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Careers in Communication: An Update

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EARLIER research (Wolvin, 1991) led to the conclusion that "Speech Communication as a major offers considerable flexibility and competitive advantages in today's job market" (p. 33). It is important to determine if that same conclusion at the beginning of the 1990s still holds true as we look toward moving out of the 1990s. Research supports that communication skills are critically important for entry-level jobs and for career success (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997). Indeed, the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that employers are looking for communication skills first, followed by interpersonal skills and then by technical skills ("Good News for College Grads," 1997). While this communication skills research is based on many dimensions of work, what are the implications for communication specialists, the Speech Communication majors? Parker and Drummond-Reeves (1992) found reason for optimism in their survey of Boise State University communication alumni: "Employment seems relatively assured for communication graduates" (p. 8).

To run a check on this optimistic outlook and to update our profile as to what Speech Communication majors do in their careers, I sent out a questionnaire to all 969 graduates of Speech Communication at the University of Maryland-College Park. Two hundred fifty surveys were returned for incorrect or insufficient address, leaving us, then, with a base of 719 delivered questionnaires. We received responses from 202 alums, a 28% response rate. Interestingly, one of the respondents was the very first Speech Communication graduate from the University of Maryland in 1942; he is now retired.

Graduates were asked to identify their first job and their present job in an effort to determine how people are able to use a Speech Communication degree to advance in their careers. The profile of our graduates takes in every imaginable sector. Representative careers are included in Table 1.

The positions reported by our graduates are found throughout the workplace: educational institutions; businesses; trade associations; law firms; public relations firms; health organizations; media; religious institutions; government; entertainment; and financial institutions. Not surprisingly, most respondents are in business organizations.

TABLE 1
Representative Careers in Communication

<u>First Position</u>	<u>Present Position</u>
Marketing Assistant	Owner
Communication Assistant	Manager
Law Clerk	Attorney
CGO Operator	News Director
Administrative Assistant	President
Sales Assistant	Account Executive
Research Associate	Training Specialist
Operations Coordinator	Operations Director
Presentation Manager	Training Manager
Announcer	President
Cashier	Manager
Legislative Assistant	Contract Administrator
Customer Service Rep.	Supervisor
Trainer	Human Resource Manager
Computer Director	Editor-in-Chief
Analyst	Senior Consultant
Teller	Branch Manager
Technical Recruiter	Human Resource Director
Press Secretary	President
Public Affairs Specialist	Chief Speech Writer
Claims Adjuster	Claims Supervisor
Promotional Specialist	Senior Marketing Manager
Assistant	Operations Manager
Advisor	Assistant Dean
Instructor	Professor
P.R. Events Coordinator	Director of Advertising
Production Assistant	Associate Producer
Meetings Secretary	Visitors Coordinator
Sales Assistant	Videoconferencing Trainer
Legislative Aide	Public Information Officer
Assistant Youth Adviser	Executive Director
Junior Copywriter	Senior Copywriter

Respondents were asked to identify what communication issues are the most pressing in the field today. Interaction with employees/workers was mentioned most frequently (23 responses). Other communication issues that are important in the workplace are the need to develop and deliver effective presentations (20); interact with customers (19); present speeches (14); listening (13); and marketing (13).

Respondents also provided some interesting insights about the communication degree in this open-ended questionnaire. A Human Resource Associate observed that "The Speech degree is a strong broad degree in Arts and Humanities. Working in teams, giving presentations, and communicating across ethnic and gender cultures are a part of my daily responsibilities." An Executive Research Assistant indicated that "This degree is broad, so I had the flexibility to do different types of work." Supporting that research on how critical workplace communication skills are, a manager noted that "a manager's key responsibility is to be able to communicate effectively in all facets of his or her job." "The Speech Communi-

cation degree teaches you very important skills and lessons that enable an individual to be successful in any job or situation," noted a sales representative. An insurance risk manager also noted how "communication is paramount in my job. My diplomacy skills are honed razor sharp thanks to my training in speech. I'm a trained student of people." A broadcast assistant noted that her communication training was important to her in getting hired and in getting promoted "because I know how to work well with people (i.e., listening, organizing, dealing with diverse groups), but other people don't have a clue!" A webmaster who has become a computer specialist points out that "my degree in Speech Communication—not Computer Science—was the main reason I was hired. The job required superior communication skills that were crucial in the successful implementation of online websites." One of our correspondents who is now a restaurant manager found his communication background to be useful, but he felt that the university needs to provide more preparation for life in the real world: "With the economy, the state it's in, and the growing competitive job market, the way it is, we need to help growing young adults and graduates—and not just through the computer world!"

Fortunately, most of our respondents found their preparation for entering the communication market and for functioning effectively on the job to be useful. Some of our graduates noted that they would like to have had more practical work in their major (i.e., presentation techniques; meeting management; computer software). We were interested in those reactions, because we purposely have focused our B.A. in Speech Communication on communication theory and research. Our observation is that many organizations prepare communication professionals in the specifics of their work (i.e., a particular style of presentation or scripting), but that the theoretical foundation and the research skills are more generic and long-lasting to one's career in the field. It will be revealing, perhaps, to do a follow-up probe to determine how realistic that rationale is for our undergraduate major.

Other respondents stressed the importance of the internship experience and how much they wished they had more real world exposure to work in the field before they entered the job market. While we do offer an internship program for our majors, we limit the number of credits of experiential learning that can be applied to the degree requirements.

Meanwhile, our survey provides continuing support for the value of the Speech Communication major as viable career preparation. As one of our graduates observed, "Speech Communication is a degree that is not particularly useful in terms of training you for a specific career. However, the degree does teach you very important skills and theories that enable an individual to be successful in any job or situation."

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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