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A National Survey of Core Course Requirements, Department Names, and Undergraduate Program Titles in Communication

CORWIN P. KING

Writing in 1995 about Ohio University, Nelson observed that: "Even though the College of Communication is approaching the end of its third decade, the undergraduate students across the college have no college requirements. The university has General Education requirements and the schools have courses for their majors, but there is not even one course that all students across the college are expected to complete." (p. 145)

The problem is not unique, especially in colleges or departments made up of once independent programs in speech, journalism, broadcasting, and the like. But many departments are now implementing such "core courses," either as a way of tying their various majors together or of showing administrators that they are, in fact, a unified academic discipline. (Keel, 1995; Nelson, 1995).

This survey assesses the typical number of core courses departments have, the most commonly used ones, and, in a general way, their contents. Following up earlier surveys, it also provides data on department names and undergraduate program areas for a picture of the communication discipline in the '90s.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted during the summer of 1997. Examined were "hybrid" departments of communication offering at least two majors or areas of specialization including oral communication and media studies (e.g., journalism, broadcasting, or telecommunications). Respondents were drawn from the Communication in Higher Education section of the 1997-98 SCA Directory, checked against four-year college listings for each state on the World Wide Web. Contacts were made via web pages, through follow-up fax or e-mail when web datum was incomplete, and in some cases, through old-fashioned library re-

search of college catalogs. This assured a near-perfect response rate of 98%; only three targeted schools could not be found. The outcome was data from 176 institutions representing 43 states and the District of Columbia. Of these, 108 (61%) had at least one course required of all communication students and were included in the main part of the study. Institutions ranged in size from 650-student Dana College of Nebraska to 32,000-student Wayne State University of Detroit. They included the state universities of New Mexico, Idaho, Maine, and Wyoming, plus Purdue and UCLA — all together, a reasonable cross-section of communication departments in the country.

CORE COURSES

Table 1 shows the number of courses required by the 108 schools. The range is from one to eleven, with the mode at four. Nearly all (90%) are three-credit semester courses, for a total of 12 semester credits in the typical core.

TABLE 1

**Number of Core Courses Required by Departments
in Order of Frequency**

Number of Courses	Number of Departments
1	4
2	14
3	14
4	23
5	21
6	13
7	8
8	5
9	2
10	1
11	3
	<hr/> 108

Forty-two courses were listed and are prioritized below with the number and percentage of schools that listed them. In most cases alternate titles for courses are mentioned, and where titles are particularly unique, a catalog description is supplied to define better the course contents.

1. Communication Theory—58 (53%)

Dynamics of Communication; Perspectives on Human Communication; Communication and Rhetorical Theory. (About half of the schools have this course at the lower-division level, and about half are upper-division.)

2. Introduction To Oral Communication—49 (46%)

Introduction to Public Speaking; Speaking in Business and Professions; Speech Fun-

damentals; Foundations of Public Communication (George Mason University, VA: "Theories and principles of public communication with emphasis on methods of persuasion, propaganda, speaker/listener alignments in the public setting, and measurements of effective public communication.")

3. *Introduction To Mass Communication—41 (38%)*

Introduction to Mass Media; Mediated Culture (Lamar University, TX: "An introduction to the concept of popular culture as a media-audience, inter-action and a historical consideration of the rapidly altering nature of what was known previously as 'mass communication'.")

4. *Interpersonal Communication—40 (37%)*

Communication and Interpersonal Behavior

5. *Introduction To Communication—35 (33%)*

Survey of Communication; Principles of Communication, Human Communication; Communication and the Human Community (University of North Dakota: "An introduction to the important concepts and principles of human communication, with a focus on how humans create meaningful worlds to live in through shared language, shared visual perception and interaction processes. Examination of the conflicts and opportunities that can result from communication differences within and among communities, with particular emphasis on gender, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, class and physical ability."); Fundamentals of Communication; Introduction to Communicology; Communication and Theatre: A Way of Seeing, A Way of Sharing (Pacific Lutheran University, WA: "An overview of the nature of human communication and theatre as a distinct communication form; the systematic analysis of communication by scholars. Students learn how to use critical tools to examine communication in various forms, including interpersonal contexts, theatre, television, film, and print. Introduction of the research and reasoning tools necessary for people seeking a career in a communication field.")

6. *Introduction To Written Communication—34 (32%)*

Writing to Communicate; Writing for the Mass Media, Writing, Language and Communication, Introduction to Journalism; Technical/Creative Writing *

7. *Mass Media And Society—33 (31%)*

Survey of Mass Communication; Communication and Society; Media, Society and the Individual; Media Literacy (Pacific Lutheran University, WA: "Introduces the critical study of media and their effects by discussing three elements of media literacy understanding the technical nature of media and providing rudimentary knowledge of their operation; understanding the media as an industry and how the profit motive affects production, presentation and consumption of media; and understanding the effects of mediated messages on individual and collective behavior."); Mass Communication and Culture; Mass Communication and Social Impact; Broadcasting and Society; Information Technology and Social Change (University of North Dakota: "Evolution of communication technology and consequences for how people communicate and acquire information, including the impact of culture, economics, and public policy on contemporary media practices.")

