

The View from the Ivory Tower: Evaluating Doctoral Programs in Communication

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The present study assesses perceptions of (1) the quality of American graduate programs in communication, (2) the qualities that communication scholars deem important in a communication PhD program, and (3) the adequacy of the number of PhD programs with specific specialties and applications in communication.

A national survey of communication faculty and chairs was conducted via the World Wide Web. Study results suggest that top evaluative criteria for doctoral programs included the quality of the university library, up-to-date computer facilities, student attendance at academic conferences, the national research reputation of the communication faculty, and faculty encouragement of students to explore diverse perspectives on communication research. The only specialty for which a majority of respondents reported there are “not enough” is Media Information Technologies. Program quality rankings confirm past work suggesting that Midwestern programs—particularly those with applied origins in agricultural journalism—continue to rank highly in the field.

Keywords: Communication Discipline; Doctoral Programs; Reputational Rankings

The study of institutional quality represents an active area of inquiry in the communication field (e.g., Burroughs, Christophel, Ady, & McGreal, 1989; Doctoral Education

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Committee, 2004; Hickson, Turner, & Bodon, 2003). The present study assesses perceptions of (1) the quality of American graduate programs in communication, (2) the qualities that communication scholars deem important in a communication PhD program, and (3) the adequacy of the number of PhD programs stressing specific specialties and applications in communication.

Literature Review

Defining the Field

Despite the fact that communication is one of the fastest growing fields in the U.S., ranking among the eight largest nationally in BA graduate production each year, information on enrollment trends remains sketchy (Craig & Carlone, 1998). This ambiguity may stem from the discipline's relative youth (Rogers, 1994), as it was not even recognized as a field of study by the Department of Education until 1966. The three decades to follow witnessed a 534% growth rate in the number of communication degrees awarded, during which time the journalism/mass communication subfield grew 1,500% (Becker & Graf, 1995; Becker, Vlad, Huh, & Prine, 2001). Even so, scholars (e.g., Atkin & Jeffres, 1998; Nelson, 1995) argued that communication programs were vulnerable to budget cuts through the 1990s. The academy's hesitancy to recognize communication as a discipline (Book, 1993) may stem from program identification challenges; that is, few academic units in communication use the same name (e.g., journalism vs. [mass] communication; communication vs. speech) (see *Communiquest Interactive*, 2004).

As these and other commentators suggest, communication scholars need to document their centrality to the academy in terms of pedagogy and academic quality. This is especially true during times of budgetary shortfall (Book, 1993), but as Craig and Carlone (1998, p. 67) note, "this turns out to be difficult because we find that rapid intellectual, institutional, and societal changes have rendered old familiar explanations obsolete and we no longer understand the field well ourselves."¹ The authors (1998, p. 68) outline how speech, journalism and other subfields have converged towards "communication," having been massively transformed as the field has grown to its present "amorphous contours," including the following sub-areas: communications, general; advertising; journalism; broadcast journalism, public relations and organizational communication; radio and television broadcasting; radio/television, general; communication media; and communications, other. These categories have been joined by "Speech/Rhetorical Studies" and, in some contexts, "Communication Disorders Sciences and Services" as well as "Drama" and "Film." Communication is thus viewed as a hybrid area of study that encompasses liberal arts perspectives as well as job-related applications.

Commentators (Atkin & Jeffres, 1998; Beniger, 2005; McCloskey, 1994) maintain that communication is emerging as a central discipline in the academy owing to its ascendant role in the growing information economy. For instance, 4 of the top 20 "high growth" job categories are staples of communication programs—having been

transformed by new technology—and include: advertising, printing/publishing, broadcasting and motion pictures (Department of Labor, cited in Lin & Atkin, 2002). Applications in interpersonal and organizational communication are also central to this “communications revolution.”

Within the field, studies of institutional quality employ two major research approaches: (1) “subjective” evaluations of programs based on surveys completed by peers (e.g., Doctoral Education Committee, 2004; Edwards & Barker, 1983; Edwards, Watson, & Barker, 1988; National Research Council, 2004), and (2) “objective” measures, typically indicators of scholarly productivity in major communication journals (e.g., Hickson et al., 2003; Stacks & Hickson, 1981; Watson, Barker, Ray, & Hall, 1988). When comparing these approaches, Edwards et al. (1988) concluded that peer records correlate positively with publication records, with faculty of doctoral institutions’ salaries, and with other objective measures of quality.

