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**The Small-College Communication Program:
An Assessment of Communication Program
Organization and Curricula at Private Liberal Arts
Colleges in the Midwest and South**

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Abstract

The study investigates selected features of communication degree programs at small, private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and South. Topics covered include how communication programs at such colleges are organized at the departmental level, what courses are most commonly offered in small-college communication programs, and what course enrollment limits are typical for such programs. Our findings suggest that communication programs are now commonly found at such institutions, with most housed in academic units that refer to communication in the unit name. Beyond relatively widespread commitments to restricting course enrollments, these programs are generally marked by great diversity in their course offerings and apparent foci.

Introduction

Whether measured by the number of communication programs at U.S. universities or the number of graduates produced by such programs, the communication disciplines have grown rapidly since the mid-twentieth century. The story of this growth has been told in many places, and we will not repeat it here. At its core, this story begins with the emergence of communication as a distinct discipline (or set of related disciplines) separate from English, sociology, and psychology. During the twentieth century these communication disciplines would form their own regional, national, and international organizations and were marked by the creation of undergraduate and graduate programs at public and private universities throughout the United States and, eventually, around the world.

The stories told about the growth of the communication disciplines historically have emphasized large research universities and their graduate programs. Smaller, undergraduate-centered colleges and universities have received much less attention in these narratives, with rare exceptions (e.g., Hamilton College). More has been written about the programs of larger, usually public, universities, ranging from early innovations at Cornell University and the University of Wisconsin (Gray, 1954) to relatively recent curricular and organizational concerns at Ohio University (Nelson, 1995b) and Wichita State University (Keel, 1995). Finally, studies of disciplinary trends may include small, private liberal arts colleges in their analysis of those trends (e.g., King, 1998), but such studies may

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mask features of small-college communication programs that are unique to such programs.

Because we agree with Nelson's (1995a, p. 133) claim that "the communication disciplines are all over the country in every size and type of higher education" institution, we wish to examine the small, private institutions that historically have been inadequately considered in attempts to assess the discipline. In this study we concentrate on private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and South to consider how these colleges offer communication programs to their students. We do so by investigating how communication programs are organized at the departmental level, what courses are most commonly offered in small-college communication programs, and what enrollment limits are typical for such programs.

Literature Review

Ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand students, small, private liberal arts colleges are roughly 750 of the 3,500 colleges and universities in the United States (Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996). While some of these institutions are supported by significant endowments, most have relatively small endowments and are tuition-dependent. With no public support for their operating budgets, many small liberal arts colleges face disastrous fiscal consequences if their enrollments decline even slightly. Cumulatively, these institutions have an enormous impact on higher education in the U.S., but their relative obscurity outside their immediate regions led Astin and Lee (1972) to label them "invisible colleges." With over 500 member institutions in the U.S., the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is a consortium of these small colleges that provides resource and advocacy services for its members. (While CIC institutions are not necessarily liberal arts colleges, the typical CIC institution probably would describe itself as such.)

For a few small colleges, departments of "speech," "oratory," or "public speaking" emerged in the nineteenth century, with such institutions as DePauw University, Hamilton College, Wabash College, and Whitman College mentioned in Smith's (1954) famous account of the development of discipline-centered departments. However, like other larger colleges and universities, many small colleges began to add communication programs only during the mid and late twentieth century as these programs became increasingly popular with students. In some cases, communication programs were not added without considerable resistance from the tight-knit faculties common to such institutions (Hotchkiss, 2002), who perceived communication programs as providing vocational education outside the liberal arts core. Even where enthusiastic support for communication programs has long existed, however, the small size and scale of these institutions often limit them to hiring only a very few full-time faculty to support the program. The challenges of staffing small-college communication programs have long been recognized (e.g., Corrigan, 1957).

In this study, we hope to provide a snapshot of these small-college communication programs as they are experienced by students at such institutions. We do so by looking at small liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and South. These

adjoining regions were chosen to reduce the likelihood of regional differences emerging as a confounding variable in this study and to minimize the risk of regional overrepresentation in random sampling, given the very large number of liberal arts colleges found in New England and the mid-Atlantic states.

