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Communication Curriculum Reform, Liberal Arts Components and Administrative Organization

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THE last several decades have witnessed considerable ferment about curricular reform in higher education (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Blanchard & Christ, 1993; Bloom, 1987; Boyer, 1987, 1990; Boyer & Levine, 1981; Carnegie Foundation, 1977). Far from being immune from the controversy, the field of communication has been a part of the overall fermentation within academe. Much debate has been generated about the nature, scholarship and curriculum of communication studies. Critics both inside and outside the field argue about its disciplinary foundation, even while they propose the revitalization of the liberal arts dimension of the communication curriculum (Blanchard & Christ, 1993; Shepherd, 1993). As a result of the ferment, communication units in colleges and universities have been challenged to redefine and more coherently focus their curricular efforts.

Central to this process is the conceptualization of liberal arts study within communication programs. The purpose of this study is to investigate the substance and level of importance placed on liberal arts as elements within the communication curriculum and whether the definition and significance of these liberal arts elements change according to the emphasis of different communication programs. That is, do differences in liberal arts communication courses exist between communication programs organized around speech communication and those that encompass other degree programs such as mass communication? To explore the nature and extent of the curriculum now in place, we reviewed current communication programs through a survey of the membership of two organizations—the Association of Communication Administrators and the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. Prior to the analysis of our findings, we review academic

literature to provide a discussion of the history surrounding the organization, curricula, and proposed future of liberal studies within communication programs.

DISCIPLINARY FOCUS

Organization

Over the years, communication scholars have questioned the nature and curriculum of the communication discipline. One of the more recent discussions of the dilemma facing the field of communication was suggested by the editors of two issues of the *Journal of Communication* devoted to "The Future of the Field." The editors, Levy and Gurevitch (1993) offer the proposition that "communication scholarship lacks disciplinary status because it has no core of knowledge and thus institutional and scholarly legitimacy remain a chimera for the field" (p. 4).

Attempts to define the "core of knowledge" of communication as a discipline inevitably reflect the different traditions that are variously subsumed within "communication" departments in American universities. Among these, Rogers and Chaffee (1993) identify speech communication and journalism as different traditions that they argue have never lost their separate roots and still constitute the two major subdisciplines within communication studies. Reconciliation of differences between the historic and epistemological foundations of the two subdisciplines is complicated still further by ongoing tensions regarding the basic identification of each.

Within speech communication, the debate over the essential core of knowledge has focused on "rhetoric" for some, and on "communication" for others. The "rhetorical" humanistic scholars emphasize the classical tradition of rhetoric as energizing knowledge (Hostettler, 1980). On the other hand, the "communication" scholars tend to emphasize the complex symbol system that constitutes communication (Petelle, 1980) or the dynamic, interactive nature of communication (Marlier, 1980). For some, the interrelationship of rhetoric and communication is evident in orality theory (Ong, 1982) and in the related belief that the primary subject matter of speech communication is "the study and practice of spoken language" (Dance, 1980, p. 328). The gap between mass communication and interpersonal (or speech) communication is reflected in their different purposes and boundaries, as well as their somewhat different methods and theoretical orientations (Berger & Chaffee, 1988). The deep and continuing nature of these differences is emphasized by Wartella (1994, p. 60) in her ICA Presidential address, when she characterizes the division between journalism/mass communication and speech communication (as well as the division between professional and academic study) as actual "fault lines."

Curricula

Blanchard and Christ (1993, p. 62) present an altered conceptualization of this polarization—that the curricular focus of communication programs needs to shift away from industrial, occupational, and career values toward the liberal university traditions. The structuring of the communication curriculum along industry lines (i.e., print journalism, broadcasting, advertising, etc.) that were in effect three or four decades ago has grown increasingly more controversial in the current information age. A shift in curriculum to that proposed by Blanchard and Christ parallels the transition from the industrial age to the information age, according to the authors. Although they neglect to incorporate rhetorical-communication traditions in their integrated communication model, Blanchard and Christ's attempt to forge a "New Liberal Arts" (p. 35) by uniting interpersonal communication with mass communication curricula and moving both to a central place within the university baccalaureate experience bears consideration.

