



Eight-Year Program Review IBHE Report

Summary: see attached Resources page

PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT SUMMARY

1. **Reporting Institution:** Eastern Illinois University
2. **Program Reviewed:** B.A. in Communication Studies
3. **Date:** January 6, 2026
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5. OVERVIEW

Since our last 8-year report, the Department of Communication Studies merged with the Department of Journalism to form the School of Communication and Journalism (2019). The school houses five majors with Communication Studies being one of those majors. Within the major there are four option areas for students to select from as areas of specialization. Three of these areas, Corporate Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and Mass Communication, are offered in a traditional on-campus format. The fourth option, Communication in Organizations, is a fully online degree completion option. We also house three minors: Communication and Cultural Diversity, Communication Studies, and Advertising, and have a large and growing on-campus and online graduate program.

The School of Communication and Journalism defines its mission statement as follows: “The School of Communication and Journalism prepares students to think critically, act responsibly, and produce creatively to better communicate in a diverse, democratic society. Our school offers a variety of majors that combine liberal arts education with professional and hands-on training. Courses are designed to develop oral, written, relational, digital, and visual skills critical to the fields of communication and journalism. We foster communication approaches that facilitate freedom of expression, transparency, advocacy, and civic engagement.” The school’s mission directly supports EIU’s mission, with an emphasis on diversity and belonging, and critical thinking and clear communication in order to “become responsible citizens and leaders.”

Aligned with the missions of the university and the school, the Communication Studies major addresses a critical societal need by emphasizing transferable communication skills. As stated on the Communication Studies website: “Good communication skills are essential in almost every industry today. In fact, employers identify the ability to verbally communicate with people inside and outside an organization and the ability to create and/or edit written documents among the top ten skills they seek when hiring new college graduates. Communication Studies graduates have the knowledge and critical skills employers want. They develop strong verbal, nonverbal, and written communication skills and cultivate the ability to speak well in front of small and large audiences.”

The program’s learning objectives are: 1) students will acquire communication studies disciplinary knowledge, which includes an understanding of the discipline and its central questions, as well as the ability to apply communication theories and engage in communication inquiry; 2) students will also improve their critical thinking skills. This includes developing critical questioning skills, and learning to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize data in a variety of contexts; 3) students will be able to create and implement message strategies in a diverse range of contexts, which includes an emphasis on writing and speaking; and 4) students will cultivate a sense of social and ethical responsibility, and multicultural sensitivity.

For the on-campus options, the learning objectives are realized across a common core curriculum and required classes relative to each option area. The core curriculum consists of seven courses (21 hours, including a senior capstone), and focuses on disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, research methodology, and on social, ethical, and multicultural responsibilities. Each option area requires 18 hours of required specialized coursework, and nine hours of electives. The Communication in Organizations online degree option consists of 34 hours of required coursework and 12 hours of electives.

6. MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 6.a. Description and assessment of any major changes in the program

School of Communication and Journalism: In 2019, the Department of Communication Studies and the Department of Journalism formed the School of Communication and Journalism. The Communication Studies major is now part of the new school located in Buzzard Hall. The school consists of two divisions with separate curriculum committees. The Communication Studies major is housed in the Communication Studies division whose undergraduate curriculum committee reviews and votes on curriculum proposals for the major. The curriculum committee in the Journalism division has an advisory function and provides feedback on all proposals.

Human resources: The major is supported by five tenured and tenure-track faculty, and six annually contracted faculty. In addition, four more tenured and tenure-track faculty, and two more annually contracted faculty, support the program by teaching in the common core and elective classes. All faculty are active researchers and recognized experts in their field.

Curriculum: Since our last review, the Communication Studies curriculum has been revised in the following ways: 1) the Communication Studies common core was expanded to comply with research indicating employers are looking for employees that are able to communicate across difference and are interculturally capable. The core was thus expanded to include two courses featuring diversity and difference; 2) a capstone experience was created to provide a culminating experience for graduating seniors; and 3) in order to better serve the Illinois community, online offerings have been increased. Details about these revisions follow.

The Communication Studies common core. Two courses were added to the core that feature diversity and difference. The driving motive for these additions was faculty expertise that found that racial and sexual majority students could go their entire academic career without engaging in sustained research and discussion on diversity and difference. As a result, we added CMN 3220: Rhetoric of Race and Class, and CMN 3903: Rhetoric of Gender and Sexuality. The latter is also offered as an elective in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies interdisciplinary minor. Both of these classes emphasize the ways in which interpersonal, organizational, and mass media communication practices both maintain racial and gender oppression, and simultaneously make space for progressive and liberatory opportunities. Faculty and student feedback for these classes have been quite positive, suggesting the addition of these courses in the common core have provided a well-rounded experience for students, preparing them for their concentrated studies in their option areas.

