Greetings to you on a cold and frosty morning in Amherst, where the view out the window of my new office in the Integrative Learning Center shows big piles of snow between here and the DuBois Library and the Student Union, as well as a completely frozen pond!

We’ve had a busy start to the spring term and a very productive fall 2014. We welcomed two new colleagues: Prof. Soo Young Bae studies the role of social media in political deliberation and participation, and Prof. Alena Vasylieva studies conflict, argumentation, and deliberation through the lenses of language, social interaction, and culture. Over the past year, Prof. Sut Jhally was Executive Producer, Director, or both on recent educational videos on the topics of consumerism, violence and militarism in video games, and marketing practices of the food industry. Prof. Donal Carbaugh has a grant to work with General Motors on designing in-car communication systems. We had 3 departmental faculty members—Profs. Lisa Henderson, Shawn Shimpach, and Mari Castañeda—and 1 graduate student—Fadia Hasan—nominated for the University-wide Distinguished Teaching Award and another faculty member, Prof. Claudio Moreira, nominated for the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Outstanding Teaching Award. Prof. Leda Cooks received the 2014 Thomas Erlich Civicly Engaged Faculty Award for her community service learning and community based research. And the list goes on! These are just a few examples of the recent scholarship, outreach, and recognition of Communication faculty.

As you may know, we moved into our fabulous new home on campus, the Integrative Learning Center, this past August. It is a lovely brand-new building—bright, modern, and already a popular meeting and working space for students. This past October, we hosted an All-Class Reunion and Alumni Celebration to celebrate —maybe some of you were there! The event featured panels in which featured alums spoke to current students about their careers and the paths that led them there, as well as a screening of a Media Education Foundation film based on the work of Prof. Lynn Phillips, who responded to questions and comments after the screening. We also converted our new Hub meeting and event area into a dining space and had a lovely dinner which spurred lively interactions among alumni and faculty.

Just in time for the spring 2015 semester, we opened the department’s all-new state-of-the art high definition digital Television Studio and editing suites, as well. Profs. Dave Maxcy and Bruce Geisler are teaching hands-on classes in this exceptional facility this term, and our new Chief Broadcast Engineer, Ruben Garcia (who came to us from his prior positions at Discovery Channel and BBC America), is providing technical support. The students are thrilled to be learning and creating digital media projects in these wonderful new settings.

This spring we are hosting a number of wonderful events, including sessions on Engaged Research and Teaching and Learning a Diverse Classroom in our graduate student proseminar; a Movie and Pizza Night series; an Alumni Panel on Careers in Health Communication; and our second annual Communication Student Showcase, in which our students present their work in such categories as Audio Visual Productions, Public Speaking and Performance, Civic Engagement or Community-Based Work, and Research and we bestow cash prizes for top winners! If you’re in the Boston area, consider joining us for an event tomorrow, Thursday, March 19 at the UMass Club which features social hour and networking from 5-6 pm, followed by a presentation by Prof. Jarice Hanson titled “What’s Social about Social Media?” You can register here.

Finally, I have a farewell to report. April Tidlund, who has been the department’s Undergraduate Program Secretary and Scheduling Officer for no less than 49 and a half years, retired in December, 2014. No doubt many of you remember her well since she had such a warm and helpful presence for students and faculty alike during her long career. We wish her the very best in retirement! Please visit our website periodically to keep up to date about the many activities and accomplishments of our faculty, about events sponsored by the department, and other news.

Sincerely,

Erica Scharrer, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair, Department of Communication