A report by Burroughs et al. (1989) reinforces the need for scholarly productivity, as those institutions that spawn productive faculty “make a disproportionately high contribution to the advancement of this field and those who attract such people to their faculty ranks have a better chance of offering their students a high quality graduate education” (p. 40). Peer review journal productivity is the most commonly accepted yardstick by which faculty quality is measured in the social sciences and productive faculties are considered an important foundation upon which to build a PhD program (Vincent, 1991).

Focusing on studies of scholarly productivity, arguably the most important determinant of perceptual ratings, Bodon, Hickson, and Stacks (1999) found that Midwestern programs dominate the top 15 departments in communication association journals (from 1915 to the 1990s). They observed a similar pattern of findings in their analysis of productivity from 1996, which identified the top 50 (or 99th percentile of) researchers in the field. This confirms earlier findings in speech communication (e.g., Edwards & Barker, 1983; Edwards et al. 1988; Hickson, Stacks, & Amsbary, 1993). Even so, the communication discipline has not been included in multidisciplinary studies of scholarly quality through its first 4 decades, having failed to meet the disciplinary threshold of inclusion; the National Research Council (NRC) evaluates only those disciplines that produce at least 500 PhD graduates per year (e.g., NRC, 2004).

Studies of scholarly productivity in such professional sub-areas as telecommunication likewise suggest that Midwest-based programs accounted for the plurality of scholarly entries during the past decade and a half (Atkin, 1996; Vincent, 1991). Most of the programs hosting the largest number of prolific scholars were housed in public institutions. This confirms other work suggesting that scholars who rank highest in article productivity tend to reside at departments located within large, state supported schools with a tradition of research (Burrowes, Bah, & Mesidor, 2000; King & Baran, 1981; Schweitzer, 1988; So, 2001). These schools are also among those that rank highly in other studies of scholarly productivity in such subfields as advertising (Soley & Reid, 1983), mass communication (e.g., Schweitzer, 1988) and telecommunication (Vincent, 1984; 1991).

Focusing on perceptual surveys, Graham and Diamond (1996) observe that the information yielded is often too “soft” to provide a reliable basis of academic quality. Their own analysis of fellowship awards and journal productivity data, collected over the course of a decade, found that those measures did not correlate well with reputational surveys. After Alma College received a lackluster evaluation in a *U.S. News & World Report* survey, the school president conducted a survey of 158 college presidents serving as respondents. He found that 84% of respondents were unfamiliar with some programs being evaluated (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1996).

Controversy notwithstanding, the popularity of *U.S. News’s* “Rating the Colleges” attests to the pervasiveness and importance of peer surveys in determining school ratings. Atkin and Jeffres (1998) note that some peer surveys have been criticized for (1) overly inclusive or unqualified panels of evaluators, (2) low response rates, and (3) poorly specified evaluation criteria. As Glasser and Goldstein (1996) suggest, such shortcomings can lead to biased ratings based on large faculty/alumni voting blocks or vague denotations of overall school prestige, as when *U.S. News* ranked Stanford’s “radio-television” program among the top five nationally, even though they offered no such program. Other commentators (e.g., Francese, 1996) maintain that surveys of this sort seem rather vulgar, and that high ratings guarantee neither sound programs nor good professors.

The stakes in these evaluative enterprises can be high, however, with Schweitzer (1988) noting that they’re widely used for internal and external purposes. This is especially true of institutions that find themselves highly ranked (Greenberg & Schweitzer, 1989), as positive evaluations can help boost student recruitment and external fundraising. Burroughs et al. (1989) nevertheless caution that no single indicator of quality is sufficient for making an important judgment about any given program.

Across these various perceptual surveys, researchers have yet to examine fully the specific factors perceived to relate to doctoral program quality. The most comprehensive efforts to date, by the National Communication Association (Doctoral Education Committee, 2004; NCA, 1996), rated departments based on several communication doctoral specialties: communication theory and research, rhetoric, organizational communication, applied communication, intercultural communication, and critical-cultural/media studies. Although faculty turnover can alter a program’s rating, the relative stability of faculty affiliation has prompted review agencies (e.g., the NCA and NRC) to conduct their reviews on an occasional (often decennial) basis. The present study complements this effort by focusing on specific attributes of doctoral programs—such as quantitative methods coursework—in terms of how valued they are by communication faculty and department chairs. In particular, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What qualities of a communication PhD program are most important in determining its overall reputation?

RQ2: What is the perceived adequacy of the number of communication PhD programs offering an emphasis in various sub-areas (e.g., media information technologies)?

