Departmental Excellence: Constituencies in Tension

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There is no one answer to the question, "What should a Communication Department be?" However, if we ignore the local culture of a University or College, we do so with an implicit conviction that it is possible to discover a universal model for departmental excellence. Of course, if one accepts the notion of historicality, then individual departments need to address the unique demands of the socio-cultural changes that impact the national discipline and the particular academic home that houses a departmental unit. This responsibility holds implications beyond the success of individual departments. If the discipline is to advance, it will be through communication departments that demonstrate excellence in a variety of modes. This essay places the question of departmental excellence within the winds of historicity and temporality and the political demands of multiple constituencies.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Few departments are free to ignore four basic questions. First, how do we define excellence in our discipline? Second, how do we offer excellence for a given campus or academic home? Third, how do we demonstrate to the public how excellence is defined for the discipline and how sensitivity to one's local academic home provides a unique dialectical synthesis, outlining the market niche for a department? And finally, how do we demonstrate to a cynical public our willingness to be held accountable for the dialectical synthesis of discipline and academic home that forms the identity of a given department and, by implication, the future of the discipline? We are situated in the "accountability" era of higher education. Witness the demands of accrediting agencies and provocative populist works, such as Sykes's *Prof Scam* (1988). We need to address this historical moment by presenting a public defense of what many of us have long considered the undisputed right of the academic department: to encourage great teaching and scholarship. We must now answer the following politically framed question: "Why should we give you, this department, a right to pursue teaching and scholarship on this particular campus?" Accountability invites a feeling of vulnerability. We must prove, not just assume our worth to a campus. All departments are vulnerable that cannot articulate a direc-

tion and document success. Communication departments are, perhaps, even more vulnerable. Roy Berko reports that in 1993, the National Communication Association national office received over 80 requests for help in defending communication departments (Berko, 1994, cited in Engleberg, 1996). This problem, however, presents an unwanted, but nevertheless necessary, dialogical opportunity. Vulnerability implies an openness to the other. We cannot live in this historical moment if we ignore the speech around us. One cannot enter into dialogue without making oneself vulnerable to the other's voice, permitting influence from the other to shape us to some degree. And, if a genuine dialogue is invited, we are given opportunity to shape the other. A genuine dialogue of local and translocal voices permit co-shaping that gives birth to a new entity that is neither uniquely the domain of the campus nor of the discipline, but their shared creation: the academic department.

We are held accountable by and feel vulnerable to the concept "excellence." Excellence is a rhetorical term, defined by "players" on a campus, who determine whether or not we are identified as "excellent" contributors to the particular academic culture of the campus. In turn, our evaluative status represents the status of the discipline in our home university or college.

EXCELLENCE

Excellence—what is it in practice? Such a question has propelled inquiry from Aristotle to Pirzig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* Dialectically, excellence is the synthesis of competing demands aiming at a "good," each of value, each problematic without the other. This essay examines two social goods understood best in dialectical tension: the craft of the discipline and the craft of an academic "home" (Arnett, 1992). Craft knowledge and action are gained in apprenticeship in the discipline and in apprenticeship as a campus citizen. Excellence emerges out of life-long apprenticeship *and* leadership to both the discipline and the home campus. When two contrasting calls for excellence, one local—the campus—and the other translocal—the discipline, meet in tension, only then does the opportunity for discovering departmental excellence emerge. In dialectical fashion, both the discipline and the unique academic home co-shape a departmental vision of excellence. To attend only to the discipline results in a linguistic oddity, the Discipline Department. To conform merely to a University mission invites an equally problematic linguistic phrase, the University Department. The tension brought forth by naming one's discipline, in this case, Communication, and naming one's role or place on a campus, Department, reminds us that a unique discipline has been given an opportunity to be a part, a department of a larger mission. Excellence for the Communication Department lies in the tension of translocal disciplinary commitment and the mission of a local academic "home" (Arnett, 1992).