The Communication Studies Capstone. In 2021, the Communication Studies faculty approved a capstone course to replace the requirement of the university senior seminar. The course, CMN 4680: Capstone in Communication Studies, was offered for the first time in the 2024 spring semester. The goal of the capstone is to provide concentrated focus on the value of a Communication Studies degree as seniors prepare to depart from the university. Thus, the curriculum requires students to revisit their studies, delving deeply into their option areas, and produce a culminating portfolio that speaks to where they were as they began their studies, and how their education has prepared them to enter the job market and participate as citizens in a diverse democracy. There is a strong research component to the portfolio, and students are required to adapt that research to an audience outside of their major by presenting their portfolio in a public poster session. In addition, all students in the capstone course are required to work with Career Services to create a profession resume and cover letter that is appended to their final portfolio.

The capstone course also provided us with an opportunity to assess seniors in key areas required by our assessment plan, primarily social, ethical, and multicultural sensitivity. Some results are highlighted below.

Expanded online offerings. Our online degree completion program, Communication in Organizations, has maintained strong numbers in the past few years, and only recently has experienced the decline common to most regional university programs in Illinois. With limited faculty to deliver multiple programs, the Communication Studies faculty have had to adapt the curriculum to serve both our native and online students. Additionally, a lesson we learned from the COVID years is that native students are not as interested in online courses as they once were, so the audiences for online courses tend to be working adults. We have streamlined our program as much as possible to serve our online and offline community, without sacrificing the value and rigor of our courses. One way we have adapted is by offering online courses that are of interest to both sets of students. For example, in fall of 2022, we added the fully online course, CMN 3980:

Strategic Social Media Communication, currently a required class in the PR major, to the Mass Communication option area for the Communication Studies degree. As a fully online course, this class has a strong practical component for native students as it provides hands-on training in strategic social media – something students are very likely to experience in their future careers. The course is also adaptable enough to serve as an elective in the Communication in Organizations online degree. This example shows how the faculty have adapted to changing communication practices in the world, and to decreased resources in the university.

6.b. Description of major findings and recommendations, including evidence of learning outcomes and identification of opportunities for program improvement

One of the most significant changes we have made as a result of our curriculum updates is revising our assessment plan. Prior to the curriculum revisions described above, we were using a pretest-posttest method to determine learning outcomes and disciplinary knowledge, and a survey given to all seniors to assess social, ethical, and multicultural sensitivity. We found that these methods were not adequate and were not giving us accurate results. For example, the pretest-posttest method tested all students in communication classes whether they were Communication Studies majors or not. This method also did not differentiate among class level of students, testing sophomores alongside seniors. Moreover, the senior survey was sent out to all seniors, but the only incentive to complete it was the occasional extra credit offered by faculty. In 2020, we put together an ad hoc committee to revise our assessment plan.

Revised assessment plan. For disciplinary knowledge, our revised assessment plan adopted learning outcomes as set forth by the National Communication Association. These outcomes detail what Communication Studies majors should know, or be able to put into practice, by the time they graduate. Communication Studies graduates should be able to:

- Describe the communication discipline and its central questions.
- Employ communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts.
- Engage in communication inquiry.
- Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context.
- Critically analyze messages.
- Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy).
- Apply ethical communication principles and practices.
- Utilize communication to embrace differences.
- Influence public discourse

In order to focus on Communication Studies majors, assessment instruments were created and delivered to faculty asking them to assess *only* Communication Studies majors, and only for the rank appropriate for the course, e.g., 2000-level courses assess sophomores only, 3000-level assess juniors, and 4000-level assess seniors. The assessment instruments focus on the skills of critical thinking, writing, speaking and listening, with an emphasis on message creation and analysis.

The new senior capstone course was offered for the first time in the spring of 2024, and the senior survey was implemented into this course. We believed the results of the senior survey would be more accurate and thoughtful when delivered to students in a course that focused on what it means to be on the cusp of graduating from their major, as opposed to a survey given as part of a voluntary, undifferentiated experience.

Below is a sample of the assessment outcomes for AY 2023-24 and AY 2024-25.