Method

Beginning with the list of over 500 colleges and universities listed as member institutions on the Web site of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), a population of 96 institutions was identified for 19 contiguous Midwestern and Southern states. Forty-six colleges and universities were then randomly selected as the sample to be assessed. Beginning in late 2002, undergraduate students were recruited to retrieve information about communication programs from the Web sites of these 46 institutions. The students were trained to collect material for any major and/or program that seemed logically related to a communication discipline (e.g., speech communication, broadcasting, journalism). Courses and/or programs in communication disorders (i.e., speech pathology and audiology) were excluded from this analysis, as were courses and/or programs in theatre. Web sites that were incomplete or did not function when first visited were visited at a later date to see if data retrieval was possible. If it was not, the institution was not analyzed for the study.

Following the retrieval of information from 44 of the 46 institutions, a graduate student was trained by the first author to compile data collected regarding the organization of communication programs and the courses most commonly offered by small-college communication programs. First, the name of the department or other academic unit housing the communication program or major was identified. Second, the student coded courses, including courses with alternate names, for consistency with courses at other institutions (e.g., "Presentational Strategies" at one university was coded as a "Public Speaking" course for the purposes of this study). Course data for 20% of the institutions were randomly selected and then independently coded by the second author, who was trained by the first author and had no prior involvement in the study at that time. Intercoder reliability, assessed using percentage of agreement, was .90.

Following the collection of the data described in the previous paragraphs, representatives from 40 institutions listed as CIC members and having identifiable communication programs and faculty or departmental e-mail addresses were then randomly selected and contacted via e-mail and asked to supply maximum course enrollments for their institutions for four common communication courses. Four of these e-mail messages were returned as undeliverable. Seventeen of the 36 schools (47%) contacted provided course enrollment limitation data for some or all of the courses mentioned in the initial e-mail.

Findings

To supply a picture of the communication programs at small liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and South, we looked for data in three areas. First, we sought to identify the department, school, or other academic unit most immediately responsible for offering communication courses. Second, we wanted to

discover the courses most commonly offered at these institutions. Third, we hoped to uncover the typical class sizes at such institutions.

For the 44 institutions for which we retrieved usable information, 39 clearly had undergraduate programs offering one of the majors we would today associate with the speech communication and/or mass communication traditions (e.g., communication, journalism). The remaining five institutions did not have a communication major or did not clearly identify this major on their Web sites. Again, communication disorders programs and majors were excluded from our analysis.

Program Organization

Most recently, King (1998) relied on data from 176 institutions to report on the department names used by departments listed in the National Communication Association (NCA) Directory. For the institutions in our sample, we specifically worked to identify the name of the academic department or other unit most immediately responsible for offering communication courses. In doing so we assumed that a department chair, school director, or school or college dean would have formal responsibility for leadership of the unit. For example, if a college or university had a communication program located in its Department of Humanities, we identified the Department of Humanities as the immediately responsible unit.

The unit names are listed in order of frequency in Table 1. Consistent with King's findings for all NCA-listed institutions, "Department of Communication" is the most common unit name for these liberal arts colleges with communication programs, and 22 of 38 communication programs (58%) identified here had "communication" incorporated in the titles of their academic units. Several communication programs (16%) were housed with other humanities disciplines in a "Department of Humanities." When not housed individually or in humanities departments, communication most commonly shared a departmental home with theatre or fine arts (however defined).

For this sample, no department or other immediately responsible academic unit used "journalism" or "mass communication" in the unit name. However, we asked a student coder to generate independently a list of 50 communication programs and the departments responsible for those programs from a list of randomly selected CIC institutions located throughout the United States. Two of those 50 institutions had departments using these terms in their names, a "Department of Mass Communication" and a "Department of Communication and Journalism."

Table 1
List of Academic Unit Titles in Order of Frequency

| Name | Number of Institutions |
|--|------------------------|
| Department of Communication | 8 |
| Department of Humanities | 7 |
| Department of Communication Arts | 5 |
| Department of Communication and Theatre Arts | 2 |
| Department of Speech Communication and Theatre | 2 |
| School of Communication | 1 |
| School of Communication and Arts | 1 |
| Department of Communication and Fine Arts | 1 |
| Department of English, Theatre, and Speech Communication | 1 |
| Department of Communication and Theatre | 1 |
| Department of Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies | 1 |
| Fine Arts Area/College of Liberal Arts | 1 |
| Unclear | 4* |
| Unknown | 8** |

* A communication program of some sort clearly existed, but the academic unit responsible for the program was not readily identified from the available online materials.

** It was not evident that a communication major or program existed at this institution, or no information regarding the responsible academic units was available online.

