

**The Blending of the Traditional and
Professional Approaches to Communication:
Department Chairs Share Administrative Challenges,
Opportunities, and Best Practices**

Rod Troester¹
Molly Wertheimer²

The genesis of this article was a 2013 Eastern Communication Association panel that gathered department chairs of blended communication programs (those combining a traditional communication studies perspective with a mass media perspective) to exchange challenges, opportunities, and best practices of administering such programs. The article reviews the available literature and synthesizes and summarizes the experience of participating department chairs tasked with administering blended departments.

As chair of a communication major at a campus location of a large Eastern university, I was recently involved in a central administrative exercise to eliminate “duplicate minors.” Over the years many of the 20+ campuses had developed communication minors unique to their campus locations. Some had grown from the traditional liberal arts approach to communication (i.e., interpersonal, small group, rhetorical, organizational, intercultural, and so on), while others had grown from the more professional approach (i.e., radio/TV, print/broadcast journalism, advertising/public relations, and so on).³ Unlike the other campus locations, both the communication minor and the major had been developed on my campus as a blended version of these two approaches. The charge was to condense the seven existing minors to what central administration considered a more reasonable number.

While this task not only generated lessons for program administrators, it also brought into focus the unique challenges and opportunities of offering and administering blended, mixed, and/or hybrid programs. At the same time and on a hunch, I queried the Eastern Communication Association’s (ECA) distribution list of communication administrators to see what guidance might be available from chairs of blended programs. That query yielded an April 2013 ECA panel entitled “The Confluence of the Traditional and Professional Approaches to Communication: Profiling Programs that Combine the Best of Both.” The purpose of this essay is to share the findings of the panel with a broader audience who, much like the eight participants, might be charged—willingly or otherwise—with administering blended, mixed, and/or hybrid communication programs.

Representatives from eight communication programs with blended majors contributed to the discussion of the challenges and opportunities such majors and minors present to administrators, faculty, and students. Panelists also offered their “best practices” for administering blended programs successfully. All of the schools represented were public colleges or universities, some were from multi-campus institutions, some were from large research universities, and some had enrollments in the major of several hundred, while others had much smaller enrollments. While clearly not a representative sample, the schools

¹ The Behrend College

² Penn State University

³ While we realize these categories are not inclusive of all of the approaches that can be taken to communication, and that they are not mutually exclusive, for the remainder of this essay we will refer to these approaches as the traditional and the professional.

represented do provide a diverse cross-section of colleges and universities.⁴ Each panelist also contributed a brief written response. These abstracts were summarized and synthesized by the panel respondent—and a co-author of this article.

The Context and Background

Given the positive reception the panel received, we wanted to share with a wider audience the “best practices” recommended by the panelists. Before doing so, however, it made sense to look more deeply for guidance on program administration from the available literature published on chairing academic departments, especially that relevant to areas such as communication studies, communications, and so on.

There is no shortage of volumes offering general advice and recommendations on the academic administration of departments. Nearly all of the volumes we examined referenced Allan Tucker’s *Chairing the Academic Department* (1st ed., 1981; 2nd ed., 1984), which was published in conjunction with the American Council on Education. Working with a Kellogg Foundation Grant and his experience in the Florida university system, Tucker drew together into book form materials he had used in a series of seminars and workshops. The major topics included leadership styles, delegation, recruiting, affirmative action, decision-making, and professional development—roughly a dozen topics. Interestingly, the first sentence of Tucker’s second edition seems as true now as it was almost twenty-five years ago: “The present economic crisis in higher education raises a fundamental question concerning the ability of colleges and universities to fulfill their traditional functions.” (p. 1). Aside from his prescient remark, Tucker identified not fewer than twenty-eight roles the department chair must play in order to be successful.

Following Tucker’s lead, Walter H. Gmelch and Val Mishkin published *Chairing an Academic Department* (1995), essentially a handbook for the new department chair. These authors contend that “academic leaders may be the least studied and most misunderstood position in the world” (p. 6). The reason they give is that most department chairs come to their positions without any formal training in the tasks they need to perform. This theme is repeated in nearly all of the books we examined. Gmelch and Mishkin outline four key roles the department chair must perform: faculty developer, manager, leader, and scholar. Realistically, how many faculty members learn these skill sets in their role as faculty members? Surely, the position of department chair requires more skills than most faculty have when they assume the position.