RQ3: What are the rankings of PhD communication programs in the U.S.?

Methods

Study data were collected through the use of identical surveys posted in tandem on the World Wide Web. Intended to supplement ongoing surveys of Communication (e.g., Doctoral Education Committee, 2004), the survey focuses on background elements leading to reputational rankings, as opposed to reputations in various subdisciplines.

Two populations were surveyed in this study. The first population was faculty members from U.S. universities who belong to at least one of three major communication organizations (Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication [AEJMC], International Communication Association [ICA], and National Communication Association [NCA]). The sampling frame for this group was the set of organization membership directories. Using a systematic random sampling method, equal proportions of names and e-mail addresses were selected from each of the three directories. Names that did not have an e-mail address were ruled ineligible and substitutes were randomly chosen. The names of individuals who reside outside the U.S., who are not affiliated with a college or university, or whose primary position is that of an administrator were ruled ineligible and substitutes were randomly chosen.

The second population for this study was chairs of communication departments in the U.S. To begin the chair selection process, a list of communication departments was first created by consulting the AEJMC, ICA, and NCA directories once again; this process yielded a total of 672 departments. These departments were searched for on the Web; when found, the department chair name and e-mail address were added to the sample.

A total of 1264 faculty and 248 chairs were selected for inclusion in the sample. The e-mail addresses of sample members were used to invite participation in the survey. A total of 1512 requests to do the survey were sent via e-mail. Due to changes of address and/or human error, 385 e-mails came back as undeliverable. Thus, 1127 of the e-mail requests successfully reached the faculty and chairs in the sample.

A variety of social locator measures tailored to the academic sample were included in the survey: age, gender, highest degree, academic rank, and teaching specialties/areas of interest, plus name of department/university and degrees offered by that unit (i.e., BA, MA, etc.).

The survey instrument contained sections asking respondents to rate how important certain qualities are in (a) advising students interested in obtaining a doctorate in communication and (b) evaluating the strength of a job candidate's application. These sections used an 11-point (0 = not at all important; 10 = very important) scale to tap the importance of each item.²

Also included in the instrument was a section asking respondents to indicate whether there are not enough, just the right amount, or too many doctoral programs that emphasize the following types of communication: (1) applied research, (2) law and policy, (3) international/development, (4) dispute resolution, (5) general communication, (6) health, (7) instructional, (8) interpersonal, (9) mass, (10) media information technologies, (11) organizational, (12) organizational technology, (13)

applied organizational, (14) political, (15) promotional, (16) relational, and (17) rhetoric. Respondents were also allowed to indicate other, unlisted specialties that should be represented by more doctoral programs. In another section, the questionnaire asked respondents to list their choices for the top three U.S. communication programs with a doctoral degree. Both the “other specialties” and “program ranking” sections were open ended.

Results

A total of 221 faculty members and 49 chairs responded to the survey (a 24% response rate).³ Of faculty respondents, 35.5% belonged to programs offering a PhD, while 30% of chairs did. Nearly 90% of both groups reported earning a PhD. The average age of faculty was 45.54 years, and the average chair age was 50.70 years. In terms of gender, 39.7% of faculty and 29.8% of chairs were female.

With regard to RQ1, Table 1 presents the results of respondent ratings for a wide array of criteria applied to doctoral programs in the field of communication, when a) considering advising a student interested in doctoral studies, and b) considering a faculty job candidate’s application. In the questionnaire and in this table, the criteria were split into general factors and factors specific to the curriculum. As assessed by the faculty sample, when advising a student on doctoral programs, the top general criteria were the quality of the university library, up-to-date computer facilities, student attendance at academic conferences, the national research reputation of the communication faculty, and faculty encouragement of students to explore diverse perspectives on communication research. The top criteria were somewhat different when considering a faculty job candidate’s educational background. The faculty sample rated highest: student attendance at academic conferences, opportunities for students to teach undergraduate courses, student sole authorship of papers/publications, the reputation of the university, and the national research reputation of the communication faculty.

The evaluation of the various criteria by chairs resulted in slightly different “top” criteria. When recommending programs to students, the top factors were the quality of the university library, faculty encouragement of students to explore diverse perspectives on communication research, up-to-date computer facilities, the breadth of the communication faculty’s theoretic and/or methodological orientations, and a commitment of the professors to teaching. When assessing a job candidate’s record, the top factors for chairs were the opportunities for students to teach undergraduate courses, faculty encouragement of students to explore diverse perspectives on communication research, the commitment of the professors to teaching, the breadth of the communication faculty’s theoretic and/or methodological orientations, and the national research reputation of the communication faculty.