We may not like the term "excellence." We may consider it inappropriate and foolish for any outside body to attempt to define excellence. We are more content with the discipline alone offering a vision of excellence or perhaps relegating such a task to each individual scholar. But, like it or not, home campuses decide what departments will thrive and those that will be eliminated. The dialectic of disciplinary and campus visions of excellence is not polite chatter, but the political and pragmatic reality that surrounds a basic campus question—"Should we continue to offer this academic major?" Excellence is defined by standpoint; socio-economic status, race, gender, and local culture frame "excellence" as a political consequence, not as an aesthetic ideal.

STANDPOINT

Using communication as an analogy, we cannot by ourselves control the perception of departmental excellence. Therefore, we not only need to know our own standpoint, but the standpoint of the "other" (Wood, 1997). Excellence, as is communication competence, is defined according to the standpoint of the onlooker standing in judgment (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Just as judgments of appropriateness and competence reside in impressions created by actors and read by others, so excellence lies in the eye of the beholder. However, standards of excellence are not private standards. They derive from shared perspectives of participants in definable groups (e.g. ethnic, professional, community) who hold shared, identifiable criteria for excellence.

What generates a group's particular perspective? According to standpoint theory, a group's status in society, or its standpoint, shapes its members' experiences, codes of conduct, and values (Wood, 1997). Therefore, different groups may hold different expectations for what constitutes excellence in a particular enterprise, institution, or activity. These expectations will be based in the group's vision of what the institution or activity being judged should be as excellent. Political power will operationalize the meaning of the term. Excellence is a rhetorical notion, defined not in the abstract but between persons in community.

In order to enact excellence, one must be able to understand the standpoint of the "others" doing the judging, even when we are in disagreement.

MULTIPLE CONSTITUENCIES

Who are these "others" who shape a definition of excellence? They include the communication discipline, one's local campus or institutional home, and the diffused public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Each of these "others" constitutes a set of expectations that functions as a generalized other (Mead, 1934) in each domain. To the extent that a department can take the perspective or standpoint of these multiple generalized others, it can engage creatively an educational vision capable of addressing concerns of multiple audiences— each with differing criteria for "excellence."

If one accepts "excellence" as a rhetorical construct of political significance on a college campus, then one requires knowledge of the primary constituencies shaping this political debate. The eventual political outcome is shaped through the interplay of three constituencies: *the discipline, the local campus, and the larger public.*

For the individual scholar/teacher, each of the above constituencies may feel like an alien "other." However, only by participating with and attending to varied constituent voices will a department understand the political definition of the term "excellence." The individual can "holler" all he/she wants, but political terms are defined by powerful constituencies, not by lone voices.

1. *The discipline.* The communication discipline is one "other" that evaluates excellence. The discipline itself is disparate, not unitary. However, despite differing methodologies and foci, there is consensus that excellence involves teaching the best scholarship available from one's perspective. Our Ph.D. programs do lead the definition of excellence. Calls for scholarship that illuminate insight into the field of communication are a primary charge to our Ph.D. graduates. (Of course, we want high quality teaching, but Ph.D. programs live and die on research reputations [Wilson, 1995].) We place our students in accordance with the reputations of individual scholars and departmental reputation.

We cannot refute that scholarship is the key to excellence in a Ph.D. program. We should not even try to alter this view of excellence. Scholarship drives the definition of

excellence and ultimately the reputation of the discipline. (See Craig & Carlone, 1998, for a study that examines books and serials in the area of communication as one indicator of the health of the discipline.) Instead of trying to alter this view of excellence given to many graduate students, we need to both affirm and broaden the perspective of excellence by listening to yet another constituency.

2. *The local campus.* One's local university or college home judges excellence according to its mission. The mission of a campus revolves around the multiple social goods of teaching, scholarship, and service. Again, how such rhetorical terms are defined is constituent determined. Teaching excellence on one campus may be four courses per semester with teaching effectiveness scores of 4.5 on a 5-point scale. Another campus may consider one or two courses with good student comments adequate from a faculty member with multiple books with a University press to his/her credit. Yet another campus may call for service to the discipline, local community, and college as primary.