Unfortunately, specific methods through which curricula may reflect large-scale tech-

nological and social changes as well as incorporate the liberal arts with practical studies from various communication traditions remain uncertain. A growing number of writers urge communication scholars and teachers to become "more theoretical in our research and more scholarly in our curricula" (Shoemaker, 1993, p. 147). Others urge more focus on intellectual depth and an expanded notion of communication than on outdated notions of what constitutes the discipline (Peters, 1993, p. 138; Beniger, 1993, p. 19). To conceive communication not as a discipline but an interdisciplinary field (Swanson, 1993), and to "reclaim the curriculum for the community and organize it explicitly to foster cohesion" by focusing survey courses at all levels on "substantive issues and problems" (O'Keefe, 1993, p. 81) also have been suggested. A more specific response to generalizations along the lines mentioned above is to identify the traditional liberal arts aspects now present in communication education and delineate their role in various communication programs. Among the areas traditionally associated with liberal arts in communication curricula are the "historical aspects" of communication, the "communication theory" dimensions as studied by various fields of communication, and the "philosophical and ethical aspects" of communication—the liberal arts curricular components identified in the Oregon Report (*Planning for Curricular Change . . .*, 1987, pp. 48-55).

Liberal Arts

The articulation of history, theory, and philosophy as legitimate contributors to the communication curricula has in no way guaranteed their uniform acceptance within the curriculum of communication programs. For example, within speech communication, an emphasis on history can involve such diverse elements as the history of rhetoric (Hostettler, 1980), the history of public address (Brown, 1981), history and rhetorical criticism (Gunderson, 1986), and the history and rhetoric of social movements (Andrews, 1980). On the other hand, within journalism/mass communication, the concern with history focuses on the history of journalism (Carey, 1974, 1985; Emery, 1981-82; Gray, 1981-82; Halverson, 1981-82; La Brie, 1981-82). Nevertheless, regardless of subdisciplinary focus, some recent publications dispute the notion of history as impractical and call for communication academics to take history more seriously, especially intellectual history (Herbst, 1993, p. 144) and interdisciplinary work (Carey, 1985).

In the past, communication theory, as well as history, has been variously viewed both as impractical and as essential. Currently, the confusion revolves around the very notion of communication theory and the multiplicity of communication theories being discussed in the field (Craig, 1993, p. 28). This situation has prompted a call from academics to work toward a convergence of communication theory (Rogers & Chaffee, 1993, p. 130). In addition to studying and teaching about the history of communication and the convergence of various aspects of communication theory (from interpersonal to mass communication), there is also a need to examine the moral and political dimension of communication issues (Newcomb, 1993, p. 131).

Integration of liberal arts components into communication curricula has also been addressed. Arguing that it is no longer enough to educate communication students to fill career slots, Shoemaker (1993) insists that communication programs "must give . . . students a general communication education with a large conceptually based core of courses" (p. 151). Such a communication core is analogous to what Boyer (1987) sees as an enriched major, which examines the field's history and tradition, its social implications, and its ethical and moral dimensions. Another way of talking about a common communication core or an enriched major is to see it as "integrated," by which Rakow (1993) means that "the curriculum of and for the future should be holistic, that is, it will need to integrate what are now fragmented subfields of speech, interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication" (p. 157).

The enriched communication major, as envisioned by Blanchard and Christ (1993, p. 92), is dependent upon bridges being built between and among the different areas of communication, so that the common communication core transcends different curriculum sequences. Bridges among the academy, professions, and various areas of communication make the difference between a sequence-based and an integrated communication curriculum. One example of an integrated communication course in a combined speech communication/journalism curriculum is a communication-history course described in some detail by McIntyre and Jabusch (1981-82). However, these types of integrated history, theory, and/or philosophy courses rarely appear in the literature.

In summary, the nature of liberal arts elements within communication curricula at the university level has been and remains controversial. Lacking consensual definition as a discipline, the field, instead, is comprised of divergent theoretical, historical, and epistemological traditions, although it is characterized by its major subdivisions of speech-related communication studies and journalism/mass communication-related professional and conceptual studies. These, in turn, are divided among various theoretical, historical, and epistemological traditions. Recent literature suggests integrating the field and its scholarship for students through liberal arts-oriented communication courses. However, as noted above, interpretations of what constitutes liberal arts in communication are diverse. According to the academic literature, numerous manifestations of history, theory, and philosophy exist within the various communication curricula, yet there are few examples in the literature of specific communication courses that actually incorporate liberal arts elements.