In terms of curricular factors, the faculty ratings resulted in the following top criteria for programs they recommend to students: coursework in a broad range of theoretical perspectives, quantitative methods coursework, methods courses that are taught within the PhD-granting department or school, the quality of course

Table 1 Evaluations of Qualities of PhD Programs

How important is each of the following for a PhD program in communication? (0 = not at all important; 10 = very important)	Faculty sample		Chair sample	
	Student recommendation	Job candidate	Student recommendation	Job candidate
1. The quality of the university library	9.00 (1)	6.63 (12)	8.98 (1)	6.98 (15)
2. Up-to-date computer facilities	8.52 (2)	6.83 (11)	8.71 (3)	7.96 (7)
3. Student attendance at academic conferences	8.51 (3)	8.61 (1)	8.12 (8)	7.98 (6)
4. National research reputation of communication faculty	8.34 (4)	8.08 (5)	8.14 (7)	8.14 (5)
5. Faculty encouragement of students to explore diverse perspectives on communication research	8.33 (5)	8.07 (6)	8.90 (2)	8.73 (2)
6. Student involvement in faculty research	8.28 (6)	8.04 (7)	8.04 (9)	7.69 (10)
7. The breadth of the communication faculty's theoretic and/or methodological orientations	8.24 (7)	8.02 (8)	8.65 (4)	8.63 (4)
8. Commitment of professors to teaching	8.17 (8)	7.76 (10)	8.55 (5)	8.67 (3)
9. Student sole authorship on papers/publications	8.10 (9)	8.50 (3)	7.69 (10)	7.96 (8)
10. Opportunities for students to teach undergraduate courses	7.93 (10)	8.59 (2)	8.20 (6)	8.82 (1)
11. Student coauthorship with faculty on papers/publications	7.86 (11)	7.80 (9)	7.65 (11)	7.44 (11)
12. Reputation of the university	7.84 (12)	8.20 (4)	7.59 (12)	7.94 (9)
13. A communication faculty that regularly obtains research grants	7.00 (13)	6.10 (14)	7.45 (13)	7.22 (13)
14. Multimedia teaching facilities	6.55 (14)	5.75 (15)	7.41 (14)	7.06 (14)
15. International research reputation of communication faculty	6.30 (15)	6.33 (13)	6.10 (19)	6.23 (18)
16. A survey research lab	6.23 (16)	4.64 (20)	6.60 (17)	5.88 (20)
17. Opportunities for students to apply research to nonacademic issues	5.99 (17)	5.53 (16)	7.24 (15)	7.24 (12)
18. Opportunities for students to learn organizational communication technologies (e.g., tele-, video-, computer-conferencing, virtual teams, and decision making)	5.79 (18)	5.23 (18)	6.55 (18)	6.43 (17)
19. Experimental research labs	5.74 (19)	4.69 (19)	5.88 (20)	5.17 (22)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

How important is each of the following for a PhD program in communication? (0 = not at all important; 10 = very important)	Faculty sample		Chair sample	
	Student recommendation	Job candidate	Student recommendation	Job candidate
20. A communication faculty with professional (i.e., nonacademic) experience	5.72 (20)	5.49 (17)	6.63 (16)	6.84 (16)
21. A video/audio production facility	5.10 (21)	3.74 (23)	5.77 (22)	4.85 (23)
22. Opportunities for student internships	4.98 (22)	4.31 (21)	5.73 (23)	5.73 (21)
23. The university's proximity to a major metropolitan area	4.97 (23)	3.32 (24)	4.73 (24)	3.69 (24)
24. A communication faculty that regularly engages in nonacademic consulting	4.36 (24)	4.13 (22)	5.86 (21)	5.80 (19)
25. A film production facility	3.47 (25)	2.63 (25)	3.44 (25)	2.70 (25)

