

Communication Department Plan: CGSP Resolution 2012-13B

In response to the Commission on Graduate Studies and Policies Resolution 2012-2013B (Scholarly Ethics and Integrity in Graduate Education), the Department of Communication graduate program addresses the key requirements in many ways.

Initially, each August, the Communication Department conducts a required new student orientation for all incoming graduate students beginning on the Monday of the week prior to the academic term. Parts of this orientation focus on issues common to all communication graduate students, while others focus on those with GTA assignments. This orientation includes a faculty presentation about professional development that presents a section on the Virginia Tech Graduate Honor System, including definitions of plagiarism and academic misconduct. Students are given the Communication Graduate Student Handbook (available on the COMM Grad Student Scholar site), which details many of our departmental policies that involve integrity and ethics. On the Friday of that week's orientation, we hold a session that explains and outlines the department's COOP and EAP plans. This reinforces our belief that as a community, we share a responsibility for the safety of those around us. Although it is not exactly ethics, responsibility is a key to integrity. Orientation begins our graduate students' acculturation to the department, university, and discipline, and ideas about ethics and integrity are integrated throughout their academic career.

The Graduate Director, in partnership with the Communication Graduate Student Association (CGSA), presents two required, hour-long forums each year on the topics of integrity and ethics in the classroom, in research, and in the professions. Each of these requires attendance by all graduate students (whereas other forums are optional, but most come).

In addition, specific classes and other communication channels address issues of ethics and integrity, as discussed below.

Plagiarism and other violations of the Graduate Honor Code

The first of the required CGSA panels includes representatives of the Graduate Honor System (faculty and students), the chief justice, and the graduate director, who discuss the Graduate Honor Code. Case studies are shared with students that demonstrate ethics in research as well as classroom integrity.

In addition, graduate students are encouraged to become members of the Graduate Honor System as volunteers and to take appropriate graduate courses when offered (such as GRAD 5014, Academic Integrity & Plagiarism or COMM 5814 Communication Ethics).

Further sensitivity towards issues of plagiarism, deception, and other ethical violations is a recurring theme in other ways, as described in the following paragraphs.

Proper use of professional conventions in citation of existing research and scholarship, accurate reporting and ownership of findings, and acknowledgement of contributions to the work

Scholarly integrity is explored in several ways. In COMM 5024, the required core research course (typically taken the first semester), all students must complete the IRB tutorial and pass the quiz, and course topics include scholarly and scientific integrity; protection of the rights of research participants, associates, and sponsors; accurate reporting and ownership of findings; plagiarism and authorship credit; and disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. The course also addresses Resolution 2012-13B optional topics 3 (appropriate research protocols involving human and animal subjects; IRB certification), 4 (guidelines for maintenance of confidentiality in research), 5 (guidelines for determination of authorship), and 7 (discipline- or field-specific professional ethics).

In the second year required COMM 5044 (Prospectus Practicum), a review of proper and improper citation methods and bibliographical entries is a major topic, especially when writing the literature review.

While our discipline has no single bibliographical convention, there are expected approaches to information that we can't assume students know or understand. That course also reviews publication/ authorship and IRB expectations. Of course, proper citation is discussed in our core three courses (and we assume in all courses), but this review during the second year enhances the impact in a different way, since all students must successfully write and defend a thesis. Our students are expected to submit their research to conferences each semester (and have been quite successful for an MA program in doing so), and we are committed to maintaining professional conventions.

The Communication Graduate Student Handbook includes the VT Office of Research Integrity explanation about research misconduct <<http://www.research.vt.edu/research-integrity-office/brochure/misconduct-brochure.pdf>>, which is briefly introduced in one of the department's initial orientation sessions.

Ethical standards in teaching, mentoring, and professional activities

Ethical standards in teaching are a constant element in our required COMM 5034 (Teaching Practicum). All GTAs take this course each semester of their GTA contract. All of our GTAs teach public speaking; typically, they constitute more than ¾ of our graduate population. Their one-week orientation and training begins at 7:30 Monday morning the week prior to the start of fall classes and runs through 5 PM Friday. First year GTAs in their first semester teaching also take the mandatory 2 hour COMM 5034, followed by a mandatory 1 hour practicum the following semesters. Second year GTAs take a mandatory 1 hour teaching practicum each semester, joining with the first years. Among the topics that specifically address issues of ethics and integrity in teaching beyond plagiarism and other Undergraduate Honor Code violations (which are also covered), the course examines FERPA and SSD guidelines (involving a speaker from the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities), the integrity impact of new communication technologies (such as Facebook and Twitter), and dealing with issues of hate speech in the classroom, for example.

