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## The Basic Course: A Means of Protecting the Speech Communication Discipline

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# **The Basic Course: A Means of Protecting the Speech Communication Discipline**

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*Charlene J. Handford*

Judging by several articles which have recently appeared in *Spectra*, the existence of speech communication in some institutions of higher education is becoming increasingly threatened. Those who teach communication may be wondering just how serious this threat may be and what, if anything, can be done to lessen the danger of their departments being merged with others or totally eliminated.

This article seeks to clarify the dangers now faced by the speech communication discipline in the college/university setting and to offer a two-fold plan of action for its survival.

## **THE PROBLEM**

### ***Evidence that a Problem Exists***

During the summer months of 1995, *Spectra* provided its readers with some startling news regarding the security of speech communication as a discipline in institutions of higher education.

Almost as a prelude to bad news to come, the May edition included an announcement from SCA's Second Vice President, Judith S. Trent (1995) of the formation of a Task Force on Discipline Advancement. Its function is to provide help in

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establishing plans for those communication programs in need of promotion and protection.

This was followed by the June edition which featured an article by Thomas M. Scheidel (1995) who chronicled the fight for survival on the part of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Washington. Though scheduled to be cut, a successful campaign was waged and the department was saved, but Scheidel predicted that attacks on various speech communication departments will continue.

In July, *Spectra* provided its readers with a reprint of Thomas S. Frenz's SSCA Presidential Address, delivered in April (1995). Not only did Frenz acknowledge that some communication departments are being threatened, he also warned that not all will survive.

Prior to these articles, the National Office of the Speech Communication Association had published the *Rationale Kit: Information Supporting the Speech Communication Discipline and Its Programs* (Berko & Brooks, 1994). In the form of a booklet, it supplies answers to often-asked questions in regard to speech communication, some of which could be helpful in the defense of a threatened program.

### ***Reason for the Problem***

Ironically, in the April edition of *Spectra*, Roy Berko (1995), SCA Associate Director, announced that 79% of those institutions surveyed have one or more communication courses included in their general education or universal requirements.

With this good news, one might wonder if there is a contradiction here. If the communication discipline is so thoroughly entrenched in institutions, why are there reports and predictions of departments under siege? Philip Backlund (1994) may have the answer. During the Speech Communication Association Flagstaff Conference in 1989, he explained

that when oral communication was included in the federal definition of basic skills, SCA and those who taught speech were not prepared to promote their discipline; and, he believes that has not changed. Thus, speech communication is a product in high demand, but its academicians have never been able to formulate universal, workable plans for marketing it at institutions of higher learning.

## THE SOLUTION

If communication, one of the basic skills included in federal guidelines, is a threatened discipline on some campuses, a two-fold solution may be the answer: Communication departments should (1) work to establish one specific communication course as the core curriculum requirement in their institutions, and (2) these departments should establish a successful marketing strategy for the discipline.

### *Rationale*

By designating one specific course in the department as a core requirement for fulfilling federal and state guidelines, every student who graduates from that institution will be enrolled, at one time or another, in that course (with the exception of transfer students with prior credit). By offering a core requirement, the department is assured of significant student credit hours.

There are several advantages for a department with high enrollment figures. First, a department with a significant enrollment is more apt to wield greater influence in the political arena of its college and institution. This is especially true if more full-time faculty are hired, because they will serve on various campus committees, vote on academic issues, etc. Then too, most deans are probably inclined to work diligently

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to maintain the security of a department with significant enrollment, because numbers also provide greater power to that college/school within the institution.

Second, the remainder of the department can "feed off" of that required course. It is easier to build a case for offering other courses which have significantly lower enrollment if the department can produce an overall total of high numbers in terms of student credit hours. In addition, the required course can be an excellent recruiting tool for majors, in that it provides a way to reach more students who might never consider majoring in communication because of lack of exposure to that discipline. A high number of majors within a department is another important means by which a department can solidify its security, because administrators and boards are reluctant to eliminate such a program.

### ***Dangers to Avoid***

While some institutions already designate the communication department as the sole source of any core communication requirement, other departments provide a choice of courses. There are disadvantages to the latter policy.

For one thing, while this may result in a more even spread of enrollment among those courses designated to fulfill that core requirement, it is unlikely that the department will have one strong enrollment-builder. For example, during one term, interpersonal communication may be the enrollment-builder; that might change to public speaking during the next term. One course as the designated requirement makes it easier to estimate enrollment and the necessary number of faculty needed.

Also, if the department permits a choice of communication courses to fulfill that requirement, other departments within and outside that college/school may attempt to have some of

their courses included. The English department, sometimes labeling their discipline as rhetoric, might argue that speech communication is a component in one or more of their courses and should be included as one of the choices. In fact, the April 1996 edition of *Spectra* reports an effort at Thiel College to replace the basic communication course with a combined speaking and writing offering.

Probably more serious competition is apt to come from the colleges/schools of business, usually offering their own communication courses, often under such titles as business communication. Thus, a communications chair might find some difficulty in arguing with the administration that their organizational communication better fits the core requirement as opposed to the business communications course taught in the college/school of business.

Another danger may be communication-across-the-discipline programs. While some view the popularity of these programs as a sign that the communication discipline is regarded as important in the overall educational development of students, others do not. In fact there is a debate within the communication discipline regarding whether its faculty should participate in such programs (Moreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Whitney, 1993).

