

External Reviewer Report

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Introduction

This report is based on the following:

- COMS self study, 2018
- Site visit April 2 & 3, 2018
- Review of COMS website and curriculum

During my site visit I met with four tenured / tenure-track faculty members (Ed Beebout, chair, Liz Burch, Emily Acosta Lewis and Talena Sanders), two lecturers (Hillary Homzie and Kerry Rego), COMS AC Shelly Stephens, student leaders from all four media outlets, School of Arts & Humanities Dean Thaine Stearns and Sonoma State AVP of Academic Resources Elias Lopez.

The COMS self-study report provides an overview of a remarkably effective, efficient department, despite significant resource-related issues. The COMS faculty clearly have a strong grasp on their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.

I was particularly impressed with the collegiality of the faculty and the respect their students hold for them. This is a small, engaged faculty that prides itself on student success. I enjoyed my time at Sonoma State and have learned a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of my own program through study of theirs. Thank you for this opportunity.

Please note: All observations herein come from the perspective of a professor in the skills- based Department of Journalism and Public Relations at Chico State, which has eight full- time faculty members and 275 majors and minors. We also teach 9 to 12 sections of the GE A2 foundation course, along with four other GE classes each semester. Our program is separate from Communication Studies, which teaches all A1 foundation courses, and Media Arts, Design & Technology, which houses broadcasting, media criticism and graphic design.

Rather than summarizing parts of the well-structured and comprehensive COMS self-study report, I will focus my recommendations across seven areas:

- I. Resources and the Addition of GE A1**
- II. Faculty Professional Development & Program Representation**
- III. Curriculum Review & Student Perspectives**
- IV. Diversity & Inclusion**
- V. Internship Supervision & Academic Advising**
- VI. Support of and Dedicated Space for Media Outlets**
- VII. Directions for the Future**

I. Resources and the Addition of GE A1

Participating in GE A1 is mentioned as a *possibility* in the COMS self-study report, including the addition of two oral communication sections – 50 seats – in the 2019-2020 academic year. At this point COMS has submitted a course proposal to teach one major- centric section of the A1 course. The COMS report points to the A1 participation as a choice that the department will make, based on “a sufficient commitment of support and funding from the university that protects both the media-based focus of COMS and the education experience of students within the major.”

My conversations with Dean Stearns and AVP Lopez, however, indicate the *probability* that COMS will be teaching 8 to 10 sections of the course *per semester* beginning in fall 2019, to meet the A1 needs of the entire university and bring Sonoma State into compliance with [CSU EO 1100](#).

From an FTE perspective, this would be a boon to the department and school. COMS FTES was roughly 190 during the 2016-2017 academic year. Adding 8 to 10 sections of an A1 speech course in the 2019-2020 academic year would likely push COMS toward 300 FTES per academic year.

That said, the increase would only be possible if the program could mount the A1 courses in addition to its current offerings. If existing courses must be cut to staff the university- wide need for A1 courses, then COMS FTES would stagnate and degree progress would inevitably be slowed for COMS majors. As one of the largest majors at the university, the impact could be significant.

From a funding perspective, COMS absorbing A1 instruction would be a burden to both the department and school, as 25-student lower-division GE courses are expensive to teach – particularly if tenured / tenure-track faculty must be placed in the A1 classroom. With current staffing and barring a resource commitment from the university, that outcome is likely and would significantly burden and reshape the department.

COMS currently has five tenured / tenure-track faculty members and one FERP participant, which is minimal, at best, for a university program with 380 majors. Student- faculty ratio alone indicates a strong need for at least one new faculty member to deliver instruction in the major. That addition would maintain the status quo, not allow this large, successful program to progress and innovate.

It’s also important to note that COMS is not a traditional communication studies program with an integrated speech com component; it effectively is a journalism and PR program with communications in its name. Faculty members are largely focused on teaching applied skills for Web and print journalism, public relations, and radio, audio and video production, with related theory components in media criticism, ethics, and law. Between teaching and advising – both academic advising and advising four media outlets – the present faculty is spread very thin.

