

A Pedagogy for Developing Senior-Level Communication Advisors: 25 years of a Master of Business Communication Program

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Abstract

Many institutions limit business communication education to interpersonal or organizational communication and managerial writing skills. These courses enhance MBA candidate communication skills, but business school programs that prepare communicators to advise these individuals as future senior leaders remain rare. In contrast, some institutions with graduate communication programs offer graduate degrees in “Integrated Marketing” or “Strategic” communications that have varied infusion of foundational business theory and practice in the curriculum. To expand the circle of influence for professional communicators, programs embedded in business schools are necessary to provide practitioners with true business acumen.

This article presents the Master of Business Communication; a specialized master’s degree at an AACSB accredited institution. Established in 1984, this University of St. Thomas program provides robust graduate business education with a strategic focus that prepares graduate students to become senior level management advisors and leaders for departments responsible for communication with both internal and external audiences.

Introduction

In an educational environment that generally relegates the definition of “business communication” to the development of interpersonal/organizational communication understanding and foundational managerial writing skills, few institutions have managed to greatly expand the circle of influence for the practice of professional business communication. While some courses may be available to enhance the understanding of corporate and marketing communication issues for MBA candidates, few parallel programs exist in business schools that prepare communicators to advise these individuals once they rise to senior leadership. Why? Often because “Communication” is the domain of graduate programs in the arts and sciences, and “Business” that of business schools, leaving “strategy” as a frequent bone of contention.

Russ (2009) recently detailed the status of the “introductory” courses for undergraduate business students, but does not address the graduate level. Meredith (2012, 2009) continues to advocate for deeper engagement of communication strategy into a broader mix of MBA offerings. Again, the practicality of doing this holistically, at both the tactical and strategic level, hinges on mediation or elimination of contention between business and communication schools within institutions.

So what might a business communication graduate program constitute if developed without such contentiousness?

In 1984, the University of St. Thomas (UST) in St. Paul, Minnesota introduced such a program. Originally developed outside of both the university's communication and business schools, the Master of Business Communication (MBC) degree was eventually integrated into the graduate school of business, since the university has never had other graduate communication programs. After much evolution, change and generating nearly 600 degree graduates, the UST MBC program presently provides about 100 students a robust graduate education in business with emphasis on strategic communication. The program aims to develop senior level management advisors and leaders for departments responsible for both internal and external audiences.

While certainly not the only potential model, the MBC curriculum presented below represents a time tested example of a specialized master's program in business communication at an AACSB accredited institution. For instance, in Fall 2012, the Public Relations Society of America enters its pilot academic year of the "MBA Initiative" to incorporate Reputation Management/Public Relations into core and elective MBA curricula, largely based on the guidance of Dr. Paul Argenti of Dartmouth and his definitive text, *Corporate Communication* (2008). In reviewing the proposed curriculum, developed under Argenti's guidance, Opus College of Business faculty at the University of St. Thomas found that the Corporate Communication Management course offered there closely matched Argenti's syllabus. The course has been in place as part of the MBC program since 1988 and available to MBA candidates for nearly a decade.

The assumption of leadership from any graduate program must be that their offering meets some market need. As to the nuances of a communication or business foundation as primary in considering a graduate degree curriculum for business communicators, the bias of the author presented here will be decidedly on the side of business. The intention of this article is to provide some perspective and discussion fodder for those wishing to advance the cause of business communication curricula at their own institutions, and the career success of students who participate in such education.

Context and Program Mission

History

The oral history of the UST MBC degree generally acknowledges the seed of the idea coming from the collaboration of a Monsignor, a lawyer and a prominent local advertising professional. The public face of the MBC at inception belonged to the latter, as James S. Fish became an instructor and dean of the program. Fish assumed this role after serving many years in communication for General Mills, ultimately as senior vice president for corporate communications. In addition to being inducted into the Advertising Hall of Fame of the American Advertising Federation in 1984, according to author Susan Marks (2005), Fish was instrumental in the selection of the original Betty Crocker: "General Mills' James S. Fish, who in 1955 would be elevated to advertising director, was highly involved in the selection process. 'I want to be remembered as the guy who fought for Betty Crocker,' Fish was quoted as saying." It is important to have this context about Fish, as it was his perspective on professional business communication that became manifest in many of the course offerings, that included topics such as direct marketing, advertising planning, and promotions marketing which were ultimately absorbed into the MBA marketing curriculum. Fish expected a level of brand awareness and business savvy from instructors and course content that was directly based on his experience in communication at General Mills.