The proponents of communication-across-the-curriculum include Davilla, West, and Yoder (1993) who argue that these programs, if highly effective, can be a means for showing non-communication faculty that there is more to teaching speech communication than just common sense. To those critics who fear that faculty in other disciplines might come to believe that anyone can teach communication, Cronin and Glenn (1991) contend that this can be combated by extensive training for non-communication faculty.

Cronin et al. (1991) see communication-across-the-curriculum as an inexpensive alternative to adding basic speech classes. While this may be cost effective from an administrative standpoint, an argument can be raised that

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communication-across-the-curriculum should never be substituted for any communications course. Aside from allowing the discipline to be taught by some who may not be academically qualified to do so, such a policy is likely to undermine the enrollment and thereby the stability of the department.

### ***Rationale for the Public Speaking Basic Course as a Core Course***

Gregory contends that, "After taking a public speaking course, many students report that their new skills help them as much in talking to one person as in addressing a large audience" (1993, p.3). Pearson and West (1991) argue that there is no proof that public speaking is of greater value than a hybrid course. Though there is probably no point in debating which is more valuable, the public speaking or the hybrid approach, the basic course taught as public speaking may be the most logical choice as the designated communication requirement.

Consider that other disciplines seem to be less apt to offer a course which is solely devoted to public speaking. On the other hand, organizational communication is entrenched in business, and it is not unusual for interpersonal communication to be taught as units in psychology and business. Intercultural communication may be included as a unit in a business course or taught as an entire course in that curriculum. Public speaking, more than any other communication course, appears to remain within the domain of that discipline.

The reason for this may be that other communication courses rely heavily, though not exclusively, upon research from other areas such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. This, in turn, likely encourages some overlapping of communication and non-communication courses. For example,

on one campus, a course entitled medical sociology is somewhat similar to the health communication course taught in the Department of Communications; and international business communication, essentially an intercultural communications course, is offered in the College of Business.

Such overlapping could result in some non-communication faculty viewing themselves as qualified to teach courses which fulfill their institution's communication requirement. Again, unless across-the-curriculum programs convince them otherwise, non-communication faculty may be less apt to see themselves as qualified to be public speaking instructors.

### ***Suggestions for Implementation***

In terms of academic qualifications, accreditation agencies for institutions of higher learning can be a valuable tool for maintaining a distinct line between faculty members from different disciplines. As an example, one such group, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, sets strict rules regarding qualifications for faculty teaching in a baccalaureate program. According to their *Criteria for Accreditation Commission on Colleges*, full-time and part-time teachers of credit courses leading toward the baccalaureate "must have completed at least 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline and hold at least a Master's degree, or hold the minimum of a Master's degree with a major in the teaching discipline" (1992-3, p.37).

This 18 hour rule enables a department to argue that faculty in disciplines unrelated to oral communication are not qualified to teach public speaking. However, that rule may not be as easily applied to such courses as interpersonal communication, organizational communication, etc. which rely heavily upon research in psychology, sociology, and business, because faculty in these disciplines may contend that they meet the 18 hour requirement. However, faculty in



disciplines outside that of communications are less likely to fulfill that 18 hour requirement in public speaking and its related areas.

## **MARKETING STRATEGY**

No strategy makes sense if communications faculty do not believe in the value of their own discipline. Almost without exception, every public speaking, hybrid, interpersonal communication, and organizational communication text begins with an explanation of the practical applications of that area of study. Perhaps those who teach communication courses should read and re-read those sections for their own reinforcement.

Once those in the discipline have been reminded of the significance of what they are teaching, it might be wise to take time during the first day or two of class to discuss this with their students. Though often reminding the business and professional world that training students for employment is not the function of colleges and universities, most who teach in institutions of higher learning will agree that the majority of their students are there because many professions expect or require their practitioners to have a diploma. Truly, those skills taught in public speaking courses are necessary for the survival of a democracy; but, college students are likely more interested in knowing how those skills will help them professionally. It is up to communications faculty to clarify all of the practical applications of the discipline.

Communications faculty should also make sure that their colleagues in other disciplines understand the nature and value of their courses. This is especially important when service courses are involved. The course director, departmental chair, and even individual faculty can maintain a dialogue with those departments they serve in order to ascertain if the needs of their students are being met. Asking for their input

in regard to course syllabi, etc. can be accomplished via formal questionnaires or even informally over coffee or lunch.

Campus politics can be an important factor in academic matters; thus communications faculty should be highly involved in all aspects of their institution's governance. This means attending faculty meetings, participating on faculty committees, maintaining a keen awareness of the faculty council or senate, and being involved in their institution's accreditation process. By holding key positions and keeping a watchful eye on all academic matters, the departmental faculty will be better positioned to influence when necessary. For that reason, a department should strive to maintain as many full-time, tenure-track and tenured faculty as possible. Keep in mind that part-time faculty usually have no vote on academic matters.

Above all, the department should make sure that all of its offerings, especially the core required course, are effectively taught and academically sound. This is the best means by which a department can persuade other disciplines that communication courses are worthy of being required for a college degree.

## **SUMMARY**

This paper highlighted the warnings being issued to the speech communication discipline in institutions of higher education. Advising threatened departments to work toward establishing the basic course as fulfillment for federal and state communication requirements for their institutions and applying effective marketing strategies, specifics were offered in regard to why and how this might be accomplished.

According to Scheidel, "It is better to be active before danger strikes than to react later" (1995, p. 12). This is probably excellent advice for all speech communication departments.

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