In a perfect world, COMS would be allocated two hires: One to focus exclusively on teaching in the major and one to plan, coordinate, staff, and teach sections of the A1 foundation course. Both represent immediate needs. A tenure-track hire that is not focused on A1 will handicap the program as it attempts to meet the needs of the entire university; a hire that brings primarily speech communication expertise to COMS will add little to the department's skills-focused base.

There's an additional ripple here, which is the immediate need for COMS to hire a new adviser to the Sonoma State Star newspaper. Paul Gullixson has advised the Star for the past five years as a side gig to his job as editorial director for The Press Democrat in Santa Rosa. He now has left the newspaper and started a new job at Sonoma State, which precludes his participation with the student publication.

Given the pressing need to add both a news adviser and someone to coordinate the GE A1 course, I suggest that COMS be provided the resources to make a full-time hire in the fall of 2018. Someone who is more of a professional-in-residence than a tenure-track faculty member might best serve the program's present needs. Ideally this person would have extensive, current newsroom experience, as well as a master's degree from a speech com-focused program. This is a realistic expectation, as current media turmoil has pushed many journalists toward academia. This person's explicit assignment could be teaching at least one of the initial A1 sections that will be offered in the 2018-2019 academic year, advising the Star, staffing and coordinating the new A1 program, and academic advising.

A professional-in-residence hire does not preclude a tenure-track hire, search for which could be held in 2018-2019 and the successful candidate could start in fall 2019. COMS clearly has significant need for a hire to start in fall 2018 and the above plan supports that. I do recommend that a solid, contemporary media skills background be included as a job requirement with both hires for reasons explained in the following section.

II. Faculty Professional Development & Program Representation

One of the primary challenges of a media studies program is the rapid and continuous change in media industries. Much of this is driven by technological innovation and corporate ownership, which have effectively eroded the traditional media business model. As a result, it is critical that students leaving COMS are well prepared for the industries they will enter. Students must have a strong enough foundational skill set to allow them to be creative, flexible, adaptable, and resilient in the face of rapid technological and social change.

The information under the COMS mission statement online points to faculty professional development as a priority:

The COMS Department strives to improve faculty teaching and training by:

- Supporting faculty who adopt and learn new technologies.
- Encouraging faculty to teach new classes and to keep pace with changes in the communications media field.
- Sending faculty members to conferences, festivals and workshops.
- Hiring faculty members who work in the communications industries.
- Rewarding research, scholarship and creative projects.

The faculty I met with pointed to the program's greatest need as more faculty to teach and advise, but excessive class sizes for skills classes and lagging technology skills also were clear themes.

Students echoed the latter theme, noting that most faculty are not up-to-date with industry standards or emerging technologies. For example, the Star remains a print-centric, broadsheet, weekly publication in a world that long ago embraced smaller page sizes and the daily digital. The editor-in-chief said she viewed the online edition as a burden, as she is the only person who posts to it. Star staffers do not use social media to promote stories and breaking news. The Star, while a quality publication that showcases strong work, seems a bit stuck in 2008.

Students said they did not feel prepared for industry demands because they have not been focused on foundational industry skills, such as social media management, basic coding, copyediting, visual presentation, photography, strategic communication, and entrepreneurship. The students are not required to learn foundational media skills, such as adhering to Associated Press Style. Recent alumni have shared with students that their core skill sets were lacking when they went on the job market.

In short, faculty professional development does not appear to have been responsive to industry trends and needs. Part of the problem returns to resource allocation: Faculty frequently teach year-round because they must – the cost of living in the area renders academic year pay inadequate. This need for 12-month teaching means that faculty cannot use traditional academic “down time” – winter and summer breaks – to refresh their skills and engage in research regarding contemporary industry practices.