In 1999, Irene W. D. Hecht, Mary Lou Higgerson, Walter H. Gmelch, and Allan Tucker, again under the auspices of the American Council on Education, produced *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*. Taking an historical view on the developments of post-secondary education for the last sixty years, this volume recognizes the conclusion of a Pew Charitable Trust study (1996) that placed the department chair as “the principal agent for the purposeful recasting of American higher education” (p. xiv). They note how the role of chair was becoming more important and complex expanding the skill set required by a department chair.

Finally and more recently, N. Douglas Lees offers *Chairing Academic Departments: Traditional and Emerging Expectations* (2006). Lees explores the traditional, current, and future roles department chairs may be required to play, paying particular attention to the task of managing change. For Lees, chairs will increasingly be called upon to develop innovative

⁴ A list of participants and schools appears at the end of this article.

programs, seek new revenue streams and external funding sources, and play more active roles in recruiting students and designing programs to retain them (pp. 17–18) He concludes that department chairs:

...will have to ensure appropriate departmental participation, motivate faculty members to do their part, and provide an environment that creates real opportunities for faculty growth and productivity in the 21st-century world of higher education. (p. 18)

As we have said, nearly all of the books we reviewed report that most faculty members who become department chairs lack any type of formal training. In fact, Gmelch and Miskin find that the top three reasons offered by faculty who take the position include personal development, being drafted by a dean or administrator and of necessity (i.e. no other alternatives were available) (1995, p. 2). Interestingly, a recent edition of *Spectra*, a National Communication Association bulletin, focuses several reflection pieces on the topic of “professional journeys,” one journey includes administration. Jon Hess poses the question: “Why would you want to become a department chair?” This question is especially significant in view of the increasing complexity of the position. Hess answers the question by writing that department chairs have a chance to make “a positive impact on a program.” (2013, p. 9) Perhaps that is the strongest and best reasons why a faculty member would accept the position as chair.

The perspectives, advice, and guidance provided by these sources certainly could and should have to inform the work of those who chair blended communication departments. However, the peculiarities of our communication field necessitate that the chair also possess a disciplinary and content-specific background. One source, *Effective Communication for Academic Chairs* (1992) by Mark Hickson and Don Stacks provides some guidance for communication administrators. They present a collection of eleven papers, which tease out the communication skills that make chairs effective. In addition to reviewing topics like leadership, budgeting, assessment and motivation, there are useful appendices. The appendix on acquiring information focuses on the types of information a new chair should have, while another appendix draws attention to information flow—dissemination to various audiences—and confidentiality.

Professional organizations representing both traditional and professional approaches to communication also provide guidance on chairing departments. The National Communication Association (NCA) is the largest organization representing the traditional approach. As NCA prepares to celebrate its centennial, it is important to recall that the first organization of speech-communication teachers began in 1914 as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking, following disagreements over the importance of speech instruction with instructors in English departments. From these modest historical and rhetorical roots, grounded in the liberal arts tradition of oratory, the organization has grown to embrace a variety of scholarly traditions, content areas, and methodologies. According to NCA’s website, the association “...advances communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry.” (<https://www.natcom.org/about/>) The site lists at least twenty-two different content areas within communication and a recent NCA convention program lists over one hundred divisions, caucuses, and interest groups.

Similarly, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) follows the professional approach to communication. Like NCA, the AEJMC

focuses on research and lists many different scholarly areas of interest. The Association's mission is to promote

...the highest possible standards for journalism and mass communication education, to cultivate the widest possible range of communication research, to encourage the implementation of a multi-cultural society in the classroom and curriculum, and to defend and maintain freedom of communication in an effort to achieve better professional practice and a better informed public. (<http://www.aejmc.org/>)

In addition to different interest groups and commissions, the AEJMC also includes specific professions such as advertising, public relations, newspaper (journalism) and online news. AEJMC has additional divisions in communication technology, cultural and critical studies, and various types of news including history, ethics, and visual communication.

Clearly, both associations lay claim to representing the broad area of communication, even as they differ in how each defines and approaches the field. It is also clear that given the diversity of subject areas, methodologies, and situations the challenges of chairing a department or managing blended programs increase. Integrating all or even some of the areas included in both the liberal arts and the professional traditions raises puzzling questions: "Of the two, which approach should our department take?" "How do we represent ourselves to different constituencies?" And: "Can we be both?"

