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# Journal of the Association for Communication Administration

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### **Editor's Note**

I am pleased to present the second issue of *JACA* 35, our 2016 volume. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to publish the address given by Ronald C. Arnett, recipient of the 2016 Paul H. Boase Prize for Scholarship, granted by the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University for outstanding scholarship in the field of communication. Arnett offers a warning for communication administrators concerned about the corporatization of higher education, highlighting trends over the last decades that call for thoughtful response. E. Michele Ramsey offers a treatment of a new approach to a communication capstone course. Ramsey describes several elements of this course, offering insights for communication administrators who are seeking new approaches to documenting student learning and readiness for participation in the communication marketplace of ideas and commerce. Susan K. Opt explores mission statements from a Rhetoric of Social Intervention perspective, surfacing insights for communication administrators as they pursue meaningful efforts to engage departmental mission and identity. Finally, Tatyana Dumova provides recommendations for communication administrators leading graduate programs at small educational institutions, noting the potential contribution of high-impact educational practices to recruitment and retention.

Many thanks, as always, to reviewers and contributors for their work in making *JACA* a valuable resource for communication administrators. Thanks to Matthew Mancino, who continues to provide outstanding assistance with the technical aspects of the journal. Stay tuned for the 2017 volume, which is in process now.

## **Dialogic Education in an Age of Administrative Preening**

Ronald C. Arnett<sup>1</sup>

I am honored to be with you as the 2016 recipient of the Paul H. Boase Prize for Scholarship. I am thankful to Amy Chadwick, the committee, Pat Davidson, and the faculty here for this opportunity. Paul Boase was my teacher and my friend. I roomed with him at conferences for over twenty years often when I had no money and he assisted with payment. I have many stories to tell about Paul Boase: his great sense of humor, his loyalty to people, and his quiet regard for all. I simply want to thank you once again. Of all of the awards I have received, this is the most meaningful. I loved Paul Boase and was deeply fortunate to know him. I should add one other statement. My Masters thesis and dissertation director was Ray Wagner. I owe my scholarly engagement in the field of communication largely to Paul and Ray. I am thankful.

Businesses and industries invite trouble and decline when they shift their emphasis from their core principles and products to the periphery. In the United States, the automobile industry is a good example (December 2008) of the move from research and development to an emphasis on style and power. Higher education is courting a similar set of problems. We are increasingly interested in style and power—what a campus looks like and a seemingly ever-expanding pool of administrators. In a time of massive student debt (Bok, 2013, p. 95), public questioning of higher education (Bok, 2013, p. 2), and downsizing of faculty with expedient administrative growth (Bok, 2013, p. 33), higher education is losing its core values of teaching, scholarship, and service. I offer this essay as a thought piece situated within a plea for change. I am unwilling to listen to one administrator after another sell us on another dotcom era where one company after another fails (Geier, 2015). The Super Bowl commercials of 2000 consisted of 17 dotcom businesses with only 9 now in existence (Bennett, 2011; Geier, 2015). At that moment, only companies ‘not yet’ making money garnered significant investments and many stated that Warren Buffet’s era was finished (Geier, 2015; Wray, 2010). Note: Buffett is still here and many of the dotcom companies are no longer. Those company executives keep the focus off genuine productivity and, unlike Buffet, preened in front of financial mirrors.

### **Tenacious Hope**

Dylan Thomas (1952) urged resistance to and against death, to the end. His words demanded defiance to the finish: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. The light of higher education is dimming and our response must be tenacious hope. The heart of this essay pivots on statistics about the increasing rise of administrative influence in both number and power. My advice to me and to those hearing these comments is to remember why we joined higher education: we love ideas and the discussion of them with others—scholarship and teaching are lifeblood to us. A college administrator who I deeply admired stated that the definition of an adult is the ability to love when liking is simply impossible—such is our moment in higher education today. Love of the academy must sustain us in this moment of limited likeability.

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<sup>1</sup> Duquesne University

Nurturing the positive, as I offer condemnation of the current direction of higher education, requires beginning and concluding with information that walks counter to the current shadow side of higher education. I commence and close with points of tenacious hope. Optimism turns us into consumers, lamenting that the product of existence does not match our needs or tastes. Tenacious hope, contrarily, requires us to roll up our sleeves and embark upon the work. However, following the advice of another friend, when working in the fields of higher education today, “Do not forget to wear work boots. It is inevitable that you will step in numerous messy places in the field of higher education.” Thus, before I question administrative bloat, I want to remind you and me of the vital importance of administration. Tenacious hope begins with uplifting that which assists what we love in higher education: teaching, service and scholarship.

Karen Lollar (2013) outlines a practical and conceptual map, revealing the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the doing of academic leadership from a perspective of dialogic education. She offers a voice of tenacious hope, sketching the characteristics of dialogic dwelling places that she believes administrators can nourish. Lollar provides five elements capable of nourishing the terrain of creative education within the spirit of dialogic education. First, one portrays basic respect for others, beginning with acknowledgement of uniqueness and difference. Second, one responds to the call of the Other by refusing to reduce common practices and daily routines to unreflective banality. Third, one attends to all, both those we like and those we do not. Fourth, one foregoes expectation of a template of action by assuming unique responsibility for persons and situations. Fifth, one embodies a welcoming power of acknowledgment and models its importance. Lollar reminds us that communication is a bridge from the Other to me that requires thoughtful and responsible crossing. Conscientious leaders function without prescribed action; they understand the phrase “here I am” and act on behalf of an institution and the specific Other.

Lollar accentuates administrative responsibilities and obligations inclusive of the specific/concrete Other and the institution. Lollar uses the language of Emmanuel Levinas to announce the dilemma of leadership, the tension between ‘ethics’ and ‘justice,’ the ‘Saying’ and the ‘Said.’ Ethics attends to interpersonal responsibility to and for the Other. Justice responds to institutions, laws, and regulations constructed with the hope of protecting those not at the immediate table of power and influence. Saying is the revelatory that guides discernment of ethical responsibility in the spontaneity of human exchange. The Said offers guidance in and through public structures and agreements. Leadership unites contrary terms such as ethics and justice, Saying and Said. Leaders have obligations to the Other before us (ethics) and those we cannot see and do not even know (justice). We learn from and respond to the revelatory of context (Saying) and we build together configurations that others can understand and depend upon (the Said). Lollar advocates a dwelling place of unity of contraries which permits leaders to nourish lives on dialogic ground not fearful of uncertainty or a need of undue facility of response. Lollar frames leadership as crucial in meeting the complex and the unexpected. Discerning temporal answers emerges as one addresses dilemmas where leaders feel pulled between individual persons, immediate context, organizational needs, and the desire to responsively include those not present. In the heat of attending to deadlines, quantitative information, explicating goals and expectations one cannot forget the face of the Other matters as well as the importance of those not near the table of decision making. Lollar does not paint a tranquil picture; nevertheless, she details a leader’s focus of attention, inclusive of those present, those afar, and the mission of higher education, teaching, service, and scholarship. How an academic leader responds to this trinity of education invites a dwelling of what Lollar termed dialogic

engagement or what Martin Buber (1967) called “existential trust” which permits all stakeholders to trust the ground that gathers and situates our work together.

### Focus of Attention

Lollar’s essay paints an accurate picture of leadership, caught in the unity of contraries of persons and institutional obligations. Working through such daily dilemmas is the responsibility of leadership. Lollar’s insights yield a basic truth: leaders work within and with a necessarily divided focus of attention; they must seek temporally correct action as they navigate competing demands. The question posed by this essay’s title, “Dialogic Education in an Age of Administrative Preening,” unmasks what ensues when a seemingly all-administrative focus of educational attention emerges. Take for example, an exchange with a full professor and nationally known faculty member. This person came to my office with an imposed servanthood complaint, wondering why a provost feels it acceptable to say, ‘My faculty.’ My good colleague rebelled against the personal pronoun, considering three facts: (1) my colleague has a longer tenure than the provost; (2) the university, not the provost, provides an academic home; and (3) my colleague joined an academic discipline, a department, and a university, not an administrative cult. My colleague stated that the task of a provost is to facilitate good work for the institution and its members, faculty and students. The provost’s comment fell outside the horizon of tension between persons and institution and for my colleague invoked an image of “preening.” This full professor challenged a focus of attention resting on administrative strutting that omits the hard work of sorting through competing demands of persons (past, present, and future) and the mission and health of an institution.

My colleague is keenly aware of shifting power in the academic community. One senses this change in one’s own university, in professional associations, and in anecdotal tales about the academy. I offer two such stories. A colleague of mine, an outstanding administrator, entertained a large audience with the following account. When he and his wife wanted a pet, they could not agree on whether it should be a dog or a cat. Their final compromise generated a third alternative, a rabbit! A few years later, the kids wanted a dog; the family wondered how the dog would deal with the rabbit. Interestingly, the first time the dog confronted the rabbit, the rabbit bit the dog on the nose. From that point on, the dog remained afraid of the rabbit. My colleague then left his audience with a moral tied to his rabbit/dog story. For years, the faculty on college campuses acted like rabbits capable of inflicting serious wounds on administrators and members of the board of trustees. However, a dramatic shift transpired on college campuses when administrations and board members stood up and asserted a newfound fact: we are the dogs, and we eat rabbits. Since that point, the rabbits on most college campuses are cautious.

The second anecdote centers on an observation from a friend commenting on administrative mentoring programs. Such programs generally involve a senior member of the administration, commonly an associate dean or an associate provost, who meets with younger colleagues and offers comments on the process of administration. My friend states that such learning about administration is similar to meeting with a great musician who loves talking about music without taking time to actually practice the craft of music. Musicians are practicing doers as academics must be as well. Failing to engage the craft of higher education invites the dogs of administration to gather in number of dominance.

Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) wrote the *Fall of the Faculty: the Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. He is the author of approximately 25 books and 119 scholarly

articles. He holds positions at John Hopkins University and Cornell University. I cited his work extensively in an essay for the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* titled: “Educational Misdirections: Attending to Levinas’s Call for Ethics as First Principle” (Arnett, 2016). The thesis of Ginsberg’s book is straightforward; there is administrative bloat on college campuses. He asks how many of us know people who have administrative positions that are unclear in their contribution. He does not reject the importance of deans, provosts, or presidents. He critiques the expanding number and role of what he calls ‘deanlets,’ whose tasks are often amorphous. Deanlets might be a term used to describe administrators associated with Enron. I watched a video and discussion of the financial misdeeds of Enron, which generated an extraordinary number of financial changes with this country.<sup>2</sup> Interviewed Enron employees could not explicate the exact purpose of the organization. How many deanlets are unable to offer an answer that renders public support of teaching and scholarship? The ideal role of each deanlet is service that supports teaching and scholarship. If these keys go forgotten, the university loses its soul and clarity of direction; such actions result in increasing decline via lack of attention to and with core values of higher education

Ginsberg provides disturbing statistics about administration intrusion. Since 1975, the number of BA degrees granted increased 47% and the number of degree-granting institutions by 50% (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 28). The numbers of administrators expanded mightily, however, between 1975 and 2005. During this period, the number of full-time faculty increased 51%, administrators increased 85%, and other professionals including staff increased 240% (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 25). Exploring these statistics today, I am convinced we would unearth even more disturbing numbers. Ginsberg (2011) calls for increased transparency about the amount of revenue spent on administration, not only for basic deanlet salaries, but also for their staffs, meals, conferences, etc. All of their expenses challenge budgets set aside for teaching and scholarship. In Ginsberg’s words:

As a benchmark, trustees should compare their own school’s ratio of managers and staffers per hundred students to the national mean, which is currently an already inflated 9 for private schools and 8 for public colleges. If the national mean is 9 deanlets per [hundred] student[s] at private colleges then why [do some schools have 64, 40, or 31] .... Management-minded administrators claim to believe in benchmarking, so they should not object to being benchmarked. If I were a board member at one of the administratively top-heavy schools, I would want to know why my school employed three or four or five or six times more deanlets than the national average. (p. 206)

Ginsberg calls for resistance to skyrocketing administrative costs that marginalize teaching, service, and scholarship by the misdirection of resources and what a campus seemingly should value (Arnett, 2016).

Andrew Hacker, author of *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* and regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, and Claudia Dreifus of Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (2011) continue conversation about

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<sup>2</sup> The United States has preformed a number of hearings and reports regarding the impact of the Enron event on the United States economy and citizens. These investigations continued well into the 2000s. The *New York Times* continues to report on post-Enron consequences in 2016. See Peter Eavis’s article on February 25, 2016 titled, “Post-Enron Accounting Rule Requires Companies to Report Leases.”



expanding administrative positions in higher education in a book with a provocative title: *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It*. They challenge corporatization and bureaucratization of higher education, as they underline emerging titles of administrative interest that clutter the academic landscape: Sustainability Director, Residential Communications Coordinator, Coordinator of Learning Immersion Experiences, Senior Specialist of Assessment, Director of Knowledge Access Services, Dietetic Internship Director, Credential Specialist, Director of Active and Collaborative Engagement, Director for Learning Communities and First Year Success, and Vice President of Student Success (p. 30). Hacker and Dreifus indicate that bureaucrats have one basic commitment: to enlarge their responsibilities and their staffs. The authors contend that the proliferation of administration and administrators increasingly lessen focus on teaching, service, and scholarship.

Hacker and Dreifus ask, "How did universities come to be such behemoths, providing plush and numerous jobs for administrators, often at the expense of their own students?" (p. 35). One, perhaps, could ask why universities have not put a stop to this bureaucratic spiral. They offer the following summary: "putting the greater good above playing it safe, has become extremely rare among higher education administrators" (p. 39). They contend that far too often college presidents are technocrats, who were agile enough to climb to the top without making too many mistakes or enemies. Their goal is to keep the ship afloat with few major interruptions. Hacker and Dreifus suggest that the answer to the common question/lament, 'where is the leadership' requires one honest answer: no one wants to lead. They conclude with a final question, 'What are the thoughts of such leaders in that strange moment between sleep and one's first sip of coffee where one asks why did I enter the academy?' Such leaders need to pursue this question further, like an Augustine, who Arendt (1961) called the first existentialist, as he probed an existential reality, that he was a question unto himself. Augustine's query emerged from a faith commitment and a long lifetime of engagement with ideas, what we might now term a liberal arts education. We need more questions of self-reflection in and from our academic leaders. Hacker and Dreifus end the afterword of their book stating:

Overall what concerns us most is that higher education refuses to look in the mirror, to acknowledge its frequent indifference to students, let alone show a willingness to put itself on track...If the professoriate doesn't embark on some serious self-scrutiny, outsiders may start prowling their once-protected precincts. (p. 259)

When we do not monitor our own and refuse to engage in serious self-scrutiny, we risk losing the soul of higher education.

This theme continues in *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* by Ellen Schrecker (2010), who is a history professor at Yeshiva University. Her work addresses budgetary issues related to increasing reliance on part-time faculty. She laments the corporatization of the academy in manner akin to McDonalds and Walmart; the downsizing of industrial jobs and increasing use of part-time workers has invaded the academy. From 1975 to 2007, the percentage of tenured faculty dropped from 36.5% to 21.3 % (p. 202). Tenure track lines moved from 20.3% to 9.9% from 1975 to 2007 (p. 202). Full-time non-tenured faculty increased from 13% in 1975 to 18.5% in 2007, and part-time faculty from 30.2% in 1975 to 50.3% in 2007 (p. 202). Again, I am confident the numbers are more devastating today. The increasing number of contingent faculty positions in higher education moves the academy into the

realm of precarity, addressed initially by Pierre Bourdieu (1963) and most recently by Guy Standing (2011). The precariat represents the under employed and the institutionally disconnected.

The corporatization of higher education is firmly underway, inviting what Schrecker terms a great recession in higher learning. Schrecker ends with a warning. In higher education, there is more than money at stake (p. 233). Intellectual growth and meaningful scholarship put thoughtfulness of citizens at risk, requiring the academy to resist corporatization. She ends stating, "Without an aware and energized academic community that can fight for all its members, higher education as a bastion of freedom and opportunity will, like the polar bears' glacial habitat, slowly melt away" (p. 233). She reminds her readers that it is our battle, our struggle to fight for students in our classrooms, and to assist those who dream of something greater than a part-time career. We have an obligation to future academics who seek a vocation that loves ideas, research, and inquiry. Their dreams remind us why we chose to enter the academy.

Derek Bok, who is the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary University Research Professor at Harvard University and two-time former president of Harvard University first from 1971 until 1991 and then from 2006 to 2007 as interim president, provides a thoughtful scholarly/managerial analysis in *Higher Education in America*. As a man who led Harvard twice, Bok's comments on college bureaucracy call forth attention. For every dollar spent, the amount committed to administration has increased from 19 cents in 1929 to fifty cents by the end of the century (p. 110). The expansions are simply not explainable. He calls for periodic examination and reviews. He reminds us that there is an energy of change in higher education that will, perhaps, be as significant as the decades following the 19<sup>th</sup> century and changes that trailed the generation of World War II. Today is a great period of experimentation in higher education, and there is risk aplenty. Bok and the authors cited in this essay plead for creativity and zeal tied to learning, teaching, service, and scholarship, ever wary of corporatization in higher education.

Corporatization dwells in an industrial revolution model of supervisors and workers. Adam Smith (1723–1790), who emphasized the "division of labor" in the *Wealth of Nations*, understood that this performative action requires an even greater commitment to general education. We owe much of our liberal arts and general education emphasis on the arts and leisure to creative innovations generated within the Scottish Enlightenment. A division of labor requires smart people educated with thoughtful ideas applicable in personal life and the workplace. Corporatization leans on foreground implementation, ignoring the seemingly inefficient slow collection of background information that sustains personal and professional life when foreground clarity is no more.

I end my reflections by revisiting an essay entitled, "Metaphorical Guidance: Administration as Building and Renovation" (Arnett, 1999). I published this essay in honor of my father, who ran a small business that never employed more than two people at a given time. He generated a high quality of life for his family, and each day proudly went to work in a truck with his name on its side. He was a grey-collar worker; he owned the company and, simultaneously, did the work. In the evenings, he spent time with my mom as they completed paperwork associated with the business. When I reflect upon the contributions of my father, I understand a depth of tenacious hope. He did the work; he assumed the responsibility and the risk; and at the dinner table, I never heard him complain about the work. In fact, I never heard him complain! Conversation at the dinner table never centered on the activities of the day at work. The conversation ranged from fishing to hunting to sports, and always, there was space for listening to my mother talk about books. My father

never did new construction. Like the title of the essay in his honor, he made his money doing renovation. He fixed what was no longer working. My distinct memory and consistent reflection of him was that whenever he encountered a new job, he always walked into the building and smoked a cigarette. Sometimes he sat; sometimes he walked around, but always with a cigarette. I found the behavior odd when I was young. Only later did I understand that he was attending, listening, and reflecting to and upon the building he had just entered. He did not impose upon the structure; he worked within the limits of the building.

My father listened to buildings; he attended to them. He heard poetry in old rickety structures. Today, the person I hire to do work on our house exhibits a similar responsiveness whenever a problem happens upon him. Each quandary brings a smile to his face, because he knows he will learn something from that house, from that structure, and from that which he did not previously know. Renovation does not begin with the assumption that all can be easily fixed; renovation commences with a humble joy that one will learn as one meets the unexpected. The essay in honor of my father begins with the assumption that renovation does not commence with confidence in the personality and charm of the builder, but with appreciation for sustained hard work that requires attentive listening and appropriate response.

My father and the good man who does work on our house link joy with renovation. They listen and attend to a sense of memory housed in the era of a given building and its materials. Academic campuses carry such memories within their bricks and mortar; they point to what Hannah Arendt referred to as the missing link between past and future—tradition to which we can respond and over time change. Institutional loyalty lives in the enactment of such constructive activities. The loyalty begins with a love for a profession that asks us to seek the right tool for the right job, protect the safety of all on the construction site, and recognize that each task carries a bit of our soul in the performance.

Renovation in the aristocratic terms of Aristotle is an ongoing engagement of *phronesis* where one discerns action within the demands of moment and context. The *phronesis*, the action, the response, has moments of temporal completion but does not ever grasp a final stop. For the labor is necessary each day in order to live and support a family. The labor is tangible, situated within a craft-based virtue structure, reflecting the story of a man putting one brick on top of another with some suggesting he is only accumulating bricks; yet, the craftsman understands that bricks can build cathedrals. Sacred spaces require understanding that the work itself is sacred. The work is not only a living and a task, but a chance to build shelters composed of sacred repetitive practices.

I offer a plea. Those within administrative positions, as often as possible, ought to return to the construction site of higher education and do the work of teaching and scholarship. Each administrator must refuse to forget the joy of why he/she joined this profession. We must count on faculty and administrators who nourish the sacred space of higher education. We must accept the burden of this time and renovate sacred spaces with teaching, scholarship, and love of our students. Our task is to honor teaching and scholarship that permits us to uncover that which many attempt to obscure. The college campus is a sacred space that all of us must protect and promote. Daily, we must remind one another of the importance of teaching and scholarship, even as such sacred practices fall subordinate to the schemes of corporatization. Today, the sacred has secular ties in that it reminds us of something other than the ordinary and the routine.