Despite this clear catch-22, I strongly recommend that COMS faculty pursue skills-based training when ever and how ever it may be possible. There are many nationally recognized training programs that would be of clear benefit, including:

- [Educator Fellowship Program](#) from The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations
- BorderZine / [Dow Jones News Fund Multimedia Training Academy](#) at the University of Texas at El Paso
- The Poynter Institute, [Teachapalooza: Front-Edge Teaching Tools for College Educators](#)
- [The Social Shake Up](#)

Each of the preceding requires either a substantial commitment of time or professional development funding, but a faculty skills refresh also could be as simple as:

- Signing up for Poynter's [Digital Tools Newsletter](#),
- Taking online courses and webinars through [Poynter. News University](#), and/or
- Engaging with the rich range of skills modules available through [Lynda.com](#).

I also recommend that COMS begin to model professional social media engagement as a program, including posting student announcements and job, internship, and scholarship opportunities online through Facebook, Twitter, and/or LinkedIn, rather than on a bulletin board outside faculty offices.

To be relevant, the program must reach its students where they are, using the technology used by both students and professionals in the industries where students hope to land jobs. The COMS website also could use review, regardless of the status of Sonoma State's content management system. While the latter is completely out of the department's control, COMS can and should model clean, professional content for prospective and current students.

At present there are numerous typos and grammatical errors on the site, as well as the off-putting notification that "THE COMS MAJOR IS Currently CLOSED" under "Change of Major." Surely it's possible to offer a more welcoming explanation of impactation.

That said, the overall information provided on the website is solid, with the Top 10 Tips and alumni jobs section being notable strengths.

III. Curriculum Review & Student Perspectives

Students are required to take only one skills course in preparation for 12 units of experiential learning in journalism, broadcasting, and public relations. A communication-centric core underpins this hands-on work, requiring an introductory communication course (COMS 200), a communication theory-centered media criticism course (COMS 202), and a traditional social science communication theory and research course (COMS 301). A combined media ethics and law class (COMS 302), also is required, as is a senior seminar (COMS 402), which appears to be project-based media analysis. Students must take an additional two elective courses, which may be another internship, more time on media outlets, or any course in or out of the program.

The concern here is that students may graduate with neither a rigorous communication studies education, nor a deep bench of media skills built up through foundational skills classes. For example, a research course that focuses on social science research methods does not teach students how to measure media reach or effectiveness, nor does it channel student knowledge toward social media analytics and core concepts, such as SWOT analysis and the PESO model.

Students appear to be picking up most of their applied skills during the required two courses working for any of the COMS four media outlets, rather than practicing them in classes and applying them in the experiential learning labs. This somewhat contradicts the program's aim of eliminating industry-focused silos and mirroring industry needs. Students tend to gravitate toward particular outlets and stay there, as the outlets today functionally act as applied skills classrooms.

This means that the advisers are not advising student-run outlets, but teaching foundational skills in settings that have an excessive number of students for skills-intensive teaching.

Significantly, the program's dedicated skills classes are capped at 25 students each, while the media outlets may have 30 to 50 students enrolled each semester. For example, students reported that faculty routinely attempt to teach video production to 35 students using the one fully functional computer¹ in Studio Blue, and photos of the student staff of Primitivo PR showed 30-40 students enrolled per semester. In order to be maximally effective, skills classes need to have hands-on student access to appropriate technology *and* a lower student-teacher ratio.

As the self-study report indicates, there is a need for curriculum revision based on the department's mission, goals, and strategic plan. The program has a broad range of theory and skills classes, but depth in either area appears to be lacking. Given the strength and success of the four student media outlets, it seems prudent to recommend that the program enhance its skills and technology offerings to ensure majors have the tools they need in a competitive job market.

Program direction is, of course, up to the COMS faculty and should be informed by alumni success in industry and student needs for the job market.

At Chico State the growth trends have all pointed toward more technology and a stronger skill set. The two applied skills programs in the School of Communication cover journalism, public relations, broadcasting, media technology, and graphic design, with a combined enrollment of more than 650 majors and minors.

