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Building Excellence in Communication Studies: Illinois Speech Communication 1975-1995 as Exemplar

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For a significant period of time, from the late 1970s into the 1990s, the Speech Communication department at the University of Illinois achieved distinction as the most prominent center in our field for constructivist research. Constructivism is a distinctive approach to analysis and communication research that places central focus on interpretive structures and practices that shape conduct within communicative contexts (Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982). In this essay, I want to comment on building departmental excellence through creating the conditions for development of the kind of focus that emerged at Illinois.

Constructivism's central tenet is that the human world is invested with meaning through cultural and individual processes of interpretation within the ongoing fabric of social interaction. Individuals enter into and are shaped by their location within history and culture, but they have available personal and social resources for applying cultural and experience-based constructs to navigate novel contexts. With experience, individuals and groups develop stable structures for interpreting the social contexts of everyday life and the people who are part of them, and their communicative practices can, in part, be understood through analysis of these stable structures. Hence, much of the constructivist research on which our department has focussed analyzes the patterns of social construal and communication strategies associated with stable differences in the complexity of individuals' constructs for perceiving and thinking about persons. There is an important continuity in this kind of analysis at the individual and interactional levels with that of such analysts as Thomas Kuhn (1970) in the concern with the historically embedded paradigms that shape practice within fields of study. This orientation provides the starting point for the present discussion.

CONTEXT AND EXCELLENCE

Every field and social institution develops constructs that express, however implicitly, what it values. Any discussion of building excellence must begin with an understanding of those constructs that define the particular field of interpretation within which the endeavor is positioned. A university department occupies a central location within a multi-valued array that embodies complex and sometimes competing models of excellence. The multiple and potentially contradictory concepts that define excellence in the modern university make the task of building and defending excellence fraught with difficulty. We at once are members of a broad, pluralistic field of study made up of multiple subfields, each with its own prevailing paradigms and evaluative standards. The department with all its internal complexity is organized within a particular college or school structure overseen by lead administrators with their own value constructs; the school or college is itself made up of multiple departments, each defined by distinctive traditions and preferences. And we are all constituent members of a given campus with its particular place in the pecking order of American higher education and the expectations that go with such position. At various times on a given campus the salient pressures will emphasize the needs of undergraduate students, the quality and stature of graduate programs, imperatives associated with developing support for sponsored research, or many other emphases reflecting local situations. Concepts of excellence express multiple contexts of evaluation, and successful program development requires sensitivity to these multiple frames, including those hierarchies of valuation embedded in local circumstances. Building excellence involves development along particular pathways that achieve endorsement and are given support within a locally-inflected hierarchical value matrix.

In the end, it is critical that the potential pulls in different directions be reconciled into an approach that works to achieve positive regard at multiple levels. If a department is built that is regarded as excellent within the discipline at large but is not well regarded within its campus, it will not receive the long-term support essential for enduring excellence. A department that ignores its standing within the discipline to address only the internal agenda of a dean, provost, or president is similarly unlikely to sustain long-term excellence. Likewise, a department that focuses only on one dimension, such as its graduate program, places at risk its capacity to achieve excellence in the multiple aspects of its mission. Building excellence requires building multi-dimensional programs with high adaptive capacity.

The context for program building at Illinois in the late 1970s and 1980s presented significant advantages and substantial challenges for program building. The Department of Speech Communication, a constituent unit of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, had a deep tradition of excellence and leadership within the field. Illinois faculty had been prominent in the establishment of the modern discipline of Speech in the early decades of the century, and the department enjoyed high visibility in the field. As 1970 approached, the large umbrella department formed after World War II was being reshaped with Theatre going to the College of Fine and Applied Arts and Speech and Hearing Science on its way to separate department status within LAS. The department held a national leadership position in rhetorical studies with Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Richard Murphy, Joseph Wenzel and others continuing the great Illinois tradition that had been built under Karl Wallace's leadership of the department from 1947 to 1968.

Illinois also was one of those campuses centrally involved across the 1950s in the emergence of communication research through its interdisciplinary work in the Institute of Communications Research within the Graduate College. (The ICR later moved into the College of Communications.) The behavioral science strand within the field also was well established within Speech Communication, though it did not hold center stage in the early

1970s. Traditional areas of speech communication were represented, including a leading group in interpretation studies and a substantial speech education program. Compared to most departments in the field, Speech Communication at Illinois was large with more than 20 faculty lines and was in what amounted to a continuous recruitment mode, given the high undergraduate enrollments and the continuing high flow of graduate students.