Gregory Bateson in his writing with his daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson (1987/2005), reminded us of the secular task of preserving sacred spaces. The title of that book, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*, suggests that faculty today must go

where angels may fear to tread. Faculty must walk into terrain of sickness, remembering families with illness who somehow call forth persons of courage capable of holding all together. When there is a project at work that seems to be falling apart and someone quietly assists, I gather a brief phenomenological glimpse of my father. He was a decorated World War II veteran and a member of the Seabees. Interestingly, I only learned the fact that he had been shot and decorated at his funeral. It is amazing how human beings manifest the courage to go where angels fear to tread. Great teachers, great scholars, and great administrators must muster the courage to walk where angels fear to tread, countering the corporation that seeks to cloak the sacredness of what we do on college campuses. Sacredness requires love even when there is little to like but, indeed, much to renovate.

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## **Capstone•ish: Student Success and the Rhetorical Functions of a Different Kind of Capstone Course**

E. Michele Ramsey<sup>1</sup>

*In response to a variety of contexts, most notably the national and academic rhetoric promoting STEM majors over those in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, a new way of thinking about the capstone course in communication may be warranted. More specifically, administrators of communication programs looking for ways not only to foster growth in students, but also to increase the status of their programs on campus and in the community, might find this course useful for those programmatic goals. This paper proposes a constructivist capstone-ish course that marries the theories and applications of communication studies with a student's real world experience of preparing to enter a new phase of life after graduation. In addition, the course can help change perceptions on campus about communication programming and majors.*

In 2007, Penn State Berks began offering the university's Communication Arts and Sciences major (CAS). Right as the major started to take off, our nation experienced the beginning of the 2008 recession and students worried what opportunities they would have after graduation. In addition, from the time we launched the major until today, the drumbeat of our national and educational leaders continues to be the importance of STEM majors and careers over all others, with the humanities and arts taking the brunt of the rhetorical beatings. College administrators continue to be star-struck by the rhetoric of STEM cheerleaders across the nation in spite of the plethora of data highlighting the immense importance of knowledge based in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, and especially communication skills, in a variety of contexts, even over technical and scientific knowledge learned in majors ("Skills", Adams, 2014; Byrne, J.A., 2014; Colvin, 2015; Dishman, 2016; Dorfman, 2014; Eckart, 2014; Goo, 2015; Griffit, 2015; Korn, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; Moore 2016; Satell, 2015; Symonds, 2015; Walker, 2015; Wildavski, 2016; Williams, 2016), and in spite of evidence that careers in STEM are becoming less desirable, suggestions that we never actually had a STEM student shortage to begin with, and that degrees in communication continue to increase in value, both economically and in terms of employer demand ("College majors", Adams, 2014; Anders, 2015; Anft, 2013; Byrne, 2014; Cashman, 2015); Charette, 2013; Eidelson, 2014; "Earn", Hickey, 2013; Jaschik, 2015; "Leaders", Jaschik, 2015; Kristof, 2015; O'Shaughnessy, 2013; Peden, 2015; Ranadivé, 2012; Robinson, 2014; Segrán, 2014; Schmitt, 2014; Smith, 2015; Strauss, 2015; Tiku, 2014; Zeigler and Camarota, 2014). The rhetoric that privileges STEM majors over those in the humanities, arts, and social sciences is one that impacts our students' perceptions of their majors and their career possibilities. Thus now, more than ever, communication programs may be looking for ways to promote themselves on campus to prospective students, as well as searching for ways to help their students deal with the common misperceptions surrounding the significance of communication degrees that seem to prevail inside and outside of the academy. Thus, as I created this capstone-ish course, I worked to create something that would serve our students well in terms of their development, but that would also serve our department well by increasing visibility on campus, teaching students how to talk to others

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about the CAS major, and shining a light on the work of our students and the successes of our alums.

There are a variety of ideas about what capstone courses should require. While Glaser and Radliff (2000) and Decker (2000) suggest that the capstone should encourage students apply what they have learned in their major, Rash and Weld (2013) encourage the requirement of student engagement and a substantial amount of oral and written work. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) define them as "summative curricular approaches" (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998, p. 15) and Wagenaar, (1993) suggests a culminating experience that integrates, extends, critiques, and applies knowledge from the major. Cuseo (1998) argues that capstone courses should encourage coherence and closure in academic programming and Steele (1993) and Dickenson (1993) point to curricular synthesis/integration. Cos and Ivy (1998) denote the capstone as distinctive from an "exit" course focused on job preparation. Rosenberry and Vicker (2006) note that while first year seminars, learning communities, and other strategies are common to help new students transition to college life, far fewer pay attention to the transition from college senior to employee or graduate student. Similarly, Gardner and Van der Veer (1999) discuss the transition function of a senior experience and make the argument that educators must pay greater attention to helping college students prepare for what lies beyond.

My initial ideas for the course most significantly echo the work of Olsen, Weber, and Trimble (2002), who suggest that capstone courses offer the opportunity to review "vital lessons" learned in the major, to "revisit the relationship between a student special interest in communication and the common themes and topics associated with the discipline," to "anchor those lessons" as directly related to, instead of separate of, a student's identity, and to "instill in each student a proclivity towards choosing a well-developed communication perspective when encountering life outside the university" (2002, p. 7). To these ideas I would add an additional capstone goal. Because our discipline is so often technically joined with, misunderstood as, or conflated with, mass communications, a capstone course in communication should also train students to succinctly and effectively communicate about our discipline in general and their more narrow interests, specifically, to interested parties. Because constructivist learning theory suggests that effective learning happens when students are actively engaged in real world situations (Marlowe and Page, 2005), I decided that the overall course goal of students learning to apply the skills and theories learned in their rhetorical and communication studies courses to effectively market and sell themselves after graduation. The end result of this research and my efforts is CAS 297: Your Career in Communication, a three credit special topics course that focuses on the application of rhetorical and communication theory to a student's post-graduation plans. I call it capstone-*ish* because its goals are similar to those of traditional capstone classes, but it's at the 200-level instead of the 400-level and focuses on application. It's a course that they can take as their open elective for the major (any 200, 300, or 400-level CAS course) or for their overall electives in general education (our major, created at the University Park campus, does not require a capstone course). Here I suggest a capstone-*ish* course that encourages students to apply all that they've learned about communication to their post-graduation goals. I begin with some of the theoretical underpinnings of the course, move to course objectives and the primary topics and assignments for the course, and draw some conclusions about the utility of the course for students and administrators of communication programs.

### Thinking About the Capstone Experience

The flexibility of our major has allowed our department to craft student options that effectively integrate theory and practice. Students can choose pathways in Health Communication, Organizational Communication, Public Advocacy and Strategic Communication, or Interpersonal and Intercultural Communication. Because of some strategic hiring, students can also earn a Public Relations certificate. We encourage, but don't require, that students have an internship before graduating and offer students the training to excel in either a chosen career or graduate school after graduation. The program effectively bridges the scholarly/discipline versus praxis/craft divide and recognizes that it's our job to meet students *where they are* and guide them as best we can to use what they've learned in their major in ways that are meaningful to them.

Though historically, perhaps, there has been a distinction between a traditional capstone course and the "exit" course that Cos and Ivy (1998) point to, I believe that we can craft capstone courses that call on students to consider and synthesize past coursework and experiences *while* preparing them for the job market. This perspective recognizes the importance of communication as theoretical grounding for the educational and career choices our students have made, as well as the significance of the practical application of communication theory and skills to their own lives.

### **Course Objectives and Primary Course Topics/Assignments**

The primary objectives of the CAS 297 course include synthesis, contemplation, application, and transition.<sup>2</sup> *Synthesis* includes the recognition of important relationships, communication and general education coursework, and extra and co-curricular experiences while in college. Too often we segment our lives into neat categories that don't really exist such as "youth", "high school", and "college" without realizing that experiences in those life stages impact future life stages. Thus, students are asked to draw connections between the relationships and experiences they've experienced up to this point. A second objective is significant *contemplation* of why they've chosen to major in communication, the role of communication in their personal lives and communities, and what their life and career goals are. I encourage them to think about how they can use what they've learned in their personal lives and in their communities and to think about their short, middle, and long term goals, making sure that they know that for many people these goals may change. Borrowed from Rosenberry and Vicker (2006), a third objective is *application*. In my course application means the application of communication theories and rhetorical strategies to their own lives as they prepare to leave the college environment. Finally, I encourage significant consideration of the skills necessary to effectively *transition* to a job or graduate/professional education after graduation. These objectives are operationalized in the following primary course assignments.

### **Personal Inventory**

After reading research pointing to the utility of communication and liberal arts degrees, the personal inventory assignment encourages them to begin marketing themselves as graduates through careful consideration of their curricular, as well as extra and co-

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<sup>2</sup> Synthesis, contemplation, and transition are objectives borrowed from my colleague, Dr. Ivan Shibley, at Penn State Berks, who uses these objectives in his capstone course in general and life science.

curricular activities. The assignment centers on an inventory of their experiences, skills, and knowledge and how they can funnel those elements of their lives into a cohesive and persuasive argument to a prospective employer. Students complete their personal inventory sheet and then are asked to present their findings in a short personal inventory presentation. First, students are asked to explain the major in their own words, including the primary fields of the discipline and how they relate to their interests. Second, students discuss their choice to stay at Penn State Berks (one of five stand-alone colleges in the Penn State system) because of important differences from the University Park campus. Taking their personal inventory also includes thinking about areas of their lives such as minors or secondary skill sets gained from other courses, work experience, internships, volunteer work, and extra curricular and study abroad experiences. I set up a grid that helps them construct a “map” linking their life experiences and what skills they’ve garnered from those experiences using a list of general and specific skills consistently preferred by employers. Students use their skills in the creation and assessment of quantitative and qualitative data, essentially doing a content analysis of their life experiences, to complete the assignment.<sup>3</sup>

### **Cover Letters and Narrative Statements**

Another focus of the course is letter writing for possible employment and graduate school. We focus on the generic expectations of cover letters in terms of formatting and writing, how human resources offices are using cover letters to weed out applicants based on key word searches, ways to grab attention, and a relatively long list of “dos and don’ts”. The first assignment linked to this discussion is the creation of a cover letter based on a specific entry-level employment advertisement they’ve found. From here, we move to the graduate school narrative assignment that asks them to craft a narrative to a program they’ve chosen based on the program’s areas of specialization and faculty. I point out that their story and being able to effectively tell it is part of attracting people to them and thus working on their story in this way can strengthen those storytelling skills even if they have no plans to attend graduate school. We focus on applying their audience analysis and other rhetorical skills in both of these assignments.

