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Strategies for the Communications Unit: How Can We Become Central to the University and Its Mission?

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AN often heard comment about our speech, communication or journalism/mass communication departments on our college campuses is that they are not “central” to the mission of the campus. Centrality—that is the notion that the unit is inextricably intertwined with the teaching, research and service mandates of the college or university—is not just an enviable characteristic of some disciplines; it is crucial in these perilous times of academic and economic realignments on campuses. I would like today to offer some thoughts on just this question: Why are communication units perceived as not central to the university’s mission?

First, if we think of universities as institutions committed to preparing future citizens with the tools of citizenship, an appreciation of our cultural heritage and history, useful skills to be productive contributors to our economic and material life, and critical thinkers to help solve the social and human problems facing our society and indeed our world, then the study of communication should be central to any university curriculum. As is often said and written about, we are living in what has been referred to as the “information age” or the era of the communications revolution. And many of the social changes we are undergoing are changes in the practices or philosophies regarding how we communicate, such as how to bring about the information “superhighway”, not just technologically, but economically and culturally. Or, how to reinvigorate public discourse on political and social issues to help forge political consensus around practical solutions to public problems and ensure a democratic communication system free of hate speech and scapegoating. Or, how to use persuasive communications for combating public health problems and other threats to the population. My point is

that many of the problems facing our nation in late 20th century America involve communication and many of our colleagues on our campuses will agree with this point. Unfortunately, they also agree that communication scholars and faculty are not the ones to resolve these public questions—that communication study is not helpful in preparing today's citizens. Why is this? Why are communication programs not seen as central to the university's mission?

I suspect there are several reasons. Let me take up the easily dismissed one first. Our communication colleagues often claim that we are a "young" field, too new to the academy to gain legitimacy. Unfortunately, I find little to support this claim today. On the one hand, we are not so new. Most speech departments and journalism departments entered the American academy during the first or second decade of this century (both SCA and AEJMC have already celebrated their 75th anniversaries). So we are at least in our eighth decade in the academy. Secondly, recency in arrival does not seem to have hampered other academic areas such as environmental studies or cognitive science which are even younger than communication studies but which are often granted legitimacy on campuses.

No, the length of our experience in the academy has not served to imbue our university colleagues with trust. We have other problems, some perceptual, some political and some disciplinary-based and therefore, to me, much more intractable.

First, our name itself is a problem. What does it mean to be a communications scholar or a communications major? It is an ambiguous term. This can mean that one studies mass media, as I do, or it may refer to scholars of interpersonal communication, rhetorical analysis, cultural studies, organizational studies, or a variety of other subspecialties. Even the term journalism is exclusionary and often a code word for commitment to print journalism rather than broadcasting journalism, public relations or advertising (other specialties often taught in journalism schools and which are embraced within various public media institutions). Others, and most recently, SCA's past president David Zarefsky, have pointed out that the intellectual diversity of our field and the field's lack of unity—leaves us open to damaging judgments that communication study is incoherent, redundant with the "real" disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology, dilettantish, and only a service field on our campuses.

Second, this lack of unity and intellectual diversity, often poses special political problems. Our departments are often housed in different places, in Colleges of Liberal Arts, Colleges of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Colleges of Communication with or without something else such as Public Administration or Theater or in free-standing Schools of Journalism separate from departments of speech communication. Communication is a gerrymandered discipline. Also, although the growth of communication across campuses has a local and parochial inflection and is the result of historical accident, what seems all too common are the various in-fighting across departments staking a claim to some part of communication. Of course the major divide is that between professional (typically journalism-oriented) programs and speech or more generic communication programs. Several campuses have seen battles along this fault line in past years. Few campuses have good relations across this gulf. Communication departments are often fighting each other for students, resources and identity. And unfortunately, our political battles with colleagues in other communication areas is often too public and too strident. Others in the university do not understand why we can't all be housed in the same unit if we are all in the business of studying communication? According to Lee Becker's annual survey of journalism programs (*Journalism Educator* 49, 4-14, Autumn 94) of the 428 administrators surveyed, 7.7 percent reported that the programs they lead were the result of mergers and another 19% reported recent discussions of mergers and 4% said their campuses were considering closing the unit. This suggests that our internal battles on our campuses might be more than isolated events.

The political battles across communication programs on campuses is only one of our on-

campus political problems. On many campuses I have observed that communication departments (and most often the journalism oriented departments) are isolated on their campuses. This isolation takes several forms: faculty have little interaction with faculty from other disciplines, few joint or interdisciplinary degree programs or research projects; few faculty on major campus committees or governing bodies of the university; and little education beyond the communication oriented majors and far too little connection with the rest of the university. We must endeavor to reach out beyond the boundaries of our own academic departments to the wider university. This insulation on campuses, disconnection from the core courses or common undergraduate offerings is perilous today. We leave ourselves open to charges of irrelevance and can find ourselves indeed at the periphery of the university with too few interconnections with other departments when budget axes fall. While communication has been blessed with growing enrollments over the past decade or so, the trend will inevitably turn down (if it hasn't already) and we will be displaced by some other popular major. Only if we can situate communication study within a broad definition of undergraduate education will we survive on campuses eager to shed themselves of programs deemed not central to the core mission of academic study.

Finally, perhaps at the root of our battles about centrality to the mission of the university is the sense that our curriculum and our literature is not addressing the public questions about communication practice in the world. I repeat that while our colleagues on our campuses believe that communications and technology questions are of great public and social concern, we, those in communication study, are not viewed as being intellectually capable of addressing these questions. We are infrequently seen as public intellectuals about communication problems. Moreover, there is no common well understood communication curriculum, no undergraduate canon to be interrogated, nor core knowledge we can expect from undergraduates going on to graduate work. The divide between professional communication practice (read that journalism education) and academic communication study (read that speech communication) is a gulf which I fear may widen rather than narrow. Whatever undergraduate curricula discussions have taken place in the past 10 to 15 years (and there have been some) have been intramural. The speech and the journalism/mass communication traditions have talked only to themselves, and rarely across the divide. Neither side seems willing to address the larger question of the role of the study of communication as a discipline in the larger academic community.

And I believe that the health of our discipline on university campuses will be as much tied to the coherence, relevance and centrality of our teaching missions as it is to the relevance and value of our public scholarship and our political acumen.

In short, the question of whether or not communication study is central to the mission of a university masks other questions about the fractured nature of our field, our naive role in campus politics and our inattention to wider teaching mission within the university. It is attention to these other issues which should occupy our disciplinary leaders.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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