How important is each of the following to the curriculum of a doctoral program? (0 = not at all important; 10 = very important)	Faculty sample		Chair sample	
	Student recommendation	Job candidate	Student recommendation	Job candidate
1. Coursework in a broad range of theoretical perspectives	8.63 (1)	8.44 (1)	8.76 (1)	8.68 (1)
2. Quantitative methods coursework	8.46 (2)	7.93 (2)	8.61 (3)	8.31 (3)
3. Methods courses taught within the PhD-granting department or school	8.10 (3)	6.93 (4)	8.21 (4)	6.94 (5)
4. The quality of course offerings outside the PhD-granting department or school	8.04 (4)	6.74 (6)	7.86 (6)	6.85 (7/8)
5. Qualitative methods coursework	7.93 (5)	7.59 (3)	8.71 (2)	8.50 (2)
6. Required comprehensive exams or project	7.72 (6)	6.93 (5)	8.12 (5)	7.81 (4)
7. The breadth of course offerings outside the PhD-granting department or school	7.67 (7)	6.39 (7)	7.49 (7)	6.85 (7/8)
8. Required preliminary or qualifying exams	6.59 (8)	5.81 (9)	6.69 (9)	6.27 (9)
9. Critical/cultural studies coursework	6.45 (9)	5.99 (8)	7.24 (8)	6.88 (6)
10. Coursework on the economics and law of communication industries	5.73 (10)	4.70 (11)	6.55 (10)	5.92 (10)
11. Rhetoric coursework	5.45 (11)	5.05 (10)	6.29 (11)	5.54 (11)

Note. Rows in Table 1 are arranged in decreasing order of mean rated importance of PhD program features, according to how the faculty sample rated the importance of the factors for recommending a program to a student considering graduate study. Mean figures are followed by the ranking (in parentheses) for that factor by the given sample (faculty, chairs) in the given context (i.e., recommending a program to a student vs. considering hiring a graduate of that doctoral program as a new faculty member).

offerings outside the PhD-granting department or school, and qualitative methods coursework. When assessing a job candidate's record, the faculty found the following criteria most important: coursework in a broad range of theoretical perspectives, quantitative methods coursework, qualitative methods coursework, methods courses taught within the PhD-granting department or school, and required comprehensive exams or project.

The chairs' ratings were quite similar with regard to curricular factors. With regard to doctoral program recommendations, the top criteria identified were coursework in a broad range of theoretical perspectives, qualitative methods coursework, quantitative methods coursework, methods courses taught within the PhD-granting department or school, and required comprehensive exams or project. When assessing a job candidate's record, chairs found the following criteria most important: coursework in a broad range of theoretical perspectives, qualitative methods coursework, quantitative methods coursework, required comprehensive exams or project, and methods courses taught within the PhD-granting department or school.

It should be noted that many of the criteria presented in the questionnaire achieved relatively high rating scores, suggesting that the ranking may not be the critical analytic tool to examine. Most of the criteria received mean scores above the rating scale's midpoint (i.e., above a 5 on the 0–10 scale), indicating that most of the criteria were deemed at least somewhat important to a doctoral program.

The results for the items in the questionnaire that probed perceptions of various disciplinary divisions and specialties (RQ2) in doctoral programs are presented in Table 2. The only specialty for which a majority of faculty respondents—and a majority of chair respondents—reported that there are “not enough” programs is Media Information Technologies. Other specialties for which a sizeable number of respondents felt that there are “not enough” programs include Applied Communication Research (35% of faculty, and 43% of chairs), Organizational Communication Technology (32% of faculty, and 31% of chairs), Dispute Resolution (28% of faculty, and 29% of chairs), Health Communication (27% of faculty, and 38% of chairs), and International/Development Communication (23% of faculty, and 25% of chairs).

Another way to examine the data in the table is to look at specialties that garnered a substantial number of votes indicating that there are “too many” such programs at present. Such emphases included Interpersonal Communication (34% of faculty, and 45% of chairs), Mass Communication (31% of faculty, and 16% of chairs), Rhetoric (30% of faculty, and 38% of chairs), Promotional Communication (27% of faculty, and 20% of chairs), and Relational Communication (23% of faculty, and 29% of chairs). A substantial number of chairs also indicated that there are “too many” programs in Instructional Communication (29%), and Organizational Communication (27%). Most telling, the greatest proportion of endorsements by faculty for the “too many” category was found for the “General” PhD in Communication (37% for faculty, and 32% for chairs).