### **Branding You**

In this assignment I ask them to think about what makes them different and compelling. What do they want to do? What is their passion? What is their vision? What are their career goals? These are important questions that help them figure out how to get where they want to go by helping them think about from where they’re starting. They develop a branding presentation, which includes the creation of a logo using their name. Asking them to create a logo gets them to think about visual communication and rhetoric. How do they visualize themselves in terms of color, font, and graphics? Students enjoy the chance to be creative and use what they’ve learned about visual communication in both rhetoric and non-verbal communication courses to craft a design unique to them. They also create a five-minute presentation about their “brand”, which includes the creation of a succinct and crisp sentence that expresses their brand. They also discuss their target audience, how they visualize of their brand (the logo), why they’ve made the choices they have in its creation,

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<sup>3</sup> I am happy to share any of the assignments and handouts I use in the course. Please feel free to email me at [emr10@psu.edu](mailto:emr10@psu.edu) for those documents.



and ways they envision being able to get their names “out there”? For example, would they consider blogs that show them applying concepts from their major to current issues, problems, or trends? I also ask them to talk about how they can create an online presence that crystalizes and strengthens their brand.

### **Social Media/Digital Footprint**

Discussions about their brands and how and to whom they’ll communicate those brands leads us to consider the role of social media. I find that students fall, to some extent, into two categories—those that have mostly eschewed social media altogether (most have accounts, but don’t use them much) and those who don’t do much filtering when it comes to their social media use. In this time of social media dominance, having no social media presence may be seen as negatively as having a problematic social media presence because it may communicate a lack of social skill and/or an inability to effectively navigate and use social media to one’s advantage. In this section of the course the horror stories of bad social media management are covered, with the latest popular press readings on what employers look at on social media sites as well as what students *should be* posting on them. To get them thinking about the issues, the first part of this section of the course asks the students to present to the class their current social media/digital footprint. This assignment consists of two parts. First, they do a content analysis of Facebook or any social media account they use regularly (or analyze someone else’s while maintaining that person’s anonymity). Then, they craft a 5-minute presentation answering the following questions: What were the topics of the last 50 posts? What were the themes/events/occasions of the last 20 pictures they posted? To what extent is their profile ready to be seen by future employers? What should they change? Add? Subtract? The second part of the assignment is to create a profile for themselves on a visual résumé website and at least one other online site we’ve discussed in class thinking carefully about how they’re framing themselves for future employers.

I also link the social media conversation to the branding discussion. Students need to use social media to begin branding themselves in their areas of interest. Thus, I encourage students to use a blog to communicate about issues that are important to them and linked to their chosen industry. I then encourage them to use sites like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to disseminate this information to the public and to start building their brand. We cover the importance of excellent writing and the fact that the blog not only shows off their knowledge of communication theories and strategies, but that it also is a chance to show off their written communication skills and that failure to pay attention to issues of style and grammar will cost more than their blog’s content will probably gain them. I also familiarize them with sites that help them manage their social media accounts and sites that can help students create and share video résumés.

### **The Elevator Speech**

Perhaps one of the most important elements of the class, the elevator speech assignment, has two parts—a short 30-second introduction and a longer 90-180 second version. Based on the premise that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, these are speeches that I encourage students to spend a lot of time thinking about. Using the information gathered from previous assignments, students create these speeches for presentation to the class. What is the niche market they’re interested in pursuing? What problems might someone already in this market need a solution for? The longer version of

the speech is essentially the addition of the student's story to the initial 30-second introduction that positions themselves to specific audiences. I encourage them to think creatively about this speech, as it needs to open up a window to their personality to some extent while being delivered naturally and succinctly. Students, like good rhetoricians, should be able to tailor their elevator speech for specific audiences and events. To help students get into a proper mood for the creation of their elevator speech, I ask them to think about a soundtrack to the speech as simply another way to get them thinking about rhetoric. What is the tone of their speech going to be? What music makes them feel good about themselves and their future? For fun, I have them play the music in the background of their longer elevator speech. Students enjoy sharing the music that makes them feel good and they learn a little something about the rhetorical power of music, too.

## **Résumés**

Résumés are always on the minds of students getting ready to graduate. While students at our college get assistance in the creation of these documents through different classes or our career office, moving from the basics of résumé writing and visual structure to the résumé as a rhetorical document is an important shift. Because there are different levels of experience, I go over the basics of writing and creating a visually appealing résumé. Visual communication, non-verbal communication, and rhetorical training are a part of our major, thus it's often just a matter of reminding students how to put these tools to use for their résumés. We discuss visual elements, as well as the importance of clarity and succinctness in their writing, of course, but we also focus on the myriad of ways you can now get the résumé in front of the eyes of employers, such as visual résumé websites, LinkedIn, and other Internet-based resources.

## **Interviewing**

Topics that we discuss in this sections are the links between the interview and their résumés, common interviewing mistakes that may seem small but can be the difference between getting the job or not, plans for driving to the interview, preparing for the interview with research, writing thank you notes, and dealing with questions about any unsavory (we talk to our students about how to answer questions about Penn State's Sandusky scandal, for example) or political topics that might come up. We also cover the most common interviewing questions, how to answer difficult questions, new kinds of interviewing questions that are created to learn something about the interviewee's psychology, and the importance of non-verbal communication, including attire. As a daily assignment, I also ask students to deal with some of the interviewing questions we talk about in class in an oral presentation. There are 10-15 questions that I ask them to prepare answers for and the following day they take turns going to the front of the class and answering 3-4 of these questions at random. While the assignment is nerve-racking for students, once they've conquered the assignment, they note feeling better about their comfort level in interviews, especially with regard to more difficult questions.

## **Group Project**

One way to assess the extent to which the students had understood and could apply all they've learned in the course is to have students deliver that information to another

audience via a class project. I divide (based on student preference) the class into research, rhetoric, public relations, and project coordinating groups. Once the class decides on what kind of event they will have (this happens early in the semester), the researchers go to work uncovering and synthesizing the information to be presented, the rhetoricians then are charged with the construction of the messages, the public relations team is responsible for getting those messages out to the community before and during the event, and the project coordinators are responsible for managing the project's bits and pieces, from planning the event to making sure that we have all of the tools we need to successfully complete the project. The project serves not only as a means by which to assess what they'd learned and how well they could apply it, but it is also a great community-building event for the students and the major, which helps students stay engaged in our program and our college, even after graduation, and offers some great public relations for our major on campus.

Most recently, the class decided to do a flash mob in the college's cafeteria as their main event. Students chose that year's most popular flash mob song, "Uptown Funk" by Bruno Mars, and set out to create not only the flash mob, but also the ways in which the mob would magnify the messages they created for the campaign. The class decided that they would focus on undecided majors and people they could persuade to minor in CAS and focused the message on three primary areas—our major as more than its basic course of public speaking, job placement and income data, and research on the skills employers want. Students used a combination of national data on humanities/communication majors, as well as our alumni data. Finally, students used the broader skill sets that national data suggests employers are looking for that are linked closely with CAS, such as public and written communication skills, interpersonal skills, the ability to manage conflict, the ability to work with diverse groups, excellence in teamwork, and broader skills such as problem solving and the analysis and synthesis of data.

Because the project was linked to the Bruno Mars song, a ten-day countdown to the event, communicated via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, used images similar to those found in the video and each day the class counted down to the event, giving hints along with the way and marrying imagery from our major and the university's mascot with imagery made popular by the song's video. The event happened on a Wednesday, thus for two days prior, students plastered the college with signs communicating the messages about the major, its link to great careers, career pathways, and the careers of our alumni. The students from class not tasked with dancing held posters at specific times communicating the messages of the campaign regarding courses, skills, and careers linked to the major. Other students filmed the event from different angles to create the video for the event. One of our alums quickly crafted a video documenting the event, which was uploaded to a number of social media platforms.

This final project serves a number of important purposes for the students. First, it gives them the opportunity to continue to sharpen the skills and apply the theories they've learned in their communication major, especially their rhetorical skills. Additionally, through working in groups on a project like this, students can see and make sense of the different ways that all of the fields of communication work together. So, for example, rhetoricians get a sense of how students who studied public relations made decisions about how to publicize the rhetoricians' messages. Likewise, students interested in research can see how rhetoricians synthesize the information they gathered into succinct, effective, and persuasive messages. Third, students are given the opportunity to give back to their major and build community. By creating a project designed to promote the major and how prepared students in the major are for a variety of careers, students get opportunity to do something exciting and positive

for the major and the faculty that have played such important roles in their education and development. Next, students gain important practice talking to people other than just their classmates about all the major has to offer and how the skills and theories learned in the major are crucial to so many career options. They get practice talking up their major, a skill that they can use when talking up themselves on the job market.

### **The Final Presentation**

The concluding element of the course is the final presentation. At the end of the semester, the students deliver a 15-20 minute presentation that links their past and present experiences, their academic curricula, and their future plans to the class, as well as any faculty, family, friends, or other majors they decide to invite. First, they are asked to provide an introduction to themselves, including their primary career interest(s), and a thesis statement for the focus/theme of their presentation. Next, they're asked to explain their major and their fields of interest, which is an opportunity to show that they can effectively explain their education to potential employers. Third, they talk about the courses they've taken (in the major or outside of it) that have helped shape their interests and ask them to talk specifically about those courses and the impact they had on them as students. Next, they talk about any work experience or internships they've had and how they used what they'd learned in classes and/or if their experiences reflected things they'd learned in class, in order to make connections between coursework and skill sets that they were able to hone in those experiences. Finally, they discuss where they want to go in their careers and how their major, coursework, and other experiences have prepared them to reach those goals.

Through the exercise of thinking about how their family, friends, mentors, and teachers have impacted them and then linking those relationships to their experiences and coursework, they come to figure out, to some extent, who they are and what paths, relationships, and experiences have helped shape them. By understanding themselves holistically and by being able to present those connections between their family, friends, mentors, experiences, and coursework effectively, my hope is that they have more confidence in telling their stories and talking about their majors when they network and interview.

### **Conclusions**

This capstone-*ish* course has important benefits for students and administrators. In terms of students, when a capstone course integrates a student's history, previous education, and goals into the curriculum, an important integration occurs. First, students walk away with an increased appreciation for their field of study because as they apply their knowledge their own lives and career goals, they realize *before leaving college* how beneficial and flexible their major is while reviewing the "vital lessons" of their major (Olsen, Weber, and Trimble, 2002, p.7). Second, this class serves all students by meeting students *where they are*. The focus is on the student and their interests, as well as the application of communication studies to those interests, which anchors "those lessons within the sweep and scope of one's life, instead of positioning them a separate from one's identity" (Olsen, Weber, and Trimble, 2002, p. 7). Third, the students leave the course with application oriented materials that sometimes present "sobering epiphanies" for students without strong work ethics about to "try and sell themselves to a company" (Olsen, Weber, and Trimble, 2002, p. 77). Finally, the course offers students the opportunity to "experience the examined life" (Olsen, Weber, and

Trimble, 2007, p. 77) by giving students an opportunity to examine their lives and their choices for patterns, to make decisions about their early careers and how they want to position themselves as possible employees, to see just how valuable and applicable their major is *before* they leave college.

