Executive Summary

A review of the College of Mass Communications graduate program was conducted in February 2011 by a team of three internal and one external committee members. The committee met with the Dean of the college and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, members of the graduate faculty and graduate students. The team also toured the facilities and was provided with an overview of the resources available to the program. Although the external reviewer’s charge was to focus on the doctoral program, because many classes, including those in the doctoral core, have both master’s and Ph.D. students it was difficult to separate the two programs.

The three groups interviewed by the reviewers largely were in agreement regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the doctoral program. Since its launch in 2005, nine students have completed their degrees in, on average, 3.1 years. Eight of the nine are assistant professors at four-year institutions in the U.S. and the ninth is the Registrar at Texas Tech. The average time to degree and the placement of the doctoral program’s graduates are among the program’s greatest strengths. The program also has benefitted from retirements and other opportunities to hire several new faculty members who are active researchers. In fact, the college hired seven new faculty members in a single academic year, 2008-2009. The graduate faculty struck the reviewers as very cohesive and collegial, a strength that was noted by the graduate students. All three groups are satisfied with the research facilities, which clearly are among the college administration’s points of pride.

The greatest challenge facing the program and one of its weaknesses is funding, particularly with respect to graduate assistantships and stipends. The college’s limited funds for its graduate programs impacts its ability to recruit strong doctoral students and which, for a period of time, led to a decrease in the number of master’s students. Although the number of applicants and those admitted to the doctoral program has been quite consistent over the six years, in the first three years of the doctoral program 50% of those admitted enrolled while only 40% have done so in each of the last three years.

Another challenge facing the program is whether to continue to offer both professionally and academically-oriented master’s degrees. The college has proposed an accelerated professional master’s program that would enable students to complete their M.A. in 12 months. It is likely this approach would enable the college to increase its number of master’s students, but integrating these students with academically-oriented master’s and Ph.D. students creates curricular issues.

In fact, one of the doctoral program’s weaknesses is the inclusion of non-thesis master’s students in several of the Ph.D. courses, particularly research methods. In fall 2010, for example, three-quarters of the master’s students enrolled in the class did not pass. Doctoral students expressed their concerns about the rigors of several of their classes noting much of their grades were based
on multiple choice tests rather than on papers. They attributed this pedagogical approach to the presence of the professionally-oriented master’s students.

The graduate students were quite complimentary noting the strength of the graduate faculty, the program’s focus on mass communications and students’ ability to create individualized programs of study as more electives are offered. They would like to see more advanced methods courses including advanced data analysis, but these courses may be offered elsewhere in the university and given the program’s limited resources, students might be just as well served by taking these classes in other units.

There was some discussion about when students can begin work on their dissertations with some students suggesting they are discouraged from investigating potential topics until after they have completed their comprehensive exams. The review team was skeptical about whether this actually is the case.

The review team had several questions about the inconsistencies in the data provided in the self-study, some of which were addressed. The specifics regarding these inconsistencies are addressed in the relevant sections of this report.

In summary, the Mass Communication doctoral program has a strong graduate faculty who are active researchers and very supportive of the program’s students. The program is focused, has done an excellent job of placing its graduates, who on average complete their degrees in a little over three years and in the six years of its existence has established itself which should enable it to continue to recruit strong applicants. The program has limited funding available for graduate assistantships and could benefit from additional staff support for the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. The program also could be strengthened by limiting doctoral classes to Ph.D. and thesis-track master’s students rather than continuing to include non-thesis track master’s students in these classes.
Program Overview and Rating

The goals of the College of Mass Communication’s doctoral program are clear and center on preparing students to enter the mass communications professions as researchers and academics.

The program’s strategic plan tracks with its overview and its vision statement and goals are appropriate given it has only been in existence since 2005.

One of the college’s objectives is to double its graduate student population by 2020. Its strategy for achieving this objective is to increase the number of students enrolled in graduate programs by 5% per year. The number of master’s students enrolled in the college decreased from 29 in 2007-2008 to 15 in 2008-2009 although the program added six students in 2009-2010. The college fared better with doctoral students which grew from 16 in 2007-2008 to 21 in 2008-2009, an increase of 24%, and to 24 in 2009-2010 an increase of 14%. Numbers for the current academic year were not provided. The college administration indicated that it would like to have 30 doctoral students enrolled at any given time. If it is able to grow the program at a rate comparable to that of the first six years, the college will likely reach that target in the next year or so.

The college administration attributed the decrease in the number of master’s students to the virtual elimination of graduate assistantships for this group as the college redirected its resources to funding doctoral students.