Turning to RQ3, Table 3 shows respondent selections for the top U.S. doctoral programs in the field of communication, on a weighted points system (see Table notes for more information). The program ranked number one by faculty was the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which received 126 points. Other top

Table 2 Perceptions of Adequacy of Number of Doctoral Programs

	Faculty sample			Chair sample				
	Not enough	Just right	Too many	DK	Not enough	Just right	Too many	DK
Opinion on number of doctoral programs that emphasize:								
Media Information Technologies (e.g., study of emerging communication technologies)	53	19	7	21	60	13	4	23
Applied Communication Research (e.g., using communication principles for problem-solving)	35	23	9	34	43	20	6	31
Organizational Communication Technology (including tele-, video-, computer conferencing, virtual teams, and decision making)	32	14	10	44	31	21	10	38
Dispute Resolution (including mediation and conflict)	28	19	4	49	29	14	12	45
Health Communication (including communication about health issues and within a health context)	27	30	9	34	38	17	8	38
International/Development Communication (e.g., communication for national development)	23	23	12	41	25	29	8	39
Political Communication (e.g., study of the role of political messages)	23	33	17	27	17	38	19	27
Instructional Communication (including communication about education and within educational contexts)	21	24	15	41	27	15	29	29

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued

Opinion on number of doctoral programs that emphasize:	Faculty sample			Chair sample		
	Not enough	Just right	Too many	Not enough	Just right	Too many
Promotional Communication (e.g., study of advocacy communication, including public relations and advertising)	20	20	27	33	29	20
Communication Law and Policy (e.g., study of the operation of mass media industries)	20	34	10	37	38	6
Organizational Communication	17	39	19	26	45	27
Applied Organizational Communication (e.g., focus on consulting applications of organizational communication principles)	17	21	11	51	31	12
“General” PhD in Communication (without a required specialization)	13	26	37	24	30	32
Rhetoric (including argumentation, study of freedom of speech issues, analysis of messages)	13	30	30	28	36	38
Mass Communication	11	44	31	15	57	16
Relational Communication (e.g., study of interaction in human relationships)	10	31	23	36	27	29
Interpersonal Communication	6	37	34	23	37	45

Note. Rows in Table 2 are arranged in decreasing order of perceived need for more doctoral programs of that type, according to the faculty sample. DK = Don't know. All figures are percentages.

faculty selections were the University of Texas at Austin (93 points), the University of Pennsylvania (77 points), Michigan State University (70 points), the University of Iowa (69 points), Stanford University (65 points), Northwestern University (60 points), the University of North Carolina (56 points), the University of Illinois (56 points), and Purdue University (53 points). Among chairs, the University of Texas at Austin ranked number one (25 points), followed by the University of Pennsylvania (16 points), the University of North Carolina (14 points), Michigan State University (13 points) and the University of Iowa (12 points).

To check for the influence of alma mater and current institution on program rankings, a separate analysis was conducted on a subset of 126 faculty respondents that controlled for (1) the school from which each received their highest degree, and (2) the institution at which each was employed at the time of the survey. In other words, votes for alma mater and current institution were removed from the initial, uncontrolled rankings for these respondents. A comparison of the rankings before and after controlling for affiliation showed little difference. In the top 10, only one school, Iowa, moved more than one place, falling two places. The remaining schools kept their initial ranking or moved up or down just one slot. This suggests that institutional affiliations did not have a substantial impact on the rankings shown in Table 3.

Discussion

This study set out to describe the current status and valued characteristics of PhD programs in Communication and gauge the relative demand for specific sub-areas within the discipline. On the whole, study results documented a high degree of correspondence between faculty and administrator evaluations on curricular factors, and lower levels of agreement on program rankings and evaluation criteria for doctoral program quality.

Our finding of increased demand for communication technology studies suggests that faculty envisage a central role for communication studies in the emerging information economy. American universities have conferred over 50,000 communication degrees per year since the mid-1990s, which places it among the fastest growing fields since 1965 (e.g., *Communiquest Interactive*, 2004). As Craig and Carlone (1998, p. 74) suggest, “the growth in communication graduate degrees results. . .from the growth and proliferation of communication-related professional fields.”

The robust demand for communication technology specialists evidenced here confirms larger economic projections that over half of American employees today are part of a “knowledge class” in an “information age” (e.g., Bell, 1976). As this emerging economy displaces industrial enterprise, communication will continue to occupy a central role as the major means of connecting people. In this regard, respondent sentiment would seem to reinforce that of commentators (e.g., Atkin & Jeffres, 1998; Bucy, 2005; Vincent, 1991), who suggest that communication educators can