According to early program documents, “market studies” indicated a local need for graduate level education for professional communicators in corporate settings. As the dean of the fledgling program, Fish wrote in an early newsletter:

The impact of the computer on many aspects of communications has been substantial. These technological factors laid alongside the ever-larger, more complicated organizational structures of business and the non-profit sector have combined to put strains on internal and organizational communications, as well as on the external fields of advertising and public relations. Dialogue with business leaders underlined the need for development of a new breed of manager – one who knows the technologies and skills of business communications, but who also can see the necessary interrelationships of the different communications disciplines (University of St. Thomas [UST], 1985).

While the technologies available to professional communication practitioners continue to evolve, Fish’s underlying concept here that they should be prepared in a graduate program to analyze, understand and leverage those technologies remains a consistent thread in the UST MBC.

During much of its first decade, the MBC program was a stand-alone entity, connected neither to the communication and journalism departments nor to the business school. The curriculum was also much more tactically focused than today, and all of the program courses were unique to the MBC. Even in the 1990s after the degree had been integrated into the college of business, other than sharing some electives, no core courses were shared with the evening MBA program, even though both programs delivered degrees in effectively the same manner to working adults with overlapping course offerings in some areas. As the Opus College of Business advanced toward accreditation by AACSB in recent years, the offering was deeply reconsidered and redressed, now more completely delivering on the business side of the equation.

Mission – University and Program

The mission of the business school at the University of St. Thomas states: “Inspired by Catholic intellectual tradition, the Opus College of Business develops effective, principled business leaders who think globally, act ethically and create enduring value for society.” This foundation cascades down to the UST MBC as: The UST MBC develops effective, principled business communication leaders and advisors to senior management, who think globally, act ethically and counsel organization executives to do likewise in dialogues with stakeholders (UST, 2012).

Current program leadership assumes that most successful professional communicators inside organizations, or as consultants, possess a thorough understanding of the business contexts within which communications efforts occur. The confines of undergraduate communication programs make it difficult to fully prepare an individual to deeply understand the language and theoretical underpinnings of business, in addition to the communication strategies and skills necessary to expertly fulfill organizational goals. Even years of experience as a communications practitioner can leave gaps in understanding the undercurrents of management decision making, and time in the trenches doesn’t address the need for building leadership and management skills.

The most recent phase of curriculum adjustment in 2008 solidified the confluence of student needs/expectations on a tactical level and the faculty opinion that MBC students should be engaged in a

balance of MBA core classes and specialized MBC courses that parallel the MBA path. More detail on what this means in real terms will be provided below.

Students

From the beginning, the MBC degree has attracted a slightly different group than other graduate business degree programs. The most visible difference upon visiting a classroom - eighty percent of MBC students are female. This gender dominance has actually increased since the early years of the program, when only sixty-five percent of students were female.

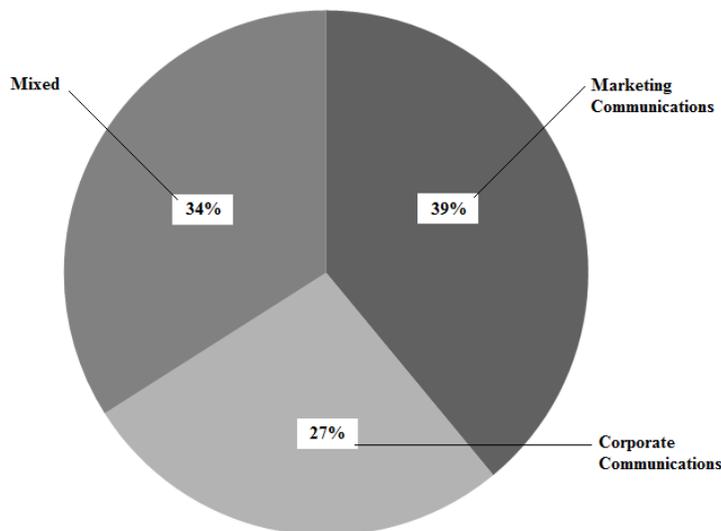
Other demographics closely parallel the university's part-time, evening MBA (Table 1), although anecdotal data suggest that the MBA students are more likely to already be in supervisory positions. Sixty percent of MBC students have no direct reports, while only fifteen percent have more than five people to supervise.