> Higher education institutions today highly value programs that assist the institution in meeting its own objectives. At Carnegie Research I institutions this may translate into publications with visible impact in high prestige outlets (e.g., prize winning books with academic presses) ... At a community college it may translate into the development of a high quality degree or certification program ... At a small private liberal arts institution with a small communication faculty it may mean securing a grant to develop an interdisciplinary teaching effort . . .that is at the heart of the institution's teaching mission. Certainly any of these initiatives could serve as an indicator of quality at any of the types of institutions mentioned. Understanding that fact is what makes "thinking locally" so important. (Applegate, Darling, Sprague, Nyquist, & Anderson, 1997, pp. 115-116)

Like any organizational culture, a campus needs interpretation. A chair needs to articulate *the* focus on a campus—scholar/teacher, teacher/scholar, research, or teaching—and allocate reasonable percentages to the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service to assist a new hire through socialization, which is not always accomplished to the extent necessary (Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998). Excellence is defined by the campus emphasis of teaching, scholarship, and service. What is the correct percentage? The answer in baseball terms is: "Whatever the umpire (campus officials and empowered colleagues) call them." A fair umpire is not necessarily one that seems like "me," but is consistent with what are called strikes—excellence.

Ellen Wartella (1996) calls us to consider why communication departments have been perceived as less than central to their universities' missions. One issue is the ambiguity of the term "communication." The variety of subject areas in communication—from interpersonal communication to mass media to rhetoric and cultural studies—has led to the perception of communication as an interdisciplinary field rather than a discipline (Becker Task Force Report). A department with a perceived vague subject matter is hard to place within the intellectual structure of a university or college. Battles internal to communication departments and isolation from other departments contribute to the perception of noncentrality as well, with problematic departments seen a nuisance (Becker Task Force Report) or as peripheral service areas. Finally, Wartella suggests that communication scholar/teachers are not seen as "addressing the public questions about communication practice in the world" (p. 152). Institutions of higher education seek to prepare students for life as productive citizens in organizational and public life. Our departments need to show their concerns for these issues through their curricula (Fritz, 1997) and mission.

A simple way to enhance a department's perceived value is to embrace "excellence" as defined by the campus. For instance, if great teaching, service on committees, and placement of graduates are central to campus "excellence" and departmental colleagues only want to discuss publication—watch out. Few people approve of violation of one's own culture. A campus mission is a reflection of the culture of a campus—violate it at your own risk. And each campus must hear the voice of the discipline in a way that it can understand, in its own language, so that the discipline may hold its own and advance in that particular location.

A local campus is a *polis*, a community that calls its members to find places of service and a vocation for their lives. "A city is a place where a small boy [girl], as he [she] walks through it, may see something that will tell him [her] what he [she] wants to do with his [her] life" (Kahn, cited in Kazin, 1998). To the extent that a department offers a sense of invitation for discovery to those who seek, it will help fulfill the mission of its local home and thereby advance the discipline.

3. *The public.* The public holds departments and entire institutions accountable for the education of each new generation of students. Educational institutions function as guardians of the liberal arts and critical thinking and speaking skills necessary to function in civil society. We are told by accrediting bodies, who represent an amorphous public, to defend our claims. What is demanded is congruence between public statements and our private actions with documentation demonstrating the congruence. As each Communication Department "walks its talk," the discipline gains a reputation for excellence and thereby advances.

For instance, if we say that we assist critical listening skills, we need to demonstrate how and to what extent. We may want customer protection when we purchase a car *and* the public wants such protection in purchasing an expensive education. We need not fear the public or accrediting agencies. They call for congruence—consistency between what we say we practice and what we do. Carl Rogers placed mental health largely at the foot of congruence. For a campus or department to be healthy, congruence between proclamation and action is essential. Accrediting agencies do us a service with their demands— they point us toward a road of health, "excellence," congruence between the stated and the performed.

Sensitivity to the above three constituencies will determine one's resource allocation on a campus and within a discipline. To ignore any constituency, whether discipline, campus, or an accountability-hungry public, is to put our resources at risk.