Table 3 Rankings of Communication Programs that offer a Doctoral Degree

Communication program	Faculty score (rank)	Chair score (rank)
1. University of Wisconsin, Madison	126 (1)	9 (8, tie)
2. University of Texas at Austin	93 (2)	25 (1)
3. University of Pennsylvania	77 (3)	16 (2)
4. Michigan State University	70 (4)	13 (4)
5. University of Iowa	69 (5)	12 (5)
6. Stanford University	65 (6)	9 (8, tie)
7. Northwestern University	60 (7)	10 (7)
8. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	56 (8, tie)	14 (3)
9. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	56 (8, tie)	11 (6)
10. Purdue University	53 (10)	NS (-)
11. University of Southern California	48 (11)	1 (20, tie)
12. Penn State University	32 (12)	1 (20, tie)
13. University of California, Santa Barbara	26 (13)	3 (16)
14. University of Arizona	20 (14, tie)	NS (-)
14. University of Minnesota	20 (14, tie)	5 (13, tie)
16. University of Missouri	17 (16, tie)	6 (12)
16. Ohio University	17 (16, tie)	2 (17, tie)
18. University of Florida	16 (18)	9 (8, tie)
19. University of Utah	14 (19)	1 (20, tie)
20. University of Kansas	11 (20, tie)	2 (17, tie)
20. Texas A & M University	11 (20, tie)	5 (13, tie)
22. Arizona State University	10 (22, tie)	8 (11)
22. Indiana University	10 (22, tie)	NS (-)
22. University of Maryland	10 (22, tie)	NS (-)
25. University of Massachusetts	8 (25)	NS (-)
26. Regent University	7 (26)	NS (-)
27. University of Georgia	6 (27, tie)	4 (15)
27. Ohio State University	6 (27, tie)	2 (17, tie)

Note. Rankings were determined by using a weighted points system. Each time a program was ranked as number one, it received three points. Second place rankings translated into two points each, while each third place ranking counted for one point. The total scores for each program at each level (first, second and third) were summed; the final figures are represented by the points shown in the tables. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison was called the top doctoral program in communication by 20 faculty respondents, the second best program by 25 faculty respondents, and the third best by 16 faculty respondents. Thus, Wisconsin-Madison received 60 first place points (20×3), 50 second place points (25×2), and 16 third place points. Wisconsin's total score for the faculty sample, therefore, was 126 points ($60 + 50 + 16$), the figure shown in the table.

The numbers in parentheses represent rankings of the programs among members of the faculty and chair samples, respectively.

"NS" indicates that the program received zero points and thus no score.

Programs that received fewer than six total points in the faculty rating are not shown.

A separate ranking for institutions not granting the PhD is available from the first author.

better prepare their students for the workplace by incorporating these changes in technology into their pedagogy and research.

But this demand for communication does not translate into a strong perceived demand for communication generalists. In fact, the more general the area designation, the more likely respondents were to indicate that there were “too many” programs serving it. Aside from the technology specialization dynamics mentioned above, this apparent reverence for specialization stands testament to the aphorism that enterprises become more complex as they age. Of course, our sample represents the communication field in the broadest sense, and some of the attributions of PhD overpopulation for mass and interpersonal communication may reflect historic splits in the field (with each camp perhaps seeing too much attention devoted to the other). Although only a handful of courses and programs are still offered under the venerable rubric of “rhetoric” (Rogers, 1994), the fact that a third of respondents place it in the “too many” category does not bode well for growth in that area. Yet, as Craig and Carlone (1998) note, statistical data can mislead when numbers are reported without careful attention to the shifting classification schemes that underlie them.

Rather than view a trend toward technology specialization as a form of balkanization, it is useful to point out that merging definitions of technology can help unify subdisciplines in communication that study them (e.g., mass, interpersonal, and telecommunication). As observers (e.g., Beniger, 2005; Lin & Atkin, 2002) note, the ongoing convergence of telecommunication media marks a “communications” revolution that is based on collecting, storing, processing, and communicating information.⁴ Thus, in an era when several communication programs have come under attack from more established disciplines in the academy (e.g., Craig & Carlone, 1998), the present findings suggest that faculty see the destiny of the field tied to the ongoing revolution in new communication technology.

With regard to perceived program quality, study findings generally confirm those of Hickson et al. (1999). In particular, all but one of the Big 10 schools (Michigan) appear on our list of 30 top degree granting institutions. The preeminence of large, state-supported schools atop our list of highly regarded schools is consistent with past work on program ratings (e.g., Hickson, et al., 1999; 2003).