What is important about the course from a program administrator point of view is that this type of capstone course helps promote the communication major on campus. In this era of what seems like an almost exclusive focus on STEM and business-related majors, shining a light on our discipline and our major is an excellent strategy. The ability of our students to effectively and succinctly talk about their major and its application to their careers and other goals positively impacts public perceptions of our current students, which positively impacts the perceptions of Communication Arts and Sciences. And while I've spent more time than I care to remember trying to convince administrators to take our program seriously—actually, even *just to understand it correctly*—it seems more difficult for administrators to ignore the declarations and positive affirmations about our program and our discipline from students. Whether they are listening to our students effectively and persuasively discuss their journeys and their plans in their final presentations or watch as our students craft memorable and convincing public events aimed at a better understanding of what we do that draw positive attention to our college on social media, they respond positively to that work and also garner a better understanding of the utility of a communication degree in a variety of industries.

I have no data to support the claim that this strategy is working. As a rhetorician, I'm simply applying two fundamental theories of rhetoric to my rhetorical situation—the recognition that language constructs our social realities and an understanding of the role that constitutive rhetoric can have in the creation of positive perceptions about our discipline, major, and students. While it's wonderful to hear positive comments from alums about how their major has helped them succeed years after they've graduated, it's even better to hear them talk effectively about all their major will do for them before they leave campus. In addition, they are our best advertisements on campus. When our students can effectively communicate the importance and utility of their major to other students, as well as to faculty, staff, administrators, and stakeholders, such as member of our college's advisory board, the reputation of our major is bolstered. Moreover, while our students communicate these important messages publicly during our class's final project, students from our class confidently communicate these messages interpersonally as well. Students engaged in extra-curricular activities in the capstone class have noted with pride that when they exhibit their communication skills or apply communication or rhetorical theory in places such as student club meetings, people talk about getting "CASed", meaning that they were taught something about their own communication by our majors in the meeting or working environment. We've garnered majors and minors as a result of these interactions. Finally, from the moment they become majors we use constitutive rhetoric as a program (orally and while branding on things like t-shirts, bags, and water bottles) and in all classes to help our students see themselves as cohesive cohort called "Communication Nation". Those constitutive rhetorical strategies that started as soon as they joined the major are in full force as the students plan and implement their final group project as a cohesive set of students creating a sort of love letter to their major. When our students speak effectively about their major and when they don't just talk about, but actually enact, their arguments about the utility of our major in places like student club meetings or major college events, they help change the way that students, faculty, staff, administrators, and other stakeholders think and

talk about our major. When people begin to talk differently about our major, they begin to think differently about major.

Though I wish I could say that these shifts are enough to help the CAS major overcome the distinct biases in favor of STEM and business on campus at this point, they simply are not. That rhetoric is too strong and too consistent, especially in the context of my college, in spite of a lack of data to support their superiority to other majors. But as an administrator looking to impact perceptions of our major on campus, working to raise the status of the discipline and our students on and off-campus, and looking for ways to prepare our students for the challenges ahead, this capstone-*ish* course has been successful in its infant stage and I look forward to further fine-tuning these strategies. Make no mistake. This course and its development as a means to promote our major is about playing the long game. This essay is not about ways to immediately shift perceptions and/or the status of a department on campus. It's my view that, ironically, a discipline full of people trained in rhetoric and human communication have done a fairly poor job of finding ways to elevate our discipline and our degree programs to a level of *prima facie* respect granted a number of majors. Communication program administrators can help change the perception of communication programs by changing the way our students and colleagues talk about those programs. In addition to the excellent work of our program's faculty in and out of the classroom, this capstone-*ish* course is one means by which the conversation at our college is beginning to change.

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## Mission Statements as Naming Proposals: An RSI Approach

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*This study explores the communication process used to generate and express communication program mission “names.” It argues that the process that underlies the creating, maintaining, and changing of names, ranging from the specific to the ideological, also generates academic unit “mission.” Viewing mission texts through the lens of the rhetoric of social intervention model reveals how the texts reason rhetorically as they propose and provide evidence for the “appropriateness” of a unit’s constituted mission name. Awareness of the rhetorical-reasoning pattern can help unit members make sense of mission-building or -revising work and provide a practical way for them to organize and critique their efforts. Furthermore, examining mission statements from an RSI approach highlights attention to the “incompleteness” of an academic unit’s naming choices, which has practical implications for constructing mission statements and defining program “uniqueness.”*

*Keywords: mission statement, rhetoric of social intervention, naming, assessment*

In 1995, the *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration* (JACA) devoted an issue to case studies of communication department responses to the increasing threats of elimination, merger, or reorganization prompted by state and federal budget and financial aid cuts (Nelson, 1995). That same year, the National Communication Association (NCA) appointed a Task Force on Discipline Advancement (TFDA) “to recommend what departments and the Association might do to ensure that they and our discipline flourish” (Becker, 1999, p. 111). One recommendation was that communication programs link themselves more clearly to institutional missions to demonstrate their importance to achieving the missions (Nelson, 1995). Thus, TFDA created a document (Morreale, Clowers, & Jones, 1998) that provided guidelines for writing effective mission statements and mission statement examples to help programs make more visible institutional connections and “avoid being on a threatened list on their campuses” (Morreale, 1998, p. 5).

Although communication programs today may not face the same dangers of elimination or dispersion that prompted NCA’s attention to missions in the 1990s, they continue to deal with the challenge of creating missions and mission statements. Mission statement development and review has evolved into a standardized practice typically expected of program review, assessment, and accreditation processes (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Paroske & Rosaen, 2012). “[M]ission statements are tangible proclamations whose content is likely to capture aspects of how organizations see themselves as well as how they want others to view them” (Palmer & Short, 2008, p. 454). Thus, communication programs are tasked with writing mission statements that proclaim or propose a “name” for interpreting the program’s purpose and place in the institutional social system.

Researchers have analyzed college and university mission statements from discursive or rhetorical perspectives, mostly focusing on thematic commonalities and differences related to values, wording, and institutional types (e.g., Atkinson, 2007, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Morrish & Sauntson, 2013). However, they have yet to explore “mission” as a symbolically constituted “name,” the rhetorical patterns that support the mission statement

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naming proclamation, or the practical implications of a mission's symbolic nature. Furthermore, researchers have investigated program or department mission statements in areas such as business, consumer studies, sociology, Christian education, engineering, and educational policy and management (e.g., Cochran & David, 1986; Creamer & Ghoston, 2012, Palmer & Short, 2008; Schmid, 1989). But communication mission statements have received almost no attention until recently when Allen et al. (2015) examined correspondences between communication department mission statements and institutional missions. Thus, this essay fills these gaps by viewing current communication missions and mission statements through the lens of the rhetoric of social intervention (RSI) model (Brown, 1978) to foreground the communication process generating their constitution and expression.

Specifically, the essay argues that like “ideology” (Brown, 1978), “mission” is constituted symbolically in social-system discourse and functions to provide meaning and order for social-system members, in this instance, academic units. Missions are expressed in texts that follow a pattern of rhetorical reasoning, which supports the academic unit's self-naming and attempts to shape constituencies' interpretation of the unit's purpose and place in the larger institutional social system. Furthermore, an RSI approach highlights attention to the “incompleteness” of an academic unit's naming choices, which has implications for constructing mission statements and defining program “uniqueness.” In all, with its focus on the symbolic nature of missions and mission statements, the RSI perspective offers a practical communication framework for organizing a program's mission-building or -revising efforts.

To begin, the essay reviews recent and relevant mission statement and mission literature and describes the RSI approach used to examine the rhetorical-reasoning process constituting mission and mission statements. Next it exemplifies the perspective in an RSI analysis of current communication program mission statements. Then it reflects on the use of the RSI model as a framework for generating missions and statements and the practical implications of their “incompleteness” for mission statement construction and program “uniqueness.” The paper concludes by considering limitations and future research.

### **Mission Statements and Missions**

In the 1960s, the corporate world began advocating the need for firms to create “mission statements” to help promote images that would appeal to external publics to increase market share and unify a company's internal units (Mitchell, 2014). Business likely adopted the concept of “mission” from the military, which used the term to name the act of tasking soldiers with the achievement of specific goals (Berger, 2008; Mitchell, 2014). By the 1970s, “a furor over mission statements” had “swept over corporate America” (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 457) and, by the late 1980s, had made its way into academic discourse (Morrish & Sauntson, 2013). In 2006, Morphew and Hartley described the apparent need for higher education mission statements as “ubiquitous” (p. 456). “Accreditation agencies demand them, strategic planning is predicated on their formulation, and virtually every college and university has one available for review” (p. 456). As academic institutions began identifying and expressing their missions, they also attributed to their academic units (e.g., programs, departments, and schools) the need to demonstrate how their existence supported the institutional mission so as to promote institutional unity or reveal units that could be cut or reorganized (Berger, 2008; Hale & Redmond, 1995; Meacham, 2008). Thus, academic

units began constituting their own mission statements in discourse that attempted to tie their purpose to the realization of the institutional mission.

In mission statement literature, scholars have focused on identifying attributes that construct the concept “mission statement.” For example, they have highlighted the behaviors that reify corporate mission statements (Bart, 1998; Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997), the types of discourse that constitute mission statements (Swales & Rogers, 1995; Williams, 2008), and the ways in which they differ from the concepts “vision,” “goal,” and “ethical codes” (Fairhurst et al., 1997; Mitchell, 2014). As Bart (2001) explained, “In their most basic form, a mission statement is a formal written document intended to capture an organization’s unique *raison d’être*” (p. 360). He indicated that corporate mission statements include these features: “why do we exist, what is our real purpose and what are we trying to accomplish” (p. 360). Holland and Nichele (2016) categorized corporate mission statement as “foundational documents,” which they defined as “texts that provide a pervasive cultural metanarrative” and offer organizational members “a cohesive measure of role stability, ethical guidance, utopian visionary goals, and strategic coherence” (p. 80).

### **Institutional Mission Statements**

In academia, institutional mission statements typically embody components related to teaching, service, and scholarship to fulfill expectancies associated with institutions categorized as “higher education” (Allen et al., 2015; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). NCA’s 1998 mission statement publication defined “mission statement” as “a summative declaration of a corporation or organization’s (department/program) philosophical ideals that subsume some combination of the corporate/organizational mission, vision, and values” (Morreale et al., p. 3). The document listed eight qualities that academic unit mission statements should reflect: centrality to university mission, disciplinary anchors, positive messages and image, a well-written sense of direction, measurable goals, departmental uniqueness, aspirations, and adaptation to stakeholders (Morreale et al., 1998).

In general, the constitution and communication of academic mission statements has become a normative part of assessment and strategic planning in higher education. They “exist because they are expected to exist” (Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 458). Furthermore, institutional mission statements “serve a legitimizing function,” “show that the organization in question understands the ‘rules of the game,’” and are required if an institution wants “to be considered a legitimate college or university by, among others, accrediting agencies and board members” (p. 458). Similarly, an academic unit within the institution gains legitimacy by creating a mission statement that demonstrates the unit’s connection to the institutional mission (MacDoniels, 1999). However, organizations can constitute and communicate their purpose by means other than textual statements, such as in organizational culture, traditions, rituals, and events (Feldner, 2006; MacDoniels, 1999).

