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# The Politics of Undergraduate Curricula in a Downsizing Culture: A Primer for Department Chairs

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**T**HERE are numerous decisions which communication studies departments must make - - some every day, some every term, and some every few years. Among those issues that must be decided every year or so are curricula updates, changes, additions, and deletions. In some cases, complete or near-complete revisions are undertaken. No decision is more important, for curricula provide one primary base for determining the philosophical perspective of the department including the departmental perspective on the number of students in each class and the number of faculty qualified to teach particular courses; relationships with upper-level administration; relationships with other departments; and relationships with other universities. For the chair, in particular, there are many "pressures" associated with curricular matters.

Much of the recent concern over curricula matters in communication studies has been stimulated by Michael Burgoon's (1989) essay in which he claimed that communication studies departments are perceived as second or third class members of the academic community. He noted that a skills orientation, especially an emphasis on the public speaking service course, provides much of the support for other disciplines' low regard for our field. His department (at the University of Arizona), therefore, developed a theory/research orientation to curriculum. Support for Burgoon's approach is also found in the work of Redmond and Waggoner (1992a), who developed (at Iowa State University) a "study" of communication approach as opposed to a "performance" of communication approach used at some other institutions. Redmond and Waggoner stimulated a response from Weaver (1992), who suggested that communication studies departments do not have to assume an either/or dichotomy between skills and theory. But Redmond and Waggoner (1992b)

responded: "We believe de-emphasizing or eliminating a skills orientation is actually beneficial because it requires our university colleagues to re-examine and thus redefine their perception of what we are as a discipline" (p. 17).

This essay includes a discussion of some of the problems associated with curricular matters and a few suggestions for dealing with them. Redmond and Waggoner (1992a) quote Burgoon concerning basic principles of what we need to do in regard to curriculum: "Other departments will not define what we offer, when we offer it, or how we will teach" (p. 2). While agreeing with the structure of that argument, this paper suggests that we must, then, *first begin with what we believe rather than what we think others think we think*. Our first concern should be with what we believe our students need to know rather than what other departments think our students need to know - - or what others think of us. Such a discussion must first confront some philosophical assumptions regarding the goals and limitations of the department from within the department. To make this discussion more general, the assumption is that the department is comprised of communication arts (speech communication), theatre, broadcasting, journalism, and public relations. Such a department immediately runs into two problems that are not solely the semantic, surface differences that they appear to be: (1) "skills" versus "study" approach, and (2) the "professional" versus the "academic" approach.

### *Departmental Philosophical Decisions*

By their very nature, some elements of the department are more professional (versus the more negative, "vocational") than are others. In addition, decisions should be considered in the context of where the department is located within a school or college. Brenton and Gray (1992) have indicated that certain curriculum problems occurred when their department (at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock) moved from a college of communication to a college of professional and public affairs. Similar problems occur depending on whether one is housed in arts and sciences, arts and humanities, or social and behavioral sciences. As well, a land-grant institution may be more likely to anticipate a department's having skills courses than a liberal arts institution. Within a department, too, there are differences of opinion. For example, in broadcasting, journalism, public relations, and to some extent, theatre, the faculty believe that their goal is to "place" the student in a position (to "get the student a job"). From this goal statement, certain courses come to the forefront as required.

Any good, green eye shade expects that students should be especially acute in detecting grammatical errors, typographical errors, and the like. Thus, there may be two or three courses in editing, graphics, and design. Reporting skills, too, are important. Computing skills are essential. Thus, the journalism student should take newswriting and reporting one, two, and three, as well as feature writing, editorial writing, and investigative reporting. By this time, the curriculum might already consist of 24 of its 36 semester hours. Throw in an internship, ethics, and law, and one might have a person ready to perform some task at a newspaper (Wicklein, 1994). The idea behind this approach is that any substantive content that the student may obtain can come from a minor or double major in history, political science, English, or economics.