Disciplinary knowledge was captured in assessment of critical thinking, writing, and speaking and listening. Our goal for students in 2000-level courses is to reach the level of minimally competent (1.5 - 2.49); for students in 3000-level courses to reach the level of competent (2.50 – 3.49); and in 4000-level courses to reach the level of highly competent (3.5 – 4.0). The tables below are based on two years of data, starting from when we began to target our majors only in our assessment.

AY 2023-24	Critical Thinking	Writing	Speaking & Listening
2000-level	3.39	3.44	3.41
3000-level	3.29	3.16	3.45
4000-level	3.22	3.55	3.36

AY 2024-25	Critical Thinking	Writing	Speaking & Listening
2000-level	3.04	3.22	2.95
3000-level	3.28	3.18	3.39
4000-level	3.49	3.45	3.53

The table below is a measure of social, ethical, and multicultural sensitivity. The data was captured in the senior capstone course from a survey taken at the end of the course, the Social and Professional Ethics Measure and the Multicultural Sensitivity Scale. The table represents two years of data collection, beginning when we started offering the capstone course. The survey is based on a five-point Likert scale. The goal is that seniors should measure as competent to highly competent.

Minimally competent = 2.50-3.49

Competent = 3.50-4.49

Highly competent = 4.50-5.00

	Multicultural Sensitivity	Social Responsibility & Professional Ethics	Flexibility in Communication
AY 2023-2024 (n=10)	4.34	4.06	3.41
AY 2024-2025 (n=9)	4.23	3.99	3.14

Although we are pleased with the specificity of the data collected under the new assessment plan, it is not without weaknesses. The primary weakness is the senior capstone survey. While the instrument was intended to measure social, ethical, and multicultural sensitivity, it is flawed in that our results do not consistently achieve the same level of reliability and validity as reported in the published instrument. Thus, we are undertaking a revision of how we assess these areas, coinciding with a major revision in the curriculum as described below in 6.d.

6.c. Description of actions taken since the last review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes

See 6 a)

6.d. Description of actions to be taken as a result of this review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes

A reality that most regional universities have had to face is declining enrollment, and we are no exception. As our numbers have dropped, we have been confronted with the fact we can no longer support numerous class offerings, forcing us to cancel underenrolled classes, and write substitutions for our majors. This is no longer tenable and has forced us to re-envision all of our programs in the School of Communication & Journalism. The new program will remain transfer friendly, and we believe the revisions will make it easier for students outside of our program to double-major in Communication Studies. Our goal is to make these changes effective AY 2026-27. The significant revisions are highlighted below.

Revision of core curriculum. The core curriculum will be reduced to three courses that will be required of all majors housed in the School of Communication & Journalism. The courses focus on media literacy, content creation, and workplace communication. The faculty of the school believe that these are skills all students must master regardless of major. After completing the core, students will complete major specific classes.

Elimination of option areas. The Communication Studies major will eliminate its option areas in favor of a generalist program. Communication Studies majors will take 24 credit hours that focus on disciplinary knowledge and skills, and 9 hours of electives that will allow for specialization in areas of public relations and advocacy, journalism and media advocacy, or creative audio-visual production and storytelling.

Comments from the College Dean:

The BA Communication Studies since its last full report (2019) has undergone significant and well-founded changes to curriculum that are responsive to developments in the field as well as challenges facing the University. The common core revisions adapt nimbly to data indicating the skills employers are looking for, and the creation of a capstone course strengthens students' preparation for entering the job market or advanced study in the field. Furthermore, the online degree completion program (Communication in Organizations) continues to adapt curriculum offerings to changing needs for nontraditional students. As with universities statewide, declining enrollment is a concern across the board, and further changes are in the works for the Communication faculty to streamline curriculum in response to this trend. We continue to see significant interest in the program at recruiting events. It is for all these reasons the program remains strong, flexible, and an asset to the University.

We recommend a decision of **Program in Good Standing**.

VPAA Decision:

- ☒ Program in good standing
- ☐ Program flagged for priority review
- ☐ Program enrollment suspended

VPAA Explanation:

Communication Studies BA (90100)

The summary above describes the thoughtfully executed curricular and structural changes required in the 2019 creation of a School of Communication Studies and Journalism. The B.A. in Communication Studies program houses three on-campus options (Corporate, Interpersonal, and Mass Communications) and one fully online option (Communications in Organizations). The program has emphasized the strengthening of students' career preparation, ability to strategize on social media platforms, familiarity with diverse audiences, and culminating experience in a new Communications senior capstone course. In particular, the refined assessment of the Communications Studies majors—rather than all students taking Communications courses—has borne more useful results for evaluating the needs of students in the major.