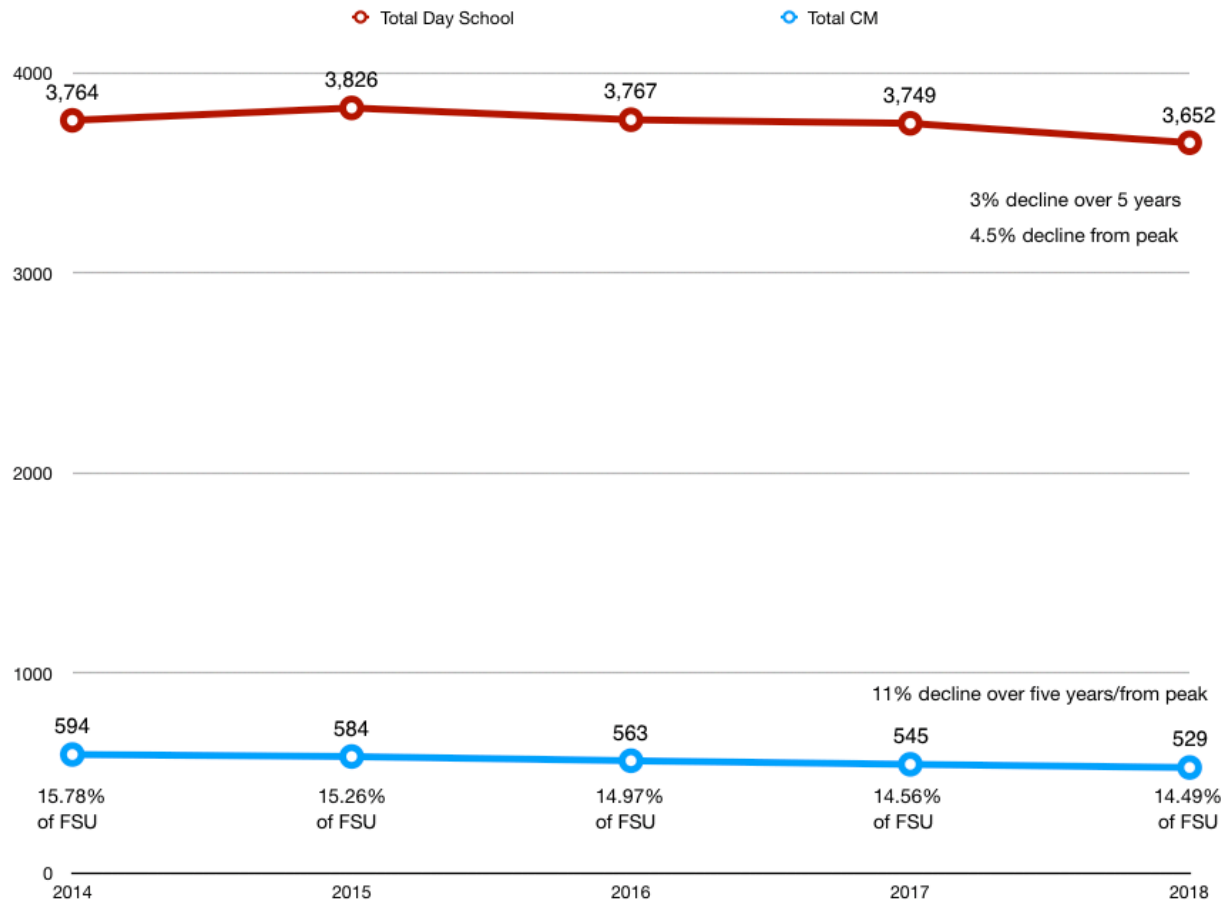

Figure 1: Communications Media enrollments against total Day School enrollments 2014-2018

Considering the breakdown of enrollments within Communications Media over the past eight years, some concentrations have generally had stronger headcounts than the university (Film/Video only decreasing 2.3% taking into account several concentration changes, Professional Communication increasing 13.9%), while other concentrations have had much fewer students (Photography decreasing 48.3%, Graphic Design decreasing 23.7%).