In order to better understand the direction of curricular development, we audited the current status of liberal arts scholarship in communication studies. We designed our research to answer three questions: first, are components of the liberal arts (which, based on our review of the literature, we operationalized as the history, theory, and philosophy of communication) being taught in communication programs? second, do these liberal arts subjects comprise core courses or electives within communication curricula? and third, what differences, if any, are there among history, theory and philosophy of communication components according to the type of academic communication programs?

METHOD

To address the three research questions, a two-page questionnaire was developed and sent to the mailing list of two organizations. One was the Association of Communication Administrators whose membership is drawn primarily from such areas as communication studies, radio-TV-film, and speech communication. The other group was the membership of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, a group of administrators who, for the most part, represent programs that involve journalism, advertising, public relations, mass communication(s), and broadcasting. This group generally does not include representatives of communication studies or speech communication programs.

Accompanying the questionnaire was a cover letter from our departmental chair addressed to the recipients. The purpose of this letter was to identify the curricular nature of the research project, assure anonymity to respondents and their institutions, and encourage recipients to complete and return the questionnaire promptly. A single mailing to 507 separate departments resulted in 243 responses, which constituted a return rate of 48 percent. The questionnaire explored 1) the nature of the undergraduate communication curriculum in the areas of the history, theory, and philosophy of communication as separate and as combined courses, 2) the role of such courses as required communication core courses, and 3) the contrast between different types of organizational units in the two foregoing areas—course content and requirements.

The survey was designed to be exploratory and as such included general questions

eliciting both closed and open-ended responses. We received responses to closed questions that were not always closed, however. Respondents sometimes added explanatory notes, or cross-references to responses to other items in the questionnaire. Consequently, the data were deemed more useful if explicated qualitatively rather than through statistical analysis. The results, therefore, are reported as frequencies and percentages, and, where applicable, in text.

Responses were organized into two specific groups for this analysis. The first group was comprised of 76 academic units in colleges and universities in which speech communication is separate from journalism both in administration and curriculum, regardless of what other areas—advertising, electronic media, public relations, etc.—might be associated with speech communication. The second group was comprised of 63 academic units in which speech communication is combined with journalism, regardless of what other areas of study might also be included. These two groups, namely, speech communication excluding journalism, and speech communication merged with journalism, were chosen for study because a preliminary review of the responses showed journalism (rather than broadcasting, advertising, or other professional emphases) to be the area of study most often represented in mass-communication programs as well as the area whose organizational placement (either with or separate from speech communication) was most variable. (The third group of 104 responses representing programs in which journalism exists separately from speech communication is not included in this study).

FINDINGS

History of Communication

Responses indicated some differences between departments in which speech communication was separate from journalism (hereafter referred to as “separate”) and those departments that included both speech communication and journalism (hereafter referred to as “merged”). As Table 1 shows, a noticeably higher percentage (54%) of merged programs offered a history of communication course than did separate programs (35.5%). This difference may reflect the tendency of journalism curricula to include a course in the history of the press, whereas such courses as the history of rhetoric in speech communication curricula may be much less prevalent than they once were. Interestingly, even though it appears that merged programs more frequently offer a history of communication course, the course was required somewhat less frequently for all majors. What is even more evident is that a relatively small percentage (16%) of programs of either type require a history of communication course for majors. About twice the percentage of merged programs (22%) than separate programs (11%) either require a history of communication course for some majors or provide such a course as an elective for majors.

TABLE 1
History of Communication Course

	Speech Communication (N=76)		Journalism + Speech Communication (N=63)	
Offered	27	(35.5%)	34	(54.0%)
Required for all majors	12	(15.8%)	8	(12.7%)
Required for some majors	9	(11.8%)	14	(22.2%)
Elective for majors	8	(10.5%)	14	(22.2%)

The responses provide a clue about one possible difference between the two types of programs. Written comments show that in merged programs the most frequently mentioned types of majors required to take a history of communication course are those in journalism sequences. This finding lends some weight to the notion that it is the legacy of the journalism curriculum in merged programs that helps account for the greater frequency of offering a history of communication course and requiring the course for some majors, especially journalism majors.