8. *Communication Research—30 (28%)*

Survey Research Methods, Historical/Critical or Empirical; Information Gathering (about three-fourths of the schools have this course at the upper-division level. Some research courses are outside the communication department.)

9. *Senior Portfolio/Assessment*—27 (25%)

Seminar in Communication; Integrative Experiences; Communication Perspectives; Thinking about Communication.

10. *Mass Communication Law/Ethics*—23 (21%)

Communication Rights and the Law; Communication Ethics and Free Speech; Ethical Aspects of Communication; Communication Law and Public Policy (About half of the schools split law and ethics into separate courses.)

11. *Persuasion*—13 (12%)

12. *International/Intercultural Communication*—12 (11%)

Messages, Meaning and Culture; Communication and Culture

13. *Introduction To Visual Communication*—8 (7%)

Rhetoric of Vision and Sound; Visual and Sound Aesthetics; Critical Issues in Visual Communication (University of Idaho: "Examination of major theoretical approaches to visual media (photography, film, and television); impact of visual images on society; communication and aesthetic functions of visual images; ethical concerns and visual media.")

13. *Communication Criticism*—8 (7%)

Media Criticism; Rhetorical Criticism; Communication Analysis and Criticism; Messages in Action (Seattle University, WA: "Rhetorical examination of the relationship between message content and effects on audiences in a variety of media including speeches, newspapers, conversations, advertisements, essays, television, and film. Students develop skills of critical interpretation and evaluation through close reading of messages.")

15. *Internships*—6 (5%)

15. *Argumentation*—6 (5%)

Advocacy, Analytic Skills in Communication; Public Controversy and Criticism

15. *Introduction To Theatre*—6 (5%)

18. *Small Group Communication*—5 (5%)

18. *Advanced Public Speaking/Debate*—5 (5%)

18. *Communication Careers*—5 (5%)

Communication Careers in Society; Career Skills; Communication Orientation

21. *Organizational Communication*—4

Communication in Human Organizations

21. *Rhetorical Theory*—4

Rhetorical Tradition

21. *Introduction To Broadcasting*—4

21. *Computer Skills*—4
 Desktop Publishing Computer Skills; Computer Mediated Communication
21. *Communication/Media History*—4
26. *Mass Communication Theory*—3
26. *Media Production*—3
26. *Communication Futures/New Technologies*—3
29. *Introduction To Public Relations*—2
29. *Voice And Diction*—2
31. *Audience Analysis*—1
31. *Communication And Social Knowledge*—1
31. *Writing For Electronic Media*—1
31. *Oral Interpretation Of Literature*—1
31. *Principles Of Advertising*—1
31. *Critical Thinking*—1
31. *Television Process And Effects*—1
31. *Radio-IV Announcing*—1
31. *Editing For Mass Communication*—1
31. *English Grammar*—1*
31. *Introduction To Computer Science*—1*
31. *Statistics For Social Science majors*—1*

* Outside the department

Only one course (Communication Theory) was listed by more than half of the departments. Only five were listed by at least a third of the departments. At the opposite end, 12 (29%) of the 42 courses were listed by only one department. Three of these were non-communication courses.

DEPARTMENT NAMES

Earlier surveys by Arnold (1980; 1984) reported data on department names and undergraduate program areas. As the present survey gathered the same information from all 176 schools, it is included as an update on these topics for the 1990s.

Arnold's 1984 survey reported 45 separate department names, 31 of which (69%) were used by only one institution. The most frequent name was "communication" (30 schools),

followed by "speech communication" (25 schools), "communication arts" (12), "speech" (11), and "speech and theatre" (9). These five constituted 58% of the total names reported.

The current survey found just 30 names, over half of which were used by only one department. They are listed in order of frequency in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
List of Department Names in Order of Frequency

Name	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
Communication	83	47
Communication Studies	14	9
Communication Arts	13	8
School/College of Communication	11	5
Communication & Theatre	7	4
Communication & Theatre Arts	6	3
Communication & Journalism	4	2
Communication Arts & Sciences	3	2
Speech Communication & Theatre Arts	3	2
Speech & Communication	2	1
Language, Literature & Communication	2	1
Communications Studies	2	1
Communication Studies & Theatre	1	.5
Communication/Drama/Journalism	1	.5
Art/Communication/Theatre	1	.5
Public Communication	1	.5
Communication & Performance Studies	1	.5
Speech/Theatre/Journalism	1	.5
Speech/Theatre/Mass Communication	1	.5
Fine Arts & Communication	1	.5
Communication & Creative Arts	1	.5
Speech Communication	1	.5
Language & Communication	1	.5
Theatre & Communication Studies	1	.5
Communication & Mass Media	1	.5
Liberal Arts	1	.5
Language Arts	1	.5
College of Arts	1	.5
College of Arts & Sciences	1	.5
	176	100

The most common name is still "communication," by an even wider margin than before, followed by "communication studies," "communication arts," the "school/college of communication," and "communications." These five names now make up 75% of the total names reported. Of note is that "speech" and "theatre" are out of the top five, and that "speech communication" now makes up less than one percent of department names.

