

Journal of the Association for Communication Administration
28(1999), 145-150

Report of the Sub-committee on Advancing the Discipline in the Small Undergraduate College Department

JOSEPH W. MACDONIELS, CHAIRPERSON

The sub-committee was asked to respond to the reports of the other Task Force committees and prepare a series of statements relevant to the charge to the Task Force which are particularly applicable to "small undergraduate college programs." The following suggestions and points made are a compilation of the responses to the NCA's Task Force on Advancing the Discipline that came from individual sub-committee members, rather than a synthesis.

RELATIONSHIP TO INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

While there is agreement that the small undergraduate college department must represent the mission of the institution, the inherent "intimacy" of smaller institutions requires greater attention to the institutional mission vis-a-vis the departmental mission in consideration of the issues and directions of the discipline.

It is essential that departments figure out what the institutional mission is and be very clear on the department mission. Often, the true mission of the smaller institution is not fully specified in institutional statements but resides in the culture, traditions and, perhaps, the religious affiliation of the institution. Units must come to a clear understanding of the true institutional mission and develop the unit mission accordingly.

In smaller institutions, mission statements are not established and delivered products of the organization but arise in the dynamic of community. They are available to be influenced as well as existing to influence. Departments must work to help shape the institutional view of the discipline and the local program so that the connection between a department's theoretical commitments and the institution's mission can be clearly recognized. An example might be the potential for clash when the Christian commitment of many smaller institutions appears to be challenged by a disciplinary focus on interpretive theories and methodologies, or postmodern perspectives.

The relationship between the departmental or unit mission and the institutional mission is important in defining the significance of the discipline to the institution. The challenge for the department is to avoid the recitation of such phrases as "making of shared meanings" or "symbolic creation of community" in contexts where they are neither understood nor valued. As one member of the subcommittee put it, "If people who teach and study communication can't come closer to the blood and bone of what DIFFERENCE it makes whether we share meaning or live in community, then we've articulated the shell of a mission but not its heart."

Articulation of the "heart of the mission" is not easy. It requires a commitment of effort, time and resources by all members of the unit. Once accomplished, it must be utilized and regularly revised.

The department mission must include commitment to providing theoretically-grounded education and must be clear about the way theoretical elements of our discipline relate to the institution's mission.

By mission and practice, we must be what we teach. It must be made clear that our disciplinary purpose is, and always has been, related to ensuring that people know how to analyze and produce the discourse required to reflectively and effectively participate in society.

Our mission ought to reflect the emphasis of our discipline on the key elements of "process" and "immediacy"; the ongoing, dynamic aspect of communication praxis.

STAFFING AND CURRICULUM ISSUES

In the small undergraduate college there is usually a great deal of knowledge—real or perceived—concerning the faculty, courses, curricular structure, and quality of each department. Issues of staffing and curriculum management are important in the credibility of the program.

The most troubling difficulty the small department faces is the perception that its program lacks rigor. Often this is a perception of the discipline transferred to the department but, more often, the transference is in the other direction. Staffing, curricular content, and the structure of the curriculum are the key concerns for managing perceptions of disciplinary rigor.

Curricular rigor is represented by the content of courses and the quality of the materials utilized in instruction. When superficial and remedial textbooks are adopted, assignments and course activities lack purpose or rigor, or when course structures and sequences lack purpose and validity, the credibility of the program is called into question.

Quality is difficult to define and achieve, particularly in the small undergraduate program where the indicators utilized in large research institutions are not easily applied. Teaching is the primary focus of programs in the small liberal arts college, but they must also reflect the cutting edge of theory in the field. Ongoing programmatic research is difficult but a commitment to continuing intellectual development by faculty is essential.

Each staffing decision in the small undergraduate program is critical to establishing the quality of the program, both real and perceived. Hiring is probably the most critical, although retention, promotion, and tenure follow very closely in importance, as the small department cannot absorb a weak member!

Departments must have a clear vision of the level of quality sought in new staff and not settle for candidates who do not reflect the requisite level of competence. It is better to say NO to a hiring than to weaken or fail to improve the strength of the department.

Retention, promotion and tenure should come as the result of intentional evaluation and review. Candidates should not be advanced whose performance or competence does

not meet institutional or departmental standards. In the small institutional context, these decisions are painful and it is easy to gloss over, rather than address, difficult issues of performance and competence.