The broadcasting student, too, must have some "skills." It would be nice if said undergraduate had some writing skills, through copywriting and newswriting. The student should also be able to use a computer. Editing equipment should be digital, computer-generated. These skills, however, are not nearly as important as voice improvement, "running" a camera, using a "switcher," or editing videotape. In the case of broadcast education and print journalism education, however, many instructors may try to make the assignments "real" in that the students must *do* them. They often are not "real" in terms of researching stories or meeting deadlines. A pragmatic consideration is the expense of broadcast production courses. Some departments, which offer mass communication, might

wish to take a more “critical” perspective on telecommunication courses.

The theatre faculty often combine three approaches: (1) acting/directing; (2) technical theatre; and (3) theatre education. The purpose, then, is to teach the student enough to “get a job.” There may be four or five courses in acting/directing. In technical theatre, the curriculum might include lighting, costuming, make-up (different from the journalism course). The theatre education major is more general in nature, usually with one course each in acting, directing, technical theatre, etc. Here the students must learn how to do many things so their high school protégés-to-be can win some state contest.

Public relations students utilize a more diverse approach to the theory and principles of mass communication and communication arts. Many of the courses in those curricula may also be required of public relations majors. In addition, they take specific courses in practica and campaigns, which utilize all of these skills, beginning with audience and situational analysis and ending with public relations “products,” which they may use in a portfolio to interview for a position.

In sharp contrast, the kinds of skills expected of communication arts people are quite different. It is important, however, to remember that they are *skills*. They learn what a theory is, how a theory works, how a theory is applied to a situation, how to undertake quantitative and/or qualitative research to test a theory, and how minds work. But what can they *do* after they graduate?

All of this is not to say that either the practical, “professional” approach or the theoretical, research orientation is preferential. However, it helps elucidate a few of the problems a chair encounters when a new course or curriculum is placed on the table. One important matter to consider in all of this, however, is that all of the students are learning SKILLS. One might say that critical thinking is a “deeper” skill than computing, but dare say anyone that a student can succeed without knowing computer basics or critical thinking in today’s society.

These approaches differ, in part, because the faculty members who assert them are different. The faculty member who worked for newspapers for 15 years of her life is quite different from the communication arts Ph. D. who has never held a position outside academia. Then, too, the students who are attracted to one of these areas versus another are different. Despite our own outcries, some of today’s students are in college to get a job or to get a better job. Some are in college to improve their learning skills. They are not mutually dichotomous.

In developing curricula, it is important that the faculty within the department discuss these perspectives extensively. By thinking about the 21st century, perhaps all of us can avoid the tendency to develop curricula that reflect almost exactly the curricula that we took when we were in graduate school.

One way of undertaking this study and discussion of one’s curricula is to ask, “How did we get where we are now in the first place?” There are numerous potential answers to this question. One thought is to begin by determining the practicalities of curricula. For example, how many total courses can the faculty teach in a two-year period? The underlying assumption here is that courses should be made available in that limited time frame, because a number of the students will be transfers from two-year institutions. Considerations must be made for courses that will be multi-sectional as well as how many faculty are qualified to teach such a course. Looking at such practicalities provides an orientation toward the next century.

Looking back, many of us find that there was a time in the 1960s and 1970s when courses were added to the curriculum as a first step in “empire building.” The idea was that we would add courses first. Second, we had to offer the courses. Third, when there were too many courses for the faculty to teach, the argument to the dean was that we need to add faculty to teach all of these courses in the curriculum. In this time of downsizing as a cultural policy, such nonsense will hardly be effective. Now most curricula committees require a statement on resources for handling any new courses. Such statements must include information about

equipment, faculty, and library resources.

Another look at the curriculum tells us that curricula are determined by internal politics. Sometimes courses were added as an incentive to hire an especially competent faculty recruit. Today the job market hardly requires such “deals,” and even if a new faculty member wants to add a course (on his dissertation topic), there are other ways of handling that problem. Special topics courses provide an excellent opportunity in this regard. Neither empire building nor bribery are good reasons for establishing curricula.