Theory of Communication

Respondents also report that the theory of communication course (Table 2) is offered by a higher percentage of merged programs (90.5%) than separate programs (73.6%). Even so, a greater percentage of separate programs (50%) require theory of all majors than merged programs (44.4%). Perhaps this difference could be attributed to what may be a relatively greater homogeneity of the curriculum and faculty educational backgrounds in separate than in merged programs, although our questionnaire did not probe this question directly. In almost one-third (31.7%) of merged programs, however, a communication theory course is required for some majors, while only slightly more than one-tenth (11.8%) of separate programs require it. Written comments by respondents from merged programs indicate a wide range of major/minor tracks in which students are required to take a communication-theory course—for example, advertising, public relations, broadcasting, communication studies, communication theory, journalism, mass communication, and speech communication. The greater diversity of major emphases inherent in merged programs may help account for the higher percentage of merged programs versus separate programs that require a communication-theory course of some majors.

TABLE 2
Theory of Communication Course

	Speech Communication (N=76)		Journalism + Speech Communication (N=63)	
Offered	56	(73.6%)	57	(90.5%)
Required for all majors	38	(50.0%)	28	(44.4%)
Required for some majors	9	(11.8%)	20	(31.7%)
Elective for majors	4	(5.3%)	12	(19.0%)

Philosophy of Communication

Responses reveal that courses dealing with the philosophy of communication are offered by a somewhat higher percentage of merged programs (25.4%) than separate programs (19.7%). Despite this, a comparison of percentages across categories of program types does not show much difference between separate and merged programs regarding the requirement of philosophy courses either for all majors, or some majors, or as an elective for majors, as Table 3 shows. As a course, philosophy of communication is not frequently required of communication students regardless of program type.

TABLE 3
Philosophy of Communication Course

	Speech Communication (N=76)	Journalism + Speech Communication (N=63)
Offered	15 (19.7%)	16 (25.4%)
Required for all majors	10 (13.2%)	6 (9.5%)
Required for some majors	2 (2.6%)	3 (4.8%)
Elective for majors	7 (9.2%)	5 (7.9%)

Instead, the most noteworthy aspect of the findings regarding the philosophy of communication course is revealed when comparison is made among philosophy, history (see Table 1), and theory of communication courses (see Table 2). For separate speech communication programs, the percentage of those offering philosophy of communication courses is much lower (19.7%) than those offering either history of communication courses (35.5%) or theory of communication courses (73.6%). Similarly, for merged programs, the percentage of those offering philosophy of communication courses (25.4%) is much lower than those offering either history of communication (54.0%) or theory of communication (90.5%) courses.

One explanation for such a pattern, we discovered in the open-ended notations of respondents, is the apparent latitude, if not confusion, among the reporting academicians about what constitutes a philosophy of communication course. One respondent who represented faculty in a speech communication program wrote that this program's idea of philosophy of communication was a general semantics course taught as a philosophy of language course. On the other hand, respondents representing merged programs offered different remarks. Some wrote that philosophy was not considered a stand-alone course but was taught in other subjects; some indicated that ethics and moral philosophy were general requirements of all of their institution's students; still others asked what the difference was between "theory" and "philosophy." The questionnaire deliberately did not define "philosophy" of communication, just as it did not define "history" or "theory" of communication. Few definitional questions, however, were raised by respondents regarding those subjects. The term, "philosophy of communication" and the parameters of a course designed to teach it appear to be far more problematic than history or theory, either as terms or course concepts. Still another possible reason for the low percentage of programs offering philosophy of communication courses may be simply that the subject is not deemed as important for students to study as the history or theory of communication.