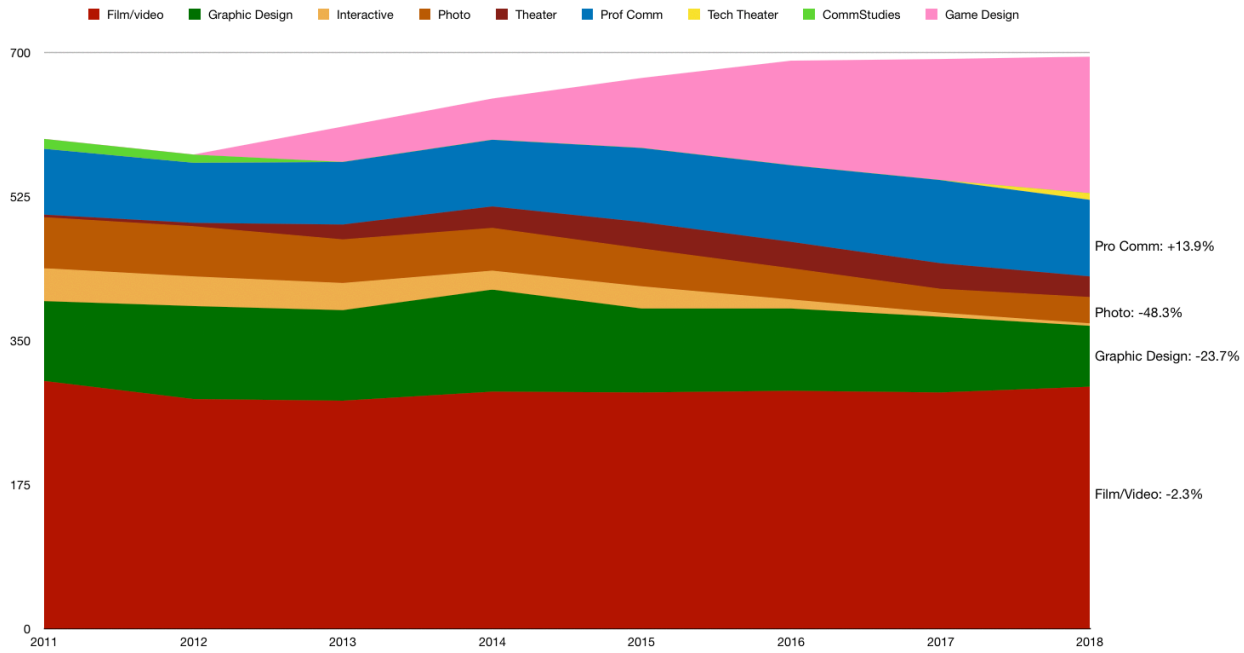

Figure 2: Enrollments by Communications Media concentration, 2011-2018

Such disparate results cause stress for all: anxiety for the programs who despite excellent work are counterintuitively not attracting students, and frustration for the programs who can feel as though they are being dragged down by programs considered to be underperforming.

Headcount Trend Analysis

H.L. Mencken wrote that "for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." Stated plainly in the self study and thereafter in virtually every conversation I had with faculty about the subject, there is a passionate and near-axiomatic belief that the largest contributing factor to headcount decline is poor admissions and recruiting management at the university level.

This is probably not accurate. Indeed, it is very likely that the admissions and recruiting units on campus need to better understand the story and value proposition of

Communications Media and then communicate that better to targeted populations. Communications Media should definitely work with those units to try and improve that area. But it is extremely unlikely that university recruiting/admissions is the biggest factor, and regardless it would be unwise to proceed with the stance that recruiting/admissions shortfalls operate in a vacuum independent of the state of Communications Media.

It also important not to oversimplify modern marketing. Nationally, potential undergraduates are sophisticated and competition for their commitment is nuanced. Do not assume that marketing to them is simply a matter of raising awareness. One must face the uncomfortable possibility that the current story of the program is being told accurately, and prospective students are simply making other choices.

This begins a vicious cycle of austerity. A program begins a decline. This leads inevitably to budget cuts and restricted hires imposed by administration. The program's capacity is thus diminished, which can lead to deeper cuts. It is normal to rage at this cycle: if there were not enough resources before, how can a program possibly do any better with less? Or further: it is self-evident that a business must spend money to make money—if administration would simply acknowledge and rectify the gaps, we would be able to operate at the capacity that they claim to want!

Let me translate how this could look from an administrative vantage point. Faculty might see (and indeed did express) the causal logic of "our major lost students because the entire university lost students." It is just as rational to imply a converse causal relationship: "over half of the university's headcount decline over the last five years can be attributed to this single major." Neither of those statements may tell the entire story, but neither are completely incorrect. It is crass to say it, but no transactional entity, profit or non-profit, can exist without whatever that entity considers to be cashflow. Whatever excellent traits may exist, major headcount and course enrollments are the cashflow at this institution. When an administration needs to invest operations and apportion hires, the program that has year-over-year declines is unlikely to make a compelling case for increased investment.

The key question is what strategies to employ to stabilize and then increase this cashflow, and use that increased position to achieve the department's other goals. I would argue that the constellation of disciplines in Communications Media afford the department some unique opportunities to leapfrog forward.

Based on actual statements from faculty in meetings, I can sense how distasteful this may seem. *Universities shouldn't be a business. We bring in more than our fair share of tuition. Just cut us loose and give us more budget and we'll thrive.*

I have seen many programs at many institutions present the following case to administrations: "we want to be able to serve more students and add some features to our existing program, if you give us [increased budget/another hire], we will be able to do this and therefore bring in more students, which is obviously what you want." *This approach never works.* There are two paths to succeed in successfully making the case for greater resources and attention from any rationally behaving administration: transformational and incremental.

Strategies

Transformational Strategies

Communications Media already has recently executed a successful transformational strategy: the new Game Design major. In the 2014 self study and external review, the Interactive Media concentration suffered from both lackluster enrollments and mission confusion. After a needs analysis based on data from regional guidance counselors and admissions data from private institutions offerring similar programs, Communications Media made a comprehensive proposal for a large change that introduced a new major. The case was made to administration that the landscape would be transformed, and once the program was live prospective students quickly responded to the proposition, and increased resources followed.

While the general sentiment among the faculty of the Communications Media major is positive toward Game Design, criticisms repeatedly emerged that I should address to make the case for emulating this model.

