

**From the Voice of the President:
Advancing the Discipline through Communication Leadership**

Amanda McKendree¹
Christina McDowell Marinchak²

College and university presidents hold significant leadership positions not only in an administrative capacity, but also in their respective academic disciplines. This summary report presents results from a study of college and university presidents who hold an academic degree in communication at any level (BA, MA, and/or Ph.D.). The interview findings are organized according to the following major themes: Disciplinary identity, Ethical communication, Communication leadership, and Advocacy within the discipline. The summary report concludes by highlighting responses to the interview findings from top leaders within the communication discipline.

Introduction

The authors received a National Communication Association Initiative Grant to interview past and current college and university presidents who hold an academic degree in communication. The guiding rationale for this project is that communication-grounded college and university presidents provide valuable insight for advancing the communication discipline. The communication leadership practices of college and university presidents serve as helpful models for what faculty can do in their own departments and on their own campuses to promote the discipline. What the authors learned from the voices of the presidents about their success and how a communication education made a difference in their rise to leadership will help advance the communication discipline.

The findings of the study coupled with the respondents' comments will offer theoretical and practical advice for communication administrators charged with advancing the discipline through their daily interactions with the populations they serve. The insights gained through our study of college and university presidents will also benefit faculty who mentor newcomers into the discipline, and undergraduate and graduate students who have an interest in both marketplace and academic careers.

Interview Questions

The authors contacted 27 past and current university presidents representing differing types of institutions from diverse geographic locations. Of the original 27 contacted, 11 agreed to participate in a 20-minute interview. During the interview, participants were asked the following questions:

- What are your perceptions of the communication discipline?
- What are your perceptions of diversity within the communication discipline?
- What are your perceptions of the National Communication Association?
- In what ways do you promote effective and ethical communication?

¹ University of Notre Dame

² University of Alaska-Anchorage

- How do you define communication leadership?
- In what ways do you serve as an advocate for the communication discipline?
- In what ways do you prepare future faculty for the communication discipline?

This set of questions was designed to gauge the extent to which college and university presidents from the Communication discipline serve as advocates for the discipline, promote effective and ethical communication, perceive the communication discipline to be diverse, and implement “Preparing Future Faculty” type initiatives. The presidents’ responses to the questions are summarized according to four themes: Disciplinary Identity, Ethical Communication, Communication Leadership, and Advocacy within the Discipline.

Disciplinary Identity

The presidents’ responses to questions #1, #2, and #3 frame their perceptions of the communication discipline. A major theme that emerged from these interviews is the identity of the communication discipline. The presidents commented on the status and rigor of the discipline, the identity of the discipline in relation to other disciplines, and the amazing differences in the field that may ultimately jeopardize its focus. All but three presidents noted the dynamic nature of the discipline and the increasing amount of change that occurs. As one president mentioned, the discipline needs to keep content relevant and yet find ways to extend the discipline. The authors also recognized that there was a variety in understanding the history of discipline. Presidents noted the breadth vs. narrowness of the discipline in terms of picking up new areas and dropping others as part of dynamic change (i.e. technology). Almost half of the presidents mentioned the new emphasis on technology and embracing new media. A smaller theme that emerged was the perceptions of the discipline as being connected to success, usefulness, and applicability. The authors also noticed that although communication is tied to success there was the perception from one participant that the topics can get esoteric and not as applicable. This was interpreted as a possible implication of breadth vs. depth tension that exists within the discipline. There was also a related comment that communication should be at the forefront of other disciplines, suggesting that communication is a discipline for all disciplines.

The presidents’ perceptions of diversity within the communication discipline fell into two different camps. The first camp addressed the discipline itself in terms of diversity of epistemology that covers both under-researched areas and some popular areas. Participants also noted that the diversity is problematic because it suggests a lack of common center. There was a comment that we need common threads that transcend discipline.

The second camp addressed personal diversity (gender, ethnicity) of the scholars studying within the discipline. One interpretation offered is that the discipline is not very diverse. One person named only one scholar that stood out as being a diverse scholar. One respondent mentioned small number of people of color. Two presidents commented that the diversity of scholars within the discipline is healthy.

Another component of disciplinary identity is the efforts of the discipline’s national association. According to the National Communication Association’s mission “the Association advances communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry” (www.natcom.org). The presidents’ perceptions of the National Communication

Association were based upon their past and current involvement with the association and the specific academic backgrounds of the presidents within the communication discipline. For example, one president discussed his background in theatre and his participation in a disciplinary organization that was more aligned with his professional interests in theatrical directing. The presidents also offered several recommendations for the National Communication Association that included providing content about the discipline that can be shared with administrators, in particular deans and provosts, providing information about tenure and promotion, and providing an additional focus on research. The presidents believe that the organization helps the disciplinary identity and bring tremendous value to the discipline. Presidents also noted the role of the organization in making the case for communication and oral communication competence. One president commented that the association has not yet found a national voice.

Ethical Communication

The presidents offered several ways in which they promote effective and ethical communication. At least eight presidents mentioned that they practice and/or model ethical communication. At least two presidents mentioned that they expect it from others. Other factors that emerged as significant to effective and ethical communication included listening, focusing on audience, openness, authenticity, transparency, responsiveness, being aware of one's image and thoughtfulness—thinking about ethical communication all of the time. The presidents also mentioned specific practices such as teaching, civic engagement, and getting the word out in various venues and publications. Examples include newsletters, regular e-mails, coffee talks, written updates, open forums, speeches, and open door days.