Each year, GTAs are evaluated by their supervisory faculty, with written comments submitted to the graduate director. These comments are included in the "Annual Review of Student Progress," which is shared both in person and in writing with the students. If there are any ethical issues with the student's GTA responsibilities, Graduate Director can follow up with the student regarding any areas of needed improvement. If a more immediate problem occurs before this yearly review, the Graduate Director, in consultation with the supervisory faculty, will counsel the student.

The Communication Graduate Student Handbook includes statements from each of the three major professional organizations (National Communication Association, International Communication Association, and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication). One of the yearly required CGSA forums includes a faculty panel led by the department's research and outreach director and includes faculty representing each of the three professional associations. Typically, the focus of this panel is on issues of scholarly integrity; conferences and journals to consider and how to ask questions about the scholarship of lesser known ones; conflict of interest; protection of the rights of research participants, associates, and sponsors; guidelines for authorship determination; and what it means to act as a professional in the field. This forum typically includes Resolution 2012-13B optional topics 3 (appropriate research protocols involving human subjects; Institutional Review Board certification), 5 (guidelines for determination of authorship), and 7 (discipline- or field-specific professional ethics). An additional CGSA forum has focused on promoting work-life balance, which may include discussions of integrity and ethics.

Available avenues for reporting alleged misconduct

These topics are typically introduced during the Friday session of our required orientation and are included in the graduate handbook. This includes a section that details avenues for appeal in a grievance process. While this is available several places in the university's graduate handbook and website, in particular at "Expectations for Graduate Education: Complaints and Appeals" <<http://graduateschool.vt.edu/node/6060>>, there is a brief statement and link in our handbook. Our department's current statement is as follows:

“It is our goal that rare issues involving improper evaluation, unfair treatment such as excessive work (academic or GTA) requirements, professional misconduct, and the like, will be discussed informally and resolved at the departmental level. Typically, such issues should first be discussed by the student, who meets with the faculty member or peer, Graduate Director, and (where appropriate) the students’ Advisory Committee Chair. In cases where the student feels that the issue has been unreconciled, the Department Head should be consulted; the expectation is that at this point, all reasonable actions will have been taken to resolve the issue within the department. However, if these informal steps do not resolve the issue, formal steps are outlined at <http://graduateschool.vt.edu/node/6060>.

It is proposed that beginning with the Communication Graduate Student Handbook 2014-15, the following will be enhanced or added to strengthen this area:

1. new section will include information about the graduate ombudsperson.
2. a link to “Ethical issues in academe” will be added, available at

<<http://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/ethics>>

In addition, in the past, the CGSA has also invited the Graduate Ombudsperson to a forum to explain her role, and how to report misconduct, and the graduate director will encourage CGSA to continue that forum. Typically, they have held that one without any faculty participation, in the case that sensitive issues come up.

In sum, the Communication Graduate Program attempts to respond to the guidelines reported in CGSP Resolution 2012-13B in the following ways:

1. all graduate students are required to attend two CGSA forums offered each year, focusing on integrity and ethics in the classroom, in research, and in the professions;
2. all graduate students are required to enroll in two courses (5024, first year; 5044, second year) that include significant components on scholarly and professional ethics;
3. all GTAs have additional ethics exposure through their required week-long pre-school orientation as well as the required COMM 5034 (Teaching Practicum) each semester;
4. all graduate students are required to attend the departmentally-led pre-school orientation that introduces topics of integrity and ethics;
5. all graduate students are encouraged to take the opportunity to participate in CGSA forums focusing on different aspects of ethics and integrity, to enroll in additional classes focusing on those topics, and to participate in the Graduate Honor System;
6. all graduate students are expected to be familiar with the material in the Communication Graduate Student Handbook, which is updated each year.

The Department of Communication has a strong commitment to graduate training in ethics and integrity, which we provide through a number of long-established channels. We will strengthen that commitment through additional opportunities, including new material for the handbook describing avenues for reporting alleged misconduct as well as resources on ethics, and suggestions for CGSA forums. If new coursework becomes available on campus dealing with ethics and integrity (such as the GRAD 5014 course or others listed by the Graduate school), students will be encouraged to enroll.