First is that somehow the new Game Design major is somehow unfairly diverting resources from other concentrations and is a primary reason to explain declining majors in the Communications Media degree. This might explain some students shifting to the new program, but in five years Game Design is now four times the size of the Interactive Media program that it supplanted. It is simply implausible that a large number of the students who are now enrolled in game design would have otherwise ended up in another Communications Media program. There is a simpler answer: Game Design presents a clear, simple case to prospective students in the region.

Another criticism (more of a dismissal) of the strong start of Game Design it has no regional competitors. There is a danger in dismissing this transformational strategy on these grounds. If it is true that there are no competitors to Game Design in the region, then it was a masterstroke to detect that gap and fill it.

Finally, there was a criticism expressed that the transformation of Game Design was only possible because it had strong advocates in upper administration. Certainly, a strong hand from upper administration can accelerate or halt initiatives—this is by definition what administration does. Should Communications Media desire transformation, it is critical to involve administration as stakeholders at the beginning (rather than gatekeepers later on), find out where alignments with institutional missions and goals can be made, and build proposals from that perspective.

I would strongly recommend studying carefully the aspects of the Game Design transformation that worked and apply similar transformative reconfigurations across the department. This report will detail some concrete possibilities in a later section analyzing majors and concentrations.

Incremental Strategies

There are several changes in the margins that could be made to bend enrollment curves in a more positive direction.

While I have been discussing raw headcount of majors as an important indicator of program health, it is also important to consider the number of credit hours generated by a program (how many people regardless of major take a program's classes). These might seem like a distinction without a difference, particularly when the vast majority of the courses in Communications Media are only available to students in the major. Six theater courses and eight media history courses are available for students in other majors to use as Liberal Arts and Sciences requirements, in particular for the Aesthetic Appreciation and Global Diversity requirements. This is a missed opportunity; there should be more courses available.

There is a limited number of new students at the university arriving every year, a significant number of them come in undecided. Also, 70% of undergraduate students nationally change their major at least once. One of the biggest untapped pools of students for Communications Media is students who are already at the university but didn't realize the possibilities available to them.

One action item in the most recent self-study (28) suggests offering "non-major" sections of popular courses. This is the right idea but doesn't go far enough. For this to make a significant change you need to make relevant seats available to non-majors with the goal of attracting them to take more courses and potentially become permanent majors. If students simply take a popular class as an elective, it will likely be too late in their degrees for them to change major if they fall in love (which they no doubt often would). The key is to design an introductory production class that you know will be a home run and make it able to fulfill a general education degree requirement for any major. Students are always looking for interesting ways to fulfill those requirements and would flock to a filmmaking or design class they could take early on as an undecided (or ill-fitted) major. This would likely increase the percentage of internal transfers.

I make this recommendation based on personal experience; when my own program was struggling to get enough majors, we reconfigured a lower level course called "Digital Media Art Fundamentals" to be eligible to count as a core aesthetics requirement. Students took it because it was interesting and (more importantly) available, but many of them hadn't realized that making art was a possible degree and career path and they changed based on one course that they simply didn't have space in their degrees to try before.

Increasing internal transfers will go a long way, but so will reducing the number of internal transfers out of the program. There will always be a number of students who just don't fit and want to make a change. But it would be valuable to find out why they are making that change. In my own program, we significantly changed our internal transfers by simply changing the order of the courses students were advised to take. For a long time we had operated the way we always had, offering a media culture course first, followed by the first production fundamentals course. This hews to a somewhat old-fashioned and inaccurate best practice of always putting students through the theory or history course first (as though at the intro level one theory course would deeply shift their practice). We found that many undergraduates who were interested in making media were put off by the first-semester studies class and switched out. When we switched the order of the two classes, students were gratified by having some basic production right out of the gate, the production work was the same caliber, but their work in the studies course the following semester was better because they had a little experience to put it into context. I notice that the Communications Media degree maps often advise Intro to Communication and Media Studies first semester with some other general classes, followed by an intro production class in the second semester. It may be worth investigating if this has an effect, even testing if some students swapping that course order has an effect.

There is an outside chance that some demographic projections in your region might cause a rising tide in enrollments at some point in the next 5-10 years. It would be unwise to assume that human geography will translate directly to positive outcomes. Better to work to turn the tide now, increase your capacity sooner than later, then if a windfall comes you will be better prepared to take advantage of it.

Mission Alignment and Messages

Articulated missions provide a glimpse into the minds and aspirations of organizations, giving prospective partners a good idea of why they do things the way they do them. The university describes itself on its website as "dedicated to integrating high-quality professional programs with strong liberal arts and sciences studies" and re-articulates that in a mission statement that highlights how it "blends liberal arts and sciences and professional programs." (2019)

The university began a new academic organization structure in 2013 that reflects a recent increase in size and complexity where units would be organized by four academic divisions headed by deans rather than reporting directly to the Provost's office. In 2017 Dean Franca Barricelli became Dean of the Division of Arts and Sciences, which contains the five departments: Behavioral Sciences; Economics, History and Political Science; English Studies; Humanities; and Communications Media. The division articulates its mission as "fostering professional development through academic programs in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies" (2019).