DIALOGUE, POWER, AND EXCELLENCE

Departments are required to articulate a direction and document success. Resources are determined by what we document. Scholarship yields reputation. Sensitivity to mission of a campus yields positive teaching evaluations, faculty promotion and salary, and placement in positions of power on the campus. Accountability requires congruence between public proclamation and private action, yielding positive assessment by accrediting agencies and satisfied alumni. Resources come to departments that know the why and the how of their actions and can benchmark those actions with a larger discipline, the campus culture, and accrediting efforts.

We often define power as interpersonal linkages, expertise, finances, and reputation (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995). Benchmarking, scholarship, great teaching, contributing alumni and blessings from outside agencies legitimize our power. Power provides resources and invites the possibility of dialogue between persons of different standpoints.

Dialogue in a political environment begins with the presence of partners with equal power. Paulo Freire has made such a view of dialogue very clear as he assisted oppressed

and illiterate Brazilian people (Freire, 1974). Martin Buber simply stated that the beginning of dialogue is knowing one's own ground (Buber, 1972).

Knowing one's own ground requires a clear understanding of one's power resources: scholarly and teaching reputation, alumni and campus support, and outside verification. A position of power then opens the opportunity for dialogue with varied constituencies: the discipline, the campus, and the general public.

One method of addressing multiple constituencies from one's own ground is through a departmental mission—a public statement addressing each of these constituencies providing guidelines in narrative fashion for the ways in which it can be carried out. An effective departmental mission cannot be crafted without knowledge of the mission of one's academic discipline and one's given university—this knowledge works in a dialectical fashion to frame a departmental mission.

The value of a mission is to establish argumentative parameters, niche, and clarity of resource use. A mission statement provides the assumptive base on which arguments are made and by which a department establishes its relationship to the university of which it is a part. A departmental mission provides direction for how resources are to be requested and allocated, which assists accountability. A mission presents an identity to the "other."

With a mission or a sense of identity in place, we must listen to the "other" as we simultaneously engage in restraint. Emotivism (MacIntyre, 1984), making evaluative judgments based on one's own internal criteria, needs to be rejected for work within limits of a given set of possibilities, defined publicly, in this historical era. We need to listen for the other's voice, not just for what we want to hear.

As a faculty joins a larger dialogue that defines the uniqueness of a given department, excellence is defined by the power of people—dialogue with differing constituencies interested in higher education. As in any *corpus* where power is distributed democratically, this entity, power, belongs not just to me or you, but to multiple constituencies. Instead of bemoaning being an academic in this era, we need to enter the fray. The discipline of communication has the vocabulary that understands the social nature of rhetorical terms such as "excellence." We understand the competing social interests that keep power under control in a democratic culture. Finally, we understand the scope of communication from democratic free speech and research accountability to human dialogue that creates community:

> Public opinions are imbedded in the ongoing dialogue in which classes, races, religions, genders, generations, regions, and a host of other significant discriminators rub against each other, problematize one another's assumptions about meaning, create discursive spaces in which new interpretations may emerge, and lead, even if tentatively, to intersections that provide collective expressions of shared sentiments. (Hauser, 1998, p. 104)

If we use what we know, we, as a field of study, not only can address multiple constituencies, but we can contribute to a fundamental human story of caring about ideas, institutions, and people—a story about "higher" education where we state publicly what we intend to do, listen to other concerned constituencies (voices), and in the best of Enlightenment learnings make our results public for all to see on a particular campus, in a particular culture, charged with a particular mission. In this way not only our departments, but our discipline, will advance in credibility and in service to the larger human community.

The task for every department that wants to pursue excellence is to know, understand, and operate within the hidden curriculum of a campus that socializes faculty to the ongo-

ing mission of that particular institution (Oseroff-Varnell, 1998). The larger public and the discipline guide us with the final test being our reception on our "home" campuses. Excellence is in the eye of the beholder; we need to look with the eyes of a translocal and a local, capable of flourishing on a particular college *polis*, with a particular understanding of academic excellence.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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