The theory-focused communication studies program, which mounts all A1 courses for the Chico State GE, has 350 majors and minors. Journalism and Public Relations has seen slight a slight increase in enrollment of majors over the past five years; Media Arts, Design & Technology has experienced slight decline; and Communication Studies has seen a slight increase, notably from students who want to major in journalism but are concerned about or discouraged from having a journalism degree. Many of those students minor in journalism.

I must confess some envy that Sonoma State's program has the attractive title of Communication & Media Studies, which allows students to gain the valuable skill set of interviewing, information gathering, writing, editing, and presentation without the stigma of being attached to a declining industry. As we like to point out, it's the in-demand skill set that gets our grads jobs, regardless of industry.

IV. Diversity & Inclusion

The self-study report points to a lack of diversity among students, but there appear to be some systemic issues that prevent the program from becoming more diverse. Chief among them is impaction, with COMS being one of 13 programs at Sonoma State listed as impacted.²

¹ Note: There are five iMacs in Studio Blue. One is a 27-inch dinosaur that would not be able to meet the demands of contemporary video editing. The students indicated that others are very slow and that only one really is reliable for their work.

² <https://web.sonoma.edu/advising/impacted>

COMS has been designated with program-level impactation for more than 20 years and the faculty accept that status as a given. The general perception seemed to be that impactation is a good thing, as it allows the program to be selective in accepting transfer students and those changing majors within Sonoma State. Impactation thus provides an air of exclusivity to the major.

A genuine desire to diversify a program must take into account the needs of first- generation, lower-income, under-represented minority students, many of whom are starting at community colleges to mitigate the cost of a four-year degree. I would argue that the exclusive nature of impactation runs counter to Sonoma State’s Strategic Plan, which includes diversity and *inclusion*. COMS has one of the highest GPA requirements for transfer students, which range from 2.0 to 3.0 for impacted programs at Sonoma State.

According to the COMS self-study, more than half of the program’s students are transfers (55.2%), with 35.7% transferring from another major and 19.5% transferring from outside the university. The high number of transfers from within the university is somewhat indicative of a “found” major, while the lower external transfer rate may reflect the effects of impactation and the selectivity it affords. Correspondingly, the self- study indicates that the program’s average GPA has risen by .22 points in the past nine years. It would be interesting to dig into the data to discover which demographics are seeing the greatest increase.

The COMS self-study points to a significant growth in URM students – particularly Hispanic students (from 14.37% in 2008 to 24.62% in 2017) – in the program since its last review. While this is undoubtedly true, data available on the GI 2025 Student Success Dashboard shows a bit of stagnation / decline in that trend.

Year	Hispanic %	URM % ³
2017	22	25
2016	21	24
2015	24	27
2014	22	25
2013	24	27
2012	22	26
2011	23	26

³Source: California State University Student Success Dashboard, GI 2025

Beyond the observation that impaction may exclude transfer students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there's a notable achievement gap between URM and non-URM students in COMS 160A and 160B, the two-semester Humanities Learning Community required of all first-year students. In fact, the achievement gap is significantly higher in those two courses than in any other course in the major. These two courses have both the largest achievement gaps and largest enrollments of the program.⁴

Course Name Code	Achievement Gaps
Humanities Learning Community COMS160A	0.45 Course GPA Gap 197 Students
Humanities Learning Community COMS160B	0.36 Course GPA Gap 185 Students
Public Relations COMS240	0.23 Course GPA Gap 181 Students
Newspaper Wrtnng and Edtng(Star) COMS368	0.16 Course GPA Gap 378 Students

The achievement gap in COMS 160A & B would be a logical place for the program to focus immediate assessment efforts, as baseline data exists. I suggest that the faculty review current course structure and implement high-impact practices that might close the gap. It's a great opportunity to increase student success.

The four-year graduation rate for COMS also has declined since the last review, from 47% for the 2008 cohort to 43% with the 2013 cohort.⁵

I don't pretend to have solutions to these issues or even to declare them confidently as issues; I share the data points only to draw attention to them so they may be helpful to COMS faculty and Sonoma State administration as they pursue increased diversity and inclusion.