As an extension of the internal politics, some courses which began as electives become required to ensure that the especially competent faculty member has enough bodies in one esoteric course to prevent complaints from upper-level administration. Another internal political reason for such requirements is that two professors find themselves competing for the same bodies. This latter problem often results from hiring two faculty members with extremely similar backgrounds and teaching preferences. Perhaps the present chair hired neither of them, but the problem continues to present itself.

An interesting question to pose is: “How many students would take this course if it was not required?” At the initial stage of the discussion within the faculty, each course should have to be justified. Such a process is likely to eliminate those esoteric, faculty recruitment courses, especially those initiated by faculty who are long gone. The discussion also helps to combine some courses. For example, is it possible to teach a “Lighting for Presentations” course that would suffice for theatre, performance studies, and broadcasting majors while at the same time providing all of these students more job flexibility? Finally, it can provide a flexible method for dealing with some of these political difficulties so that they do not reoccur in the near future. An especially attractive course title for such flexibility is “Seminar in Communication Studies” in which a new topic is taught with each offering. One restriction should be made once the curriculum is complete: for each new course that is added to the curriculum, one must be deleted. Such a policy keeps curriculum over expansion in check and provides political punch for dealing with school curriculum committees.

As a matter of practicality, cross-listed courses should be considered. In our department, for example, “Seminar in Political Communication” is listed as a communication arts course and as a mass communication course. Using this method, students majoring in broadcasting, public relations, print journalism, and communication arts may take the course. Other examples might be “Voice and Diction” cross-listed for communication arts, performance studies, broadcasting, and theatre, or “Communication Research Methods” for both mass communication and communication arts majors. Courses that appear to be redundant should also be discussed. An example might be: “Survey of Mass Communication,” “History of Mass Media,” and “Fundamentals of Broadcasting.” A larger discussion might ensue if the department decides to investigate whether it makes sense to have courses in intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and organizational communication (Smith & Turner, 1993). Whether these courses are “content” based or “skills” based, it is an approach to curriculum that says to the student, “Context is most important.” What is the content that would be omitted from the curriculum if the small group course is omitted? Does the department agree that context is important enough to form the organization of curricula?

The curriculum discussion is also a good time to investigate the possibility of team-taught courses. Such courses tend to help faculty members learn from one another in addition to improving the curriculum for the students.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming the faculty has agreed on whatever orientation it is going to have (i. e., “theory,” “skills,” or “theory and skills”), the total number of courses in the curriculum, and justification for each of the courses, then a decision must be made about requirements. There are several approaches that can be taken here. For example, there can be a “core” for all students in the department, followed by a “core” in the major, followed by a “core” in

specialization, followed by electives. Faculty should be required to re-justify their courses as requirements.

If there are no departmental “rules” about internships, this is a good time to discuss policies and procedures for such courses.

No step of the discussion is complete until there is significant agreement among the faculty. In a small faculty, consensus can probably be achieved. In larger faculties, some parliamentary “rule” should be established in advance of the initial discussion, but majority vote is probably insufficient for such a significant departmental decision. One parliamentary rule might be to allow only those affected parties to take part in decisions regarding a particular course.

### *The Upper-Level Administration*

There are many “types” of administrators. For our purposes here, “upper level” is considered anything above the department and chair. In today’s “downsizing world,” many of these administrators are bottom-line, economically oriented. For many of these “bean-counting” administrators, the numbers’ game appears more and more often. They know that someone, somewhere, many years ago decided how many students each student is. This can vary. On the one hand, one advanced medical student in a laboratory course in cardiology may count as 17 students. One student in public speaking, on the other hand, may count as just .8 of a student. Using this “formula,” it takes 21.2 students in a public speaking class to equal the one medical student.

