

What's in a Name? Department Name Revision and Its Relationship to Scholarly Productivity and Prestige Score in the Communication Discipline

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The field of communication is one that must change and evolve with current trends to survive. Part of this transition involves updating institutional curricula and departmental identities to reflect current norms and practices in the field. To explore this phenomenon, the present study offers a snapshot of how communication units behave in transitioning to new names or altering their current ones. Study data are based on a dataset from the CIOS database containing a subset of communication programs that underwent departmental name revisions from 2009-2015. Trends indicate that departments are moving toward “communication studies” designations and away from those of “speech” or “public communication.” Data also illustrate the increasingly hybridized nature of journalism programs. Departments who primarily rely on “communication” as an identifier in their name publish more frequently, employ more faculty members, and have higher prestige levels than those who do not. Results provide a snapshot of useful information regarding administrative trends in the communication discipline.

Scholarly productivity has long been heralded as the “gold standard” by which program quality is assessed across disciplines, including communication (e.g., Hickson, Bodon, & Turner, 2004). Several studies have addressed peer-review journal productivity levels of departments in the communication discipline (e.g., Feeley, LaVail, & Barnett, 2011; Griffin, Bolkan, Holmgren, & Tutzauer, 2016). As Lagoe, Atkin, and Mou (2012) note, these studies assume greater importance as universities confront growing financial pressures, particularly for emerging disciplines like communication. Rogers (1994) recounts the evolution of communication from its origins in subdisciplines such as rhetoric and journalism during the 20th century. This hybrid identity can be implicated as an obfuscating factor in tracking disciplinary trends (Craig & Carlone, 1998). Having been recognized by the Department of Education only since 1966, communication still struggles for legitimacy on many campuses (e.g., Gehrke & Keith, 2015). As a nascent discipline, several programs offered under the umbrella of communication were particularly prone to budget cuts and administrative reorganization after 1990, even as the field ranked among the largest and fastest growing since 1966 (e.g., Nelson, 1995).

In spite of administrative reorganization in the 1990's, data indicates that communication is the only humanities discipline in America to experience growth in the conferral of bachelor's degrees in 2015 (National Communication Association, 2017). Job posting data analyzed by the National Communication Association signal a general increasing trend in vacant faculty positions from 2009-2017 (National Communication Association,

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2018). Taken together, much of this growth can be attributed to the proliferation of digital communication in our academic and professional landscapes.

Even still, like many emerging and applied disciplines, communication has not been fully embraced by venerable private institutions like Harvard (e.g., Entman, 1994; Graham & Diamond, 1996). This “newcomer” disciplinary status helps explain the historical predominance of Midwestern programs—notably those with origins in agricultural journalism—among the most productive and highly rated in the field (e.g., Hickson et al., 2004; Lagoe et al., 2012; Rogers, 2004). These variegated epistemological, geographic and historical origins also contribute to a wider variation in program labeling than is typically found in other disciplines (e.g., Rogers, 2004; Gehrke & Keith, 2015). Neuendorf et al. (2007, p. 25) observe: “The academy’s hesitancy to recognize communication as a discipline may stem from program identification challenges; that is, few academic units in communication use the same name (e.g., journalism vs. [mass] communication; communication vs. speech).”

By examining trends in the academic makeup and naming of communication departments along with faculty composition and research productivity, we can explore possible relationships between a communication program’s identity and research behavior. These dimensions are crucial to understand, since how a department/school identifies itself – via its name – is likely to impact what areas it chooses to emphasize, in terms of teaching and research. The present study presents an analysis of a dataset from the CIOS database that captured name-changing trends within a six-year period. CIOS is a database that continuously harvests publication and faculty membership data that can be used to identify insights about communication pedagogy, publication productivity, and prestige.