Table 1.
UST MBC Student Demographics

Age:	75% under 35
Gender:	80% female
Length of work Experience:	50% less than 10 years
Employer Reimburses Tuition:	70% yes
Direct Reports:	60% none/25% 1-5/15% over 5
Time to complete Program:	3-7 years (70% < 5 years)

From a current and future career path standpoint, thirty-nine percent of MBC students see themselves as marketing communicators, twenty seven percent as corporate communicators and the balance (34%) identify as a mixture of the two (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Career Path Chart



As might be expected, when considering graduate programs, the factors that most influenced student choice of the MBC Program prove to be:

Location; reputation; curriculum; unique program; and relevance of content to current/future career goals.

However, the most valuable benefits of participating in the MBC Program cited by current students show some evolution to:

For current job -

Networking; relevant/applicable; knowledge broadening; and skills

For career -

Network; credential/proof of capabilities; and key to advancement

Many students and recent alumni focus on the short-term rewards of courses and the program, calling attention to instances of direct application of coursework to current real-time issues on the job, however the MBC curriculum attempts to prepare degree candidates for the longer term. Even though students ask for courses on subjects like "writing for Twitter," faculty understand the importance of providing theory and strategic principles that prepare students for technology developments far in the future (Web "X".0), by application of those tools in the context of Web 2.0 or other current business trends.

Further, all MBC-specific courses infuse consistent threads regarding ethics, strategy, leadership and the context/language of business, in both theoretical and applied perspectives. All of these elements culminate in the research component of the degree capstone course, which requires conducting value-adding research for an employer or other organization's communication issues. This applied research component and other elements of the capstone (described in detail below) provide students with tangible evidence of the value they bring to an organization. While only one potential model, today's MBC curriculum represents a specialized master's program in business communication after many years in the improvement process. Recent survey data indicate that 95% of the 2010 and 2011 graduates seeking new opportunities secured new positions within months of degree completion, a sign of student capability and market acceptance. As of June 2012, the UST MBC has over 550 alumni, of which 170 have completed the degree since 2008.

Faculty and Curriculum

The flexibility offered through a 15-course, part-time/evening format requires a combination of academically qualified full-time faculty and a select cadre of professionally qualified participating adjuncts. The focus on strategic communication as practiced in business also demands that instructors keep pace with the constantly evolving media landscape. At the same time, the curriculum integrates industry-specific communication courses with UST MBA core business courses in financial accounting, economics, management and marketing. In addition, all MBC electives are available to MBA students, increasing the potential for dialogue in the classroom across disciplines of interest, and allowing students from both programs to share in considering solutions for real world problems of classmates.

Core Curriculum

Of the 45-credit curriculum (see Table 2), the core required courses fall into three categories: shared, parallel and unique. Every MBC student takes the same financial accounting, marketing management and organizational behavior courses as the MBAs. These courses (and all electives) are shared between the programs, although the percentage of one group or the other in a classroom varies widely depending on the course subject. This represents an important distinction between the current MBC curriculum and its original model, which was separate from the business school (as are most graduate communication programs). This common foundation assures that MBC students not only understand the theory and practice, but have weathered the same academic rigors as any other graduate student in the Opus College of Business.

Parallel courses, such as Communication Law, begin with the same business foundation as the MBA counterpart (i.e. Business Law). However, that foundation leads to significant course focus on issues unique to the practice of communication. In the law, this means time spent examining intellectual property, unfair trade practices and so on – elements of interest to many MBAs as well, but imperative for those being groomed to fill leadership in communication roles. The MBC statistics requirements lean toward calculations that support research rather than financial modeling, and the economics course applies more time at the macro rather than the micro level.

Unique to the MBC requirements is Communication Research. This course provides the foundation for the research component of the “capstone” course and prepares students for the wide variety of research challenges and methods they may encounter during a career developing and leading campaigns and plans for organizations.