The Department of Communications Media, which houses two undergraduate degree programs: a B.S. in Game Design and a B.S. in Communications Media. The department also offers a battery of minors and one M.S. Degree in Applied Communication. This program review is specifically limited to the Communications Media degree programs, as the new degree Game Design will undergo a separate review at a later date. The Communications Media department has a mission statement, which details its primary focus "to educate media professionals who are technically and aesthetically competent and ready for employment in their areas of emphasis" (Baker 2019).

The publicly stated mission of the university, Division of Arts and Sciences, and Communications Media program are concise, clear, and congruent. There is no mistaking that they are all on the same page foregrounding the intent to deliver strong professional programs in an academic context. They know who their students are, where their students

come from, and generally what they want. If those desires align, it is likely that a prospective student (or faculty member, or any partner) will match well.

The Communications Media program is further divided into concentrations: Film/Video Production; Graphic Design; Photography; Professional Communication; Theater; Technical Theater; Communication Studies. Students choose one or sometimes two areas of concentration that then follow discrete curriculum pathways. Each concentration has its own mission statement (except for Technical Theater, which joined very recently) that articulate respective outlooks. Even the internship program has its own separate mission statement.

The missions written by the individual concentrations might have come from completely different institutions, and without much interaction with the missions of any of the other concentrations or the units above. This is not trivial; I believe that this mismatch is emblematic of some struggles in the program.

For example, the Film/Video and the Professional Communication missions (if a little verbose), leave no doubt what they aim for: concretes futures in their applicable industries. "Modern production standards and workflows," "prepare students for a future in the… industry," "culminating in professional caliber portfolio work." Other than specific disciplinary terminology, they are nearly interchangeable with each other in terms of communicating the kind of degree students will get. And they could almost be added straight to the missions of the program, division, and university without seeming out of place.

Other areas' stated missions are less effective to varying degrees. Theater starts strong and clear but quickly gets deep into the weeds of minute details. Communication Studies' is two sentences that are quite intimidating (I have three degrees and read it thinking "this might be too much for me"). Photography's an enumeration of equipment and facilities "for students to learn and create." Graphic Design's is quite clear and articulates the important goal of "foster[ing] creative thinking and personal artistic development," but it reads as though it offers an alternative to the missions of the university, division, and program rather than a specific embodiment and execution of those same aspirations.

It is not pedantic to bring up mission statements. They are important signals to stakeholders—current and prospective students, administrators, colleagues—about what you believe you are all about and where you put your focus. The wide variation in how those missions manifest raise questions worth asking. How can so many subunits in a single major have such widely divergent missions? Are the expressions of such different missions

manifesting in a coherent approach to the major? Are concentrations with missions that seem so different from the missions of the larger institution configured realistically in light of institutional goals and expectations?

Curriculum

The Communications Media department offers a graduate M.S. Degree in Applied Communication that has been recently refreshed, and several 18-credit minors in various concentrations, but the main focus of this report will dwell on the undergraduate B.S. degree that is the the primary draw for students, the center of the department's main efforts, and ultimately the fulcrum upon which the department's success hinges.

The Communications Media undergraduate degree is a 120-credit Bachelor of Science. The B.S. might seem unusual in these fields, but it is not unheard of. Notable examples include the B.S. degrees in Cinema and Photography or Television-Radio at Ithaca College's Park School of Communications. A B.S. degree typically allows for more prescribed courses in-major than a comparable liberal arts B.A., but fewer than a specialized B.F.A. which can be difficult for students to complete in four years. The design of this degree as a B.S. seems to be appropriate to the university, division and department missions that articulate highly professional programs.

Of the 120 credits, 66 are committed to common requirements to the university's Liberal Arts and Sciences program, with 54 credits prescribed for the Communications Media major. The major is highly differentiated between disciplinary concentrations. Virtually any other higher education institution would recognize these different areas of concentration as distinct majors.

Two courses are required for every student in the Communications Media major, and they are the only common courses regardless of concentration: COMM 1105 (Introduction to Communication and Media Studies) and COMM 1120 (Message Design). As discussed in an earlier section on incremental strategies, it might be worthwhile investigating the effect that the ordering of these courses within the curriculum has on student performance and internal transfer rates.

Based on choice of concentration, students commit to a five-course (15 credit) series of requirements. In the film and video production concentration, there are many pathway variations that allow for student choice in these requirements. The professional communication concentration allows for one variation of introductory course. All other

concentrations are fully prescribed without opportunity for variation in this primary required section.

Concentration requirements are followed by another four courses (12 credits) of electives that could come from any Communications Media discipline. This would be the only opportunity for differentiation in most areas. It is also an opportunity to take courses other concentrations, but primarily this seems to be used by students to take more courses within their primary field. Students have the option of formally declaring a second concentration after the requirements are met. It is not clear how many students actually accomplish this feat or how desirable this may be for the department. Short of overloading their schedules, having a large number of incoming AP credits, or completely committing their electives to a second concentration, it seems like it would be difficult for a student to fit these in given how much of their degree is prescribed.