The college has proposed a full-time professional master’s program that will enable students to complete their degrees in 12 months. This type of program tends to be popular and will help the college grow its graduate student population. Before launching this program, the college needs to have the resources necessary to offer sufficient classes so that students can, indeed, complete their degrees in a timely manner. While it is likely the program will enable the college to increase its numbers of master’ students, integrating these students with doctoral and thesis-track master’s students creates curricular issues.

Another of the college’s objectives was to attract and retain “only the most qualified and diverse faculty members to fill tenure-track positions, and the most qualified and diverse people to fill staff and instructor positions. The college has taken advantage of retirements and other openings to hire several assistant professors who have active research programs. Seven of these faculty members were hired in 2009 and seven others have been hired since 2006. Details on the ethnicity of the faculty were not provided, but it appears three of the newly hired assistant professors are women and one is an Asian male. Although the college has done a good job of hiring well-qualified assistant professors, it needs to strengthen its performance with respect to recruiting women and persons of color.
Appropriately, among the college’s objectives is to increase by 10% in each of the next five years, the number of research proposals submitted by its faculty, to build a collaborative research atmosphere within the college and increase by $2 million its planned gifts.

In 2007 faculty members of the college were Co-PIs on one proposal that was successfully funded. The number of submitted proposals grew to 12 in 2008, three of which were funded and in 2009 college faculty submitted 7 research proposals, two of which were funded. With $20,000 of support from the provost’s office in each of the next two years and with $5,000 in start-up research money for junior faculty, it is likely the number of grants submitted and funded will grow over the next five years.

The graduate faculty appears to be collegial and cohesive characteristics that bode well for the creation of a collaborative research atmosphere. Additionally, a review of the faculty vitae shows the faculty have a track record of co-authorship with each other as well as with doctoral students and have worked together on grants.

In 2009, the college received two endowments for graduate students; one for $100,000 that was matched 50% by the university and a second for $1 million which will provide upwards of $50,000 each year for scholarships. With these two gifts, the college has made significant progress toward its goal of increasing its endowment by $2 million and setting aside some of these scholarships for master’s students will likely help with recruitment efforts.

With respect to several of the other goals and objectives, the review team was not provided with sufficient information to determine the college’s progress toward reaching those goals.

Rating: B
Faculty Productivity

According to the data provided in the self-study, the College of Mass Communications had 25 tenure-track and 20 non-tenure –track faculty in the 2009-2010 academic year. However, the listing of the faculty members shows 23 tenure-track faculty and six non-tenure track faculty currently on staff. The discrepancy is not explained. Of the tenure-track faculty, two are professors, ten are associate professors and eleven are assistant professors.

There were problems with several of the data provided in Chapter 3: Faculty of the self-study. The source was not listed for the “Comparison of Full-time Faculty” table and the college noted the data provided for it were incorrect. It noted, “in 09/10, the college employed 29 tenured/tenure track faculty, 5 non-tenure track faculty and 15 GPTIs.” However, as noted above, the list of full-time faculty includes only 23 on the tenure track, but six non-tenure track faculty.

As noted earlier, the college has hired numerous assistant professors over the last two years and many of them, as well as the college’s tenured faculty are productive researchers. They have published articles in refereed journals, written textbooks and presented juried papers at conferences. In fact, much of the research activity of the faculty appears to center on conference presentations. The summary of refereed publications and creative activities provided on page 23 of the self-study show the faculty publishing 31 articles and abstracts, four book chapters and 38 conference papers in 2009. Although that is a decrease in the number of overall publications as compared to 2008 when the college’s faculty presented 56 conference papers and wrote five books or book chapters, the number of refereed articles tripled.

The self-study also included a table on the “Academic Analytic Doctoral Programs in Mass Communications Ratings.” Although 26 schools were used in the comparison, data only on two—Florida State and the University of Oregon were provided. When asked, the college provided a list of all 26, but did not provide the data for any of the other 23 schools. The college’s faculty appears to compare favorably to the faculties at Florida State and Oregon. It is not clear whether that is also the case with the other 23 schools.

Because some of the vitae do not list the dates of the publications, it is difficult to ascertain the productivity of some individual faculty members. It is not clear whether it is a university or college norm to not include this information.

The vitae also did not include entries on awards and service, making it difficult to assess those areas. The self-study did, however, include a chart on faculty service on graduate committees, both in and outside of the college and it indicates only a handful of the tenure-track faculty actively serve on these committees. Two faculty members have served on or chaired 13 and 18 master’s and doctoral committees respectively. This is largely due to the unusually high number of junior faculty hired by the college in the last two years and is expected to even out over time.
The self-study also provided information on the number of leadership positions held by the college’s faculty. Although no comparison to other units at the university or within the field was provided, it appears the college’s faculty are active in professional organizations. Seven are editors or on the editorial boards of publications, four are on executive boards or are officers in national organizations and 18 sit on various committees.