But, as the earlier-cited criticism of the *U.S. News* survey suggests, a department’s reputational standing may be function of general institutional prestige. This is particularly true among PhD granting programs, where several elite programs ranked highly in our survey, even though none of the private institutions any longer commands a high level of departmental productivity or a large stable of individually productive scholars (e.g., Hickson et al., 2003). Although our findings indicate that faculty productivity is an important factor in determining program reputation, several highly regarded programs (e.g., Pennsylvania, Stanford) do not presently employ any of the “top 1%” of productive scholars identified in Hickson et al.’s contemporary (2003) analyses. This inconsistency may be attributable to the fact that respondent evaluations are based on (a) books, grants, graduate student quality, or other performance indicators not reflected in productivity studies, and/or (b) a halo effect stemming from overall school reputation.

Limitations

The response rate in this study was somewhat low, which may be attributed to a lack of both incentives and follow-up attempts to contact potential participants. As Watt and van den Berg (1995) and Baker (1994) point out, surveys without personal follow-ups and incentives are likely to have lower response rates (i.e., less than 20% and under 50%, respectively). It may also be the result of several new sources of non-response error inherent in Web-based surveys, such as difficulty accessing the instrument. Due to the unsophisticated nature of the methodology (e.g., the passive nature of instrument administration), such response rates have been typical in Web survey research (Couper, 2000). In an age of falling telephone and (recently) mail survey response rates, the present rate is comparable to those for other contemporary surveys. Methodology scholars report response rates for mail surveys as low as 4% (Babbie, 2001). Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) report a polling industry standard of 40% as “very high” for a phone survey. Despite its limitations, the current sample has appreciable face validity as a representative sample of communication faculty, as demonstrated by the descriptive results.

Future Directions

The fact that some schools were rated highly here—despite not having been recorded in past institutional evaluations—suggests that faculty reputational standings can be volatile. Moreover, the fact that many perennial research leaders (see Vincent, 1991) failed to rank among our “Top 20” may be attributable to a dynamic observed by Burroughs et al. (1989), namely, that it’s very difficult for schools to retain large numbers of productive scholars over time. It remains to be seen whether this dynamic is related to higher levels of mobility in communication relative to other disciplines. Yet, while no single indicator of program quality can be considered definitive, such research may provide a reality check for scholars, administrators, and students in the field. Concurrently, it seems that student or public consumers of academic research are demanding “more perfect information” on program quality.⁵ For that reason, it will be important to repeat this work over time. Further work might profitably analyze perceived institutional quality across various subfields as well as faculty productivity in terms of journals, books, and faculty citation frequencies.

Notes

- [1] Craig and Carlone note that the fastest growth in the field since 1972 has occurred in the category of “general communication,” borrowing the following definition from the National Center for Education Statistics.

An instructional program that generally describes the creation, transmission and evaluation of messages at all levels, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, and that may prepare individuals to apply principles of communications to work in specific media. Includes instruction in modes and behavioral aspects of human communications, and the formal means by which society organizes communications. (cited in Craig & Carolone, 1998, p. 70)

- [2] The complete list of items may be obtained by contacting the first author.
- [3] Initially, there were 225 completions of the faculty survey identified on the Web site. Upon examination of the e-mail identifications, it was found that four respondents completed the survey twice. The redundant completions were deleted, for a final n of 221. On the site for chairperson respondents, there were 52 completions recorded. The examination of identifying data revealed that one respondent completed the survey four times; three of these entries were deleted, for a final n of 49.
- [4] And, to the extent that emerging digital applications assume a central role in our economy, study results can help faculty and administrators understand the high level of perceived utility for new technology applications. Intellectual copyright, for instance, now represents America's chief export sector (Lin & Atkin, 2002), as expenditures for computing and communications surpass those for industrial, mining, farming, and construction sectors.
- Investigations like ours can thus help administrators assess whether communications programs are meeting the needs of students in an increasingly "hi-tech" job market where, for instance, digital technology is transforming the study of journalism and promotional communication. The academic ferment in this area bears testament to the fact that communication professionals may all be part of the "integrated communication grid" (Dizard, 2000) or network through which anyone can send or receive messages in any mode to virtually anyone anywhere.
- [5] This is especially true of institutional analyses, as witnessed by the recent commercial success of *U.S. News and World Report's* annual collegiate ratings. That analysis easily provides the most visible and popular, if controversial, yardstick for all universities. The fact that it included mass communication for the first time in its 1996 issue is encouraging for a discipline that, despite producing 6.37% of BA graduates, has not—as of 2005—yet been included among the 36 disciplines evaluated by the National Research Council (Becker & Graf, 1995; Craig & Carlone, 1998; NRC, 2004). Of course, the subsequent complaints over how the field is represented—and the publication's hesitancy to include it in later years—points to the difficulties in evaluating a nascent, far-flung field.

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