Combined Course

When asked whether their department or unit offers an undergraduate course that combines history, theory, and/or philosophy, respondents indicated that 72.4% of separate programs and 63.5% of merged programs did offer such a course (see Table 4). Following the logic of Blanchard and Christ (1993) in their work advocating communication education's integration with the liberal arts, one might expect merged programs to offer such an integrated course more frequently than separate programs do, since merged programs presumably would be more likely to encourage faculty from previously separate units or sequences to collaborate in designing courses that forge curricular linkages between the history, theory, and/or philosophy of communication. For whatever reason, we found that clearly is not the

case in those departments whose administrators responded to our questionnaire. The percentage of programs with a combined course in history, theory, and/or philosophy required of all majors is slightly higher for merged (42.9%) than for separate (38.2%) programs. Likewise, merged programs require some majors to take such a course more frequently (14.3%) than do separate programs (9.2%).

TABLE 4
Course That Combines History, Theory and/or Philosophy of Communication

	Speech Communication (N=76)		Journalism + Speech Communication (N=63)	
Offered	55	(72.4%)	40	(63.5%)
Required for all majors	29	(38.2%)	27	(42.9%)
Required for some majors	7	(9.2%)	9	(14.3%)
Elective for majors	5	(6.6%)	5	(7.9%)

Table 5 shows the frequency with which respondents mentioned different types of combined courses. By the titles supplied and comments from respondents, it appears that the most frequently-mentioned type of combined course was one that functioned as an introduction to the discipline, whether the course was listed as communication, communication studies, human communication, rhetorical studies, or speech communication. Twenty-two different titles of such courses were listed by those representing speech communication programs. Representatives of combined programs listed 19 introductory courses titles, which included 9 mass communication courses.

TABLE 5
Categories of Combined History, Theory &/or Philosophy Course Titles#

<u>Speech Communication</u>	<u>Journalism + Speech Communication</u>
Introduction to the Discipline (22) Examples: •Intro. to Communication •Intro. to Communication Studies •Intro. to Human Communication •Intro. to Rhetorical Studies •Intro. to Speech Communication	Introduction to the Discipline (19) Examples: •Intro. to Communication •Intro. to Human Communication • Intro. to Mass Comm./Media
Communication &/or Rhetorical Theory (15)	Communication &/or Rhetorical Theory (11)
Miscellaneous: • Broadcasting/Mass Comm. (3) • Persuasion (3) • Rhetoric of Language, Thought, etc. (3) • Research methods/theory (2)	Miscellaneous: • Mass Comm. Theory/ Principles/Issues/Ethics (5) • Journalism Ethics/Seminar (2) • Rhetoric, classical or modern (2)

Some respondents provided multiple course titles, while others provided no titles. Consequently, this table categorizes the types of reported course titles based on the number of times such course titles were mentioned, rather than on the number of different departments offering such courses.

¹For a research report on communication curricula encompassing these separate journalism programs, see Sharon Hartin Iorio and Keith Williamson (1995). The role of liberal arts courses within communication curricula. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 50, 16-25.

The second most-often mentioned combined courses were communication theory or rhetorical theory (in both the "separate" and "merged" program types). One type of written comment that appeared with some regularity came from respondents who pointed out "almost all of our courses combine several of these areas."

DISCUSSION

Liberal Arts Components

Although no claim is made that these results are generalizable beyond the sample itself, the survey does shed some light on the status of the communication curriculum. First, we found that there is a liberal arts component in the communication curriculum. Of the three liberal arts components studied, all are currently being offered in a cross-section of communication programs. Communication-theory courses are being offered most frequently (Table 2), history of communication courses offered less frequently (Table 1), and philosophy of communication courses offered least frequently (Table 3). A clear majority of programs offer a liberal arts component in courses that combine history, theory, and/or philosophy, respondents' reports show (Table 4). When titles of such courses were listed, it became clear that the courses designated as combined were most frequently introduction to the discipline courses. In addition, communication-theory and/or rhetorical-theory courses were cited, although somewhat less frequently, as courses that combined liberal arts components (Table 5). What was usually missing from the compilation of course titles and from the written comments provided by respondents was any substantive indication that combined courses are integrative across subdisciplinary boundaries, or taught at a level beyond the introductory course.

