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A Summary of Ideas for Sustaining Communication Programs

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The articles in this volume of JACA include many ideas worthy of emulation and some mistakes that everyone should take care to avoid. This summary does not pretend to include all of the ideas in the articles, but it does review some of the major ones.

Here are some ideals and some ideas—none of which are guaranteed to work—that should be considered by programs that want to persist through the hard times.

1. **Attract and develop outstanding faculty.** The ideal model for a faculty member varies by institution and level of instruction. At Research I and Research II universities there is no doubt that the teacher/scholar model is dominant and that the publication/creative activity portion determines upward mobility. In the community college and smaller liberal arts colleges the ideal model might be more likely to emphasize the dedicated teacher. Whatever the type of college or university, your professional colleagues judge your field, department, school or college by the faculty in it. Having faculty who people outside the department know to be intelligent, articulate, and productive gives strength to a program.
2. **Attract outstanding students.** If you are the major of last resort on your campus, if you are more likely to attract football players than members of the National Honors Society, and if you attract majors because they don't have to take math, then you need better recruitment, higher standards, and a more challenging curriculum. You should try to attract the best of the high school debaters, the editors of the high school papers and yearbooks, and students who like the

- pragmatic combination of communication skills and liberal arts that characterize the communication disciplines.
3. Use the grading scale. Grade inflation is a national problem, and it crosses many disciplines. The engineers and scientists tend to attract first rate students, but they tend not to grade as high as communication professors do. Often the professor who is a good teacher with a fairly demanding grading scale attracts students and repels students looking for an easy route. For fourteen years I have seen how faculty grade thousands of students in hundreds of course in five different communication fields. I know that the grades tend to run high in this college with excellent students and that I am willing to bet that most communication programs are plagued by high grades regardless of the quality of the students in the classroom.
 4. Cultivate connections inside and outside your unit. Too often the faculty member sent to represent the department is not a star; instead, it is someone who has the time because he or she certainly isn't spending it doing research, writing or class preparation. Others judge you from the person you send, so send your best representative. Maintain positive relationships with the businesses that hire your graduates. One university reduced the scope of its communication programs and no newspapers, broadcasters or any professionals came to their defense. If you get to know publishers, general managers, editors and other employers, then you can call on them for support when you need it.
 5. Discourage public conflict. At universities big enough to have communication departments, ask at the university gate about conflicts or who dislikes whom in the Civil Engineering Department, the Agronomy Department, or the Chemistry Department. Few or nobody will know. Ask the same question about journalism, broadcasting or speech communication. It seems that lots of people know about our infighting: the dean gets dissed in the newspaper for dropping faculty positions in journalism (they were non-renewals of non-tenure track positions), the telecommunications school gets roasted for alleged sexism in denying tenure to a woman woman (she had no publications), and everybody knows how little the speech communication folks respect the print people because they have told everyone in sight and sound. These examples are from three different universities. Result: we foul our own nests by practicing our excellent writing and speaking skills until others see us as we have portrayed ourselves in a public display of disaffection for our leadership and our colleagues. Some communication programs need a workshop on suicide prevention.
 6. Cultivate alumni. If your students were treated taught well and advised well, then they will respect your program. After graduation they should be kept informed about their teachers and the program. They should be invited back as guests for advice or instruction. Encouraged to give small amounts while they build earning power, they can later be asked for more generous contributions. Alumni can provide internships, employment opportunities, and advice about curriculum. An event like Communication Week can offer opportunities to return to campus. An organization like a Society of Alumni

- and Friends can encourage their continuing participation. And membership in a Major Gifts Committee, campus alumni group, a board of visitors or advisory board can enrich their contributions to the program.
7. Communicate inside and outside the unit. We are supposed to be experts in communication, but our own accomplishments tend to go unheralded. Make sure that every faculty and student accomplishment gets coverage in college, university or community publications. Have a picture of every faculty member to send with the press release. Sing the praises of your alumni and get them on every important alumni and fund board you can. Make sure that faculty and staff know about the accomplishments of other faculty and staff with internal newsletters or news flashes. Top students should receive certificates or letters of congratulations, and parents should be invited to every celebration of accomplishment. Have a celebration with pictures every time a business gives a piece of equipment.
 8. Aggressively pursue outside funding and support from alumni and friends. People will give for a good purpose, and outside funding or gifts-in-kind demonstrate connectedness to the world outside academe. Mass communications departments and faculty have foundations that support the profession: the Freedom Forum, the Knight Foundation, the Hearst Foundation, and the Scripps Howard Foundation to name a few. One of the keys to resurrection for the University of Arizona's Communication Department was their impressive record of earning grants from outside funding agencies. Having a named chair, endowed professorships, a named building, donated office equipment or a named laboratory demonstrates outside support that gains respect from others.
 9. Find friends in high places. Ohio University has nine distinguished people on the Board of Trustees. Three of them graduated from the College of Communication, another was the spouse of the general manager of a large TV station, and still another was on the board of the Scripps Howard Foundation. Governors appoint trustees, university presidents nominate them, and if you do the ground work for a nominee you may help some of them to gain office. Similarly, you can help faculty to gain distinguished professorships, to join the ranks of top teachers, or nominate them for outstanding administrator awards, honorary alumni, or meritorious faculty awards. Helping your own professors gain high office in professional associations, community organizations, and named professorships can bring honor to your unit. Help your own alumni to gain recognition from the college or university. And do not forget that your students often have parents in high places. For two to four years you have an opportunity to ask them for internship opportunities, equipment, funding, and influence.
 10. Create an event that celebrates your discipline. For twenty-seven years, Ohio University's Communication Week has attracted hundreds of alumni and dozens of dignitaries for a campus-wide celebration. Recent graduates, mid-career alumni, and top-level executives speak with faculty and students about how to get jobs, how to advance professionally, and how to network with successful alumni. These