Curriculum

We identified 48 courses or course types offered at the 39 colleges with identifiable communication programs; sixteen of these courses or course types appeared at half or more of the colleges and universities included in the sample. In some cases courses (including course titles) were very similar across those institutions offering them; in other cases, course titles and descriptions varied considerably. A list of these courses in order of frequency appears in Table 2, with courses listed only once excluded from this list or folded into one of several "miscellaneous" categories. Courses we would describe as products of both the speech communication tradition and the journalism and mass communication tradition were included on multiple occasions among the top 16 courses or course types.

Table 2
Communication Courses in Order of Frequency

| Course Name** | Number of Institutions |
|---|------------------------|
| Organizational Communication | 32 |
| Miscellaneous Mass/Mediated Communication | 30*** |
| Internship | 31 |
| Interpersonal Communication | 31 |
| Public Speaking | 30 |

| | |
|--|-------|
| Capstone/Senior Seminar | 27 |
| Small Group Communication | 26 |
| Miscellaneous Media Production | 26*** |
| Public Relations | 25 |
| Miscellaneous Required Theatre Courses | 24*** |
| Persuasion | 23 |
| Writing for the Media | 23 |
| Intercultural Communication | 22 |
| Miscellaneous Communication/Speech Communication | 22*** |
| Communication Theory (200 level and above) | 20# |
| Argumentation and Debate | 20 |
| Research Methods | 18 |
| Miscellaneous Journalism | 18*** |
| Principles of Mass Media | 17 |
| Oral Interpretation/Performance Studies | 17 |
| Miscellaneous Rhetoric | 11*** |
| Introduction to Communication (100 level) | 14# |
| Communication/Mass Media Law | 14 |
| Voice and Diction | 12 |
| Business and Professional Communication | 11 |
| Mass Media and Society | 10 |
| Interviewing | 9 |
| Forensics | 9 |
| Gender and Communication | 7 |
| Advanced Public Speaking | 7 |
| Leadership | 6 |
| Desktop Publishing | 6 |
| Advertising | 5 |
| Conflict Management | 5 |
| Political Communication | 5 |
| Family Communication | 5 |
| Listening | 4 |
| Nonverbal Communication | 4 |
| Advanced Organizational Communication | 3 |
| Advanced Interpersonal Communication | 2 |
| Communication Ethics | 2 |
| Miscellaneous Religious Communication | 2*** |

* Special-topics courses and independent-study courses were excluded from this analysis. Such courses were nearly universal in our sample. Presumably such courses allow for more variety in course offerings for departments with small faculties.
 ** While initially incorporated in the coding scheme, some courses only appeared once and are excluded from this table (e.g., health communication, parliamentary procedure.)
 *** A course in the “miscellaneous” category did not readily match up with other courses in the sample.
 # Coders were instructed to distinguish between introductory survey courses with significant performance requirements and 200-level courses and above that more obviously had the discussion of communication theory as their foci.

Course Enrollment Limits

For this portion of the study, communication-program representatives of 40 CIC institutions were contacted and asked to provide the maximum number of students permitted to enroll in the four most common communication courses identified in Table 2: Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, and Small Group Communication. Four of these 40 messages were returned as undeliverable. For the 17 responses we received, the data are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Maximum Enrollments for Common Communication Courses

| <i>Course Median</i> | <i>No. of Responses</i> | <i>Mean</i> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Organizational Communication | 15* | 23.3 |
| 24 | | |
| Interpersonal Communication | 16 | 21.7 |
| 21 | | |
| Public Speaking | 15 | 21.7 |
| 21 | | |
| Small Group | 13 | 23.4 |
| 24 | | |

*For this course, one institution indicated that no enrollment maximum was specified by the institution. We excluded this response from the analysis reported here.

Discussion

Based on our findings concerning small, private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and South, we offer several observations regarding the communication programs at these institutions, based on the three dimensions considered in this study.

First, communication programs are found in some fashion at the great majority (86%) of the 44 institutions for which usable data were retrieved. Our data do not speak to the size of these programs relative to other programs at these institutions, but communication programs appear to be a normal or typical feature of the degree offerings at such colleges. While many of these programs are housed in omnibus humanities units that offer many other degree programs, most are housed in academic units that in some way use the term “communication” in the unit title.