However, by the mid-1970's the traditional excellence of the department was challenged. Wallace had retired and gone on to his final career phase at the University of Massachusetts. The middle generation that would naturally move to leadership was substantially thinned through the departure in the late 1960s to other campuses of such key faculty as Thomas Scheidel (to Wisconsin) and Thomas Sloane (to UC-Berkeley). Substantial generational change created the need for renewal just at the period that the field at large was struggling most intensely with issues of the proper balance between rhetorical studies and communication research and issues of how to build greater depth within graduate education and research to leverage our position among the disciplines. We faced continued demands for undergraduate speech instruction (enrollment in freshman performance courses totaled over 2,500 per semester) and expanding opportunities for undergraduate and graduate education within a more homogeneous unit created by the dismantling of the traditional umbrella-department structure. The complementary relationship on the campus of Speech Communication in Liberal Arts and Sciences and the professionally centered College of Communications provided synergy in communication studies, but it also made more complex the pathways through which public address studies in Speech Communication might evolve toward the expanding spheres of media studies and, later, cultural studies.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of budget constraint and serious program evaluation on the Urbana-Champaign campus. The climate was not entirely hospitable to communication studies. Radio-Television studies in the College of Communications had come under attack and the Radio-TV department was discontinued, leading to James Carey's departure to Iowa (he would later return as dean of the Communications College). The same internal Committee on Program Evaluation that had recommended the discontinuance of Radio-TV studies raised questions about Speech Communication.

By the mid-to-late-1970s, the context for program building in communication studies at Illinois thus involved substantial opportunities fed by continuing high enrollments, but this opportunity was counterbalanced by the emergence of intense internal institutional evaluation processes that pointed to the need for unequivocally demonstrating departmental excellence on a par with the campus' stature as one of American's very best universities. Because of the rapid generational change in the faculty, by the late 1970s the overwhelming majority of faculty members were under age 40, and I was asked to assume the headship of the department to continue this generational makeover.

EVOLVING A DEPARTMENTAL APPROACH TO EXCELLENCE

In reflecting on the implicit principles that guided program-building in the subsequent years, I would identify the following.

(1) We committed ourselves to incorporating into departmental practices adherence to the criteria for excellence given expression by the best units on the campus. This meant building excellence around research accomplishment, for the criterion of research excellence is at the center of the model of evaluation embraced by the university and its leading units. Expectations for promotion and other rewards correspondent with those of the best units on campus were embedded deeply into the practices and culture of the department. We did not ask what "they" (the LAS College Executive Committee, the Dean, the Campus Promotion and Tenure Committee) wanted in a record worthy of promotion; rather,

we embraced as our own the expectations for research accomplishment shared by the campus' best faculty and applied them at the department level. We also cultivated an unambiguous expectation that excellence in teaching should be integrated fully with active research programs and that rewards should reflect this deep fusion of teaching and research.

The department has enjoyed an enviable and unbroken record of having its tenure recommendations endorsed by higher levels of review, though this has been bought at the price of placing on young faculty high demands that, in many instances, exceed those on their peers at other universities with well-regarded doctoral programs in the field. This commitment to the allocation of rewards on the basis of high productivity and accomplishment has been the foundation for building the department's excellence and high regard.

(2) In the transformation of the Illinois department since the late 1970s, we also have self-consciously sought to develop excellence across the scope of our endeavors, from our responsibility for basic public speaking to our participation in interdisciplinary graduate programs. As was noted earlier, any complex institution will present a matrix of valuation within which a unit operates. There are many aspects to a department's mission, and while research excellence is central in the Illinois context, we also properly have been judged by how effectively undergraduate programs and service responsibilities have been met. Across the 1980s, the Speech Communication major was developed to a position of prominence within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with between four and five hundred declared concentrators most years, and the department's oral and written communication courses were strengthened with well-designed syllabi addressing general university expectations. We also implemented model programs for developing graduate students as teachers, and the quality of instruction has consistently been evaluated highly by students.

(3) We established a strong relationship with line administrators with oversight responsibility for the department. This involved making clear the fit between our aspirations and program goals and the values, aims, and evaluative criteria of the campus. This established a framework within which our evolving needs could be articulated, and we could increasingly gain the confidence of the line administrators above the department. The school director to whom I reported as department head maintained a flow of resources to the department and was our advocate on critical occasions.

(4) Central emphasis was placed on the recruitment and development of outstanding young faculty in all areas. As noted earlier, significant generational change, continued high instructional demand and the confidence of line administrators made for substantial recruitment opportunities. Rather than simply continuing the alignments of the past, hiring was focused within major areas of the field based upon our assessments of the potential for adding intellectual strength to the department. Said a different way, we focused on where we saw the field evolving rather than on preserving the configurations of the past. We felt that the only way to protect the legacy of excellence at Illinois was to build upon it rather than to try and maintain what had been. Our goal was to build a faculty with the capacity to reshape the field and raise its status by publishing and teaching at a level with the best in our field--and with the best in cognate departments within the university. We sought to hire individuals in every area who would be disciplinary leaders and whose work would be recognized as excellent by those in cognate fields with whom they would interact on the campus.