PROGRAM TITLES

Specific program titles weren't mentioned in Arnold's surveys, but the current survey showed a total of 50 majors or areas of specialization, none of which was listed by a majority of schools. Twenty-one areas (42%) were listed by only one school.

As indicated in Table 3, the most common areas by far were "speech communication" (including rhetoric and public address), and "journalism." They were followed by the broader areas of "mass media/mass communication." "Public relations," a relatively new area, came in fourth, followed by "theatre arts," "broadcasting," and "interpersonal/organizational communication." From there the list drops rapidly to majors from only a handful of schools, and often with rather exotic titles. Significant is the number of what might be called "applied" majors (e.g., sports communication, media management) which aim at a specific job function or organization.

TABLE 3

**Department Majors/Areas of Emphasis
in Order of Frequency**

Program Area	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
Speech Communication (R-PA)	65	37
Journalism (Print)	55	31
Mass Media/Mass Communication	39	22
Public Relations	39	22
Theatre Arts	37	21
Broadcasting	27	15
Interpersonal/Organizational Communication	24	14
Advertising	23	13
Radio-TV-Film	22	13
Communication (General)	17	10
Communication Studies	17	10
Communication Disorders	10	6
Telecommunications	10	6
Electronic Media	8	5
Media Studies	8	5
Communication Arts	5	3
Audiovisual/Film/Video	5	3
Communication Management	4	2
Corporate Communication	4	2
Human Communication	4	2
Public Communication	4	2
Writing/Publishing	3	2
Communication Media	2	1
Visual Media	2	1
Business Communication	2	1
Communication Education	2	1
Photojournalism	2	1

Graphic Design	2	1
Video Production	2	1
Acting	1	.6
Technical Theatre	1	.6
Argumentation & Advocacy	1	.6
Socio-Political Communication	1	.6
Marketing Communication	1	.6
Public Argument & Rhetoric	1	.6
Visual Communication	1	.6
Instructional Technology	1	.6
Persuasion & Critical Thinking	1	.6
Sports Communication	1	.6
Media Management	1	.6
Information Networking	1	.6
Applied Communication	1	.6
Public Affairs	1	.6
Political Communication	1	.6
Professional Communication	1	.6
Photography	1	.6
Performance Studies	1	.6
Film and New Media Production	1	.6
Multimedia Technology	1	.6
Pre-Law	1	.6

The largest number of areas listed by a single school was seven and came from three schools: Susquehanna University (PA), Old Dominion University (VA), and the University of South Alabama. The typical number was three or four.

CONCLUSIONS

What's to be made of these findings?

First, with regard to core course requirements, the following observations are noted:

1) Though a majority of departments now have some type of core course requirement, a strong minority don't. For nearly 40% of departments, there is still no common course that all students take regardless of major or specialization.

2) Departments that have a core typically have a small one — fewer than a half-dozen courses and a third of the major credits. Only six of the 108 departments have more than eight courses, and they still tend to be small in total credit hours.

3) There is a good deal of variation in cores (even allowing for differences in course titles), but one course stands out: Communication Theory. It ranks clearly ahead of anything else in popularity, with oral and mass communication next in importance.

4) Equally significant are courses that don't stand out, specifically portfolio assessment (ranked ninth) and internships (ranked fifteenth). Often touted as critical to career success, these courses are apparently not embraced by everyone as yet.

5) The courses with the greatest variety of descriptions are, perhaps not surprisingly, Introduction to Communication and Mass Media and Society. At some institutions, the introductory course is an introduction to oral communication, while at others (e.g., North Dakota) it is encyclopedic. The Mass Media and Society course at many institutions tends to be sender oriented, but at some it has a strong receiver slant, stressing media literacy and social impact.

As for the matter of department names and program areas, first, in a trend noted by Arnold in 1980 as well as 1984, while department names are fewer in number now, they show a continuing movement away from the "speech" label to the broader "communication" title. Of special note is the ascendance of "communications" (with an "s") into the top five, while again, "speech" and "theatre" have dropped in rank.

Second, the large number of program areas shows an expansion and perhaps fragmentation of the communication discipline. Indeed, is there any other academic subject with as wide a variety of majors or specializations as one finds in communication? Even allowing for some overlap among specialties, and some specialties that are similar but under different names, communication is obviously a broad field, and the differences among departments and schools sometimes seem greater than their similarities. Small wonder that inter-institutional (and intrainstitutional) cooperation is often difficult to accomplish.

Yet the academic landscape is changing. Nelson (1995b) has observed that after a period of splitting off into separate departments of theatre, radio-television, speech communication, and the like: "Now late in the century a correction is taking place. Departments . . . are finding themselves united once more in uneasy alliances forced by upper administration" (p. 134).

Working in these alliances may well determine which communication programs succeed, and which fail, as we approach the millenium. The present survey may show both the challenges they pose—and the potential.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Corwin King (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University, 1973) is Professor of Communication and former Chair of the Department of Communication at Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA 98926.

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