The self study indicates (and student testimony confirms) problems with not having enough seats available for lower-level students in required classes when upper-level students from other concentrations decide to take those courses with registration priority. This may be a problem in some concentrations. Students in graphic design report wanting to take additional courses in their concentration, but when the courses are cancelled due to low enrollment students are forced to take concentration electives in other areas. It is not clear what the will of the faculty is in this regard, and unsurprisingly common practice varies from area to area. On paper the much of the curriculum seems to be ambivalent about students exploring other fields (allowing it but not encouraging it). Students report very different advice from faculty advisors, some strongly advising total commitment within a discipline, others advising the students developing a more varied talent stack.

Not all of the major requirements are production based. The degree requires a one course (3 credit) media history overlay, which may be used to fulfill a requirement in Liberal Arts and Sciences. The permissable courses vary by concentration; it is interesting and perhaps telling that there is no single course that would fulfill this requirement for all the concentrations. There is also a three course (9 credit) "upper-level theory" requirement that incorporates a writing requirement. Here there seems to be some variation on the term "theory" as it is commonly understood in other degree programs at other institutions. There are courses here that would be recognizable is most programs as theory-based ("Media Criticism," "Writing for Aesthetics," or "Intercultural Communication" for example). Others are typically not considered theory (for example "Writing for Film and Video," Document Design," or "Journalism"). While these are no doubt valuable courses, they may pose a danger of short-

changing students' development of a theoretical base by counting courses that are clearly professional/production classes. On the other hand, nine credits of upper level theory (in addition to 3 credits of history and another 3 credits of intro studies) is quite high for even a liberal arts program, so this might be a wise compromise solution.

Each undergraduate student completes the degree with a 12 credit internship. This internship is in effect a full-time job for the student. This is indeed a differentiating aspect of the Communications Media degree at Fitchburg State University—while internships (required and elective) are very common across the country in nearly every discipline, it is highly unusual to require such a large one for every student. The result is a unique capstone experience for every student. The size and complexity of this program requires discussion in a later section of this report.

Structure of Concentrations and Majors

Higher education curriculum is always complicated business, but in my estimation the Communications Media major is one of the most convoluted that I've studied. The proliferation of concentrations under a single major designation does not seem to offer many benefits that would not be otherwise available under a clearer structure of distinct majors. The faculty and students of the concentrations already speak and behave as though they were freestanding majors. One student summed it up plainly, "it's one major, but everybody acts like their concentration is their major anyway." The very complex set of curricular structures unique to each concentration backs this up. I agree with several of the thoughts of the last external reviewer who also recommended investigating a move to majors; it would be worth it if only for clarity to prospective students, a population which Communications Media cannot afford to alienate. "What do you want to major in?" Clarity will always win.

There would be problems changing concentrations to majors. Several of the concentrations are likely too small in terms of students or faculty at this point to become their own major. But there are clear affinities of discipline that would make for smart connections and clear pathways into new and powerful majors. Some of these might currently be unthinkable or even distasteful to some of the faculty now, but the advantage of being an external reviewer is that I can point things out that might be uncomfortable from an internal perspective.

One possible (and frankly obvious) example could be a Film/Video and Photography major. Perhaps the disciplines of Film/Video and Photography could be concentrations within such a major, but more possibilities might be imagined if you considered the lens-based disciplines as closely aligned academically as they are in the working world. Cinema and Photography

programs are common, and usually the cinematic side of the partnership is much larger simply owing to labor statistics. Sometimes the faculty on the photo side of such partnerships can harbor resentment when they might rather be a freestanding program of their own. Such bristling usually falls by the wayside when photo faculty find their classes newly filled by filmmaking students looking to sharpen their eyes—you would be hard-pressed to find a working filmmaker who was not made better from a photographic foundation.

Another possible major configuration might simply be Design, comprised of concentrations of Graphic Design and Integrated Marketing Communications (or some similar strong name that Professional Communications expressed desire to evolve into). Again the existing areas could remain concentrations under an overarching design major. The fine art foundations of Graphic Design would be vital to students distinguishing themselves in a marketing environment, and the client services fundamentals of Professional Communications would be a force multiplier for any designer. Coming to an agreement on a small, core set of agreed upon courses could free up faculty to offer the kinds of distinctive courses that students want, offering them to a wider pool of eager learners. Whether a shift happens in a new major or some other structural change, it is clear that some understanding and agreement between these two concentrations must be forged as soon as possible. There is a palpable tension between the Graphic Design faculty and other areas, especially Professional Communication. One student said, "there's a wall between ProComm and Graphic Design, but it's not the students at all. It's only the faculty. Everyone knows it and they need to keep it more private." It's common for such professional relationships to deterioriate over time, especially under stress. But given the skill, stature, and dedication of faculty in both of these programs, if they had the opportunity to clarify what each does best and build partnerships to accommodate respective expertise, it would be an opportunity to start anew with more purpose and clear potential to the students.

A major in Theater is another obvious addition, with potential concentrations in Drama and Technical Design. Each of these fields could plainly not exist without the other.

Communications Studies might be more complicated to integrate into the dream example majors I am suggesting. There's certainly no reason it couldn't be its own major as well. It's not logically clear as to why it's only available as a second concentration, perhaps other than it resembles a traditional liberal arts program more than the others. There might simply not be the student demand to support it, but that demand might be hidden since students seem less inclined to take second concentrations. Perhaps the workload of serving up the only two

required courses for every soul in the program, in addition to a history and additional theory requirement, uses most faculty bandwidth.