Electives

As Table 2 details, numerous options exist for MBC degree students to: concentrate more deeply on their current area of expertise; drill into a new discipline; or bolster themselves with a broader sampling of course subjects. Depending on the needs, experience and goals of a student, courses from management, operations, finance or other departments can be approved, assuming the student can appropriately accommodate any prerequisites.

Elective course syllabi often need to be revisited to assure content is evolving with the changing nature of communications within organizations and with external audiences. This also includes redressing course titles and descriptions during faculty curriculum review to keep pace with the expectations of students and the marketplace. Further, consistently considering and offering topics courses for evaluation of incorporation into the curriculum proves helpful. Recent MBC topics courses include: Strategic Writing; Investor Relations; and Interactive Marketing. The UST MBC program can offer such a wide variety of specialized electives because of the shared course model. As a stand-alone program, it would have been impossible to deliver this variety of courses to students during recent economic downturns.

Table 2.

UST MBC Degree Curriculum (15, 3-credit courses)

Core Courses (8)

(Shared courses in bold, Parallel courses in italics)

Marketing Management

Management of Organizational Behavior

Financial Accounting

Principles of Economic Analysis

Statistical Methods for Decision Making

Communication Law

Communication Ethics

Communication Research

Elective Courses (6)*

Business Writing

Strategic Writing

Public Relations Writing

Technical Writing

Persuasion

The Creative Process

Communication Technology

Public Relations Practice

Public Affairs for the Corp. Exec.

Corporate Communication Mgmt.

Investor Relations

Interpersonal Communication

Organizational Communication

Management Priorities and the Communicator

Promotions Marketing

Advertising Planning

Creative Strategy in Advertising

Direct Marketing

Integrated Marketing Communications

Direct Marketing

Consumer Behavior

Business to Business Marketing

Brand Management

Interactive Marketing

CRM Management

* (Electives from other business disciplines as required by student need/expertise)

Capstone Course (1) – (Core, plus 4 electives prerequisite)

Communication Leadership Priorities

Integrate knowledge attained and applied in all previous UST graduate courses to assess and develop strategies at the business unit and/or firm level

Source. (UST, 2012)

Capstone – Communication Leadership Priorities

The MBC Capstone employs a case study model as a core element of its pedagogy. Because of the immersion and shared experience of students in the graduate business school, when MBC students arrive in the capstone classroom, at first they tend to respond to cases operationally and strategically as any MBA would. This helps the program avoid any market assumptions that the MBC is just “watered-

down MBA,” and assures that students truly have the level of business acumen necessary to provide exceptional advice to managers.

The capstone course was developed to reflect the nature of the Evening-MBA capstone course, while shifting the focus slightly to more deeply consider the communication ramifications inherent in the cases used by the MBA students. The current instructor attempts to emulate his own experience in a UST MBA capstone, where he and another “PR” person were consistently asked by the professor to debrief each case from the communication perspective at the end of core operational discourse. The course uses a combination of cases required by the MBA capstone and others selected for communication relevance or timely topical convenience. Guided case discussions weave together the divergent elements of MBC course experience to consider how the multifaceted case issues can be considered and addressed within the context of broader theoretical frameworks. Supplemental context stems from introduction and application of analytical “lenses” from business, communications and sociology for investigation and deconstruction of cases and analysis of qualitative data. As prerequisites for this capstone course, students must complete all MBC degree core courses plus at least four of their six electives.

Consulting

All MBC graduates who progress in their careers will ultimately find themselves advising senior management about communication issues. This consultative role may come as an outside contractor or agency executive, or as an internal resource. To this end, two elements have been incorporated into the course.

The more dominant of these elements comes in the form of the course text, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You: The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor*, by prominent public relations/crisis communication consultant James Lukaszewski (2008). The book details many challenges and remedies for communication advisors to consider from someone who made a career advising CEOs through many of the most prominent corporate crises of the last two decades. Before moving to New York for his career, Lukaszewski was a guest lecturer in the MBC, and he now returns at the end of the semester to provide post-script to his written work.

The other element circles around the idea that many communication professionals “hang out a shingle” as: a freelancer while working elsewhere; as a way to make ends meet between jobs; or as a conscious career move. To this end, the course spends time considering the foundations of taking on the role of entrepreneur and how to manage a consulting business.