Communication Leadership

The presidents offered several different conceptualizations of communication leadership while at least one president did not understand the question (How do you define communication leadership?). Two presidents provided almost textbook definitions. For example, one president stated that communication leadership is communication that moves a group or organization towards the accomplishment of the mission and vision of the group or organization. Two presidents mentioned leadership that draws upon their own experiences and background. Another component of communication leadership that emerged is responsiveness and the related practices of addressing questions, focusing on audience, and providing feedback. The practices of listening and being directive were also mentioned as important to communication leadership. Another component is engaging in public communication and making communication processes public. The presidents also mentioned various task dimensions and interpersonal dimensions of communication leadership. Task dimensions included putting communication leadership into action by practices and involving others in the process of team leadership. The interpersonal dimensions mentioned included openness and trust. Finally, several presidents commented on the inextricable link between communication and leadership with one president noting that leadership is communication.

Advocacy within the Discipline

The final two questions were designed to gauge the extent to which presidents served as advocates within the discipline and mentored others into the discipline. The presidents reported that they serve as an advocate within the discipline through their personal practices, words, and programs. Programs could include extracurricular activities, connecting written word to media, and support the hiring of faculty with communication backgrounds. The presidents also reported that they serve as an advocate by personally supporting undergraduate research. At least four presidents commented that they tell people about their own background, share their disciplinary roots, and tell people about their own training. Two presidents occasionally teach within the communication department on their campuses. One president expressed concerns over favoritism using the words “your own discipline is fed last.” Presidents also served as advocates by talking about the usefulness of the degree, mentoring students on the effectiveness of the degree, explaining how communication is excellent preparation for a variety of careers, and mentoring students into graduate school. At least one president mentioned the need for persistence with those who do not “get it.” Another aspect of advocacy that the presidents described was modeling communication leadership style and engaging in professional practices in both on-campus venues and off-campus professional organizations.

The presidents also reported on the ways that they prepare future faculty for the communication discipline. Some of these avenues included one-on-one mentoring, helping future faculty mentor students, meeting with students, providing opportunities for involvement, sponsoring joint student-faculty research, getting more people to dean and provost level, keeping personally involved in the discipline by staying connected and sharing stories, and encouraging people to lead. Some presidents did not have preparing future faculty so they discussed preparing students for the marketplace. At least one president mentioned that this is not the job of a president.

Responses to Summary Report

Upon completion of the summary report, the authors identified leaders within the communication discipline to offer comments on the initial findings from the 11 interviews. These leaders included Sue DeWine, Past President of Hanover College; Mark Hickson, III, Professor of Communication Studies, University of Alabama at Birmingham; Jon Hess, Professor and Past Chair, Department of Communications, Associate Dean for Faculty Scholarship, Internationalization and Inclusive Excellence, University of Dayton; Nancy Kidd, Executive Director of the National Communication Association; and Lynn Turner, Professor and Chair of Communication Studies, Marquette University and Past President of the National Communication Association.

The following material summarizes the key takeaways from their responses to the report and provides insight into future research. The responses addressed the role of the university president to help **clarify the communication discipline** through two areas:

- **Agreed upon Common Communication Ground.** Responses noted a “lack of common understanding of the discipline,” while other responses referenced implementing “key elements of ethical communication” and the issue of an insufficiently “diverse discipline.” The phrase “communication is a discipline for all disciplines” was viewed as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the discipline is important and every discipline relies in some way on communication. But on the

other hand, as one response noted, the common sense notion that communication infuses everything begins to dilute what communication is and suggests that communication is not really a discipline, but rather a component of every other discipline.

- **Practical Dialogue or Practical Conversation.** One of the responses identified the need to understand how to tackle “practical problems in everyday applications,” while another referenced the benefit of finding out how the presidents’ “communication principles [applied to] their external communication and how they promote real communication externally more than internally.” The idea is that communication has become commonplace; however, it has been mistaken for common sense. College and university presidents need to communicate effectively and efficiently with internal and external publics.

Specifically, the responses highlighted the following communication principles and strategies:

- **Inoculation theory** was mentioned as a strategy for responding to campus incidents when negative information might be coming from other sources. When the priority is to relay the facts to students and parents before rumors and information from uninformed sources enter the conversation, inoculation theory was viewed as a useful perspective.
- **Strategic ambiguity** was another communication strategy that worked well for the presidents in their leadership roles.
- **Small group communication strategies** can assist leaders as they attend many meetings and must adapt to different contexts and changing contexts. Audience analysis was also mentioned as a small group communication strategy that can ensure the correct (and appropriate) information was disseminated to an audience.

In addition to specific communication strategies, the responses addressed various **factors in ethical communication**, including:

- Listening
- Focusing on the audience
- Openness
- Authenticity
- Transparency
- Responsiveness
- Thoughtfulness

These qualities point to the need for leaders within colleges and universities to consider the ethical implications of their communication for their public(s).

Finally, responses to the report also indicated that it is important for the communication discipline to have communication scholars in top-level university administration positions. The National Communication Association was mentioned as a resource for these top-level administrators.

Possible next steps include interviewing university provosts with degrees in communication. The role of the provost might be a better position for exploring issues of

mentoring faculty and encouraging communication faculty. The next round of interviews might also address the tension that exists as top-level university administrators support the communication discipline without privileging the discipline. The authors were encouraged to pursue the presidents' strategies for managing the tension between acting as an ambassador for the discipline while still appropriately representing the broad range of disciplines in the academy.