In addition to competence and performance, personality and character are magnified in the small institution context. Members who alienate faculty from other programs, administrators, or students cause great damage to the perceptions of the whole program and discipline. Such members are not dismissed as an isolated minority but are regarded as spokespersons for the values, attitudes, and objectives of the whole department.

The importance of curricular offerings and scheduling decisions is also magnified in the small institutional context. Schedules must be constructed to meet student programmatic needs more than faculty preferences. When small departments fail to present the curriculum efficiently, the credibility of the department suffers.

PROBLEMS OF THEORY AND PERFORMANCE

Finding the balance between theory and performance is a persistent theme in the small undergraduate college program. With heavy demand for practice pressuring programs into a service role, theoretical approaches are often ignored. When programs place greater emphasis on the theoretical study of communication, the institution may call for greater emphasis on performance.

Departments must find a way to make clear that the skill development or performance qualities of their programs, the qualities which are sought by employers, are derived from and intrinsic to theoretical understanding, the quality which is valued within the academy.

The curricular demand of the small undergraduate unit is such that teaching "performance" courses is unavoidable. The inclination of scholars in our field to avoid or renounce performance courses has significant consequences at many small, undergraduate institutions. Recognition of performance as a laboratory for the enactment of theory is an approach which can dissolve the dichotomy of theory versus performance.

Whether a program is theory or performance focused, it is important that clear and sensible programs of assessment are established which will ensure progress toward goals. Assessment of the consequence of exposure to our programs is particularly salient for small institutions where the feedback from graduates is widely noted across the institution.

A careful balance between theory and performance combined with clear evidence from systematic assessment may make it possible for us to demonstrate to the public that what we are teaching its children is making enough difference.

COLLEGIALITY AND PARTICIPATION IN INSTITUTIONAL LIFE

The context in which smaller undergraduate programs are located provides much greater access to a large portion of institutional life. This is both an advantage to be exploited in several ways and a disadvantage. It is a disadvantage in that concerns about credibility, competence, collegiality, and teamwork surface quickly and publicly. On the other hand, access to the processes of the institution can be an advantage.

The small college environment allows access to the formal and informal networks where matters of disciplinary importance can be raised, discussed, and distributed within the institution.

In informal, casual and commonplace meetings with colleagues, administrators and others, intellectual and professional competencies are demonstrated, recognized and, often, rewarded.

Participation on committees, task forces, or in the governance system allow disciplinary values and professional skills to be displayed. Thus, we have opportunities to model what we teach.

Policies and programs of the institution are easier to influence in the small institutional context. Election to faculty posts, participation in committees, and participation in the important discussions of educational purpose and practice are available to most faculty members in small undergraduate programs. Articulating in these forums the larger view of human communication which our discipline represents can be significant in shaping the understanding and perception of the department and the discipline.

Interdisciplinary initiatives represent both opportunities and dangers at institutions of all types. In the small college context, the opportunities might be real and positive but it is often difficult to construct institutional structures to recognize the value.

In many institutions, communication faculty are uniquely qualified to be involved in faculty development initiatives. Faculty can also provide a resource for programs of other disciplines (which in many cases have supplanted our programs), such as mock trials, model United Nations programs, etc. In showcasing expertise and skill through these efforts we not only support the institution and declare our support for its programs, we demonstrate the vitality and significance of our discipline.

SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING

A lack of opportunities to develop or engage in scholarship is often the lament of faculty in small undergraduate programs. This may be a legitimate complaint or it may be an excuse as we have some faculty members from such programs who have done important scholarly work in our discipline. It is recognized by many at small undergraduate programs that the best teaching occurs when faculty members are most fully involved as students of their discipline. However, this is often difficult to achieve and it occurs too seldom.

The institutions in which small undergraduate programs are most often found place great emphasis on teaching as the central and most valued commodity and it is important that units in such institutions be recognized for teaching excellence.

It is also the case that scholarship concerned with pedagogy ought to come from such programs and institutions. It is important that efforts be made at the departmental, divisional, and institutional level to ensure recognition and reward for such scholarship. At the level of the discipline, programs which place particular emphasis on pedagogical scholarship need to be expanded and emphasized.