(5) We also evolved the goal of building within major areas of the field interconnected groups of faculty who could work together effectively, for the department was seen as needing to be more than a collection of individual faculty stars. We sought self-consciously to build faculty clusters in which we felt we had comparative advantage that could be bolstered by additional hiring. The strategy was to build complementary

groups that represented major directions of disciplinary development. Ken Andersen and Roger Nebergall were part of a loosely coupled group that supported traditional empirical persuasion studies, but that cluster was supported by individuals from other groups that were being systematically developed. Established mid-career strength in communication theory and interpersonal communication was provided in the late 1970s by Jesse Delia and Ruth Anne Clark. The focus we provided was directly supported by recruitment of our graduates, Barbara and Daniel O'Keefe and by the intersecting areas of communication theory, interpersonal influence, discourse analysis, and relational communication research. These latter areas were rounded out with strong additional hiring that included David Seibold, Dean Hewes, Sally Planalp, Marcy Dorfman, Randall Stutman, and Sara Newell (and later Daena Goldsmith and Dale Brashers). The communication research groups these faculty members formed were complemented with one of the field's most forward looking faculty clusters in small group and organizational communication through the recruitment of Robert McPhee, Scott Poole, George Cheney, Noshir Contractor, and Andrea Hollingshead, among others. Qualitative and ethnographic studies were established early in the 1980s around Cheris Kramarae with a focus on women's issues and gender studies, and the ethnography of communication was extended into other areas through hiring Robert Husband in organizational communication and Peggy Miller, Carolyn Taylor, and George Kamberelis in cultural and developmental processes in communication. Recruitments to rhetorical theory and public discourse studies in the late 1970s and 1980s included Thomas Conley, Celeste Condit, Barry Morris, Michael Lacy, Dilip Goankar, and James Jasinski, among others, and the rhetorical studies group was balanced by development of a philosophy of communication and cultural studies perspective by adding individuals such as Lawrence Grossberg, David Desser, James Hay, and Andrea Press who connected to interdisciplinary programs in the LAS College (the Program for Cinema Studies and the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory) and to the communication and culture group in the College of Communications. More recently, a political communication group has been developed around David Swanson with the recruitment of Scott Althaus and David Tewksbury.

(6) A hallmark of the Illinois department has been its involvement in many of the interdisciplinary engagements that the field naturally opens. While striving for leadership within the discipline, broad involvement within the life of the campus was encouraged. As a consequence we have had over the past quarter century close involvements through one or another faculty colleague with outstanding faculty members from across the Urbana-Champaign campus. This has contributed materially to the department's stature in its home environment. Various of our faculty have held joint appointments with Anthropology, Afro-American Studies, Business Administration, Communications, Criticism and Interpretive Theory, Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Psychology, Engineering, Library and Information Science, Linguistics, Political Science, Psychology, Writing Studies, and Women's Studies. The interdisciplinary texture of the field has also led us to be open to hiring across disciplinary lines where training and talent have established a fit (past or present faculty with the Ph.D. from outside communication studies include Thomas Conley [Classics and Social Thought], David Desser [Film], James Hay [Comparative Literature], Stephen Hartnett [Comparative Literature], Andrea Hollingshead [Psychology], George Kamberelis [Educational Psychology], Michelle Koven [Human Development], Peggy Miller [Psychology], Andrea Press [Sociology], and Carolyn Taylor [Applied Linguistics]). The cross-disciplinary standing of the faculty and their interdisciplinary engagements have permitted the department to build substantial local visibility and have positioned it well toward participation in the rising tide of interdisciplinary work on the campus. Strong interdisciplinarity, however, has meant we have had somewhat less

presence within the field and its journals than would be the case with a more singularly discipline-centered faculty.

(7) While building groups with shared interests and approaches, the department also has sought always to promote the development of its faculty, and in particular to provide an environment and resources important to the development of young faculty. This has included provision of essential research facilities and support, manageable teaching loads that involve close alignment of areas of teaching with areas of expertise and appropriate support by teaching assistants, and assignment of service responsibilities with sensitivity to research and teaching demands (in many cases service responsibilities have been lodged with academic professionals rather than line faculty). Beyond this, all the diverse groups that have made up the department have benefitted from policies aimed at maintaining the competitiveness of graduate student support, for attracting the best graduate students is essential to the overall intellectual vitality and robustness of a department in a university such as Illinois. The shared outlook within faculty groups has further contributed across the years to intellectual engagement among the faculty, their development of collaborations, and the formation of strong research teams involving faculty and graduate students. At the same time, the overall size of the department and the diversity of groups and approaches have assured broad exposure to the intellectual traditions of the field and to the potential for training in multiple traditions.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AS AN EMERGENT DEPARTMENTAL FOCUS