When considering these transformations, I strongly recommend building curricular space for crossover. The fact is that design is vital to all of these disciplines, the grammar of cinema is nearly universal, you could imagine foundational classes in all of these disciplines that would affect everyone in any of these majors (or I would argue, any other major). Be careful not to be too precious with prerequisites, though. I can't tell you how many times a painter without any film prerequisites has changed my animation class for the better. Motion graphics would be a tremendous boon for a most filmmakers. Projections design in theater is in huge demand; many theater programs don't teach it, and theater students often don't take filmmaking classes. If you purposefully allow flexible pathways that aren't overburdened with every prereq that the perfectly trained student would take in an ideal world, you can make space for groundbreaking things that can make your Communications Media even more of a destination.

There is so much potential for a quantum leap in this program. The time may be ripe for a planning retreat to explore and nail down some options. If you go that route, you may want to consider using an external facilitator to help tease out possibilities and navigate through run-of-the-mill political quicksand that can slow things down.

Capstone and Summative Experiences

Public jurying and exhibition of student accomplishments is a high impact practice. Similarly, experiential learning at a high level like an internship goes a long way in preparing students for post-college. There are strong structures in place for both of these in the Communications Media department, and they are regularly referred to in the self-study and in site visit conversations as distinguishing aspects of the program.

The year-end "VISIONS" showcase is a strong exhibition of student work from across the concentrations. I had the opportunity to observe VISIONS work mounted in the campus gallery, as well as student films online, not to mention extensive examples of graphic design student work from multiple years. The work is good. The faculty in Film/Video, Graphic Design, Professional Communication, and Photography can be confident that their students' work does in fact represent them well and is in line with the caliber of student work from similar undergraduate programs.

The other summative experience is the capstone internship program. Every undergraduate student in Communications Media goes through this process. First students go through a portfolio review, through which they must be certified that they are in a suitable place for 12 credits of internship—the equivalent of a full-time job.

Portfolios and Program-Level Assessment

In the self study and site visit conversations, faculty identified a problem with the number of students reaching the internship portfolio review and not being acceptable enough to proceed. This is of course the downside of a required internship, what do you do with students who have to graduate, are doing well enough to get through classes, but just aren't that employable yet? We face this problem in my program as well. Internship sites who are friends of mine will say "the last one was great, can you just send me students like that?" But when a site gets someone who might be a decent student but is not good on the job yet, the relationship with the internship site is damaged.

A few things need to be considered to try to address this. First, as a faculty you should determine in your assessment process what your success goal is. Is your portfolio review goal to have 0% ranking as "unacceptable" or "needs improvement"? That is probably not attainable without severe score inflation. Would 10% do? Film/Video is pretty close to that already. Does it need to be the same for all programs?

Then you need to decide what you do with the students who fail the portfolio review. Should you force 10% of all students to withdraw, or take more classes and try again? Perhaps there's a way to create a degree tier for students who just aren't internship caliber. Maybe everyone who achieves the internship receives a degree with distinction—a gold standard. And students who are ok in coursework, C's all around, but just can't put together a decent portfolio? Maybe such students have to take those last 12 credits as coursework. Those students could earn a degree, but without the gold star of internship distinction. When they get out into the world, would they then have to try to scrounge a normal internship on their own? It's more likely these students would end up like millions of people who go on to have good careers that aren't in the direct field that they majored in. There's nothing inherently wrong with that unless they end up chronically underemployed. Allowing for the fact that it is common for people to have strong, fulfilling, lifelong careers not obviously tied to what degree they got would be testament to the strength of the general education foundations inherent in your degree programs.

Finally you need to agree on a process to help students earlier who may be lagging behind. This is just a good retention strategy. There are many possibilities to pursue this, but it you'll need to balance faculty workload against the law of diminishing returns as you attempt to approach perfection. The self study mentions the possibility of a mid-program review to catch deficiencies. This could work, but as a brute force method will expend much faculty effort to questionable effect. How "ready" would a sample portfolio be at mid-program? What would you do with the people who you deem unsuitable at that point?

There is an extra hidden puzzle here: how do you gracefully address the fact that it is completely possible for a student to pass classes and have lackluster professional work? There is no single answer, but it's not a unique problem. You would need a robust program-level assessment process to really assess this independently of earned grades. It's possible that there may be grade inflation issues that are part of the discrepancy between passing courses and portfolio preparedness. Personally, I find myself ranting about this when I get upper level students who aren't performing and I ask myself "how on earth did this person even get into my class?" Then I remember that I personally taught them and they earned a passing grade.

The truth is that people are complicated, and it's normal for course grade performance and big-picture performance to generally track but not match. Programs need to confirm both of these, and a well-design program-level assessment process can do that. The self study indicates a need to update program level learning outcomes and improve assessment processes; it is always good to revisit these. It's critical to to able to fearlessly ask the question "how do we honestly know that we're accomplishing what we say we are?" and have the courage to develop processes that can warn us about things we're biased to overlook. Otherwise programs run the risk of becoming tautologies: "I know we're great because students do Great Thing X. I know Great Thing X is great because students do it. Assessment complete." Who determined that Great Thing X is the thing to measure? Or that it's objectively great? I analyze program assessments for other departments in my own school, and the most common problem I see is this tendency toward biased tautologies. We have to be willing to go to the doctor and be open to hear that we might need to change things in uncomfortable ways for our own health.