This makes one just want to pause and say, “Hmmm.” There should be no doubt, however, that these numbers are important. They are behind the idea of “weighted credit hours” (the public speaking student carrying little “weight”), and they are important because of “formula funding.” Formula funding means that many institutions, colleges, and departments are budgeted based on their weighted credit hours generated. There are biases in the system, but one cannot fight “campus hall” on this, even if the system does not use the formula. The formula is cemented just about as much as the Ten Commandments. This is an administrative subject with which the chair should be well versed. In addition, the chair should educate the faculty concerning “weighted credit hours generated” and “formula funding.”

Under this system, it is not good to teach public speaking courses - - at least not at the freshman level. Any 100- or 200-numbered course should be changed to a 300- or 400-level course. A 400-level might be best, for then one can double-list as a 500-level graduate course. Graduate students are weighted more than undergraduate courses, and upper-level courses (300 and 400) are weighted higher than 200- and 100-level courses. Another “hmmm.” Does this mean we should teach public speaking at the split undergraduate/graduate level? Probably not, for the curriculum committee in the college or university will think one is “playing games” with the course numbers. Everyone knows that public speaking is not a graduate course - - it is a “skills” course - - very unlike the cardiology lab. For good or ill, formula funding and weighting create another problem with curricula. For example, is television production, I (studio) a 200-level or a 300-level course? The double-bind for the department is that the 300-level will generate more credit hours per student, but then students cannot take the course in a two-year institution because a two-year institution cannot teach junior-level courses. This does not mean that a two-year institution cannot teach television production, I (studio); it means only that it cannot be a 300-level course in a two-year college. Once one has worked out all of the intradepartmental problems with curricula, it might be a good idea to count the weighted credit hours generated over the past year. Next the total hours can be multiplied by the university tuition per credit hour.

By undertaking this task, the department can determine how many tuition dollars were generated during the past year. By comparing the tuition dollars generated with the

department's budget, one can determine whether the department "paid its own way." While such a figure may be unrealistic - - administrators will say the department didn't include "overhead" - - the departmental response might be that neither did it consider any state funding, federal funding, or alumni support. Most communication departments do well in utilizing the "bean counter's" own arguments because communication department budgets are relatively low in comparison with cardiology departments. In all probability, the money argument was the rationale for weighting courses in the first place.

Minimally it is a good idea for the department to determine whether it is "paying its own way through tuition." The information may never be requested. Nevertheless, having the data available helps the chair and the faculty understand better the accounting mentality as well as whether courses are "profitable" from an institutional perspective. In a downsizing environment, changes in curricula should not decrease the total weighted hours generated.

Considerations for the total number of hours in the major and the minor should be undertaken. Comparisons with other similar departments will influence the decision making. Usually a major in communication arts should be an "extension" of a minor. Such a tactic allows a student to change from a minor to a major without undue difficulty. In addition, departments should try to refrain from teaching "service" courses that are required by only one or two "outside" departments. For example, instead of having a special course in "Teaching the Language Arts," one might want to consider an "Instructional Communication" course at the senior/graduate level. In such a course, the instructor may teach the basic elements of communication in the classroom for teachers but also for communication majors who feast their eyes on communication consulting. Graduate students in education, especially those in fifth-year certification courses, may take the course. Under other circumstances, they may take a public speaking course at the 100-level as a prerequisite for entering their graduate program. Using the weighted credit hours generated approach, fifteen seniors and five graduate students will generate many more hours than 25 students in a public speaking course.

### *Relationships With Other Departments*

Curricula matters often affect other departments. Even when communication studies departments do not believe their courses have any impact on other departments, the concern over "turf" is almost always present. At most institutions, curricular changes must be approved by a committee of the school or college as well as a university committee. The politics of turf protection across campus are similar to that within the department. There are several ways to prevent problems here. First, the department should look at the title of the course, the level (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), the prerequisites, and the course description. If it appears that any of these items may create objections elsewhere, it is best to discuss them with the chair and/or faculty in other departments before sending them to a committee. For example, anthropology may consider "Intercultural Communication" turf infringement, but "Interracial Communication" may not be. However, the African-American Studies Program may have trouble with the latter. One way to resolve such problems is to agree with the other department to use one of their upper-level courses as a prerequisite, which may also meet some other requirement. Second, the department should always look at cross-listing a course with another department. Third, if a course requires a prerequisite from another department, the other department should always be consulted. The communication studies department, however, should be able to answer any committee questions about prerequisites.

