Executive Summary

On February 11, 2011 this select committee, along with an outside reviewer, Dr. Marianne Barrett from Arizona State University, met with the Dean and Associate Dean of the College of Mass Communications. A tour of the College’s facilities and resources was also conducted, followed by separate meetings with graduate faculty and students. What follows is a review of the College’s graduate program that includes an examination of key areas along with corresponding evaluative grades. Where appropriate, recommendations have also been made for possible solutions to noted areas of concern.

Such areas, specifically, are
- MA professional students and their impact on the research emphasis of the program,
- funding,
- and the workload for the graduate advisor

All these could serve to mitigate future successes and growth if not effectively addressed.

However, on a positive note, the graduate faculty is energetic, productive, and supportive of the students in the program. There is a genuine sense of collegiality among them as they work with each other and graduate students on service and research projects. Graduate students leaving with PhDs are being placed quickly at excellent institutions to take on research/teaching positions. In summary, we regard favorably the efforts of the College to continue to grow what is already a very competitive graduate program.

Program Overview and Vision (Good)
The program’s documentation included discussion of the program’s vision and mission; however, the content revealed little about the direction of the graduate program or how the identified goals relate to broader university strategic priorities (e.g., increasing enrollment while promoting student success, increasing and maximizing resources, etc.). Although the documentation made comparison to the current college and university strategic plan difficult, interviews of administration, faculty, and
students did indicate that the program is intensely focused on growing its enrollment while ensuring a high degree of quality in coursework and research experiences. However, a review of faculty survey results considered in the context of the documentation suggests that the program is in need of clearer goals, especially for the master’s program.

**Faculty Productivity (Very Good)**
Assistent professors comprise half of the Mass Communications graduate faculty. With only two full professors and nine associate professors, the 11 assistant professors are the majority. Senior faculty discussed the junior faculty’s investment in research and teaching, which has helped the Mass Communications graduate faculty to have the highest level of publications and citations in comparison to their peer institutions. The faculty described their efforts in securing external funding. However, concern was raised that faculty members who are working to establish research agendas may, in their zeal, be prematurely committing to projects well outside of their interests and field. Because external funding opportunities specifically targeting communications research is limited, faculty members expressed concern about how to assess their productivity in this domain, especially as demands change in the future. Despite a “young” faculty and clear investment in research activities, students described their professors as “extraordinary in their willingness to support students,” “terrific mentors,” and “amazing.” Students further commented on their faculty’s commitment to scholarship to suggest that faculty truly integrate their research into their teaching. Service outside of the college was documented but discussed less as administrators reported that they discourage significant engagement in service by assistant professors. Additionally, survey results identified concern for assistant professors taking on the demands of chairing dissertation committees. The workload of Mass Communications graduate faculty has consistently increased since 2007; however, workload has just approached the average level reported for the university.

**Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates (Excellent)**
We are greatly impressed by the quality of graduate students in this program, especially PhD students who complete all coursework, exams, and dissertations in an average of 3 years. Many also have landed prestigious faculty positions at other Mass Communications programs across the country. This will only serve to continue the reach of Tech’s influence, which will more than likely contribute (if it has not already done so) to an increase in applications to the PhD program. This competition will further engender improved quality in an already outstanding graduate student body.

There is some question, as we have already noted, regarding the standing of professional MA students and whether there are too many to deal with now or in the future. Certainly, there is the danger, as class sizes of 25 suggest, that graduate faculty could be overwhelmed with advising and teaching, along with research, should there be too many graduate students. More graduate students also mean more competition for often difficult to find funding. But we feel there are reasonable solutions available, especially for addressing the demands placed on the program by MA professional students. The program also has been creative despite challenges to fund graduate students. Recent endowments have also made available future funding opportunities for graduate students. The program should be recognized for the quality of its graduate students and the trend already apparent for this quality to continue to improve.

**Curriculum and Programs of Study (Good)**
Our rating can be attributed to the flux right now regarding Masters students, especially those in the professional track, when graduate faculty are stretched so thin given their own research agendas and the demands of teaching/directing Masters theses and PhD dissertations. A few students during their
session with us were unhappy about a particular graduate course that had 25 students. Other students indicated their displeasure with having to take too many multiple choice exams in a PhD level course. It is possible that a course of this size, as well as the need to assess with a method like a multiple choice example, is the result of a large graduate student body (at least in comparison to the size of the graduate faculty). Several PhD students also discussed frustration with what they perceived to be an intense pressure to graduate in three years. Although the fundamental concern related to this complaint was difficult to identify, the three year limit on student funding appeared the most likely issue.

Certainly the graduate program should continue to flourish, but the possibility of its continued success may depend on the ability of the program to address the education of Masters professional students alongside MA and PhD students that are more research-driven. One recommendation that could address the issue is to establish a curriculum whereby Masters professional students would take courses with advanced undergraduates, rather than putting them in more research-focused courses where they often are not interested in the subject matter and make it difficult for faculty to manage the course load. Programs like this exist elsewhere and such a model may prove effective here. Other faculty not currently eligible for teaching research-related graduate courses could teach the professional MA students alongside advanced undergraduates in cross-listed courses (4000/5000). The result would be smaller classes for the research track graduate students, or the potential of adding, should funding be possible, more MA research and PhD students since class space in research courses would only be allocated to them.

**Facilities and Resources (Very Good)**

Given that the College is moving to new facilities soon that promise additional space for teaching, staff, and laboratory needs, the committee has elected not to focus in detail on the shortcomings of the current arrangement since they will not necessarily be applicable in the future. However, we do recommend, if space allows for it, the following to best serve the needs of the graduate program:

- **Redundancy of lab space and facilities** for those labs especially that are generating valuable research and that both faculty and graduate students use often. This will mitigate problems with faculty and graduate students trying to book times to conduct research.

- **Reduction of the number of graduate students sharing office space.** We do believe present facilities account for the current overload of graduate students in offices. Still, to ensure the program thrives (and of value potentially for recruiting top notch students) we recommend affording more space for graduate students or less students to an office.

In all other respects we were impressed as a committee with the lab equipment of the program.

**Staffing Resources: Support for Graduate Advisor**

Both faculty and graduate students commented positively on the dedication and quality of advising provided by the graduate advisor. However, some also noted that the graduate advisor is overworked and, as a result, stretched thin in his duties, causing a few to express frustration with the speed or availability of advising. It is our understanding that despite the size of the program, which is only increasing, there is one faculty member, with no support, responsible for coordinating the MA and PhD program, completing all paperwork regarding graduation, degree audits, dissertation/thesis
defense paperwork, and also managing student recruiting (not to mention fulfilling his own active research agenda).

A more structured curriculum approved recently by the college’s graduate faculty will most likely make academic advising easier. Other changes we have recommended to the handling of MA professional track and MA thesis track students may as well. But ultimately the best solution, and one that is potentially most impactful in the short term, is that the University strongly consider funding a full-time support person for the Chair/Advisor of the graduate program.