Research

The applied research component has been central to the UST MBC model since the program began. While the early format resembled a somewhat academic-oriented approach, often heavy on literature reviews, in implementing the capstone course in 2009, faculty redirected the development of research and associated reports. The new approach still incorporates literature review, but expects only those elements that impact the “client” be used in the report. These citations must: indicate questions previously answered or other facts previously unknown to management; inform the method of research in some critical way; or provide lenses through which data can be analyzed.

In this same vein, research questions concentrate on gathering data which can add demonstrative value to the organization once analyzed. More often than not this means that one or more audiences are identified and methods evolve from the kind of access the organization has to the participant pool and the type of information considered both valuable and accessible given that access. Student projects have included work for a wide range of organizations, from small non-profits to Fortune 500 firms based in Minnesota. In recent years, students have consistently been using this research opportunity to highlight their own value to current employers, or firms being targeted for the next career move.

Caveats and Considerations

Of the lessons made most obvious in reviewing the history of the UST MBC program, most threads lead back to the individual courses – specifically electives. As noted above, in the early years the program tended to offer more tactical-level content. The program today assumes that functional expertise, such as presentation skills, can and should be developed through seminars and experience. Students interested in growth in these tactical areas are referred to skills-oriented providers. As an institution providing graduate-level content, while students will be improving skills in writing and presentation in the process, courses will always be geared toward bringing theory and practice together in professionally relevant contexts.

Another related strand has to do with staffing courses. In the first couple of decades, MBC students took courses almost entirely from adjunct faculty. The MBC program and its students benefited from both the cost effectiveness and real-world expertise of highly regarded local professionals. As the MBC focus moved toward a higher level of theory and strategy, more courses were offered by full-time faculty. With recent AACSB accreditation, UST now must accommodate new standards for balancing academically qualified (AQ) and professionally qualified (PQ) instructors, as well as levels of participating faculty.

Even without accreditation issues, the wide variety of topics deemed necessary to support students' needs presents staffing challenges. In recent years, hiring tenure-track marketing faculty has included consideration of each new member being able to deliver at least one MBC course topic. We also have adjunct faculty who earn participating status by assisting with admissions committees and Assurance of Learning. Another option for coverage that a school might explore would be tapping into AQ faculty from communication departments. This would not only assist in class coverage, but help build relationships across schools within the university.

After nearly thirty years of educating Twin Cities communication professionals, MBC alumni now serve as communications leaders in: companies such as Wells Fargo, General Mills, Target, Best Buy, Medtronic, Cargill, 3M, Thomson Reuters, and Blue Cross Blue Shield; agencies such as Weber Shandwick, Carmichael Lynch Spong, Colle & McVoy, and Padilla Spear Beardsley; and in non-profit organizations such as Minnesota Public Radio, The Minnesota Opera, and Lutheran Social Services. A recent review of titles among alumni who participate in a UST MBC LinkedIn group reveals that most of them serve in advisory or leadership roles (Table 3).

It is worth noting in this list the absence of President/CEO titles. In advising students on making a choice between pursuing an MBA or an MBC, the program staff uses a relatively simple litmus test. If the student sees herself at the apex of a career as a professional communicator as an advisor to the firm president rather than as the president, an MBC would provide an appropriate education. The program's

emphasis on research and management advising positions the MBC graduate to fulfill important roles that support senior management and the success of the organizations they serve.

Table 3.

UST MBC Alumni job titles from UST MBC LinkedIn group members - Summer 2012

Senior Management Roles

Sr. VP of Marketing
 Sr. VP of Public Affairs and Corporate Strategy
 AVP, PR & Corporate Communications
 VP Marketing
 Founder
 Owner

Advisory/Tactical Leadership Roles

Web Operations & Design Lead
 Senior Marketing Leader
 Account Supervisor
 Content Strategy Lead
 Senior Web Marketer
 Senior Marketing Analyst
 Senior Development Officer
 Change Mgmt. and Org. Readiness Consultant
 OE Consultant
 Senior Digital Marketing Specialist
 Writer & Communications Consultant
 Public Relations, Social Media and SEO Consultant
 Marketing & Communication Consultant
 Operational Risk Consultant