Background

Despite the growing importance of program output and “branding,” scholars have yet to examine the relationship between departmental name and productivity. As Craig and Carlone (1998, p. 67) suggest, such identification is complicated by the discipline’s “amorphous contours,” as “rapid intellectual, institutional, and societal changes have rendered old familiar explanations obsolete and we no longer understand the field well ourselves.” They note the National Communication Association (NCA)’s nomenclature encompassing such sub-areas as general communication; advertising; public relations and organizational communication; journalism; broadcast journalism; radio and television broadcasting; radio/television, general; communication media; and communications among others. Communication thus represents a hybrid discipline that encompasses liberal arts and applied professional domains, as these designations have been joined by such others as “speech/rhetorical studies,” drama,” “film,” and “communication disorders sciences and services” (e.g., Neuendorf et al. 2007).

Some schools or colleges of communication, for instance, also have documentary/film studies, information sciences, etc. as part of their portfolio. Examples include Rutgers’ School of Communication and Information and Northern Arizona University’s School of Communication, which has an MA in documentary studies. At other schools, these same fields are either solitary programs (Center of Documentary Studies at Duke) or attached to other departments like English. This confusion has even complicated program evaluations conducted within the discipline. For instance, Stanford was ranked among the Top 5 programs in Radio-Television, according to *U.S. News and World Report* (2004), despite having no such program.

Gehrke and Keith (2015) note that this programmatic diversity presents opportunities as well as challenges in framing the identity of communication as a discipline, one that's not shared by allied fields like sociology or psychology. This, combined with the newness of communication as a discipline, complicates the task of explaining our pedagogy and scholarship to other stakeholders. Even though undergraduate enrollment numbers place communication among the six largest disciplines nationally (McKinney, 2006), the field's amorphous contours complicate the task of explaining what we do to outsiders. This, in turn, can present difficulties in advocating for resources when administrators from more traditional disciplines do not have a full grasp on the nature of what communication scholars truly do. These identity issues are intensified by the rapidly changing media environment that form a significant area of study under communication research. Columbia president Lee Bolinger garnered national attention when he argued that their journalism school should de-emphasize its traditional focus—involving the teaching of skills by practitioners—to emphasize scholarly issues in a rapidly changing communication discipline: “To teach the craft of journalism is a worthy goal, but clearly insufficient in this new world and within the setting of a great university” (See Arenson, 2012, p. 1).

This begs the question of how research orientations vary between professional, media-oriented programs and communication units, which may have traditionally emphasized speech communication. Focusing on publishing patterns in journals indexed by the National Communication Association (NCA), Edwards, Watson and Barker (1988) found that objective tallies of faculty productivity correlate positively with subjective peer evaluations (e.g., National Research Council, 2010) as well as publication records, with faculty of doctoral institution's salaries, and with other objective measures of quality. Barnett and Feeley (2011) uncovered moderate correlations between subjective ratings and indicators of quality placements of graduate students.

Hickson and colleagues (2004, 2009) conducted studies of the most prolific scholars based on their publication totals in 24 journals included in the *Index to Journals in Communication Studies*. Although that index was discontinued in the mid-1990s, the CIOS database compiles the number of a scholar's career publications in communication journals, which can then be compared across individuals and institutions. Scholars (e.g., Feeley et al. 2011; Hickson and associates 2003, 2004, 2009) have provided comprehensive tallies of publication frequency for communication scholars and programs over time. Productivity analyses have also focused on research productivity in such subareas as mass communication (Hickson, 1991), advertising (Zhou, 2005), law and policy (Burrowes, Bah, & Mesidor, 2000), telecommunication (Atkin & Jeffres, 1996; Vincent, 1991) and even across various ethnic diasporas in the field (e.g., So, 2001). The CIOS database reflects scholarly productivity for individual authors, reflecting their departmental and institutional affiliations.

This reinforces the need to consider objective measures of productivity, particularly given the high stakes in these evaluative enterprises (e.g., Feeley et al., 2011; Schweitzer, 1988). In particular, scholarly publication activity represents a key determinant of institutional appointment, tenure and salary and the primary method through which scholarly productivity can be assessed (e.g., Lagoe et al., 2012). Although various metrics have been used to assess productivity among scholars in other academic fields, little work comprehensively addresses the productivity by department type (e.g., Speech Communication v. Journalism).

