

NCA

NATIONAL COMMUNICATION
ASSOCIATION

ASSESSING DOCTORAL
PROGRAM QUALITY IN
COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

When seventeen speech teachers formed the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking in 1914, they recognized that alongside their pedagogical pursuits would have to develop a strong and vibrant research trajectory for the new discipline to thrive and achieve academic, institutional legitimacy. Just five years after the founding of the NAATPS, the group's research committee presented a report at the annual convention, arguing that research and scholarly inquiry were important activities, indeed, essential ones, for the scholars of public speaking who had only recently formed their own discipline.

The pursuit of that research agenda depended upon active and growing programs in Speech that offered not just a baccalaureate degree, but that trained future generations of speech teachers and researchers through the granting of graduate degrees. Writing in 1935, Franklin Knower (right) remarked that “during the last fifteen years there has been an almost constant increase in the amount of graduate work carried on in the field of Speech,” and his index of graduate work in the field of speech from 1902 to 1934 demonstrates that growth. Only one doctoral degree in Speech was granted prior to 1926 (Sarah Stinchfield, “The Formulation and Standardization of a Series of Graded Speech Tests,” University of Wisconsin, 1922), but between 1926 and 1934, 42 doctoral degrees in Speech were conferred by colleges and universities in the United States.¹



According to Knower's account, six programs granted all 43 doctoral degrees in Speech between 1902 and 1934—Columbia University, Cornell University, the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, Stanford University, and the University of Wisconsin. Leading the way were Iowa and Wisconsin, with 13 and 15 doctorates respectively.²



The “constant increase” in graduate degrees that Knower identified in 1935 did not slow—by 2011, 651 doctoral degrees were awarded in the Communication Arts & Sciences, according to the National Science Foundation's *Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED)*. Moreover, 93 institutions conferred doctorates in Communication, with the University of Texas, the University of Missouri, and the University of Southern California leading the way.³

As the numbers of doctorates in Communication has grown, and as the number of institutions granting this degree has expanded, demands for assessments of doctoral

¹ Franklin H. Knower, “Graduate Theses—An Index of Graduate Work in the Field of Speech from 1902 to 1934,” *Speech Monographs* 2 (1935): 1-49.

² Knower, “Graduate Theses,” 4.

³ See “A Profile of the Communication Doctorate: The 2011 National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates,” available at www.natcom.org/data. The NSF's Survey includes in the Communication category doctorates granted in Journalism.

program quality have also intensified. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing today, prospective students, higher education administrators, faculty members, and other interested parties press for measures of doctoral program quality and excellence.

This report offers a review and analysis of the historical and contemporary attempts to assess doctoral program quality in Communication. It is meant for prospective students, doctoral program administrators and faculty, and the general NCA membership concerned about the state of doctoral education in Communication. It does not strive to offer a new or improved assessment of doctoral program quality, or a new ranking/rating system of doctoral programs. Rather, this report simply digests and discusses existing efforts by a range of sources to assess the quality of doctoral education in Communication.⁴

Antecedents

As graduate education, and doctoral education in particular, grew and developed in the early 20th century at U.S. colleges and universities, so too did the desire to assess, rate, and rank the programs that provided doctoral education. By all accounts, the first such assessment of doctoral program quality appeared in 1924 and was authored by Raymond Hughes, the 8th president of Iowa State University. Another early study was released by the American Council on Education in 1934 and third by Hayward Keniston in 1957 that limited inclusion to only those programs at institutions that were members of the A.A.U.

Arguably, the first comprehensive, widely distributed study of graduate program quality was released by the American Council on Education (A.C.E.) in 1966. Authored by A.C.E. vice-president Allan Cartter, the study was promoted as the most comprehensive review of graduate education undertaken to that point. The study's questionnaire was sent to 5,367 faculty members, and 80% of those questionnaires were returned, generating a usable sample of 4,008 responses. Cartter's study was decidedly reputational, asking respondents to rate the quality of doctoral program faculty. Disciplines were categorized broadly into general subject headings: Humanities; Social Sciences; Biological Sciences; Physical Sciences; and Engineering. Cartter's study did not include Communication or any similar discipline in its report.⁵

Four years later, A.C.E. released another rating of graduate programs, and included more disciplines. The only new discipline included that was related or close to Communication was Linguistics. The 1970 study generated 6,093 responses, and was essentially a replication of the Cartter study, asking respondents for their assessment of

⁴ For a similar initiative in another discipline, see "A Workshop on Assessing the Quality of Graduate Programs: Report of an ASA Membership Initiative," available at www.amstat.org/misc/AQGPworkshop.pdf.