Facing the portfolio issue as a retention issue, it may be best to look at other metrics. What are the leading indicators of substandard portfolios, are they related to benchmarks for retention like attendance and engagement?

Does portfolio performance correlate with overall GPA? There is a minimum 2.5 GPA required for internship. If most of the people who are underperforming in portfolio review are within a certain threshold around 2.5, you could detect that early and design an intervention specifically for those students in their second year. Is there a specific course or assignment that you notice is an early indicator of portfolio underperformance? You could build a specific intervention around that, or even normalize such an assignment to raise red flags as early as possible. Perhaps there are softer, qualitative hints you could use to warn about portfolio underperformance. Does it correlate to chronic low attendance? First-generation status? Disengagement behaviors?

All in all, the portfolio review results seem to be statistically not that unusual to the outside eye. But if you wanted to skew that bell curve up, then collect a little more information the next time you have a review. What was a student's GPA as a sophomore, are they Pell eligible, are they first-generation? Ask the faculty to consult their past grade records and indicate if they recall the student having attendance issues or disengagement behaviors. Find a colleague with statistical prowess to run the results through SPSS and see if any of the newly collected data presents a statistically significant correlation to portfolio underperformance. If you find one that does, you'll know where to put your intervention.

Internship Structures

This brings me to the Internship process that is in place. It is truly impressive in scope and scale, clearly a value proposition that distinguishes Communications Media from other programs in highly visible ways. It is also worth examining some structural issues that became clear in conversations with faculty and students.

The 12-credit full time internship as a capstone experiential learning experience program for all students is an admirable goal. It is obviously a brilliant solution for many students. However I would pose the question as to whether it should be the unvarying default option for every living soul coming through a degree as variegated as Communications Media.

In my meeting with students, I spent a large portion of the time listening to perspectives on the internship process. Several students expressed frustration with the process of communication, advising, and placement around internships. The concept of placement raised particular ire in the discussion, as students originally understood placement to mean something other than what they describe: which is being given one or several leads and then having to secure the internship themselves. Some students report being given only one

option, while they see colleagues who are given several. Other students describe getting placed at a site that is not actually taking interns, or one that they consider substandard. One student from outside the region expressed anger at being told that they would be placed, only to find that they had to find their own internship that fit the unique requirements of the program. There is no doubt much nuance to the backstory of these discussions. In some ways one of the most important part of getting an internship is the act of searching for and getting the internship in the first place. But there was an undeniable consensus feeling among the students of not really understanding the process until too late. This clearly needs to be looked into.

A first-generation student described the real hardship of having to quit a paying job they need to afford tuition in order to carry the required 32-40 hours a week of the internship, and they had a genuine concern of not being able to do it. There are realities of having to make sacrifices for one's education, but should an internship of this highly unusual nature truly be the *only* avenue to get that important experience? The Communications Media Internship Handbook is shockingly callous in its attitude in this respect. It warns that "expenses of the internship should be planned for well in advance," and after enumerating several ways that their finances will likely be impacted suggests only that "if necessary, it is better to postpone the internship and work a semester so that you will have enough resources to enable you to devote full attention" to the internship (4).

The most visible central graduation requirement of the entire program is predicated on a sorting mechanism that is accidentally tuned to incentivize traditional students with financial flexibility and disincentivize students who are first generation, non-traditional, and financially precarious. In a higher education landscape where a significant growth sector is first-generation and non-traditional students, at an institution that has explicitly stated that it has goals to better serve these exact populations, inflexibility in this area is extremely unwise.

Faculty across disciplines also expressed confusion and frustration with the internship process. Many faculty members feel excluded from the entire process and seem confused about the labor and compensation structures surrounding how internships are administered. At this point, the minute details of this institution's courseload, equivalency, and other policies are so idiosyncratic that I don't feel that I can make a specific suggestion that would be meaningful. I would simply point out that there is a strong feeling that the process is a black box that should be brought into the light and discussed.

Some faculty echoed the student concerns about inflexibility as it relates to finance. Others, particularly but not exclusively in Graphic Design, lamented the one-size-fits-all nature of this particular internship program. This is worth exploring and discussing candidly among the full faculty without preconceptions. By "without preconceptions" I refer to specific, explicit statements from both students and faculty that the current internship structure needs to be revised but it probably never will because it's considered to be sacred and immutable.

Again, the 12-credit full time internship program is clearly an valuable process and obviously should continue because it benefits many students. But counterfactually, it cannot reasonably be considered the only necessary condition for student success, because there are students in myriad programs that across the nation who do not have this process and still flourish. Would it be possible to require an internship of any kind, but have the full-time internship be a special distinction (as mentioned in an earlier section). Perhaps this could happen in conjunction with an internal or co-curricular agency model? There is already precedent for this in the Game Design major as a credit-bearing model. Other institutions run professional-level co-curricular film studios and design agencies that are major capstone experiences. Think of first-tier student daily newspapers and their role in major journalism programs, or main stage productions in theater and dance schools.