Productivity levels can be uneven; however, as Hickson et al.'s (2003, 2004, 2009) analyses of productivity in the 20th century found that the mean, median and mode in NCA-sponsored journals was one publication. Similarly, in another CIOS sample Stephen and Geel (2007) found that *more than one-third of the membership of the scholars had not contributed any articles to*

the field's mainline periodical literature. Despite this rich literature on aggregate productivity across the discipline, little work addresses the influence of a unit's name and academic orientation on scholarly productivity. In an attempt to provide a yardstick to help departments gain a better understanding of whether they are “on-trend” with the field as a whole, we pose the following research questions for descriptive purposes:

- RQ1: How have trends in labeling departments evolved in recent years?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between departmental orientation/name and research productivity?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between number of faculty and unit publication frequency?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between departmental orientation/name and prestige score?

Method

The data for this study were culled from data systems created by the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship (CIOS). CIOS is an independent non-for-profit organization that is supported through university library subscriptions. CIOS provides a number of databases and other electronic services in support of scholarship and education in the communication/journalism field including ComAbstracts, ComVista, and ComAnalytics. The data for this study are drawn from CIOS's ComAbstracts and ComVista operations. ComAbstracts is an abstracts database, with links to full text, that tracks all papers published in approximately 145 central journals in communication and journalism from 1915 on. ComVista is a census-level database tracking department faculty membership at more than 700 university departments in communication/journalism in the US and Canada. These two databases merge in ComAnalytics, which provides normative publication frequency data for individuals in the field and for departments in the field. The present analysis compared department name, publication frequency, number of program faculty, and prestige score from the years 2009 and 2015.

Variables of Interest

Department name/identifier. The specific names of each department in 2009 and 2015 are identified in the database. This category includes any name used to signify an academic unit (e.g. department, school, unit, etc.). All the names (old and new) were normalized to remove words like “and”, “of” and “in”, and phrases like “Department of” and donor names.

Publication frequency. Publication frequency refers to the number of manuscripts that each department published in CIOS-tracked journals in 2009 and 2015. These include journals such as *Communication Monographs*, *Human Communication Research*, and *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, among others. This number reflects collective publications by all full-time faculty regardless of rank or tenure status.

Program faculty. Program faculty refers to the number of full-time faculty in each department in 2009 and 2015. This includes all full-time faculty regardless of rank or tenure status.

Prestige score. Prestige score refers to the overall stature rating of a department based on frequency of publication in CIOS journals weighted by the prestige level of the publication outlet. This score is computed by multiplying each publication in CIOS databases attributed to a faculty member from that department by its “prestige weight.” The prestige weight is a CIOS metric that reflects the degree to which a publication is associated with perceptions of scholarly excellence in the communication field (see Stephen, 2011, 2012a for information on metric validity and a description of how prestige scores are computed).

Analysis

Consistent with past work, the present study employed a range of analyses to explore the data. First, basic content analytic methods were used to review departmental names and identify themes. Once thematic categories were created, department names were re-reviewed and coded into categories (specified below). After coding took place, descriptive statistics were used to determine the most and least popular naming categories. Descriptive statistics were also used to provide information about publication frequency, faculty employment, and prestige scores. Correlation analyses were used to examine the relationship between number of faculty at an institution and publication frequency. Independent samples *t*-tests were applied to determine whether those three variables differed based on two predominant categories used to name communication departments.

Results

Trends in Departmental Names or Identifiers

In total, 240 communication programs changed their name from 2009-2015. Names were initially reviewed by a single coder and coding categories were developed based on the content of each label. First, categories were identified for departments solely represented with the term communication (e.g., *communication*, *communication studies*, or *communications*). Second, categories were identified for departments that used a different term to represent their program. These programs either included more specialized areas of the field (e.g., *journalism*) or fields complementary to communication (e.g., *media studies*). Whenever the word *communication* was paired with another area, the code defaulted to the category represented by the specialized or complementary area of the field (e.g., *journalism and communication studies* would default to *journalism*). Some department names included more than one specialized or complementary field in the title (e.g., *radio, film, television*). These names were separated out into their own categories if they were identified more than three times in the 2009 and/or 2015 data. Any programs with hybrid department names identified fewer than three times were placed into the “hybrid” category. Programs that did not include specialized or complementary communication identifiers (e.g., *communication and philosophy*) were deemed uncategorizable.