It wasn’t clear from the self-study how faculty workload is determined, nor what the numbers mean. The workload within the college is the same as within its departments and slightly below that of the university. When asked for comparable data from other mass communication colleges regarding faculty workload, the college administration was unable to provide those data. It was noted that one of the college’s peer institutions has twice the number of faculty, but a comparable number of students. It also was noted the college’s faculty is more productive on average that its peers. How that comparison was made is unclear.

Rating: C (because of the inconsistencies and therefore unreliability of the data provided.)
Quality and Quantity of Graduate Students and Graduates

The program’s students and its record of placing its graduates are its primary strengths. This is largely the result of the college’s strategic approach to admissions and its commitment to ensuring its students are not only able, but also strongly encouraged to complete their degrees in three years. Clearly, the college’s administration and its faculty were committed from the outset to building a strong Ph.D. program.

Recognizing the importance of having the first graduates of its doctoral program be well-trained researchers with solid teaching experience, the college’s doctoral admissions committee has been judicious in selecting the members of its first several cohorts. Typically, the college admits about 50% of its master’s and doctoral applicants. Since 2005, the yield of admitted to enrolled students has varied from 37 to 50% with just under 44% enrolling on average.

About half of the applicants, 60% of those admitted and anywhere from 30 to 75% of those who enroll in the college’s graduate programs as new students each year are White. Non-residents are a separate classification. Since 2005, an almost equal number of male and female students have applied, been admitted and enrolled. The exceptions are 2006 and 2008 when twice as many women as men were admitted and 2007 when almost three times as many women as men enrolled. These numbers track with the national trends in journalism and mass communication programs where 64% of master’s students and 56% of doctoral students are women.

In terms of quantitative admissions criteria, the average GRE scores of enrolled graduate students in the College of Mass Communications programs are at the median of other programs at the university and since 2006 the GPA of the college’s doctoral students is, on average, higher than the GPA of its master’s students.

What is particularly impressive about the college’s doctoral program and its students is the time to degree and the placement of its alumni. The faculty and the college administration are deservedly proud of their track record of graduating well-prepared students in an average of 3.1 years. Although it is commonplace for doctoral programs in mass communication to provide three years’ of funding for their top candidates, it is not uncommon for students to take one, two, or more additional years to complete their degrees. The college is to be commended for its ability to provide the guidance, mentoring and support necessary for its students to complete their degrees in such a timely manner and to secure solid tenure-track positions at well-regarded institutions. Eight of the program’s graduates are assistant professors and the ninth is the registrar at Texas Tech.

Having a cadre of alumni at colleges and universities around the country will enable it to recruit viable candidates and further establish its reputation.

The college administration asserts the optimal size of the doctoral program is 30 students, with a cohort of ten students matriculating each year. The program began in 2005 with nine students.
and has grown to 24 students in 2009. Of the 24 students, 14 were classified as Graduate Part-time Instructors (GPTI). These students, who are required to work 20 hours a week, receive stipends of $8000 a semester, fee waivers and scholarships to cover the cost of in-state tuition. They generally teach one class a semester and assist faculty members with their research projects. This mix of teaching and research duties is another of the program’s strengths. It gives doctoral students the type of classroom experience and scholarly training that will make them competitive in the job market and provides quality research assistance to faculty members. Further, the college’s strategic plan includes faculty mentoring and the use of university teaching and learning resources to train GPTIs.

In the summer the college also offers, on a limited basis, research assistantships and the opportunity to teach a class. The college administration acknowledges funding is its greatest challenge and limits its ability to attract as many high quality doctoral students as it would like. This should improve somewhat in fall 2011 as the college will have more than $50,000 in graduate scholarships available each year.

Rating: A
Curriculum and Programs of Study (rating)

According to the self-study, “the Ph.D. in Mass Communications at Texas Tech focuses on the integration of different approaches to the study of mass communications and of all media of mass communications.” Each student is “required to acquire at least some background across the areas of mass communications and some familiarity with all media of Mass Communications.” Those areas are: advertising, electronic media, photography, journalism or public relations. All doctoral students must take 21 hours of core work, six to 15 hours in a minor area outside of the college and 12 hours of dissertation work. Students who enter the program without a master’s degree must take 39 hours of mass communications electives while those with the master’s must complete 12 to 24 hours of mass communications electives. Although the graduate students noted their ability to create individualized programs of study and seemed to be satisfied with the number of electives, the course catalog lists only two courses each in advertising, electronic media and photography and three each in public relations and journalism. There appear to be sufficient course offerings in mass communications, although only a handful are at the 6000-level or above.