### **Academic Unit Mission Statements**

Most studies of higher education mission statements have focused on the institutional level, although a few have examined statements at the academic unit level. For example, Schmid (1989) described a sociology department’s steps to construct a mission statement and the curricular changes that resulted. Schmid observed that the statement creation process offered a way for unit members to “derive and articulate a collective understanding of who they are” and what they practice (p. 323). Creamer and Ghoston

(2012) explored the potential influence of mission statement themes, finding that colleges and schools of engineering that incorporated diversity language in their statements tended to have higher enrollments of women. Scholars also have analyzed business school mission statements for their effectiveness, diversity, and incorporation of accrediting initiatives (e.g., Cochran & David, 1986; Monds, Wang, & Bennett, 2012; Palmer & Short, 2008).

Communication program missions and mission statements have tended to be discussed briefly in literature concerning disciplinary questions and curriculum. For example, Delia (1982) alluded to mission in a commentary about issues that influenced what he called “departmental focus.” Wartella (1996) mentioned “teaching mission” in a reflection on factors that resulted in communication programs failing to be perceived as central to a university’s mission. Redmond and Waggoner (1992) and Rakow (1995) touched on mission statements as premises for guiding their programs’ curricular revisions. Hale and Redmond (1995) identified their program’s failure to connect clearly to the university mission as influencing their institution’s perception that the communication unit was unneeded. Most recently, Allen et al. (2015), in a random selection of communication department web pages, found that 81 of the 100 sites examined included mission statements, and 64 of the 81 departments had mission statements that linked to their institutional missions. They also noted that over half of the communication mission statements mentioned “career preparation, skills development, and references to integrating practice with theory” (p. 64).

### **Mission Definitions**

In writing about mission statements, researchers typically have assumed that the meaning of “mission” is commonly understood. In a review of literature related to a mission-building study, Feldner (2006) observed that, despite scholars’ frequent discussions about the development and implementation of mission statements, “concrete definitions of mission are relatively scarce” (p. 71). When researchers have defined “mission,” they usually do so in a few words, such as an organization’s purpose, reason for being, *raison d’être*, or sense of shared expectation or worth (e.g., Atkinson, 2008; Fairhurst et al., 1997; Monds et al., 2012; Morphey & Hartley, 2006; Palmer & Short, 2008). The NCA mission statement document characterized “mission” as “the organizational (departmental/programmatic) purpose, which is distinct from vision (future direction) and values (principles)” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 3). The TFDA subcommittee recommended that a communication program’s mission should “include commitment to providing theoretically-grounded education” and “be clear about the way theoretical elements of our discipline relate to the institution’s mission” (MacDoniels, 1999, p. 146).

More recently, Khalifa (2012) has argued that a clearer definition of “mission” is needed because of inconsistencies in or lack of definitions he found in a comprehensive review of mission statement literature. He proposed that “mission” be defined as “a resolute commitment to create a significant value or outcome in service of a worthy cause—a cause that the members of the organization admire and be willing to exert their attention and energy in its pursuit” (p. 242). Khalifa explained that this categorization incorporated attributes associated with “soft human needs and hard organizational requirements” by providing both a sense of meaning for the human being and a sense of direction for the organization (p. 243). In addition, Khalifa contended that the definition prompted organizations to make “a choice among competing alternatives,” thus developing their own “unique” and “authentic” missions (p. 243).

## Influences on Missions

However, various factors may influence organizations' attempts to constitute and express mission "uniqueness" or "authenticity." For example, in analyses of university mission statements, Atkinson (2007) and Morrish and Sauntson (2013) found more similarities than differences in institutional mission emphases. Atkinson (2007) speculated that rather than creating unique purposes, institutions might be borrowing mission statement metaphors from other apparently "successful" similar institutions in hopes of emulating their success. Morphew and Hartley (2006), who analyzed more than 300 U.S. university and college mission statements, suggested that the values of an institution's benefactors may influence how an organization constitutes its mission. They hypothesized that academic institutions "may be using mission statements not for planning or cultural purposes, but as a means of telling important stakeholders outside the institution that 'we understand what you want and we're going to deliver it to you'" (p. 470). Furthermore, to fulfill the attributed need for a mission statement, organizations may invent "fabricated" or "inauthentic" missions, which Khalifa (2012) claimed are recognizable by their "vagueness, lack of choice, feel-good formulations, etc." and fail to fool those close to the organization (p. 246).

A factor influencing communication program mission creation has been the discipline's apparent lack of centrality and clear identity (Beadle & Schmidt, 1999; Redmond & Waggoner, 1992; Wartella, 1996). In 1990, Smith and Hunt expressed hope that the then burgeoning assessment movement would lead to the creation of disciplinary identity because they argued that meaningful assessment required a discipline to be able to define itself. However, they noted that achieving this result would be difficult because "communication departments have benefited from absorbing every aspect of social and humanistic study into a global concept of communication. No academic field has attempted to be more things to more people than 'communication'" (p. 3). In 1995, the Association for Communication Administration (ACA) attempted to prompt centrality by proposing a disciplinary definition that emphasized the "diversity, breadth, and depth of the field itself" (Korn, Morreale, & Boileau, 2000, p. 40). "The field of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The field promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication" (Korn et al., 2000, p. 40). A 1999 ACA member survey found that most respondents viewed the definition as potentially useful for developing program mission statements (Korn et al., 2000). In 2000, Morreale, Osburn, and Pearson (2000) argued for communication's centrality in higher education, based on a review of 100 publications, including books, newspaper and journal articles, and conference papers, that highlighted the importance of communication. They defined the communication discipline as "an essential component of the educational enterprise" because the study of communication "develops the whole person, improves the work of education, advances the interests of society, bridges cultural differences, and advances careers and the work of business" (p. 25). More recently, Paroske and Rosaen (2012), like Smith and Hunt (1990), argued that assessment could be a means for "discovering what communication *is*" (p. 110). They suggested that their proposed meta-assessment approach, modeled after Craig's (1999) attempt to unite the field meta-theoretically, might help communication programs find unity and potentially lead to disciplinary centrality.

In all, higher education institutions and academic units have assumed and acted upon the apparent need to construct missions and express them in public statements. Scholars have examined the attributes and purposes of mission statements and missions, primarily at

the institutional level. They also have highlighted the lack of or inconsistencies in “mission” definitions and factors that may influence the construction of “unique” missions. In addition, they have suggested elements that communication program missions and statements should include and have attempted to define and explicate the centrality of the discipline to aid in mission development. However, uninvestigated is the centrality of the communication process in constituting and promoting missions and mission statements to which attention now turns.

### **An RSI Approach**

A starting point for exploring the communication process generating mission and mission statement constitution is Brown’s (1978, 1982, 1986, 1987) rhetoric of social intervention model, which directs attention to the symbolic nature of “ideology” and, by extension, “mission.” Although the RSI model primarily has served as a framework for analyzing communication as the driver of social-system change (e.g., DeBord, 2009; Gring, 1998; Opt, 2012; Opt, 2013; Opt, 2015; Snyder, 2009), this study uses the model as a method for uncovering the communication process by which academic unit social systems constitute and reason for missions.

### **Ideology and Naming**

The RSI model is based on the assumption that social systems discursively construct overarching interpretations of experience or “ideology,” which Brown (1978) defines as “any symbolic construction of the world in whose superordinate ‘name’ human beings can comprehensively order their experience and subsume their specific activities” (p. 124). Ideology provides “a fundamental sense of order, meaning, and comprehensive explanation for all of experience” (Opt & Gring, 2009, p. 57). Ideology is constituted by and shapes how we communicatively create, maintain, and challenge social-system interpretations of needs, power, and experience (Brown, 1978).

The definition of ideology as a “superordinate name” arises out of the model’s foundational assumption that “naming,” or the transformation of physical and conceptual experience into symbols, is our most fundamental human activity (Brown, 1978). In essence, we constitute and communicate identity, relationships, and attention to experience by symbolic categorizing or naming. A “name” can range from a label given to a specific symbolic categorization of experience (e.g., “dog,” “cat”) to an overarching symbolically constituted social-system narrative (e.g., American dream, Russian dream) (Opt & Gring, 2009). In all, as we communicate, we construct, maintain, and change a symbolic “reality” that gives us a sense of meaning, order, and control (Brown, 1978; Opt & Gring, 2009).

### **Rhetorical Reasoning and Incompleteness**

Brown (1972) argues that this constitutive naming process follows a pattern of rhetorical reasoning, described as “the statement of a name,” “a statement of its appropriateness,” and “a statement of the expected or appropriate response” or “a listing of reasons that the categorizing of reality is accurate” (p. 377). In essence, to give meaning to experience, we categorize it symbolically by proposing a name that seems to “fit” or make sense of experience. We support our naming claim, or its “appropriateness” for interpreting experience, by communicatively emphasizing aspects of experience that exemplify our social

system's agreed-upon defining or "criterial" attributes that constitute the name (Brown, 1972; Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1965). For instance, when a person fires a weapon in a school or shopping mall, social-system members attempt to make sense of the experience communicatively by attributing a name, such as "psychotic individual" or "terrorist." They argue for the "appropriateness" of the naming proposal by discursively highlighting how aspects of the experience, such as the person's apparent background, nationality, and motives, are the same as the criterial attributes associated with the proposed name. The negotiated name creates expectancies about why the person acted and how the social system should response to the action (Opt & Gring, 2009).

However, a tenet of the RSI model is that names and, by extension, ideology, are always "incomplete." To constitute names, we must abstract from experience by communicatively "foregrounding" and "backgrounding" attention to it like when we label a figure/ground illustration as "face" or "vase" (Brown, 1978; Opt & Gring, 2009). As Burke (1966) put it, words act as "terministic screens," directing our attention toward and away from certain interpretations of experience. Thus, we can disagree about the "appropriate" name to attribute to experience (e.g., "psychotic individual" or "terrorist"), depending on what we rhetorically feature and mask attention to in experience (Brown, 1982). Furthermore, we may become aware of "gaps," or experience that seems to violate expectancies prompted by a name or ideology, such as when expectancies encouraged by the American dream tenet "hard work leads to success" go unfulfilled (Brown, 1982; Opt & Gring, 2009). By reasoning rhetorically, we can propose naming and ideological alternatives or revisions to our symbolic reality that seem more "complete" so as to preserve a sense of meaning about and understanding of ourselves, others, and day-to-day experience (Brown, 1978, 1982; Opt & Gring, 2009).