With regard to the naming trends queried in RQ1, department names in 2009 were varied (See Table 1). Some of the most commonly identified programs included (1) *communication*, (2) *media* or *media studies*, (3) *journalism*, (4) *communication studies*, (5) *theater, dramatic arts*, and/or *dance*, (6) *communications*, and (7) *speech/public communication*. Table one outlines a full list of category frequencies for 2009. In total, 14 departments were deemed “hybrid” programs based on the previously specified criteria, i.e., whether an area of specialization was included in the title and whether the name required its own category, based on representing multiple specialties on a frequent basis. Another 15 departments were uncategorizable in this dataset.

In 2015, the most commonly identified types of communication departments included (1) *communication*, (2) *media* or *media studies*, (3) *communication studies*, (4) *theater, dramatic arts*, and/or *dance*, and (5) *journalism*. In total, 19 departments were deemed “hybrid” programs based on the previously specified criteria. Another 16 departments were uncategorizable in this dataset.

In the shift from 2009-2015, some new trends emerged, and others remained consistent. Even though all departments within the dataset altered names to some degree, the frequency of departments labeled as (1) *communication* and (2) *theater and/or dramatic arts and/or dance* remained relatively similar. Most programs moved away from the term *communications* in favor of other options such as *communication*, *communication arts*, and *communication studies*. A substantial increase can be seen in the number of programs that labeled themselves as *communication studies* (19 in 2009 vs. 39 in 2015). A clear drop was found in the number of programs that identified as *speech* or *public communication* (16 in 2009 vs. 1 in 2015).

Although a dip can be seen in the number of programs solely titled as *journalism* or *journalism communication* (25 in 2009 vs. 15 in 2015), further analysis of the data indicates that departments are not shifting away from journalism programs completely. Instead, journalism programs are becoming more hybridized with a diverse range of specializations and/or complementary areas. In 2009, journalism programs were most commonly paired with mass communication. Another four programs in the *hybrid category* signaled that journalism was also paired with film, creative writing, and theater on a less frequent basis. In 2015, journalism was most often paired with public relations and various forms of media (e.g., digital, new media). Within the eclectic hybrid category, journalism was again paired with creative writing, and film.

New labeling trends that emerged in 2015 included (1) *strategic communication* and (2) *communication and/or media arts*. The strategic communication framework reflects trends in the field to use an umbrella term to label the diverse but converged nature of offerings in public relations, digital media, and mass communication.

Table 1
Categories and Frequencies of Department Names in 2009 and 2015 (N = 240)

Name	2009	2015
Advertising	2	1
Broadcasting	4	0
Communication	36	38
Communications	18	4
Communication Arts and/or Media Arts	9	15
Journalism	25	15
Communication and/or Media and/or Media Studies	21	36
Communication Studies	19	39
Rhetoric	3	5
Theater and/or Dramatic Arts and/or Dance	19	14
English Literature and/or Writing and/or Language	5	5
Film and/or Radio and/or Television	5	4
Speech Communication or Public Communication	16	1
Public Relations	2	0
Strategic Communication	0	5
Digital Media	0	1
Advertising and Public Relations	3	2

Journalism and Mass Communication (or Media)	9	9
Communication Arts and Sciences	5	1
Journalism and Public Relations	0	5
Theater or Performing Arts and Speech Communication	8	1
Communication and Visual Design	2	4
Hybrid	14	19
Not Categorized	15	16

Publication Frequency

Per the publication trends queried in RQ2, it was found that general communication departments (i.e., those with the name *communication* or *communication studies* in 2015) significantly differed from other types of programs in their frequency of publication ($t(99.71) = -2.78, p < .01$). The average publication frequency for *communication/communication studies* programs was 26.57 ($SD = 41.22$) while that of programs without the above name was 12.56 ($SD = 23.35$). This difference was not found in 2009.