Small undergraduate college programs need the help of the professional association in sponsoring, encouraging, and presenting course syllabi, publications, and seminars which help undergraduate faculty: 1) expose students to the cutting-edge research and theory, 2) demonstrate the connection of such theory and research to practical applications in potential career paths, and 3) prepare students to take theoretically-grounded approaches to communication problems in their own professional capacities.

CREDIBILITY OF THE DISCIPLINE

The final set of issues raised by the sub-committee deals with the discipline and its credibility. The great breadth of our discipline presents a particular challenge to small undergraduate programs. In the first place, such programs must choose between two rather unsatisfactory alternatives. A program can commit to being comprised of "generalists" who have some preparation across a spectrum of disciplinary interests so that a staff of three or four can represent the full breadth of the discipline. The risk in this approach is

that the program lacks depth of inquiry in any area. On the other hand, a program can decide to represent a limited scope of the discipline at some depth, leaving some areas unaddressed in the curriculum. The risk of the first option is the "Jack (or Jill) of all trades with mastery in none" perception, which is too close to the dilettante charge that is often levied at our programs and professionals. The risk of the second option is that areas of the field are not covered, leaving students with serious interests in some areas underserved. A better argument can be made for the latter in small programs striving for quality but, in practice, most small programs seem to opt for the "creative generalist" and hope for the best.

With a high demand for attention to communication issues and competencies, small undergraduate programs often feel that they lack the resources to meet the expectations placed upon them; expectations which many believe we ought to be prepared to meet. This dilemma is reflected in the comments of the sub-committee members.

Perhaps our problems within the liberal arts environment are more intellectual than political; we are called upon to represent, with some authority, a revolution in communication which colleagues and administrators know about but do not understand. They turn to us to clarify the major issues in this revolution and, most often, we cannot do so; indeed, few could.

We need to demonstrate that the literature we produce and read, the questions we ask and seek to answer, are central to the future of education. This is a demanding task and the pressure to do it is as great in the small program as it is in major research institutions.

We must respond to the approaches taken by other disciplines that present communication courses. On the one hand, we cannot rightly lay exclusive claim to many of the topics and issues raised in these classes, and often do not have the resources to provide those courses ourselves to serve other programs. On the other hand, when others cover the major topics of our discipline, we no longer are needed. A discourse which explains the unique perspective of communication theorists and practitioners and still admits other approaches and presentations is necessary.

Responding to the recommendation that we conceive of ourselves as having a "strong disciplinary foundation with an interdisciplinary reach," we are concerned that we will be delegated the "service" work while the intellectual issues and implications are covered in other disciplines.

The oral communication across the curriculum proposal is fraught with potential problems. While such a program can work, to be done well it demands an investment of resources which many institutions, particularly smaller institutions, are unwilling to make. The consequence is an inadequate representation of our theory and practice while we and our program come to be seen as redundant!

It is also important to remember that the demands of the small undergraduate program are such that the INTRA-disciplinary disputes which engage many of our larger programs cannot be tolerated. Thus, the curriculum of small undergraduate programs tends to be more inclusive and more effectively integrated than at many larger undergraduate programs.

CONCLUSION

The subcommittee has identified areas of concern that derive from the task force document and it has stated positions which are intended to alert or inform the small undergraduate college program of pitfalls or strategies to be considered. This summary of the comments and thinking of the subcommittee members is intended to be the basis of reflection, rather than a prescription for action. It is our hope that all small undergraduate college programs in communication take seriously the call we have to represent this disci-

pline in the most effective and appropriate manner possible, consistent with the mission of our institutions.

Sub-Committee members:

Joseph W. MacDoniels, Chairperson, Hope College, Holland, MI.

Mary Beadle, John Carroll University, Cleveland, OH.

Charles Delancy, Furman University, Greenville, SC.

Ellen Hay, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL.

Pat Jefferson, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN.

Alan Lerstrom, Luther College, Decorah, IA.

Meridth Moore, Washburn University, Topeka KS.

Pat Palmerton, Hamline University, St. Paul, MN.

Jacqueline Schmidt, John Carroll University, Cleveland, OH.

Richard Somer, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY.

Roger Smitter, North Central College, Naperville, Illinois

Mike Vickery, Alma College, Alma, Michigan

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Joseph W. MacDoniels (Ph.D., University of Kansas, 1972) is Professor of Communication at Hope College, Holland, MI 49423.