A brand new basic course textbook, *Communication in Everyday Life* (Duck & McMahan, 2015), illustrates how this complexity might play out in our classes. In the chapter called "Histories of Communication" (note the plural), Duck and McMahan note that those studying and teaching communication must often explain what it is they are doing—unlike faculty who teach courses in seemingly self-evident areas such as chemistry. They write: "Telling someone you are studying communication requires explaining what you are studying to others" (p. 21). They list more than a dozen variations and combinations of what our departments have been and still are named, including communication, communications, communication studies, communication arts, speech, speech communication, rhetorical studies, mass communication, media ecology, media studies and more. Surely, these labels potentially confuse students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. Discovering a way to add clarity both to the name and the majors of blended programs presents other dimensions of challenge.

Thus, the literature consulted provides a starting point and general guidance for chairing departments, but the peculiarities of our field also suggest that chairing blended communication departments poses unique challenges. For further advice, we turn next to the panelists who have chaired departments with blended programs for a discussion of the challenges they faced and their best practices.

Additional Challenges

Disciplinary Confusion: National Communication Association President Steven Beebe recently reminds us of the necessity of exploring the ideas that unite us as a discipline (Beebe, 2013). The theme of the 2012 NCA Convention, "Celebrating our COMMunity," echoes one of the biggest challenges panelists discussed. They point to the confusion of different constituent groups about the nature and scope of the communication discipline, especially adding in the further complication posed by combined or blended programs. Chairs often hear comments representing popular stereotypes of the field; for example, "Oh,

you teach public speaking?” or “I want to study broadcast journalism, do you have it?” One important constituent group, students and their parents, usually do not understand the many advantages of pursuing a communication degree, especially a blended degree that combines the traditional and professional approaches. According to panelists, these advantages include increased employment opportunities and diverse career tracks. Further, students and parents may be convinced that professional production-type approaches are more advantageous in terms of career opportunities than are traditional liberal arts approaches, not realizing what a profound advantage it is to develop sound skills in speaking, writing, reasoning and critical thinking.

Curricular Considerations: Designing, integrating, coordinating, and sequencing a major that blends traditional and professional approaches can be more challenging than programs that focus on one or the other. Questions emerge such as: “How should we balance course work in the two approaches?” “What should the balance be between theory and practice”—that is, what conceptual knowledge should we teach and what percentage of time should we spend on development of technical skills? Curricular considerations also include identifying core competencies and determining how they can best be merged into an integrated curriculum and a coherent program. The problem of program assessment also becomes more complicated when combining traditional with professional approaches because the latter often have specific, rigid accreditation standards and guidelines that maybe inconsistent with more traditional approaches.

“Intra”disciplinary Confusion: Faculty and administrators may also be confused about what their colleagues do in terms of teaching, research, scholarship, creative activities, and service. This confusion may complicate annual performance evaluations, peer-reviews of teaching and scholarship, and tenure and promotion decisions. Panelists confess that it is difficult to compare traditional or research based scholarship with productions, journalistic work, and creative accomplishments. For example, how does an evaluator weigh the different merits demonstrated by the use of technical, production skills compared to quantitative or qualitative research articles? Should any of these methods be valued more highly than others? Says who and why? And, how should we deal with differences in perceptions of value across faculty with such different orientations?

The Money: Administrators such as deans and provosts from outside of blended departments and even faculty from inside may not understand the practical needs for funding in different areas such as hiring new faculty and updating equipment, laboratories, studios, classroom spaces, and so on. Panelists explained that the costs associated with production studios and the technology needed for professional production coursework quickly add up, and they require continual reinvestment to keep them current. At a time when administrators are looking for ways to economize, justifying the expenses associated with adding or blending production courses into a communication major becomes an on-going challenge. In addition, convincing deans, provosts, ultimately, legislators of the value of blended programs—as public universities must do—may also be difficult as tuition costs continue to rise along with student debt and parents’ expectations of a “pay-off” for their investment.

Conflict: Finally, panelists note there can be underlying and even open hostility between and among faculty from traditional and professional approaches. Traditional faculty

can view professionals stereotypically as simply technicians, while those with a professional approach can view traditionalists as anachronisms. Sad, but true, that underlying feelings and biases can erupt into open conflicts, turning the climate into one of hostility, which in turn makes the administration of the combined program even more difficult. A literature is developing on incivility in academia, and how the tensions among faculty can have serious demoralizing and debilitating consequences. (Twale & DeLuca, 2008)

Despite the potential for misunderstanding and confusion, curricular and assessment hurdles, professional evaluation/accreditation concerns, costs and conflicts, panelists suggest that the opportunities for growth and renewal when the two worlds of communication studies and professional media-based communications combine can be well worth the effort.

