Rhetoric and Public Culture is the study of how language and symbolic action function in public contexts. Our program focuses on the relationship between public communication and civic engagement, social and cultural identity, and power and resistance in local, national, and transnational contexts. Our course of study focuses on conventional and unconventional forms of public discourse, including but not limited to political address, mass and digital media, popular culture, visual culture, and vernacular discourse. Courses explore a range of theoretical, critical, and special topics, including but not limited to classical, modern, and contemporary foundations of rhetorical theory, practices in rhetorical criticism, feminist and queer theory, political communication, identity and difference, and critical/culture theory. Students can expect a comprehensive training in both classical and contemporary approaches to the study of rhetoric. Faculty and students specialize in a wide range of areas such as myth and political ideology in public address, spaces of local and national memory, countermemories of dissent, border rhetorics, indigenous and Latin American rhetorics, discourses of violence and state repression, portrayals of gender and sexuality in Hollywood, rhetoric of mass media, and precarity in postindustrial society.

Our award-winning faculty members are active scholars with established and innovative areas of research. Faculty book titles include Gambling with the Myth of the American Dream (Aaron Duncan), The Bad Sixties: Hollywood Memories of the Counterculture, The Anti-War, and Black Power Movements (Kristen E. Hoerl), Abstinence Cinema: Virginity and the Rhetoric of Sexual Purity in Contemporary Film (Casey Ryan Kelly), Food Television and Otherness in an Age of Globalization (Casey Ryan Kelly), and The Style and Rhetoric of Elizabeth Dole (Ronald Lee coauthored with Rachel Friedman). You can also find their essays in highly respected journals including Argumentation and Advocacy; Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies; Communication, Culture, & Critique; Communication Quarterly; Communication Studies; Critical Studies in Media Communication; Feminist Media Studies; Javnost-The Public; Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture; Journal of Communication and Religion; Management Communication Quarterly; Quarterly Journal of Speech; Political Communication; Southern Journal of Communication; Text and Performance Quarterly; Rhetoric Society Quarterly; and Western Journal of Communication.

Aaron Duncan
Dr. Duncan’s research focuses on sporting culture, public mythology, and political communication. He serves as the Director of the award-winning Speech & Debate team.

Kristen Hoerl
Dr. Hoerl specializes in the rhetoric of social protest, feminist criticism, and public memory. Using insights from critical studies, Dr. Hoerl explores how popular media engage public controversies and respond to movements for racial and gender justice. She is currently the editor of Women’s Studies in Communication.

Casey Kelly
Dr. Kelly’s research at the intersection between rhetoric and cultural studies explores a range of cultural proxy wars concerning gender, race, and nationalism, including food and globalization, hegemonic masculinity, sexuality and film, pop culture and neocolonialism, and indigenous self-determination.

Ronald Lee
Dr. Lee studies contemporary American political discourse. His research deals with the rhetorical construction of presidential legacies, the discourses of poverty, the mythical use of American place in national politics, the evolving standards of journalistic coverage of religion, and the use of race in post-civil-rights era political discourse.

José Ángel Maldonado
Dr. Maldonado specializes in rhetorical theory and cultural studies. Specifically, his research focuses on the ways that the militarization of Mexican cities and towns has altered civic life. His research centers on critical rhetorics of life and death in post-NAFTA Mexico, and covers topics such as mass graves, narco-violence, vigilantism, and feminicidios. Additionally, he is interested in globalization, modernity, colonialism, transnationalism, indigeneity, and Latin American rhetorics.
"Cultivating Scholars, Developing Teachers"

Graduate Courses in Rhetoric and Public Culture

In addition to the courses listed below, we also work with students to identify method and topic courses in other areas and departments as well as developing independent studies.

- Rhetorics of Social Protest and Resistance
- Political Communication
- Rhetorical Criticism
- Critical/Cultural Studies in Communication
- Border and Transnational Rhetorics

- Feminist and Queer Studies in Communication
- Media and Culture
- Classical Rhetoric
- Modern Rhetoric
- Contemporary Rhetoric

Courses Graduate Students Can Teach

In addition to opportunities to teach our standardized courses (Communication in the 21st Century, Business and Professional Communication), our goal is to provide experience teaching courses independently in your general area of study.

- Rhetorical Methods in Communication Studies
- Public Speaking
- Intercultural Communication
- Visual Communication
- Public Advocacy and Civic Engagement
- Rhetoric, Media, and Civic Life
- Communication and Popular Culture
- Gender and Communication

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Application Deadline for Fall is January 15th

Contact our Director of Graduate Studies at jsoliz2@unl.edu or specific faculty members for questions about our program.

Visit comm.unl.edu/graduate for more information on our program, scholarly initiatives, and the application process

Graduate Assistantships

- Competitive stipend
- Tuition waivers
- Health insurance
- Travel funds for conferences
- Professional development programs
- Department and university leadership roles
- Faculty research collaborations

We have current openings for graduate assistant coaches for our nationally recognized Speech & Debate Team!