⁵ Allan M. Cartter, *An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1966). Note also the responses to the Cartter study from sociologists: Dean D. Knudsen & Ted R. Vaughan, "Quality in Graduate Education: A Re-Evaluation of the Rankings of Sociology Departments in the Cartter Report," *The American Sociologist* 4 (1969): 12-19; and Janice M. Beyer & Reuben Snipper, "Objective Versus Subjective Indicators of Quality in Graduate Education," *Sociology of Education* 47 (1974): 541-577.

doctoral program faculty quality as well as the quality of graduate training.⁶

Assessing Doctoral Program Quality in Communication

In their survey of the study of graduate program quality, Daniel DiBiasio and his colleagues at Ohio State concluded that attempts to assess graduate program quality typically fall into one of four categories: reputational studies (relying on expert judgments and informed opinions); productivity studies (measuring faculty output in scholarly publications and the like); correlational studies (demonstrating the relationships that exist between reputation and productivity measures); and multidimensional studies (using multiple indicators to judge quality). All of the existing studies of doctoral program quality in Communication fall into one of these categories.⁷

The first comprehensive attempt to assess the quality of graduate education in Communication was published in 1977 in what was then called the *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin*. Edwards and Barker replicated the procedures used in the A.C.E. studies to assess program quality across a number of sub-areas in Communication and to generate overall rankings and ratings for doctoral programs in the discipline. Their sample of 190 respondents rated and ranked the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin, and Penn State University as the top three overall doctoral programs in the country.⁸



For several years, studies undertaken by Edwards (left) and Barker (right) offered rankings/ratings of doctoral programs in a number of different areas. These authors replicated their 1976 study two years later for programs in “Speech Communication.”⁹ Six years later, Edwards and Barker authored another study that appeared in ACA’s *Bulletin*, again replicating their earlier attempts to



assess the reputations of doctoral programs across an array of Communication sub-fields.¹⁰ Another five years passed, and Edwards and Barker (working now with Kittie Watson), conducted another reputational study with

⁶ Kenneth D. Roose & Charles J. Andersen, *A Rating of Graduate Programs* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1970).

⁷ Daniel A. DiBiasio, Jean E. Girves, & William Poland, “Assessing Quality in Graduate Programs: An Internal Quality Indicator,” *Research in Higher Education* 16 (1982): 100-101. Specific to Communication, see also Timothy D. Stephen, “Measuring the Reputation and Productivity of Communication Programs,” *Communication Education* 57 (2008): 297-311.

⁸ Renee Edwards & Larry Barker, “A Rating of Doctoral Programs in Speech Communication, 1976,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 20 (1977): 59-69.

⁹ Renee Edwards & Larry Barker, “A Rating of Doctoral Programs in Speech Communication, 1978: Part I,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 30 (1979): 23-34.

¹⁰ Renee Edwards & Larry Barker, “Evaluative Perceptions of Doctoral Programs in Communication, 1982,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 45 (1983): 76-91. A version of this study is also found in J. Renee Edwards & Larry L. Barker, “Perceptions of Highly Regarded Doctoral Programs in Selected Areas of Speech Communication: 1982,” *Communication Education* 32 (1983): 63-68.

different samples.¹¹ These same authors also conducted studies of doctoral program reputations in theatre and mass communication.¹²

Almost eight years after the final Edwards and Barker study, the Speech Communication Association undertook a study, commissioned by the SCA Research Board and carried out by the National Office staff. Noting that “reputational studies by their nature will always be flawed in some manner,” the 1996 SCA study sought to assess the quality of doctoral programs in eight specific research domains, based on responses to a survey. The return rate of the survey was approximately 35%, and the final report detailed the responses from a total of 345 respondents.¹³



Eight years after the 1996 study, the National Communication Association sought again to rank/rate the doctoral programs according to reputation. Spearheaded this time by the NCA Doctoral Education Committee, and led by Thomas Hollihan (left), the 2004 NCA Doctoral Reputational Study ranked and rated dozens of doctoral programs in nine separate sub-categories of Communication. Programs were rated for their overall scholarly quality of program faculty, the program’s effectiveness in educating researchers, and the quality change of the program in the preceding five years.