Second, the communication programs at these liberal arts colleges were quite diverse, and our data suggest no universal agreement on what courses are required to offer a communication program. When independent study courses, special topics courses, internship courses, capstone courses, and the miscellane-

ous course categories are excluded, only five specifically identifiable courses—Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, Small Group Communication, and Public Relations—are taught at 64% or more of the institutions in this sample. Such a lack of consensus about a common core inventory of courses may contribute to institutional and student confusion about the identity and core mission of communication programs, assuming that such a common identity does or should exist. The prominence of courses in interpersonal, organizational, and mediated communication does suggest the rhetorical tradition—often associated with the liberal arts tradition of communication pedagogy, dating to the nineteenth century—does not dominate these communication programs at liberal arts colleges. Instead, the entire range of communication scholarship and instructional practice is represented in these programs, albeit with considerable variation from institution to institution.

Third, these programs do not respect old distinctions between the speech communication and journalism and mass communication research traditions. Courses in Public Relations, Media Writing, Media Production, and Principles of Mass Media were commonly offered at these institutions, as were courses in Organizational Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Persuasion, and Argumentation and Debate. While communication studies departments and journalism schools often exist separately from one another at larger institutions, these communication programs at liberal arts colleges embrace the entirety of the communication disciplines.

Fourth, the course catalogs at these institutions suggest a strong commitment to both for-credit internship opportunities and senior seminar or capstone experiences. These data cannot speak to the actual extent of internship opportunities or the commitment to offering the capstone course with regularity, but they do suggest some recognition of the importance of such opportunities to student learning and/or institutional assessment.

Fifth, and not surprisingly for institutions that make small size a virtue in their promotional materials and self-descriptions (Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996), these institutions generally cap course enrollments at very modest maximums. For example, only one of the 17 responses for Public Speaking indicated a course enrollment maximum of over 24 students. However, these data do not allow for comparison to enrollment caps in other disciplines at small liberal arts colleges or to enrollment caps in communication courses at other, larger institutions.

Limitations and Conclusions

Several limitations of this study mean that the data reported here should be interpreted with great caution, with these limitations also suggesting fruitful possibilities for further research. First, there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn based on data drawn from institutional Web sites. Such data are often incomplete or out of date. Small colleges in many cases have very limited technological resources and, as a result, may have inadequate or unreliable Internet materials. Additionally, Web sites typically do not indicate how frequently a course might be taught. A course listed on a site may be taught regu-

larly, or it may not have been taught for several years. Inactive courses are removed from course lists more quickly at some institutions than at others.

Second, our findings provide a snapshot of the communication programs at these institutions. Such research does not capture general trends or the evolution of these programs over time, yet such data are required for a more complete picture of communication pedagogy at small, private liberal arts colleges. Smith's (1954) summary of the development of speech departments through the mid twentieth century indicates that these departments often changed dramatically from year to year, and the unsystematic impression we gathered from reviewing some Web sites was that some institutions in our sample had made significant and recent changes in their communication programs.

Third, we did not collect data on the courses required by these communication programs of all undergraduate communication majors. To the extent that the required core of communication courses signals faculty beliefs about disciplinary identity and desirable outcomes for students, a review of these core courses should provide helpful information.

Fourth, our definition of the population to be sampled requires should be carefully examined by those who might use this study as a starting point for advocacy. While our intent is to minimize problems with regional variation and sampling, generalizing our results beyond the Midwest and South could be problematic. Also, we confined our efforts to CIC member institutions, but a great many small and/or liberal arts colleges are not CIC members, and some relatively small liberal arts colleges are publicly supported. The bias to CIC members creates another problem for generalizing our results.

Fifth, this discussion is marked by our inability to collect adequate data on the number of communication faculty at the institutions in our sample, a dimension on which we originally intended to report. The variation in faculty-rank designations at these institutions, when combined with incomplete and/or outdated Web sites, made reasonably accurate reports impossible to generate. Self-report data on full-time faculty support for these programs will be required in future research to create a satisfactory account of staffing levels. Notwithstanding the emphasis many liberal arts colleges place on the use of full-time faculty in the classroom, our fragmentary and confusing data do suggest that many of these colleges rely on part-time, adjunct instructors to support 20% or more of their communication courses. We also were not able to collect data on the number of communication majors at these institutions, as such data were not available on institutional Web sites or were summarized in the most general terms (e.g., "approximately 100 communication majors").

In closing, small, private liberal arts colleges frequently have been "invisible" contributors to the communication disciplines, yet these institutions produce thousands of communication graduates and are major stakeholders in the disciplinary debates over matters of self-definition, communication administration, instructional pragmatics, and so on. We are well advised in the communication disciplines to learn more about the state of these communication programs in order to provide better advice to those considering faculty careers in

such institutions and to consider best practices emerging at these flexible and dynamic colleges and universities.

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