Dear Dr. Miller:

We, the graduate faculty of the Communication Studies department, appreciate the opportunity to respond to the five-year review of our graduate program that took place during the 2009-2010 academic year. Our department exhibits many strengths. One is what the review committee recognized as a clear dedication and commitment to the success of our students. Our faculty members work closely with students in the supervision of projects, direction of theses, and publication of articles and book chapters. Another major strength is that a significant number of our graduate students are well-prepared when they enter highly ranked Ph.D. programs in communication and related disciplines. An additional strength identified by the committee is that we have a strong, coherent vision for our department, and that we clearly are in line with the university’s overall mission to achieve research university status.

As with every program, Communication Studies has weaknesses that it continually works to overcome. With the exception of the current academic year, our graduate enrollments have declined in recent years. More specifically, our department experienced a significant drop between 2007 and 2009. This also led to a decline in enrollments in our core courses. Also, the average GRE scores of entering graduate students have slightly declined. Despite the budget cut that we recently underwent, as well as future cuts, we are currently attending to these weaknesses by enhancing our recruiting efforts as well as seeking opportunities and resources that can help us bring more revenue into our department (to be addressed below). In addition to enrollment declines, our department has had to work with the lack of physical space, and recent cuts to our operational budget have made it difficult to maintain equipment as well as obtain up-to-date technology that we need to teach our classes and conduct our research.

In light of the weaknesses highlighted in the five-year review, there are many opportunities that our department plans to exploit in the coming years. First, our department has room to grow in terms of adding more tenure-track lines, specifically those occupied by associate- or full-professor individuals. Second, our department is in a good position to reexamine or reinforce some or all of our admission requirements. For instance, our in-house assessment revealed that incoming students achieving a combined verbal and quantitative GRE score below 800 usually struggle to complete the program, if they do complete it at all. Although we cannot legally use the GRE as the sole decision-making criteria, we can encourage incoming students to retake the GRE if they do not score well. Finally, through our General Education courses, our department
generates many weighted student credit hours for the College of Arts and Sciences. These courses are vital to the role our department plays in revenue generation for the College.

Having outlined the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities that exist in our graduate program, we now highlight significant areas discussed in the five-year review. What follows are action plans to address each area.

To address the recent decline in our graduate enrollment, a high priority for us will be to grow our graduate program:

- One relatively easy and low-cost way to increase recruiting is to have a visible presence at the conferences we attend, and to utilize conference activities to network with potential future graduate students as well as other faculty who may recommend our program to their students. By participating in graduate open houses at the annual meetings of the National Communication Association, Western States Communication Association, International Communication Association, and Southern States Communication Association we will make our program more visible to both potential students and faculty alike. Increased visibility at the Texas State Speech Association annual conference will give us additional exposure to state high schools and colleges. In addition, we can do more to encourage our graduate students to attend and present at these conferences in order to provide our department with more visibility, and to raise the standards of current graduate students. When attending these conferences, current graduate students have an ideal opportunity to attract new students.

- We can work more to capitalize on the success of our debate program, which has achieved two national championships within the last three years. This would include continuing to recruit potential graduate students at debate competitions, asking traveling coaches to have recruiting literature on hand, and potentially adding a component to our graduate program specifically geared toward training future debate coaches.

- Develop the graduate program page on the departmental website. This would be a relatively low-cost way to "market" our program. More information about admission requirements need to be added. We might consider adding a link from the home page to highlight our graduate students and/or our debate team in order to better recruit interested students. In addition, we need the page to discuss the strengths of our MA program and highlight the excellent work of past students.

- Many of our incoming MA students include our undergraduate majors, who comprise some of our most successful students. We will continue to tap into this group by developing strategies specifically targeting the undergraduates, such as publicizing our colloquia and by inviting distinguished alumni and other guest speakers.

- It would be good for us to identify "feeder" schools, for undergrad and graduate students, and target these with information and recruiting strategies. For instance, our self-study revealed that significant numbers of our students in the past have originated from certain schools, such as West Texas A&M University (WTAMU). It should be noted that WTAMU has begun their own Master’s program in recent years; however, students who wish to continue their education at another school would still be ideal to target in our recruiting efforts.
• Work more closely with the Graduate School and continue to be made aware of their resources. Our department needs to provide information to the Graduate School that would help them promote our program through specific funding and funding opportunities.

• Another way to increase our graduate enrollments is to distribute the COMS graduate degree. We need to consider taking the degree to place-bound in-state and out-of-state students. Our degree is a low-cost, high-value product relative to the other MA’s in Texas that would appeal to these students whose work and family lives make it impossible to relocate to Lubbock for a graduate degree.