Building overlapping and intersecting faculty groups resulted in the emergence of the Illinois department in the late 1970s and 1980s as a center for constructivist studies. The beginning of this period saw a strong turn within the discipline toward meta-theoretical analyses and concern with the presuppositions of theoretical and methodological approaches to communication study. This included work within the tripartite framework of laws, rules, and systems perspectives (see "Alternative Perspectives for the Study of Human Communication: A Symposium," 1997). The identification of the Illinois department with this turn and with the subsequent movement toward interest in interpretive approaches was established through Daniel O'Keefe's critique of logical empiricism (O'Keefe, 1975), my essay on constructivism and communication study (Delia, 1977), my co-authorship with Grossberg on the general theme of interpretation and evidence in communication study (Delia and Grossberg, 1977), and Swanson's analytic investigations of approaches to rhetorical criticism undertaken within the framework of epistemological concepts closely related to those of constructivism (e.g. Swanson, 1977). Thus, by the late 1970s constructivism was substantially connected to the growing body of work pointing to the centrality of interpretive processes in communication even though constructivist research seldom involved ideographic investigations.

Constructivism's visibility as a vigorous research strand also was well established by the close the 1970s when the "Constructivist's Olio" issue of *Communication Monographs* (1979) appeared. The association of this work with Illinois was strengthened by Ruth Anne Clark having begun to publish within this framework (e.g., Clark & Delia, 1977; Delia & Clark, 1977; Delia, Clark, & Switzer, 1974). The association of constructivism to the department was further reinforced by our recruiting the O'Keefes back to Illinois. Constructivism's visibility as a highly productive research paradigm was further heightened by graduates such as James Applegate, Brant Burleson, Susan Kline, and many others trained in this tradition who established their own vigorous research programs on other campuses and extended the networks of involved scholars. The influence of the perspective also spread internationally, with a particularly noteworthy presence in Australia.

When a dominant perspective takes root and is followed by a substantial number of graduate students, that perspective is naturally reinforced by the informal interaction patterns among those students. This, in turn, will typically make it easier to do work within the perspective, and productivity is intensified. The intellectual agendas of other paradigms are likely to be seen as less compelling as the hegemony is strengthened. This was to some degree characteristic of the Illinois department for a period, but our goal remained to open rather than limit the intellectual horizon, and Speech Communication at Illinois was never monolithic in outlook or approach. Indeed, transitions to new problems and perspectives were rapid from the mid-1980s into the 1990s as new faculty clusters were developed and different problems and issues came to the fore within the discipline and in the agendas of individual faculty. It is fair to say that all the traditions that defined the department of the early 1980s have been transformed, joined by others, and infused with the excitement of current disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns.

Because writings associated with constructivism helped shape what turned out to be an important disciplinary turn toward the centrality of interpretive processes in understandings of communication, the constructivist group at Illinois dominated the identity of the department for a time and became a strong magnet for excellent graduate students. The general importance of this for building departmental excellence is, I think, twofold. First, it points to the value of building groups focused toward issues at the leading edge of the field, for it is from such groups that the field's work is shaped. Second, it underscores the utility of cluster hiring to build faculty groups who can be mutually reinforcing and leverage one another's work. We have seen many examples in recent years in which major strides in building departmental excellence have followed from the development of intersecting faculty groups who are positioned to capitalize on and shape major intellectual developments. For example, several literature departments (and some communication departments) nationally have rapidly changed their character by building groups to capitalize on the rapid turn toward cultural studies. Similarly, life science departments have been repositioned in short order through hiring large groups in core cell and developmental biology or in bioinformatics and functional genomics to reposition toward major turns within molecular bioscience.

Thus, the constructivist turn in communication studies at Illinois in the late 1970s and early 1980s underscores the value of multiple-group cluster hiring of excellent young faculty within a field's areas of highest vitality. This approach to building excellence permitted the unplanned, emergent development of a dominant perspective for a time, but preserved adaptive capacity by avoiding a narrowing of mission toward singular support of this emergent focus. It needs to be emphasized, therefore, that cluster hiring of the sort practiced at Illinois works best when balanced by a broad vision of excellence that recognizes both the need for diversification of perspectives and approaches and the importance of promoting practices that support the ongoing self-renewal of a department's faculty. In the end, long-term excellence in the research university is secured by hiring and sustaining the careers of faculty who are intellectually engaged with one another, with the missions of their unit and campus, and with the leading edge of their respective fields. Departments that sustain excellence long term are those that cultivate and reward the faculty's continual self-renewal toward the horizon of the discipline. It is thus noteworthy that the Illinois department at the close of the century is guided by principles very close to those followed in building the department of the early 1980s even though the areas of principal disciplinary focus are now far from those of two decades ago.

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