These options could become just as visible and distinguishing to prospective students, and could make your programs seem more open and available to those who might feel that they should not start in Communications Media because they would not be able to finish.

Equipment and Facilities

The equipment inventory that I examined is well-selected; there is obvious expertise and experience in technology planning. Students report satisfaction in access to gear, and in the condition of the gear that they are using. If the programs increase in size, then a commensurate increase in equipment capacity will need to go along with that.

Tech purchases and maintenance are expensive, and it will be important for administration to be responsive to increases in enrollment. The faculty should bear in mind that as mentioned in earlier sections, I have never seen a modern administration respond positively to a growth proposal that can be summarized as "if you buy it students will come." Communications Media should plan to present proposals for technology based on incrementally outgrowing what exists and then meeting that increased capacity. This will be a more compelling argument when you can show that the increases are sustainable.

The Film/Video facilities on the third floor of Conlon Hall are unacceptable. I would detail the extensive damage and decay, but I will refrain from taking up the pages since these have already been reported extensively to the university, with renovations scheduled and then deferred year after year. I cannot put it more plainly: this is a hazard to health and safety and must be addressed forthwith. The extensive water damage in proximity to substandard electrical work amazes me that the place hasn't had fires. I didn't bring material to test for mold, but merely walking through these labs began to trigger an asthmatic response. If my child were considering attending the program, I would forbid it based solely on what I know it would do to his health to spend that much time editing in those labs. While addressing the deterioriating state of those spaces, I'd also recommend updating the general design and look of the areas was successfully done recently other parts of the building, if only to assure families of prospective students that they are not committing their children to a program stuck in the 1970s.

Updated facilities in the design labs are handsome and well-functioning. Students report frustration with the quality of the printing lab, and regularly pay outside companies for more acceptable output. Students also complain that the labs are staffed by student workers who are not knowledgeable about the labs and who cannot help with technical issues, and that while the professional staff are regarded as outstanding, there aren't enough of them available.

Interestingly, students note that in the Film/Video program they use the provided digital facilities all the time. However, students in other programs (Graphic Design, Professional Communication, and Photography) use the digital lab spaces but tend to prefer to use their own laptops while there unless they absolutely have to access a university-owned resource (fonts, for example). It would be worth doing a use study of the spaces to find more details. This concurs with both my observations while touring facilities (but this may have been an off-peak time). It also concurs with trends in my own program—our students want to use the labs, just not the lab computers.

Budget, Fees, and Administrative Partnership

All programs at all institutions have less funding than they would like. I suggest many ways in this report that the Communications Media department could make concrete proactive steps to increase their bottom line while maintaining and increasing their quality. However, some concrete actions are necessary from the university administration.

Faculty have a general feeling of good will toward the Dean and Provost, who are seen as qualified and diligent. But there is a simultaneous frustration at what they perceive to be opacity and unfairness in the process of apportioning budget and levying fees. Regardless of the facts of the proces, the lack of communication around it when coupled with the optics of other high visibility issues (continuing deferred maintenance in a truly bad facility simultaneous to gleaming renovations elsewhere) does not help the relationship, and fosters a sense that someone up the chain of command has it out for the program.

I outline many proposals for change in this report, and have attempted to make cases that would encourage faculty buy-in for these examples. However, none of this will work if there is not a feeling of partnership between the faculty and administration. No one on faculty will be willing to commit to the work of major changes if they believe that nothing they do will make difference, or if they think that it's all a scheme to increase tuition dollars to apportion to other campus projects.

Lab fees are a good example. Tuition is amazingly low at this institution, probably too low to support operations. Institutions everywhere use lab fees to make up that shortfall. When lab fees were instituted in recently, they was applied to some Film/Video courses, but without communicating clearly to faculty how the decisions were made, and how the money is used. To oversimplify, if you collect lab fees for pencils, then the people who believe they paid for pencils expect pencils to appear. The truth is that you have to charge for "pencils and stuff" to pay for future pencils and student workers and a few surprise potholes and so forth. The economics is convoluted, but not that difficult. When uncommunicated it leads to conspiracy theories, decreased morale, and disconnection. Opening up the ledger for all to discuss wouldn't be productive, but regular opportunities for candid conversations to address economics will go a long way.

If the administration is as committed to growing the program as it seems to be, it needs to be a clear partner with the faculty as to what kinds of specific results a program can expect when they meet specific bechmarks. Otherwise, faculty will not trust that the effort to change will bear any fruit for their program.

Last Words

I am deeply impressed by the faculty and students of Communications Media. The mission of Fitchburg State University is vital to the region and the state, and Communications Media creates an educational experience for students that is highly impactful, and responsive to the community.

As in all institutions, there is work to be done, but it is apparent that the faculty are ready, willing, and able to innovate through challenges to make the student experience even better.

To my outsider's eye, all the personnel and imagination is in place. The administration is engaged. If all stakeholders keep candid communication at heart, I am certain there is nothing the program can't accomplish.

It was my distinct pleasure to meet with everyone and participate in this review process. If I can be of further service, please do not hesitate to ask.

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