### **Missions as Names**

From an RSI perspective, "mission" can be defined as an overarching "name" constituted symbolically by academic unit members to make sense of their unit's nature and purpose. In essence, mission can be considered the academic unit social system's "ideology" because it enables members to "order their experience and subsume their specific activities" (Brown, 1978, p. 124). Furthermore, like ideology, mission influences members' interpretations of needs, power, and attention to experience, just as those interpretations shape mission creation. Like all symbolic constructions, missions are "incomplete," for in constituting their "unique" or "authentic" mission, members make choices (Khalifa, 2012)—all missions are abstracted symbolically, constituted by communicatively featuring and masking attention to aspects of a unit's experience (Brown, 1982). Finally, mission and ideology are intertwined in that a social system's ideology influences what academic unit members attend to in constituting mission, just as the constitution of mission helps reify social-system ideology.

However, unlike ideology, which is created, maintained, and changed symbolically in a wide range of ongoing social-system conversations and texts (Brown, 1978), academic unit members typically negotiate and formalize missions in settings such as committee and faculty meetings (e.g., Schmid, 1989). The outcome of their mission-constituting activity usually appears as texts, or mission statements, published on the unit's web site or in catalogs and strategic planning documents. From an RSI perspective, a mission statement communicates a unit's proposed self-name, which promotes an interpretation of and expectancies about the unit's nature and purpose. Besides stating the name, the mission statement also provides

evidence for the “appropriateness” of the unit’s naming choices. In essence, mission statements are forms of rhetorical reasoning designed to intervene in how constituencies interpret a unit’s institutional purpose.

### **Communication Mission Texts**

To see more clearly the naming and rhetorical-reasoning patterns underlying academic unit mission statements, NCA’s 2014 list of 808 undergraduate communication program web sites (available at <http://www.natcom.org/data/members/#Databases>) was used to find communication program mission texts. Each link appearing in the list was clicked, and working links were considered for analysis. Links that connected to programs with graduate studies only were excluded because of possible mission differences between undergraduate and graduate levels. Next, each undergraduate program web site was searched for a mission statement. Similar to what Allen et al. (2015) found in their collection of mission statements from communication department web pages, some missions appeared as texts on a page or under a title explicitly labeled with words such as “mission statement” or “our mission.” Other times, the unit’s mission was implied in texts that began with words such as “our goal,” “our purpose,” “our aim,” “our focus,” or “our commitment.” In addition, some mission statements ran one sentence while others were paragraphs. In all, 216 communication program mission statements were compiled for analysis. Following the RSI method, the texts first were read closely to identify patterns in the types of self-names that academic units were proposing in their mission statements. Then, the texts were read again to detect patterns of rhetorical reasoning being used to support the academic units’ naming proposals. The next section provides an overview of the key names emerging from the RSI analysis.

### **Rhetorical-Reasoning Process**

In the communication mission texts analyzed, academic unit members’ symbolic categorizations of themselves tended to be organized around the taken-for-granted purposes of an academic institution—teaching, research, and service, an institutional naming pattern observed by Morphew and Hartley (2006) and Allen et al. (2015). As shown in the following analysis, these purposes were communicated in the types of words used to construct mission statements.

### **Teaching Names**

In the majority of the communication mission statements examined, unit members constituted and attributed to themselves the name “teacher” to make sense of their purpose. Rarely was that role specifically mentioned in the texts; rather the name was implied by what the statements claimed was the members’ reason for being. They are here to “educate,” “prepare,” “equip,” “empower,” and “develop,” all attributes associated with the symbolic category “teacher.” Some mission texts offered additional support for the “teacher” naming by describing types of content taught, such as communication theory, research, skills, and practices, and types of teaching methods used, such as engaged learning, experiential learning, and seminars.

In addition, the mission statements often reasoned rhetorically for the “appropriateness” of the “teacher” name by emphasizing the ultimate purpose associated



with that symbolic category—to bring about change in knowledge and/or skills, thereby advancing people and the world. For example, students become more “effective” or “better” in enacting roles such as “leaders,” “critical thinkers,” “problem-solvers,” “speakers,” “writers,” “researchers,” “consumers of information,” “competitors,” “community/global participants,” “local/global citizens,” “advocates” and “future graduate students.” Alternatively, they become more “effective” or “better” in enacting particular actions, such as “working together,” “meeting workplace challenges,” “navigating a changing world,” “synthesizing complex information,” “creating, designing, and delivering messages,” “transforming society,” “excelling in many fields and professions,” “engaging in lifelong learning,” “achieving personal and professional success,” and “appreciating and practicing communication.” In all, as unit members expressed their nature and purpose in mission texts, they tended to chose and promote the name “teacher.”

### Research Names

Besides “teacher,” the analysis of the mission texts indicates academic unit members constituted and attributed to themselves the name “scholar” or “researcher.” In a few cases, only the “scholar” and not the “teacher” name was mentioned in a mission statement. In most instances, “scholar” tended to be less emphasized than “teacher.” This difference may reflect variations in institutional mission expectations, with “scholar” being foregrounded at universities that name “research” as their mission. Unlike “teacher,” the role “scholar” or “researcher” often was expressed explicitly in statements like “we are scholars who...” or “we are a community of researchers who...” When not, the name was implied in attributes associated with that symbolic category, such as “explore,” “study,” “generate,” “examine,” and “advance.” Some of the statements further promoted the “appropriateness” of the “scholar” naming by describing briefly types of experience studied, such as “the crucial role of communication in human relationships,” “the exchange of messages in interpersonal and mediated situations,” “communication processes,” “communication’s influence on identity,” “creation and negotiation of meaning,” and “communication’s impact on society,” or types of methods used, such as “socio-cultural, evolutionary, and biological approaches,” “a wide range of humanistic and scientific methods,” and “pluralistic perspectives.”

In addition, at times, the mission statements reasoned rhetorically that unit members are “scholars” or “researchers” by directing attention to how their actions embodied the ultimate scholarly purpose of “bettering” the discipline and/or society. For example, the knowledge gained when they act as “scholars” or “researchers” “contributes to scholarly knowledge that unites the field,” “creates a more humane world,” “furtheres the study, teaching, and practice of communication,” “enriches human interaction,” “enhances a region’s/state’s social/economic conditions,” “answers questions,” “generates new knowledge about communication practices,” and “improves the human condition.” In all, some of the communication program mission statements provided evidence that in addition to meeting the expectancies associated with the name “teacher,” unit members also fulfilled those linked with the symbolic category “scholar” or “researcher.”

### Service Names

Finally, in the texts analyzed, linkages to the third expectancy of academic institutions, “service,” tended to be less emphasized or developed as compared to unit members’ naming themselves as “teachers” and/or “scholars.” The texts never proposed a

specific role name, such as “servant,” but implied the name in mentions of attributes associated with that symbolic category, such as “serving,” “helping,” and “working with.” To add support to the “service” naming, the mission statements sometimes indicated the recipient of the action, such as the “college, university, community, and profession,” “external constituencies,” or “metropolitan region.” In a few cases, the mission statements reasoned rhetorically by highlighting attention to an ultimate “service” purpose of “enhancing” a community or society, such as “to improve their communication practices,” “to improve the quality of communication in everyday life,” and “to improve communication and aid problem solving.” In all, although the mission statements sometimes highlighted “service” as an action to which unit members “are committed,” “dedicated,” or “contribute,” the texts provided little support for the “appropriateness” of the naming proposal.

### **Name Constitution and Reflections**

Overall, analyzing current communication mission statements through the RSI model lens reveals a pattern of rhetorical reasoning underlying the mission text constructions. In essence, the mission statements propose an academic unit “name” and support its “appropriateness” or its “fit” in explaining the academic unit’s purpose. Unit members can use awareness of this pattern as a framework for organizing and making sense of their attempts to build and express a mission. They can focus on how their talk to create or revise a unit mission functions as naming proposals and attend to the rhetorical-reasoning process that members use to advance their mission propositions. For example, in proposing the name “teacher” or actions associated with teaching (e.g., “prepare,” “equip”), unit members can reflect on how they constitute the name symbolically, what they consider to be the criterial attributes of “teacher,” and how they interpret themselves as enacting these attributes. In so doing, they can consider the types of evidence their mission statement provides to support the “appropriateness” of the “teacher” name they have attributed to themselves.

### **Mission Name Incompleteness**

Besides providing a way to understand the constitution and expression of mission, the RSI model offers a framework to help mission builders to reflect on and respond to the potential “incompleteness” of their symbolic constructions. The RSI model’s conception of “incompleteness” can be applied to the mission statement development process in several ways, ranging from a review of the rhetorical-reasoning process to a consideration of mission “uniqueness.” To begin, academic units might analyze their mission texts for “incompleteness” by attending to potential “gaps” in the rhetorical-reasoning process generating the texts. For example, a mission statement might state simply that a unit’s mission is “teaching, research, and service,” as occurred in a couple of the communication program mission texts, without providing evidence to back the naming claim. Although such a mission constitution suggests a unit purpose in line with expected higher education institutional missions, it assumes that the unit’s constituencies share the unit members’ interpretation of what it means to “teach,” “research,” and “serve” and how the unit uniquely contributes to the institutional mission. Furthermore, as the analysis of communication mission texts indicated, a statement might provide more evidence for one aspect of a unit’s mission than another. For instance, most of the examined communication

mission statements proposed “service” as part of the unit members’ mission, but failed to demonstrate the “appropriateness” of that naming. Thus, when constituting missions and mission statements, builders can reflect on the adequacy of the rhetorical reasoning generating the naming proposals and consider potential influences on constituencies’ interpretation of the academic unit.

Another way academic unit members might assess the “incompleteness” of their mission texts is by considering the abstractive or “terministic screen” nature of names (Brown, 1978; Burke, 1966). As this analysis of the communication program mission statements and Morpew and Hartley (2006) and Allen et al. (2015) have indicated, unit members tend to construct missions in which they name themselves “teachers,” “researchers,” and “servants.” Yet, from an RSI perspective, in promoting attention to these names, members communicatively mask attention to alternative potentialities for categorizing themselves symbolically. For example, a few of the communication program mission statements named the members as “contributors,” “collaborators,” “integrators,” and “colleagues,” which highlight rhetorically other aspects of the academic unit members’ experience. Furthermore, an assumption of the RSI model is that all ideological names communicate social-system interpretations of needs and power (Brown, 1978), which is also reflected in mission names. For instance, “teacher” implies that the unit members’ purpose or mission is to meet students’ knowledge or skills needs in a complementary social hierarchy (Brown, 1986) whereas a name such as “collaborator” indicates a more equal exchange of needs-meeting behavior in a social hierarchy that emphasizes reciprocal power (Brown, 1986). Thus, mission builders can consider the “incompleteness” of their symbolic categorizations in terms of how their chosen mission names feature and mask attention to alternative aspects of the academic unit’s identity, needs, and power.