As the authors of the 2004 study (that is, the 2003-2004 NCA Doctoral Education Committee) reported, there were several limitations to the findings, specifically, the low response rate (33%), the length of the questionnaire (84 pages), the contamination of the study by public discussion of its inherent weaknesses, and the failure of some departments to adequately circulate the questionnaire to all faculty members.



Prominent in the discussion surrounding the 2004 NCA Reputational Study was the anticipation of the impending release of another assessment of doctoral program quality by the National Research Council (NRC). The NRC conducted a multidimensional assessment of doctoral education, published in 1995, but that study did not include Communication. After considerable lobbying and determined advocacy from Communication faculty, the NRC promised to include Communication in their next study. That study, released in 2010, generated more confusion than clarity, but did, nonetheless, rank and rate 83 different doctoral programs in Communication. As Fink, Poole, and Chai concluded in response to the NRC report, there emerged at least

¹¹ See Renee Edwards, Kittie Watson, & Larry L. Barker, “A Rating of Doctoral Programs in Selected Areas of Speech Communication: 1987-1988,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 66 (1988): 23-36. See also Renee Edwards, Kittie W. Watson, and Larry L. Barker, “Highly Regarded Doctoral Programs in Selected Areas of Communication: 1987,” *Communication Education* 37 (1988): 263-269.

¹² See Renee Edwards, Kittie Watson, and Larry L. Barker, “A Rating of Doctoral Programs in Selected Areas of Theatre: 1987-1988,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 67 (1989): 62-73; and Kittie W. Watson, Renee Edwards, and Larry L. Barker, “A Rating of Doctoral Programs in Selected Areas of Mass Communication: 1987-1988,” *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin* 67 (1989): 20-36.

¹³ Speech Communication Association, “A Study of the Reputations of Doctoral Programs in Communication,” 1996. Available at www.natcom.org/data

fourteen specific criticisms about the report and its methodology. Among the more prominent criticisms were the dated nature of the NRC report's data, the reliance of the NRC on a social scientific model of publishing that used only a limited range of outlets to calculate publication productivity and did not include books, and the overall "fuzziness" of the data and the ranges of data reported.¹⁴

Other Measures of Doctoral Program Quality

The 2000s and early 2010s saw a surge of interest in assessing and measuring doctoral program quality, in Communication and in other disciplines. Driven perhaps by such metrics as the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, or the demands of university administrators, or the clamor for public accountability in higher education, more and more efforts were offered during this period to measure and rate/rank graduate programs. Operating alongside the NCA 2004 Study as well as the NRC study, these other initiatives provide a more complete sense of how doctoral programs in Communication are currently measured and assessed.

George Musambira, working with assorted colleagues, has published several productivity studies of Communication programs. In 2000, Musambira authored an analysis of top convention paper productivity from the 1994-1998 conventions of the National Communication Association and the International Communication Association (ICA). Among Ph.D. granting institutions, Musambira found that the University of Texas, Purdue, and Penn State University were the highest ranked programs in top convention paper productivity.¹⁵ Taking a somewhat different tack eight years later, Musambira along with Sally Hastings assessed editorial board membership as a marker of scholarly productivity, finding that Purdue, UCSB, and Penn State University were the most visible doctoral programs on editorial boards of NCA and ICA journals.¹⁶ Another measure of scholarly productivity was published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in both 2007 and listed the top ten programs in a range of disciplines, including Communication. The "Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index" was compiled by a private company (Academic Analytics)—the top ten programs in Communication were, in order, Arizona, UCSB, Pennsylvania, Michigan State, Cornell, Colorado, Maryland, Columbia, Missouri, and Michigan.¹⁷

Kimberly Neuendorf and her colleagues released a study in 2007 that reported on their findings from a reputational study of Communication faculty members and department chairs. As with previous reputational studies, Neuendorf et al.'s suffered from a relatively low response rate (24%). This study also provided two different sets of

¹⁴ Edward L. Fink, Marshall Scott Poole, & Sabine Chai, "Analysis of the NRC Report on Ph.D. Program Quality," *Spectra* 47.2 (2011): 16-19.

¹⁵ George W. Musambira, "Top Convention Paper Productivity in the U.S.: Analysis of National Communication Association (NCA) and International Communication Association (ICA) Awards 1994-1998," *Communication Education* 49 (2000): 284-296.

¹⁶ George W. Musambira & Sally O. Hastings, "Editorial Board Membership as Scholarly Productivity: An Analysis of Selected ICA and NCA Journals 1997-2006," *Review of Communication* 8 (2008): 356-373.