During the review the department was encouraged to examine our current curriculum and departmental structure. Here are the future directions we are considering:

• Certificate Program: We are considering offering a certificate program (both at the graduate and undergraduate levels) that includes specializations such as Communicating Justice/Justice Studies, Health Communication, Crisis Communication, and Organizational/Business Communication. Our offerings would not be limited to these topics. These and other certificate programs would broaden our appeal to students, and draw graduate students from other departments to enroll in our courses. This option might also be appealing to students who work full-time who want to earn graduate credits, but do not have aspirations of completing a thesis or full MA degree.

• We will continue to evaluate the applied and theoretical goals of our program in terms of its ability to meet the needs of our students. The report notes that of 27 graduates, 8 have gone on for a PhD. If the majority of our graduate students do not have a PhD as their goal, we may consider ways to better meet their needs in terms of helping them to be successful and to graduate in a timely manner. In an effort to meet students' goals, we may also consider developing more applied courses geared toward such areas as education/pedagogy, organizational/business communication, or debate. If such courses cannot be added to our current rotation, we can encourage faculty and instructors to add more applied elements to the courses they already teach. In addition, we should continue to consider if the goals of our graduate program necessitate the writing of a thesis by ALL students, or if we should consider an option between the comprehensive exam and the thesis.

• One way to address student and faculty needs/goals is to evaluate our core courses. Our five core—or required—courses are Communication Theory, Theories of Rhetoric, Qualitative Research, Quantitative Research, and Historical-Critical Methods. The number of "core courses" could be reduced. For example, students might take a general theory course and then have a choice of two of the following: rhetorical theory/methods; qualitative methods; quantitative methods. Reducing the core courses would free faculty to teach more special topics (a desire noted in the report), or to change special topics to more frequently rotated courses (a recommendation in the external report). Reducing the core courses would also help students to select a line of study in which they will thrive more quickly in their course of study. As we consider these decisions, we plan to evaluate what other peer MA programs require of their students in terms core courses.

• We need to reexamine our teaching load, which is currently at 2-2. While productive research faculty may be able to teach no more than two courses in the long semesters,
faculty whose primary role is to teach may need to take on a load that is close to 3-2 or 3-3.

- Our department needs to continue to stress the oral communication service component we provide to the University. One way to do this is to develop capstone courses that place emphasis on the oral component. We can also revise the COMS course descriptions in the catalog to reflect more accurately the oral communication emphasis.

- Our faculty have had many discussions about our program being “generalist.” On the one hand, our generalist approach has appealed to a wide variety of students’ academic interests. However, it is possible that we are hurting ourselves in this time of “cutbacks” and budget reductions. It might be a good time for us to take a streamlining look at our programs, our course inventories, and our tracks (Interpersonal Communication, Corporate/Organizational Communication, Rhetoric and Public Address). We might take a good look at numbers of students who track in certain areas and then put more of our resources in those areas. Our department needs to continue this discussion as to whether we (a) maintain our generalist approach, (b) identify certain tracks to emphasize, or (c) do both.

Our response to the graduate review also considers how our department can align itself with the overall strategic plan of the college and the university in order to attract more funds and resources, as well as fit in with the Responsibility Centered Management model:

- As we continue to apply for and receive grants, we will potentially have the opportunity to fund additional graduate students as Research Assistants. It is important that the Graduate School help us to make this happen as currently our program does not have funding for RA positions, which can benefit students while increasing overall faculty productivity. As we work more closely with students on research, we will continue to increase the quality of students through research, presentations at conferences, publication of manuscripts, and encouraging students to continue on to PhD programs while engaging more on a true graduate student mentoring process.

- In line with Tech’s becoming an emerging research institution, we need to consider raising faculty pay across the board to more equitable standards at state and national levels. In addition, we should continue to pursue and request new faculty lines, to continue to replace those lost to administrative positions.

- Our faculty endeavor to increase the number of external funding proposals we submit by initiating and/or seeking interdisciplinary collaboration. We already enjoy collaborations with colleagues in Mathematics and Statistics, the Health Sciences Center, wind energy, and other departments. We also continue to attend training sessions and workshops on various aspects of the grant writing process, and plan on taking advantage of the interdepartmental networks that provide mentoring and opportunities in grant activity.

Our response to the five-year review of our graduate program constitutes a commitment to address the points of concern identified by the review committee as well as the issues that have already been discussed within our department. As we follow through on these action steps, we are dedicated to the mission of the College of Arts and Sciences and of Texas Tech University as we strive to become an emerging research university. If you have any questions, please contact
Dr. Olaniran (Interim Chair) at b.olaniran@ttu.edu or Dr. Scholl (Interim Associate Chair and Graduate Director) at juliann.scholl@ttu.edu.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Bolanle Olaniran
Interim Chairperson

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Cc: Dean Lawrence Schovance