The Opportunities

Change Is/Will Happen: Panelists point out how quickly the world of communication is changing; how the formal lines of distinction among communication emphases are blurring in today's communication practices. One panelist mentioned embracing this convergence, using the example of social media, posing the question: Is communication across social media best studied as a form of interpersonal, small group, public, or organizational communication? While social media is clearly computer mediated communication, it is also broadcasting and a form of journalism as well as potentially news gathering and reporting. According to panelists, blended communication approaches provide for a rich discussion of the future possibilities and potentials of new communication forms than is possible when studied separately.

Change is Digitizing Us All: Adapting to, even embracing, the realities and potentialities of the digital world and new technologies has become not only necessary, but also valuable, if we can do so without losing sight of what we have learned from studying communication theories and practices from older, ancient technologies. Embracing and blending the traditional and professional approaches will broaden, deepen, and extend the knowledge, skills and competencies of our graduates. Core competencies like writing, speaking, reasoning and understanding the theoretical bases for crafting successful messages can be complemented and expanded by professional, technical, problem-solving production skills and competences.

Embrace Our “Intra” and “Inter” Disciplinarity: Blending communication approaches provides the opportunity for interdisciplinary and perhaps **intradisciplinary** teaching and research among faculty. New (and oftentimes younger) faculty members with fresh ideas can facilitate the re-thinking of older ways of teaching courses and can revitalize the curriculum. As online education becomes a more integrated part of traditional college and university teaching, our common interests in communication, message crafting, and interpretation can help insure the quality of new modes of instruction. Offering students a forward-focused, intradisciplinary approach, based on the best from the traditions of liberal arts and mass mediated communication, can provide the critical thinking skills and technological know-how to excel in careers.

Blend the Old and the New: Finally, embracing an increasingly digitized world where no one can predict what communication professionals will be doing 20, 30, or 40 years from their dates of hire would seem to advantage our programs and our students. A

two thousand year rhetorical and communication heritage can endure into the future, if we keep the fundamentals fresh. Thinking narrowly about key concepts misses essential insights and restricts our students' potential. Our panelists made this point when they said that a broader approach to communication serves students' education and career interests, if the approaches allow us to re-think and re-imagine basic assumptions and distinctions. This is exactly the kind of thinking Carole Blair called for in her message to NCA members on the 2014 Convention theme "The Presence of our Past(s): NCA at 100." (<http://www.natcom.org/convention/>)

Best Practices

Continually Educate: The panelists also recommend best practices to address the challenges and make opportunities into realities. One best practice is to deal up front with the confusion over communication by revisiting, revising, and/or renewing a program's vision and mission statements and by articulating carefully what our programs are about and what core principles and courses hold the program together. We also need to educate our internal stakeholders (administrators and campus colleagues) and external stakeholders (potential students, parents, legislators, donors) about who we are, our long heritage, and our potential for shaping the future. This could be as simple as developing an "elevator speech" and a set of talking points that clearly express what we are, what we do, and what our graduates can do. Putting profiles of alumni on our websites also illustrates alternative careers in communication. It is critical to provide admissions offices and campus tour guides with information that generates excitement. All of these practices will help change students' perceptions of our field from mandatory public speaking class or writing for the student newspaper to a major filled with exciting challenges and diverse career opportunities. A particularly valuable resource in this regard is the 2012 National Communication Association's Chair's Summer Institute: "Raising Your Program Profile," available through the NCA website:

http://www.natcom.org/uploadedFiles/More_Scholarly_Resources/Chairs_Corner/PDF-CSI-Resource_Guide.PDF

Build Solid Programs: Once we clarify who and what we do, we need to offer a solidly integrated curriculum that truly blends the best of the traditional and professional approaches. Core competencies can be established that cross **intradisciplinary** lines. Some will remember a time when we focused our attention on the spoken-ness of speech, then speech communication, now communication studies. Incorporating the ever-evolving means available for communication only enhances the solid foundation on which the discipline is built. At the same time, while it is attractive to try to become all things to all students, it is essential not to over-promise or over-extend. Blended programs need to maximize, but not over-extend, physical and faculty resources.