¹⁷ "Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, available at <http://chronicle.com/stats/productivity/page.php?year=2006&primary=10&secondary=79&bycat=Go>

rankings, one derived from a faculty score and one from a subset of Chair scores. Among faculty, the highest ranked doctoral programs were the University of Wisconsin, the University of Texas, and the University of Pennsylvania. Among department chairs, the highest ranked doctoral programs were the University of Texas, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of North Carolina.¹⁸

Mike Allen and his colleagues have reported the results of their productivity studies of doctoral program quality that are based on citation patterns and frequency. One study, appearing in the *Electronic Journal of Communication*, ranks doctoral programs based on the combined number of citations of articles authored by faculty members. The citation data comes from the *Web of Knowledge*—the Thomson-Reuters indexing system. Allen et al., acknowledge that the *Web of Knowledge* is sparse in its journal coverage and is “less comprehensive and inclusive of works across the social sciences and humanities.” Sixty doctoral programs were ranked, with the University of Pennsylvania, UCSB, and Michigan State University have the highest number of citations. Notably, Penn’s number of citations, number of publications, average citations per publication, and average citations per faculty were demonstrably, significantly higher than any other program.¹⁹ Shifting the source of their citation data, Allen et al., produced a study of doctoral programs based on citation information from Google Scholar. The overall number of citations for every program increased with the use of Google Scholar, and the top ranked programs were Ohio State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Illinois.²⁰

Conclusion

From the 1970s until now, scholars and associations alike have sought to measure and assess the quality of doctoral education in Communication as proffered by doctoral granting institutions in the United States. This report has traced the history of efforts to assess doctoral program quality and digested the existing rankings and ratings that are particular to the discipline of Communication.²¹ As indicated here, most such assessment measures are either reputational studies or productivity studies and both approaches entail a series of issues and concerns. Reputational studies are inherently

¹⁸ Kimberly A. Neuendorf, et al., “The View from the Ivory Tower: Evaluating Doctoral Programs in Communication,” *Communication Reports* 20 (2007): 24-41.

¹⁹ Mike Allen, Melissa Maier, & Dennis Grimes, “Evaluating Doctoral Programs in Communication on the Basis of Citations,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 22 (2012).

²⁰ Mike Allen, et al., “Comparing Communication Doctoral Programs, Alumni, and Faculty: The Use of Google Scholar,” *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration* 32 (2013): 55-68. For a discussion of the role of citation patterns, see Tim Levine, “Rankings and Trends in Citations Patterns of Communication Journals,” *Communication Education* 59 (2010): 41-51.

²¹ While generally complete, this report does not include other assessments of doctoral program quality that exist in the literature but that do not provide clear rankings/ratings of doctoral programs. See, for example, George A. Barnett, James A. Danowski, Thomas Hugh Feeley, & Jordan Stalker, “Measuring Quality in Communication Doctoral Education Using Network Analysis of Faculty-Hiring Patterns,” *Journal of Communication* 60 (2010): 388-411; and Timothy D. Stephen, “Clustering Research Activity in Communication Doctoral Programs: Relationship of Publication Productivity and Department Size to Disciplinary Reputation and Prestige,” *Journal of Communication* 59 (2009): 768-787.

difficult to conceptualize and execute. Response rates to such studies are often low and the measurement instruments can be complicated and onerous for the respondent. Who is sampled for reputational analyses and what factors contribute to a program's reputation are persistent issues for reputational studies. Timeliness is also a concern, as program reputations change quickly, faculty members change affiliations, and program offerings vary from time to time. Indeed, for many of these reasons and others, NCA and its Doctoral Education Committee have opted to not replicate the 2004 Reputational Study.

Productivity studies of research output are also complicated. What research is counted, what databases are used, what citations are measured—these are all issues that such studies must grapple with as they proceed to assess doctoral program quality. On a related note, because Communication is a multi-methodological, pluralistic discipline, its scholars conduct and disseminate their research differently and those differences may well involve publication patterns and frequencies as well as citation practices.

Consumers of rankings and ratings of doctoral programs in Communication would be well-advised to consider such limitations and to adapt their expectations about such quality measures accordingly. Whether prospective or current graduate students, faculty members or unit administrators, anyone who attends to assessments of doctoral programs in Communication, or any discipline, should seek out and consult as much information as possible, recognizing that no single assessment or measurement of graduate program quality is definitive and that, in the case of doctoral program quality, more information and more data is better than less.