V. Internship Supervision & Academic Advising

COMS requires that each student in the major complete an external, supervised, applied skills internship. Hillary Homzie, a part-time lecturer, supervises 80-plus students per semester who are completing internships for the School of Arts & Humanities. She offers student orientation, an initial workshop and meets individually with students enrolled in COMS 499, which is the department's internship class.

Homzie appears to be an enthusiastic, engaged internship supervisor, but she has a substantial internship supervision load for a *one-course* assignment. Homzie seems dedicated to placing students in internships that have a strong learning / training component.

⁴ Source: California State University Student Success Dashboard, GI 2025 – Course GPA Achievement Gaps for All Freshman, Transfer, and Graduate Students

⁵ Source: California State University Student Success Dashboard, GI 2025 – What are their academic outcomes?

This requires substantial effort at vetting supervisors and internship locations. That said, the sheer number of students makes it unlikely that the school's internship supervisor is able to meet the requirements of [CSU EO 1064](#), which establishes guidelines for internship programs.

While it seems efficient to have one person supervising internships across the School of Arts & Humanities, the present workload is excessive for a single person. I recommend that sections of internship advising be capped at no more than 45 students to allow ample internship program planning, site assessment, orientation, and annual review.

Academic advising is a program strength, one the students said they greatly appreciate. The students I met clearly like and trust their faculty advisers. Currently four tenured / tenure-track faculty members advise all COMS students, with an advising load of approximately 91 students per person. That number will dip to the low 70s when the department's most recent hire begins advising in fall 2018. Should the department get a professional-in-residence, the advising load would dip to a still-high, but more manageable, 60 students per adviser.

Coming from a program that has mandatory advising for every student, every semester, I have strong appreciation for the importance and burden of major advising. The upside is a strong four-year graduation rate; the downside is intensive advising on top of teaching, student media supervision, research, professional development, and service obligations. To be clear, it is not advising that overwhelms this faculty – it is the wide-ranging obligations that must be met by a small faculty with a large number of majors.

COMS does not require advising, but strongly recommends that students see a major adviser each semester prior to registering for classes. There is clear tension for COMS faculty with the school and university over the department's emphasis on major advising, which necessarily includes some GE advising. The School of Arts & Humanities has a GE adviser to work with students from all programs, but if all students went to that person for GE advising, the staff member would be quickly overwhelmed.

AVP Lopez said that Sonoma State is in the process of creating a dedicated academic advising center to cover the entire campus. This is a commendable move; general advisers often are responsible for helping students choose not only classes, but choose majors. This does not take away the need for major advisers, however. Faculty advisers are a hallmark of a high-touch, high-impact major and should be encouraged as work that contributes to student success.

VI. Support of and Dedicated Space for Media Outlets

The four student media outlets – Studio Blue, the Sonoma State Star, Primitivo PR, and KSUN – are a great strength of COMS. They are points of pride for the program, the university's face to students and prospective students, and an anchor for alumni outreach. Studio Blue, the Star and KSUN each have been active parts of campus life for 30 to 40 years. Primitivo PR is a relative newcomer, but has tremendous potential and is one of only about 30 student-managed PR agencies across the nation.

COMS Chair Ed Beebout provided me the proposal for a campus media center he submitted to AVP Lopez and Dean Stearns in March. I recommend that the proposal be an addendum to the self-study report, as it makes important recommendations for the future of the program.

Despite the number of COMS majors and success of its studio outlets, they clearly lack stability in either funding or space allocation. Primitivo has been moved in the past year and there seems some uncertainty as to the future of the Star in Salazar Hall. The students I met with expressed concern that the media outlets do not have strong administrative support for the future, despite their relatively high visibility and campus impact.