Lead and Manage Equitably: Administratively, leading and managing blended programs requires a keen sense of equity and balance. Departmental and committee leadership should be balanced and equitable among traditional and professional members of the faculty. If the chair has a background in one area, she or he must develop a thorough understanding of the needs of faculty in other areas. He or she must make sure faculty members understand and publicly appreciate the unique talents colleague brings to the

program. Panelists advocated for joint departmental committees (e.g. programming and curriculum, annual review, P&T) where faculty members have interdependent and common goals that unite committee structures rather than separating and dividing them. Diversifying committee membership fosters a sense of community among all constituencies of a program.

Publicize Broadly: Another best practice is to promote activities that include representatives from all of the departmental emphases. For example, a panel discussion focusing on local politics or national elections could present an audience the insights from rhetoricians, communication theorists, media professionals, and so on. A lunchtime speaker series might also foster understanding and appreciation of each other's creative and research-based scholarship. Other best practices suggested by panelists include using a peer-review system where faculty can provide feedback to each other across different areas; using team-taught classes; providing support for shared field trips, co-authored presentations and productions; developing joint service learning or community engagement projects; and rewarding work well-done, including public praise of those ventures.

Cultivate a Positive Culture: Administrators and faculty members need to foster and nurture a common culture. Without such a common culture, students and faculty members can intentionally or unintentionally get and give the message that there are factions and divisions within the department when this is the last thing desired. For example, students interested in broadcasting and/or PR can come to think of these as separate and distinct fields rather than parts of a broader communication department. This would also include a commitment on the part of department chairs to discover and eliminate real or perceived conflicts over territory and/or stereotypes that can linger and fester over time. Administrators must make sure to address conflicts when they arise, especially those about alleged favoritism in the distribution of resources. They must help faculty members understand each other's needs, for example, for additional faculty, updated equipment, revamped studios, offices, classroom spaces, and so on. The more faculty members understand each other and the needs of the program as a whole, the more collaborative they will be when asked to share limited resources.

Stay Student Focused: Yet another best practice is to focus on the curriculum needs of students. By doing so, faculty can create an intelligent, progressive curriculum. Faculty may first need to assess the curriculum, identifying core competencies required by all students for graduation and the core courses to help students acquire these competencies. A best practice suggested by several panelists for administrators, faculty, and staff is to develop efficient course schedules, covering several semesters to make sure required courses and their prerequisites are sequenced well for the cohorts as they enter the different emphases in the program. Faculty input is critical in the development of schedules to include not only requirements, but also supplemental and supporting courses, courses used for minors, internships, and more. Increasingly, curriculum development must also include hybrid as well as online courses; in fact, some programs indicated administrative requirements to develop and offer courses on-line. The panelists recommend that we make sure the curriculum is flexible, but do not try to be all things to all students, since over-extension is only a couple of bad decisions away.

Monitor the Environment: Some panelists mentioned threats or potential problems as well as opportunities related to constituencies outside of the program. For example, the business school might be territorial about emphases or courses taught in advertising and public relations. A best practice is not to ignore such challenges, but to reach out and look for opportunities to collaborate on joint activities and to point out the complementing versus competing aspects of the respective programs. Using service learning in communication courses can also enhance the department's profile through community engagement. Such programs provide students with valuable practical experience while raising the visibility of programs. Also, there might be opportunities to develop articulation agreements with community colleges or other neighboring institutions on common areas of programming. Area institutions might be a source of adjuncts should the department need them. The basic point is to turn competitors into collaborators.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, combining a traditional liberal arts communication approach with a mass media professional approach might be a good way to update what we do and how we sell our programs to a number of different constituencies. Helping students learn speaking, writing, critical thinking, and reasoning skills typical of liberal arts based programs and the problem-solving and production skills learned from more professional programs may be just what students need to develop careers in a rapidly changing communication environment. Given the challenges, opportunities, and best practices, the bottom line is how we can best benefit the lives and futures of our students.

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Panelists/schools:

Jason Wrench
Department of Communication and Media
State University of New York at New Paltz

Kristen Campbell Eichhorn
Department of Communication Studies
SUNY Oswego

Candice E. Thomas-Maddox
Department of Communication
Ohio University, Lancaster

J. Kanan Sawyer
Timothy Brown
Department of Communication Studies
West Chester University

Don Stacks
School of Communication
Miami University

Sally Vogel-Bauer
Department of Communication
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

Cindy Lont
Director, Film and Video Studies Program
Communication Department
George Mason University

Rod Troester
Department of Communication
Penn State at Erie, The Behrend College

Molly Wertheimer
Department Communication Arts & Sciences
Penn State, Hazleton Campus