Communication Core

Our findings also show that the communication core (or required) courses frequently are not representative of liberal arts components. History, theory, philosophy and/or a course that combines some of these subjects are required by a minority of programs surveyed. It should be noted, however, that the theory of communication course and courses that combine liberal arts subjects are core requirements in a sizable number of programs. The theory of communication course was reported to be required of all majors by close to half (47%) of all respondents surveyed (Table 2). Percentages show that combined history, theory, and/or philosophy courses required for all majors (40%) also are substantially represented (Table 4), but, we reiterate, courses listed as combining liberal arts subjects are most often entry level and introductory (Table 5). The history of communication is a required course for all majors in less than 15% of all reporting communication programs (Table 1), and the philosophy of communication as a required course for all majors is taught in less than 12% of programs (Table 3). In other words, infusing and integrating the liberal arts in the communication curriculum has often been advocated (Blanchard & Christ, 1993; Rakow, 1993; Rogers &

Chaffee, 1993, Shoemaker, 1993). At this point, such integration seems more of a hope than a reality, because the communication core does not appear to be enriched by the liberal arts.

Types of Programs

Our study did find that there are certain differences between programs in which speech communication is separate from journalism and those programs in which journalism and speech communication are merged. A higher percentage of merged programs offer courses in the history of communication (Table 1), the theory of communication (Table 2), and the philosophy of communication (Table 3), but the reverse was found for courses combining history, theory, and philosophy. Such combined courses were found more often in the curricula of speech communication programs. This is not a result we expected. The opportunity to build bridges linking disciplinary interests, we expected, would exist to a greater degree among merged programs, but that was not the case.

Another difference between program types involves the requirement of courses with liberal arts components for communication majors. Respondents in speech communication programs report that more individual core courses dealing with history, theory, or philosophy are required of all majors than do respondents from merged programs. A possible reason for this finding might be that separate programs (such as speech communication), being somewhat more homogeneous in their disciplinary focus than merged programs, find it more feasible to require a given history, theory, or philosophy course of all majors than do merged programs.

A slightly higher percentage of merged programs than separate speech programs require combined courses of all majors. This finding may indicate that merged programs that actually offer combined courses have restructured their curricula more completely and are consequently more committed to combined courses as a requirement for all majors than are separate speech communication programs.

SUMMARY

Overall, our study suggests that the liberal arts subjects of history and theory and entry-level courses that combine history, theory, and/or philosophy have found a niche in the communication curricula, but that there is little uniformity in the extent to which these courses are offered across the curricula. Neither are the courses made a requirement for most students. Our study implies that the process of reformulation and/or integration of communication curricula with regard to liberal arts components has not progressed very far. The curricula of speech communication programs appear to place more emphasis on theory and courses that combine liberal arts subjects, while curricula in programs where speech communication and journalism are merged appear to emphasize theory and, to a lesser degree, history. Philosophy seems to be ill-defined and neglected as a course offering in both program types. Our study leads us to believe that the merger of programs does not necessarily entail integration of programs. Merged programs appear to couple the traditional course offerings and core requirements of speech communication programs with those of journalism programs without much change or development of liberal arts components in the curriculum, save the commitment of 90% of the programs to provide theory. We did not find much integration of liberal arts components in communication course content beyond the entry level in either speech communication programs or merged programs.

Our survey examines current course offerings and shows the relationships of liberal arts components in regard to the organization of communication programs and curricula. Several questions warrant further research: 1) Will liberal arts subjects continue to have a place in communication curricula? 2) What core courses can provide unity for the diverse subdisciplines and areas of communication study? 3) Should merged programs offer the same courses

as previously separate programs, or revamp and transform the curriculum? 4) Are theory of communication courses emerging as the glue that holds future curricula together? 5) Does the history of communication continue to be important as media technologies and communication programs develop? 6) Is the philosophy of communication withering, or is it developing as a course examining the study of professional ethics, the development of free speech, or the purpose of communication in society? 7) Will courses that integrate liberal arts subjects either at the entry or advanced level of study provide intellectual purpose for modern communication curricula? 8) Is the communication curriculum moving toward coherence?

The task ahead for future research is to examine closely the offerings of communication-based programs through more comprehensive methods—in-depth surveys, review of course catalogues, and on-site program reviews. The more long-term and difficult challenge is to envision, articulate, and implement curriculum for communication programs of the twenty-first century.

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