Finally, academic unit members might consider mission statement “incompleteness” in reasoning rhetorically for the “uniqueness” of the unit’s contribution to the institutional mission. The 1998 NCA mission statement publication suggested that a mission statement include a “declaration” of “philosophical ideals” and indicate “disciplinary anchors” and “departmental uniqueness” (Morreale et al., p. 3). For the most part, the analyzed mission texts provided evidence to support naming unit members “teachers,” “scholars,” and “servants,” and, at times, they indicated “uniqueness” and “disciplinary anchors” by emphasizing what the members teach (e.g., communication knowledge and skills) and research (e.g., symbolizing activity, messages) and how they serve (e.g., helping others improve their communication). Assumed is that the attention to “communication” makes the unit “unique” compared to the institution’s other academic units. However, some of the examined communication program mission statements failed to specify “uniqueness” and presented missions that might be common to other disciplines, such as “to prepare students as leaders in their communities and careers” or “to prepare students to enter a wide variety of diverse professions.” Furthermore, because “communication” is a symbolic abstraction, academic unit constituencies may constitute “communication” differently from unit members and so fail to interpret the unit’s mission as “unique.” In a few cases only did the analyzed communication program mission texts propose attributes of “communication,” such as “how meaning is created and negotiated in human interaction,” “storytelling,” and “how human beings create, transmit, receive, and respond to messages.” Thus, by examining the rhetorical-reasoning process generating the mission texts, mission builders can reflect on how they are constituting and advocating the “uniqueness” of their communication mission within their respective institutions and defining the discipline.

## Conclusions

In all, this essay has argued that the same communication process that underlies the creating, maintaining, and changing of names, ranging from the specific to the ideological, also generates academic unit “mission.” Viewing mission texts through the lens of the RSI model reveals the rhetorical-reasoning pattern constituting mission texts as they propose and provide evidence for the “appropriateness” of a unit’s mission name. As Schmid (1989) noted, in the process of creating mission statements, program members get a better sense of who they are and what they do—a sense that likely comes from categorizing themselves symbolically as names give a sense of meaning, understanding, and control (Brown, 1978). Awareness of the rhetorical-reasoning pattern can help unit members make sense of and organize their mission-building or -revising efforts. Furthermore, examining missions and mission statements from an RSI approach highlights attention to the “incompleteness” of an academic unit’s naming choices. Given that Creamer and Ghosten (2012) found that mission statement wording potentially influences constituents’ perceptions of a discipline, then awareness of “incompleteness” can enable mission builders to reflect on what is being featured and masked in their naming choices.

As scholars have pointed out, a clear limitation in studying mission statements is their potential lack of “authenticity,” lack of importance to constituencies, and influences that shape their construction (Khalifa, 2012). Academic units may constitute “inauthentic” mission texts to fulfill institutional expectations and/or to appeal to constituencies as opposed to developing mission texts that reflect how they interpret their purpose (Atkinson, 2007; Morpew & Hartley, 2006; Morrish & Sauntson, 2013). Also unit members and their constituencies may be unaware of or fail to attend to a unit’s mission statement. Thus, the mission text may differ from how unit members or others interpret the academic unit’s purpose (Atkinson, 2008; Fairhurst et al., 1997). Furthermore, Berger (2008) suggests that corporate missions, emphasizing profit, efficiency, and goal achievement, have shaped academic institutions’ mission focus, and, in turn, academic unit missions. Thus, future research should explore these aspects of academic unit mission in more depth to better understand factors that may influence mission statement understandings and emphases. However, regardless of “authenticity” or the pressures shaping academic unit mission creation, the communication process of generating and expressing mission remains the same.

Because this study of missions focused on academic units’ expression of their missions in texts on program web sites, analyzing discourse from academic unit meetings about mission construction and revision might provide more insight into the rhetorical-reasoning process and program members’ choices when constituting missions. The discussions might reveal whether the mission statement reflects how unit members “authentically” see themselves or whether other factors, such as stakeholder expectations, have influenced mission development. Moreover, although this study limited its attention to the rhetorical-reasoning patterns constituting mission texts, a cursory review of the types of content and activities emphasized in the mission statements suggests that they fail to reflect a common “disciplinary” identity. As several scholars noted, a potential hindrance to constituting communication program missions has been the lack of centrality and definition of the discipline (Beadle & Schmidt, 1999; Redmond & Waggoner, 1992; Wartella, 1996). The absence of disciplinary centrality in the mission statements may indicate that the academic units’ mission constituting efforts are more for institutional compliance than disciplinary commitment. For example, from the RSI perspective, the mission creators discursively may be foregrounding the need construct missions to cooperate with

institutional stakeholders' demands for a mission statement and, as a side effect, masking attention to the core questions and purposes that might unite the communication discipline. Thus, more work is needed to examine to constituting academic unit mission "authenticity" and its potential for building disciplinary identity.

Finally unconsidered in this study are the ways in which academic unit missions both shape and are shaped by the ideology of the social system in which the academic unit is located. A clue to this influence may be glimpsed in the analyzed mission statements' assumption that the ultimate purpose of teaching, research, and service is to "improve" or "better" people, communities, and society. In essence, academic social systems appear to be organized around the apparent overarching name of "making the world a better place," an expectancy traditionally linked with "American dream" ideology (Brown, 1970; Opt & Gring, 2009). The examined mission texts suggest that communication program academic units are focused on maintaining a version of ideology that emphasizes perfecting people and society. For example, members teach knowledge and skills that give students the attributes needed to be "successful," do research that leads to "progress" in understanding communication, and engage in service that promotes "freedom" and "equality." This emphasis may reflect Berger's (2008) concern that academic mission statements reflect the "corporate" expectancy of goal achievement. Thus, future research should explore how in reasoning rhetorically to constitute overarching academic unit missions, academic units also are discursively linking their missions to the achievement of a current interpretation of ideology. Perhaps in reflecting more critically on their symbolically constituted missions, academic units could play a great role in creating alternatives to or revising existing ideology.

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## **Creating Cluster of Excellence within Graduate Programs in Communication**

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*Effective recruitment and retention of graduate students by small-size colleges and universities requires innovative solutions, as they find themselves operating in an increasingly competitive market. Creating clusters of excellence within existing graduate programs offers a way to develop a competitive edge. By integrating high-impact educational practices such as faculty-guided research, small schools are uniquely positioned to make an impact on the quality of their students' overall educational experiences. The author seeks to start a conversation about the challenges facing graduate programs in communication offered by small colleges and universities and discusses a strategy for potential solutions.*

### **Challenges Facing Small-Size Institutions of Higher Education**

Maintaining successful graduate programs in today's highly competitive higher education environment requires addressing many challenges with innovative solutions. Along with the growing financial burdens on students and the changing needs and expectations of professional fields, many small-size colleges and universities find themselves under the pressure of keeping their graduate programs both effective and viable. To attract and retain graduate students, their programs need to stand out in providing a combination of theory and practical experiences. Creating clusters of excellence within existing graduate programs based on engaging students in research activities presents a way to address such a challenge.

### **High-Impact Educational Practices and Graduate Education**

Research acknowledges the value of student engagement and high-impact educational practices, including faculty-led student research projects and intensive writing, in having positive influence on student success. According to George D. Kuh (2008), founding director of the National of Student Engagement, participation in these activities can be critical. Kuh (2013) further emphasizes that the effect of high-impact activities is enhanced when students:

- Interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters  
(i.e., work on a research project)
- Get more frequent and substantive feedback  
(i.e., throughout entire research inquiry cycle)
- Discover the relevance of learning through real-world applications  
(such as in research intensive courses)
- Publicly demonstrate competence  
(such as presenting at conferences and colloquia)

By integrating high-impact educational practices in their graduate programs, small colleges and universities, although limited in resources, are uniquely positioned to make a positive impact on the quality of their graduate students' overall educational experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Point Park University



## Indicators of Excellence

A *cluster of excellence* is a strategic grouping of curriculum offerings within an academic program aimed to create synergistic effects in student learning. Such a cluster was developed at Point Park University, Pittsburgh and included two core graduate classes, two elective graduate seminars, and two graduate capstone courses (see Figure 1). Applied Mass Communication Research Methods was an existing class, while Communication Theory and two elective seminars were newly developed. Directed studies, in which students work on a one-on-one basis with a faculty member, fostered a connection between learning and the practical application of knowledge.

In 2011-2015, three School of Communication graduate programs—M.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication, M.A. in Communication Technology, and the concurrent M.A. J.M.C./M.B.A. program—enrolled from 60 to 90 students in a given year.

Graduate students taking classes in the cluster in 2011-2015 were encouraged to engage in faculty-guided research. Graduate student research presentations at state and regional academic conferences served as a *marker of excellence*.



Figure 1: Cluster of excellence within the School of Communication graduate programs

## Cluster of Excellence Timeline

In 2011-2015 the faculty member teaching in the cluster supervised over 100 directed study projects resulting in **35 graduate student presentations** at state and regional academic conferences:

- 2011-2012: 6 conference presentations
- 2012-2013: 7 conference presentations
- 2013-2014: 9 conference presentations
- 2014-2015: 7 conference presentations
- 2015-2016: 6 conference presentations

All submissions were competitive and reviewed by faculty members from Pennsylvania colleges and universities and beyond. Two graduate students published their work in a scholarly journal. Students also initiated the biannual *Three Rivers Communication Technology Colloquium* to share research ideas, practice presentation skills, and connect with the School of Communication graduate program alumni.

### Key Takeaways

*Research activities* mentored by a faculty member can have an overall positive impact on graduate student educational outcomes, both in and outside of the classroom, leading to:

- Enhanced analytical skills and critical thinking abilities (Feldon, Maher, Hurst, & Timmerman, 2015; Mullen, 2000; Wright-Harp & Cole, 2008)
- Improved self-awareness and social responsibility (Ulasewicz & Vouchilas, 2011)
- Greater metacognitive processing capabilities (White, Frederiksen, & Collins (2009)
- Increased student engagement and satisfaction (Ulasewicz & Vouchilas, 2011; Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997)
- Increased confidence and job marketability (Feldman, Divoll, & Rogan-Klyve, 2013)

Besides conference presentations, students also initiated the biannual *Three Rivers Communication Technology Colloquium* on the university campus to share research ideas, practice presentation skills, and connect with graduate program alumni.

### Recommendations

To ensure that students are taking advantage of learning opportunities provided in the cluster, the following strategies may be recommended:

- Create an environment in which there is genuine belief in students' research capabilities.
- Explore the connection between faculty-led student research and student success.
- Promote student research and create funding support for student conference participation.
- Promote student success in university and local media.
- Encourage faculty to engage in an in-depth analysis of high-impact educational practices at the graduate level.

The cluster of excellence approach can be replicated by a single faculty member or a group of faculty working collaboratively. Indicators of excellence can also vary. By integrating high-impact educational practices, such as academic research, small colleges and universities can make a positive impact on the quality of their graduate students' overall educational experiences.

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