Middle Management Roles

Communications Director
 PR Director
 Director of Corporate Communication
 Communication Manager
 District Manager
 Marketing Manager
 Marketing Communication Manager
 Senior Manager Advertising & Brand Mgmt.
 Marketing & Brand Manager
 Executive Director
 Associate Director, Marketing Communications
 Director of Institutional Advancement
 Senior Manager, Product Development
 Director of Marketing
 Manager, Marketing Communications
 Marketing Manager
 Communications Manager
 Director of Corporate and Marketing Comm.
 Marketing Director
 Manager, Custom Content

Tactical Roles

Insights Analyst
 Writer/Editor
 Communication Specialist
 Public Relations Specialist
 Marketing Communication Analyst

As an example of the transition from working student to communication leader, consider Beth Naffziger, a 2010 MBC graduate. As her capstone research project, she conducted focus groups with celiac disease sufferers who cannot eat traditional baked goods. Her research led to new gluten-free product developments for French Meadow Bakery, a division of the international consumer products company Rich Products Corporation. It also led to her promotion to Brand and Marketing Manager for gluten-free products. According to Naffziger, "The MBC program changed me in a variety of ways, top of mind is the way I look at my business world, specifically, how I analyze information and communicate with the unique audiences I deal with every day. Each class brought on new perspectives and insights... I have a better understanding of the core areas of the business and enhanced communication skills for day-to-day life and strategic planning purposes" (UST, 2012).

While it would certainly be interesting to offer contrast to the MBC pedagogy, it has proven difficult to find a comparable alternative in another business school for comparison. Further, it is not the purpose

of this paper to specifically call into question graduate communication programs within other disciplines, although many such programs purport to serve those interested in careers in strategic business communication. However, readily available data would be insufficient to gauge integration of business acumen of other programs compared to that done within the MBC, even at institutions recognized internationally for excellence in communication and journalism. Without accessing all the syllabi for these programs, and relying on course descriptions alone, it remains impossible to assess whether such offerings may indeed provide student advancement in skills and strategy development as communicators specifically oriented to deliver strategic business communication. The author can only suggest with certainty that by being imbedded in the school of business, all the courses delivered in the MBC are grounded in business theory and practice.

Conclusion

The commitment of the UST MBC program is to produce skilled, creative communicators who can: advise senior managers; identify and assess business problems; and design effective communication strategies to address a broad spectrum of business issues. The curriculum has been designed to honor both academic learning and professional practice. Research-based knowledge and practice-based methods co-exist comfortably in lectures and class discussions.

Instructors are drawn from the ranks of experienced University of St. Thomas full-time business faculty and selected from among outstanding practitioners in the Minneapolis/St. Paul business community. Their backgrounds support the diversity of disciplines, perspectives, and experiences that contribute to program uniqueness.

For current students, UST MBC provides a unique and powerful combination — some core courses shared with MBA students, and communications courses specifically developed with the business communicator in mind. Few other degrees offer this integrated approach that develops in-depth business acumen and communication expertise at the same time.

In 2013 academic year, the faculty committee will enter a new curriculum review cycle for the UST MBC. A key focus will be on updating electives to meet the changing needs of the market so that the degree continues to deliver the relevant knowledge, expertise and leadership perspective that can best enhance the firms our students serve, and their own careers. Further, those involved in the UST MBC would like to support the development of similar programs at other AACSB accredited schools, as we believe there is a need for this level of communication leadership across the board, and as the quality and status of professional communicators grows in any market, it grows in all markets.

Within the context of the reader's own institution there may be any number of takeaways from this case, but approval of curriculum and staffing will become the most daunting hurdles to creating a similar program in other institutions. Because St. Thomas has never had a graduate communication offering anywhere else at the university, there were never the associated turf battles over curriculum. The current "shared course" curriculum would be easier to sell to administrations, as it would put new students in empty seats to attend existing MBA core courses. Further, with some creative staffing or other course sharing models, an institution could gradually build its elective base until the program has reached a consistent enrollment. UST MBC enrollment generally equals 8-10% of UST Evening-MBA enrollment. The potential of additional students and a differentiating program in a local market may be the most compelling aspect of this case to contemplate, at a time when most schools of business struggle to maintain enrollments.

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