The Star's current space in Salazar Hall appears to be in some jeopardy because it is not staffed throughout the workday. The nature of student newsrooms is that the students work off-hours on a rolling schedule, particularly when the focus is a weekly newspaper. The cycle tends to be one of feast – everyone working on deadline to get the paper out – or famine – no one in the newsroom. If the Star shifted from a dated, print-centric model to a more industry-reflective daily digital schedule, the space undoubtedly would have more consistent use.

Primitivo PR's current space in the library is a tight fit for the spacious workstations, nearly new iMacs, and conference table. An ideal setting would allow some separation between the workspace and where client meetings are held. When I visited Primitivo PR on a late Monday afternoon the space was completely empty and the student had some trouble finding someone to give us access. That indicates to me that the students are not being encouraged to take ownership of the new space; it simply feels temporary.

Studio Blue is the most interesting mix of state-of-the-industry and anachronistic TV newsroom from the '80s. While a handful of iMacs were visible, the students told me that only one is fully functional. The workspaces are crowded with old equipment, surrounding the new LED lighting system and blue screen. Studio Blue clearly will be moving in the near future to make way for the renovation of Stevenson Hall. This is unfortunate, as the space has many interesting possibilities. It might make sense, for example, for KSUN to share the studio.

COMS has requested that Sonoma State allocate space for a single media center to work as a hub for all four outlets. A model to consider might be the consolidation of all media outlets at Oregon State University into the [Orange Media Network](#), which brought the student newspaper, radio and TV stations, lifestyle and fashion magazines, and literary and arts journal together in one space. The media hub is not focused only on communications majors, but is a multidisciplinary network.

COMS could do something similar, which would allow the program to pursue one set of state-of-the-industry equipment, rather than a mishmash of technology and resources spread across four media outlets.

I strongly recommend that students be allowed to participate in the planning process for whatever lies ahead. The students I met with noted that at one point there was a board that included students from Studio Blue, the Star, Primitivo PR, and KSUN. This allowed them to support each other's efforts and find common points for collaboration. They said it was enthusiastically supported *in concept* by the faculty, who praised the students empowering themselves. The students felt they needed more faculty support, however.

VII. Directions for the Future

A review of key take-aways from the preceding sections:

I. Resources and the Addition of GE A1

It appears inevitable that COMS will be taking on all sections of Sonoma State's GE A1 course. This isn't in itself a bad thing. In fact, it presents many interesting opportunities for the program, given adequate support and resources. Without thought and planning, however, the A1 implementation could be disastrous for both COMS and Sonoma State. I recommend that the university support an immediate hire to guide A1 course development, including methods of assessment. If this person can also teach and advise the Sonoma State Star, it would be a win-win for university and department.

II. Faculty Professional Development & Program Representation

Support, encourage, and reward faculty for professional skills development and curriculum innovation. Update the department website and model professional social media engagement.

III. Curriculum Review & Student Perspectives

Review the COMS curriculum, particularly how and where foundational media skills are taught. Find out what alumni are doing with their degrees, what current students want to do with their degrees, and what skills industry professionals find vital. Revise the curriculum accordingly.

IV. Diversity & Inclusion

Remove barriers to diversity and inclusion. This might include finding ways to end the program's long-standing impaction.

V. Internship Supervision & Academic Advising

Reduce the supervision load for the school's internship coordinator. Supervising 80 students a semester as a one-class assignment sidesteps the intent of EO 1064 and puts student interns at risk.

VI. Support of and Dedicated Space for Media Outlets

Bring the media outlets together. This does not preclude the outlets from having their individual identities, but it's worth finding out what student leaders can do when they're provided a stable space to explore multimedia convergence.

Finally, many of the pieces are in place for COMS to seek accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, which holds its programs to nine standards of excellence. ACEJMC values faculty professional development, curriculum

innovation, diversity and inclusion, and assessment – all things the COMS self-study points to as areas for growth and improvement.

With Sonoma State's most recent WASC accrediting cycle completed, the university undoubtedly is looking toward improvements for the next review. ACEJMC accreditation of COMS is certainly an idea worth exploring.

Respectfully submitted,
Susan Wiesinger, April
2018