Faculty Employment

As for the faculty size dynamics queried in RQ3, full-time faculty in each department ranged from 1-26 in 2009 and 1-24 in 2015. The average number of full-time faculty per department was 5.26 ($SD = 4.34$) with a median of 4.00 in 2009 and 5.66 ($SD = 4.19$) with a median of 5.00 in 2015. Significant differences in number of faculty employed ($t(238) = -2.72, p < .01$) in communication ($M = 6.17, SD = 4.74$) vs. non-communication departments ($M = 5.16, SD = 3.82$) were identified in 2015. A positive and strong correlation was also found between number of faculty and publication frequency in both 2015 ($r = .76, p < .01$) and 2009 ($r = .68, p < .01$).

Prestige Scores

Per the relationship between department name and prestige scores (RQ4), in 2009, overall prestige scores ranged from 0-973.59 with an average score of 24.16 ($SD = 78.59$). In 2015, overall prestige scores ranged from 0-431.98, with an average score of 26.14 ($SD = 58.94$). In 2015, a significant difference existed ($t(86.85) = -3.10, p < .01$) in departments that solely used communication identifiers ($M = 48.01, SD = 88.07$), which presented higher prestige scores than those that did not ($M = 15.81, SD = 33.96$). This difference was not identified in 2009.

Discussion

The present investigation explored the relationships among several variables including departmental labels, trends in department name changes, frequency of departmental publication, number of program faculty, and prestige score among a subset of communication programs within the CIOS database that underwent departmental name revisions from 2009-2015. Results provide information regarding administrative trends in the discipline of communication, which could prove helpful in enabling programs to attract students and resources while enhancing the health of the discipline as a whole.

Given the eclectic nature of the field, communication grapples with more extreme framing challenges than other academic disciplines (e.g., Gehrke & Keith, 2015). Pending disciplinary expertise, communication programs can take on social-scientific, humanistic, and rhetorical approaches. Another layer to this challenge involves accounting for applied areas of study such as film, journalism, television, radio, public relation, digital media, marketing, new media, etc. We also find ourselves utilizing theories and concepts that have grown out of other social-scientific, humanistic and rhetorical domains. The diverse nature of our field thus presents unique challenges in framing the discipline in a consistent and coherent manner. Communication scholars have long since called for efforts to re-imagine our fractured paradigm—thereby turning our weakness into a strength by aggregating these scattered ideas—so that communication can be the sole discipline that synthesizes and connects literature across traditional social-scientific, humanistic, and rhetorical boundaries (Entman, 1993).

Building on this knowledge, interesting descriptive trends emerged in approaches to naming departments. Across a six-year span, names using the terms (1) *communication*, (2) *media* and/or *media studies*, and (3) *communication studies* tended to be the most frequently utilized departmental labels within the dataset. These descriptors indicate that programs appear to be more focused on broad-based identifiers of communication programs rather than unique areas of specialization. It also appeared as though many programs were moving away from specific trends such as the use of the terms (1) *communications* and (2) *speech* or *public communication*. The trend to move away from the term *communications* may have resulted from scholars' interest in shifting away from a consistent misnomer that has plagued programs in the field. Although sometimes used interchangeably with *communication*, these terms have distinct meanings. The term *communications* refers to specific technological methods that are used to transmit or send information; by contrast, *communication* addresses the process of exchanging messages between individuals or entities. By changing names from *communications* to *communication* or other specialized areas of the field, departmental names are likely becoming more accurate reflections of the content addressed within their courses. Another important trend reflected in the data demonstrates programs' likelihood of moving away from names using the terms *speech* or *public communication*. This signals that programs could be moving away from a speech focus in the discipline to other more general or applied approaches to the field (see Stephen, 2014).

Descriptive data also signaled that departments addressing certain applied areas of the field (i.e., *journalism*) are becoming increasingly hybridized. Standalone journalism programs represented a substantial proportion of the dataset in 2009 ($n = 25$). By 2015, many journalism programs incorporated other areas of the discipline such as public relations, new media, digital arts, and mass communication in their name. These shifts could reflect trends in the field toward convergence and the increasing value being placed on communication professionals who are versatile and have a deep understanding of multiple areas of the field in our ever-changing digital landscape. For example, in our current era of online journalism, journalists must possess skills beyond interviewing, writing, and editing. Journalists are now often required to create and publish video packages and effectively manage a professional presence on social media.