days, businesses sponsor each school's day, and students, alumni, and parents participate in the awards ceremonies. Anyone can start modestly with a day to celebrate communication even if they have only one alumni guest to address the students. An event brings publicity and campus attention to the program.

11. Create student organizations. Students can sustain interest in communication disciplines with a minimum of faculty supervision—if the department helps them get organized. Among the organizations, some with national affiliations, are Public Relations Student Society of America, Sigma Delta Chi, Alpha Epsilon Rho, an Advertising Club, the American Society of Training and Development, the Radio and Television News Directors Association, Women in Communication, a video production unit, a radio club and many more. These interest groups provide early networking opportunities, chances to learn more about the profession, and opportunities outside the classroom to interact with faculty and staff.
12. Encourage internships. Students today are as likely to earn an entry-level position through an internship as they are through a job application. Top programs cultivate internships with alumni and professional colleagues. Some programs have endowed internships in exotic places, others have a few top internships with the best production houses, newspapers, and magazines; and still others invite students to find their own internships for experience, for credit or for grades. Such programs work best if a faculty or staff member is assigned the responsibility of serving as internship coordinator. Even a highly academically oriented speech communication program can find internship opportunities among the business where their graduates usually find jobs.
13. Keep accurate records. Nearly every program that has experienced an attack has found that the information used against the program was incorrect: fictitious figures on the number of majors, mythical figures about grades, wrong information about outside grants and contracts, and no information about internships or placement. Your ability to produce data that is verifiable and accurate can work well in your defense.
14. Establish an identity. I know of no academic discipline that goes by so many names. The 1994-95 SCA Directory illustrates the problem. The state of Alabama comes first with 19 names for departments with few repeated: Telecommunications Department; Eng/For Lmag/REI/Speech and Thtr; Department of Communications Media; Communication Department; Theatre Department; English Department; English and Communication Department; Speech Communication & Theatre Department; Communication Arts Department; Telecommunications and Film Department; Theatre and Dance Department; etc. The Directory is a kaleidoscope of names and titles.

Furthermore, knowing the name of a department may tell you little of nothing about its content. A Telecommunications Department might be radio-TV or it might be a voice and data program. A Speech Communication Department might be organizational communication, oral interpretation, legal communication, political communication, rhetoric and public address, debate or some or none of

the above. Some departments are dedicated to rhetoric while another is dedicated to quantitative studies. A radio-TV program might be critical studies or an audio-video production program. And Journalism might be entirely news/editorial, could be public relations and advertising, might be broadcasting and photojournalism, or could be all of the above.

We need to use our speaking and writing skills to communicate to others what we do. Introductory classes can help inform the students about communication disciplines. Internal curricular reviews are an opportunity to tell colleagues in other fields what we do. And meetings with prospective students and parents provide a situation for explaining our practical, applied approach to education.

15. Use the network. People with communication degrees are chairs of Boards of Regents, members of boards of trustees, presidents, academic vice presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs. People with communication degrees are presidents and executive officers of major companies. When your program gets in trouble you should seek support from people who can write, call or correspond with their professional counterparts.

A dean writing to another dean knows which arguments work best. A Pulitzer Prize winner who proclaims the excellence of a program is difficult to disclaim. And a university president who gets a call from the Vice President of Ameritec (a communication graduate) is likely to take the call. Thousands of communication graduates are pleased about their education and are happy to help if called upon to defend their major. You need to plan ahead with names, addresses and phone numbers so your defense team can be called into action.

No administrator has time to prepare for every contingency, and nobody could do everything suggested in this summary. But in our current climate every administrator does have to make intelligent moves to strengthen the unit, to protect it from adversaries, and to defend it from a variety of attacks. The authors of the articles in this volume are among the people in our field who can help. I hope the stories of their successes and their challenges will help you with any problems you might face in the future.