MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Todd McNerney, Chair
    Budget Committee

FROM: Dr. Brian R. McGee, Chair
      Department of Communication

DATE: March 24, 2010

SUBJECT: Enrollment Consequences of C-minus Requirements
          Department of Communication Proposals

Dr. Tom Heeney, a member of your committee, has conveyed to me your request for an enrollment impact statement. This statement would concern the Department of Communication proposals for a C-minus minimum grade requirement in our departmental major and minors, effective with the 2011-2012 academic year. My understanding is that your committee wants to understand any possible link between adoption of this requirement and the College’s fiscal model.

Enrollment Impact Statement

Our conclusion is that the enrollment impact of a C-minus minimum grade requirement for the COMM major and minors will be minimal. Most students do not earn D grades in their COMM major and minor courses. Fewer students will earn such grades once this requirement is imposed and students change their behavior.

Related to the enrollment question, there is no certain method for predicting a financial impact, whether positive or negative, as the result of imposing this requirement. If there is a financial impact resulting from this requirement, it almost certainly will be minimal.

Rationale for Departmental Position

We provide below several data points and observations consistent with this impact statement:

1. As previously distributed, our study of Spring 2009 B.A. recipients in the department showed about 160 D grades were earned by those students in courses fulfilling COMM major requirements. This total was no more than 5.5% of all grades earned and applied to the major. The percentage in all probability is lower, as our method of calculation underestimates the
number of non-D grades applied to the major and overestimates the number of D grades applied to the major.

2. For the 2009 Fall Semester, undergraduates in COMM-prefix courses earned 2,383 recorded grades, 90 of which were D grades. So, D grades accounted for only 3.8% of COMM grades earned in that semester. However, of those D grades, an unknown number were earned by students fulfilling program requirements outside COMM (e.g., COMM 104 support-course requirements) and by students intending to use COMM courses for free-elective credit. In addition, of the 90 D grades earned in Fall 2009, 11 of those D grades were earned in COMM 210. Students who earn D grades in COMM 210 already have to repeat this course and earn a grade of C-minus or better if they intend to continue in the COMM major. So, the number of D grades that would require course repetition for Fall 2009, assuming our proposals were already in effect, would be some number significantly short of 90.

3. Students will have ample warnings about and be properly educated regarding a future C-minus requirement for the COMM major and minors. No student will be unaware of the rule, which would not take effect until students begin declaring the major or minors under the terms of the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Catalog. Whatever the number of students who have to repeat courses in future years, they will not be surprised by this obligation of persistence in a Department of Communication program.

4. Student behavior will change once a C-minus requirement is put in place for the COMM major and minors. Initially, students who do poorly early in a term will be more likely to withdraw from a COMM course, rather than risk earning a D grade. Further, and more importantly, students who might previously have been satisfied to earn a D grade in a particular course section will change their disposition and behavior in order to earn a grade of C-minus or higher in that course. This change in student behavior is exactly the point of C-minus requirements, as proposed by our department and as previously adopted at many other colleges and universities. These behavioral changes will reduce further the number of students who would have to repeat a course because a D grade is earned.

5. Our previous correspondence with a department head at the University of Georgia indicated there were no institutional problems of any sort associated with the C requirement in their Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, though the rule presumably creates individual problems for some students. She clearly was not aware of any structural issues with enrollment management resulting from their long-standing rule for a minimum grade of C in major coursework.

6. As noted in previous documents submitted in support of the COMM C-minus proposals, nothing will prevent a student in a major or minor elective course from selecting another elective

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1 This is not an unusual outcome in the humanities and social sciences. For the same semester, 3.0% of the undergraduate grades earned in one of the larger HSS departments (not COMM) were in the D range. For another large HSS department in the same semester, 2.6% of the undergraduate grades earned were in the D range. For a third large HSS department, 5.3% were in the D range.

2 Not surprisingly, the available research on university-level students and course grade outcomes suggests that student disposition is a useful predictor of grade outcomes. A C-minus requirement for each course applied to the undergraduate major or minor would have obvious consequences for student disposition toward the completion of work in a particular course. See, e.g., William B. Armstrong, “The Association among Student Success in Courses, Placement Test Scores, Student Background Data, and Instructor Grading Practices,” Community College Journal of Research and Practice 24 (2000): 681-695.
course to fulfill major or minor requirements. In such cases, students will use the D grade to fulfill institutional degree requirements (122-hour minimum, general education obligations) while completing another COMM course to meet departmental requirements. In such cases, no course repetition will be needed, though a student might alter her or his plans for undergraduate course selection.

7. Students who repeat a course because of a previously earned D grade will not necessarily incur new costs for degree completion, as they might repeat the course in a future semester when already registered as full-time students and without exceeding 18 credit hours (e.g., completing 18 credit hours instead of 15 hours). In the absence of actual formula funding supplied by the state, such repeated course credits might create additional evidence of faculty productivity (or further marginal stress on heavily subscribed courses), but no new tuition or state-supplied revenues.

8. Students who incur new costs as a result of the C-minus requirement might do so in ways that generate new revenues for the College (e.g., additional COMM summer enrollments) or for other institutions (e.g., Trident Tech, other universities offering COMM courses suitable for transfer to the College). There is no evidence, however, that such repeated courses will be a meaningful source of revenue for our own institution or other institutions.

9. Because completion of an undergraduate minor is not required to earn the baccalaureate degree at the College of Charleston, some students might drop a COMM minor program rather than repeat a course in which a D grade was earned. While this outcome would not be ideal, such student choices would reduce the overall incidence of course repetition. In addition, the COMM minors are relatively small, and the students in those minors are unlikely to be responsible for a meaningful number of repeated courses.

10. With a very high fill rate across most COMM course sections, a very substantial need for course repetition would have consequences for the department’s undergraduate enrollment model. However, all the available evidence points to a course repetition demand that would be far more modest than even current rates for D grade assignment would suggest. In addition, the department chair and faculty will have access to the usual institutional tools for managing enrollment challenges (e.g., course substitutions).

11. Given the paucity of available data, there is no good way to build an enrollment or fiscal model accounting for the impact of a C-minus requirement in the COMM major and minors. When the relevant variables are considered, however, no evidence suggests the impact of this requirement would be significant, let alone unmanageable. The best way to evaluate the impact of such a rule at the College of Charleston would be to allow one or more large academic departments to adopt the rule and assess the relevant outcomes a few years later.