A sizable portion of hybridized programs were not represented with specific category labels because these unique pairings occurred so infrequently (three times or fewer) in our dataset. One example of this type of pairing is a department of communication and philosophy. One explanation for this phenomenon could be that unique pairings of disciplines in single departments tend to occur at small schools where enrollment in a single communication major cannot justify the resources required to sustain a full department. If the

institution does not happen to have a complementary discipline to connect with communication, the program may ultimately be connected with anything in the humanities, social sciences, or arts.

These findings can be used as a guide for scholars in the field to gain a greater understanding of whether their units are consistent with the field as a whole. As a discipline, what are we communicating to outsiders? On balance, journalism programs have been only half as productive as communication programs. This may reflect the fact that journalism programs have traditionally emphasized skills as opposed to theory and methods. It will be interesting to see how initiatives like Bollinger's at Columbia, aimed at promoting scholarship in Journalism, alter these trends over time (e.g., Arenson, 2012).

Moving to inferential relationships between variables, significant differences were found in publication frequency, number of faculty, and prestige scores in departments titled as communication departments vs. communication-related departments that did not highlight communication as the primary focus of their departmental name. Differences may have emerged for multiple reasons. One can surmise that departments that don't box themselves in specific categories and have broad names such as "communication" or "communication studies" follow a broad discipline-oriented research agenda and successfully publish across multiple areas in the field of communication. It is useful to note, however, that research productivity is not necessarily the primary goal for many communication programs, especially for those that only offer undergraduate degrees. Such departments might adopt names that are easily marketable to potential communication majors and minors, such as Department of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts; Department of Film, Video, and Interactive Media, etc.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the current study provides a comprehensive description of naming, prestige and administrative trends among communication departments across a six-year period, this investigation is not without limitations. First, a high level of variance exists within the publication frequency and prestige score variables. This is due to the fact that the majority of scholars within the field have published one or zero articles over the course of their career. The tendency for scholars to publish so infrequently may be partially to blame for our lacking recognition in the academy. If researchers in our discipline are not publishing as often as others, it could diminish the likelihood of scholars from other disciplines coming in contact--and gaining familiarity--with work in communication. Since this was a secondary analysis, we were also limited by the variables and dates in the current dataset. For instance, 2009 was selected as an initial start date because it was the first year that CIOS began systematically harvesting department data for the database. Moreover, the information in the CIOS dataset was gleaned from individual departmental websites and potentially can contain some error. Department websites may not have been updated to reflect personnel changes when data were collected. Even though the dataset captured information only for those departments that changed their names in the time period between 2009-2015, the findings can be categorized as having high longitudinal validity and generalizability, due to the fact that this is carefully-harvested census-level data. As such, this analysis provides a revealing portrait of the shifting nature of our discipline's identity. Future investigations might determine whether these trends persist within predominantly undergraduate institutions as well, given that their orientation may be more professional and less research-oriented than their graduate counterparts. This would be particularly useful in determining whether institutions with identities and missions

that differ from research institutions (e.g., liberal arts) take a distinct or similar approach in framing the focus of their communication departments.

Conclusion

As Lagoe et al. (2012) observe, the fact that communication was incorporated in the NRC's most recent decennial ratings signals growing recognition for the discipline. Scholars in many fields argued the NRC ratings were poorly done, and that they did an especially weak job of representing the communication field (Fink, Poole, & Chai, 2010; Stephen, 2012b). But at least the field was included this time — showing up is half the game. And though the NRC's methodology may have been less than ideal, the importance of program naming issues was evident even in that murky data. Of the 13 NRC-ranked communication programs in the top decile of the field, seven were named communication, three mass communication, and of the remainder, one each of speech communication, communication arts and sciences, and communication studies. No program with a more exotically hybridized name appeared, and no program with journalism in its name appeared. Clearly, program names signal the academic coherence of a unit, and they provide focus for the program's disciplinary identity and its agenda as one aimed primarily toward scholarly productivity versus training in applied areas. Thus, names are of consequence, and the present study can help programs ascertain how to better position themselves for future evaluation.

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