The required courses include one in Integrated Communications Campaigns and another in Contemporary Issues in Communication Technology, but none in advertising, electronic media, journalism or photography. Since media psychology is one of the program’s areas of strength, it might consider including an advertising course in the required core. The limited number of courses in all of the areas except for mass communications may make it difficult for students to acquire background across the areas of mass communication. If that is the case, the college and its graduate faculty may want to reconsider that requirement. The college might also want to consider streamlining the number of specializations it offers and focus on the one or two areas in which it has a critical mass of faculty.

Another challenge facing the program is whether to continue to offer both professionally and academically-oriented master’s degrees. The college has proposed an accelerated professional master’s program that would enable students to complete their M.A. in 12 months. It is likely this approach would enable the college to increase its number of master’s students, but integrating these students with academically-oriented master’s and Ph.D. students creates curricular issues.

In fact, one of the doctoral program’s weaknesses is the inclusion of non-thesis master’s students in several of the Ph.D. courses, particularly research methods. In fall 2010, for example, three-quarters of the master’s students enrolled in the class did not pass. Doctoral students expressed their concerns about the rigors of several of their classes noting much of their grades were based on multiple choice tests rather than on papers. They attributed this pedagogical approach to the presence of the professionally-oriented master’s students.
The graduate students were quite complimentary noting the strength of the graduate faculty, the program’s focus on mass communications and students’ ability to create individualized programs of study as more electives are offered. They would like to see more advanced methods courses including advanced data analysis, but these courses may be offered elsewhere in the university and given the program’s limited resources, students might be just as well served by taking these classes in other units.

There was some discussion about when students can begin work on their dissertations with some students suggesting they are discouraged from investigating potential topics until after they have completed their comprehensive exams. The review team was skeptical about whether this actually is the case.

As noted earlier, the average time to degree for the doctoral program’s alumni is 3.1 years. The college administration and faculty are, as they should be, clearly proud of this accomplishment. The graduate students, however, would like the option of extending their time in the program to four years, even without funding in the final year. They indicated that having to complete their comprehensive exams and dissertation within a single academic year does not provide enough time for them to fully internalize what they’re learning, particularly with respect to research.

Now that the doctoral program is established, the college administration and graduate faculty may want to consider allowing students to take more time to complete their degrees.

Rating: B+
Facilities and Resources

The presentation of the data in Chapter 5: Department is troubling. On page 51 under “Department Operating Costs as a Fraction of Employees,” the college notes it “has no idea how these data were calculated,” but surmises the data represent the total for the college’s “M&O, Course Fees, Lab Fees, Technology Fees, and HEAF allocations.” The college questions the data, but does not provide an alternative explanation. The college argues “the cost per SCH for the college is more efficient than most colleges on campus,” but does not provide the data to support its contention.

When asked to address the discrepancies, the college administration responded,

“I believe some of the discrepancies can be attributed to the fact that the COMC offers MA and Ph.D. degrees in Mass Communications despite not offering undergrad degrees under this designation. The COMC undergraduate offerings are in Advertising, Electronic Media, Journalism and Public Relations. Any report run using MCOM majors then was skewed because no undergraduate data exists—as no undergraduate program in MCOM exists.

Also, it is clear that some of the information is simply incorrect. I cannot address why this is the case. The data you provided must have been generated from some university data base. However, the request for the data might have been made inaccurately (mc data rather than data by majors).”

On a positive note, the college has numerous scholarships available to graduate students and annually awards more than 30 that vary from $500 to $3500. It currently occupies about 31,000 square feet of space that includes almost 80 offices, 17 labs and a library. In 2012 it is scheduled to move into renovated space on campus that will enhance its research and teaching capabilities. The college’s eight research labs are impressive and the college has one of only two labs in the country able to do psychophysical research. The labs were cited by the administration, graduate faculty and students as one of the program’s strengths. And the review committee concurs. All three groups seem satisfied with the facilities, but are looking forward to the move to the new space.

The college’s HEAF expenditures have increased dramatically since 2004; from $42,399 to $175,790 in 2009. The lion’s share of these expenditures is related to computer hardware and software which will continue to require significant outlays.

The library resources and information technology appear sufficient to support the program, but that is not the case with staff. Students and faculty indicated the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies was overworked or stretched thin. He shares an administrative assistant with the college’s four department chairs. He also teaches classes, has an active research program, serves on numerous dissertation and thesis committees and has overseen 27 independent studies in the last six years. The dean is aware of the workload and has discussed some alternatives with the
associate dean. Additionally, beginning in fall 2011, he will have a full-time support person and there is the potential for the advising load to be distributed across faculty.

Grade: B