Some years ago, the author chaired a college curriculum committee. One of the course submissions was for a 400/500 level course in the history department, entitled, "History of Women in America." The course had no prerequisites. The faculty member tentatively teaching the course was asked if this was what was intended in light of the fact that one could

hypothetically have an incoming freshman in the same course with a Ph. D. student in history. The answer was that such a situation was unlikely and besides none of the 400/500 level history courses had prerequisites. Such an approach brings up the issue of what is the purpose of a prerequisite?

From a strictly philosophical standpoint, one might ask the question, "How much knowledge of the subject matter do you expect a student to know when the student enters a class?" For example, how can one edit another's copy, if the editor is ignorant of who, what, when, where, and other elements of newswriting? How can one edit a videotape without a knowledge of camera angles from production, I? How can one progress well in a theory building course without having a theory course first? However, when such prerequisites are simply for gatekeeping, they should be investigated more thoroughly. Such gatekeeping courses may prevent qualified students from registering for the course. Prerequisites should be justified within the department.

### *Relationships with Two-Year Institutions*

Many of us also operate based on a set of assumptions about two-year institutions, often dependent upon the number and percentage of students who transfer in from two-year institutions. Many programs are quite dependent upon transfer students from two-year colleges. Most departments are willing to give up the authority to such courses as public speaking, interpersonal communication, introductory newswriting, fundamentals of broadcasting, and survey of mass communication. However, the four-year institution becomes much more parochial about radio and television production courses, directing, and communication theory.

There is a rarely-stated opposition which says that "they" shouldn't be teaching such courses. "They" do not have the facilities or qualified instructors. At the same time, departments in four-year institutions dependent on the two-year schools must make agreements such as "This course will count in the basic curriculum; that one will not." "It can count as a general elective, but it will not count in the core." When competing, four-year institutions are more open about curricula than is ours, some students attend where they can "count" the most hours. Thus, we have our next encounter with the "numbers game." The department should communicate regularly with two-year institutions about curricula; changes should be discussed so that both parties understand the rationale for changes in courses at the 100- and 200-levels.

## CONCLUSION

The courses taught in a department provide the campus community with a perception of the department, but curricular decisions must first be made within the department. While this paper has taken no position on theory versus skills nor "professional" orientation versus an "academic" orientation, the author does indicate that a discussion of these matters needs to take place within a communication studies department. There are certainly values that can be achieved through such a discussion, although discussions may be both time-consuming and conflict-generating.

The department should agree about a total number of courses in the curriculum; redundant and obsolete courses should be deleted; the faculty should justify those courses which remain; required courses and prerequisites should be further justified.

The department should have an understanding of administrative perspectives on curricula. Formula funding and weighted course hours generated should be understood. The department should determine the extent to which it "pays its own way." Curricula development should be discussed with faculty in other departments that may feel communication studies is infringing on their subject matter. Finally, considerations should be given to

community college transfer students. By keeping these suggestions in mind, a communication studies department will find curricula building a much more satisfying and long lasting endeavor.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The team-teaching concept is an important element which is not the primary topic of this study, but it is one which deserves some attention here. There are a number of different possibilities here. For example, two sections of a course may be listed at the same time, one in a small room and the other in a room twice as large. Lectures may be undertaken by individual teachers (with both present) or the two combined. In this case, each instructor gets credit for his/her course. Sometimes the two sections meet together; sometimes (labs) meet separately. Another approach might be taken where two individuals have courses in the summer session. One might teach the first half of the term in both sections; the other instructor would teach the second half. If there is only one section, one instructor might get credit one term (or year) and the other the next term (or year). The advantages are enormous. Students get the expertise of two for the price of one. Faculty learn from one another not only content but also pedagogical techniques.

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