

Commentary

As a continuing department, four seasoned communication administrators were asked comment on the question, “*What is the role of today’s communication administrator?*” from their perspectives as administrators. The four administrators responding are Thomas J. Hynes, President of Clayton State University (Georgia); Richard R. Ranta, Dean College of Communication and Fine Arts at the University of Memphis (Tennessee); Michael D. Miller, Chair of the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at Henderson State University (Arkansas); and Mark Hickson, III, Faculty Fellow in the Office of the Provost Affairs and two-time president of the University of Alabama-Birmingham’s Faculty Senate, as well as former department chair at Mississippi State University and the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

From the perspective of a University President

Thomas J. Hynes Jr.
Clayton State University

I begin with the premise that a university president should not be viewed as a communication administrator. For a wide array of reasons, the disciplinary background of a university leader/administrator requires some distancing from perceived advocacy for one’s disciplinary connections (especially in those instances in which resources are at stake, and disciplinary connections alone do not provide reason for allocation of those resources).

But it is also without question that most leadership and management responsibilities of a university president (and to a similar extent the chief academic officer) require either a professional or intuitive understanding of a whole range of communication studies content—both applied and theoretical.¹ This would tend to provide university presidents (as well as chief academic officers with communication backgrounds) valuable perspectives and tools for success in management and leadership. And so from my own perspective, presidents whose perspectives have been framed by our discipline ought to be exemplars for organizational, group, interpersonal, and mediated communication practices. (For some of us, there is, of course, always the risk of an “is—ought” gap.)

Communication Administrator Roles

Roles for a communication administrator might be expanded or constrained, depending on institutional culture—certain assumptions about the relationships chairs, deans, and faculty have relative to university-wide conversations can surely be influenced by local conditions. It is also the case that roles can be assigned, especially in instances in which collective bargaining establishes many parameters for administrative and faculty actions. But with that caveat aside, I have observed effective communication administrators assume some important and valuable roles for their colleagues and for their colleges and universities. And in fulfilling these roles, such individuals become essential representatives of our discipline.

Communication Department Chairs

The role here I believe is at least twofold: 1) to make and demonstrate the case for the value of the discipline; 2) to provide intellectual capital derived from the discipline to provide solutions to

¹ I would note as examples of this claim items such as message development and presentations, including written, oral and electronically and computer mediated, including emerging social media; content analysis or messages relative to multiple internal and external audiences; organizational communication theories; argumentation in case construction for internal policies and external institutional support, among other communication studies interests.

problems facing individuals located elsewhere on an institution’s organizational chart. So, for example, a chair might seek strategic opportunities for interdisciplinary agreements within a college. Generally speaking, communication studies are to varying degrees helped or penalized for a comfort level with work at disciplinary borders—e.g., history, psychology, philosophy, sociology, English, political science, media studies as examples of such areas. It is possible for chairs to point to areas of disciplinary expertise that are often cited as essential skill and knowledge sets for a wide range of employers—effective spoken communication, and demonstrated effectiveness in group work. (Of course the effective communication chair will be able to communicate these areas as collegial contributions to the university’s mission, and exclusive of self-interested advocacy for additional departmental resources).

Deans of Colleges or Schools of Communication

A reasonable and fairly typical summary of the roles of deans can be found in the Illinois State Policies and Procedures Manual:²

...Deans play five essential roles, serving as:

1. academic leaders of colleges;
2. representatives of their colleges to the rest of the University, especially University administration;
3. representatives of University leadership to their colleges;
4. managers of college resources; and,
5. representatives of the college and University to external bodies. These five roles remain constant even though specific responsibilities and duties may vary according to the mission, size, and complexity of the college.

In each of these roles, a dean of communication (or of arts and sciences colleges which include a communication studies program) can contribute significantly to university leadership. And a dean fulfilling these roles would have access to all of the resources that are available to a chair in fulfilling his or her roles.

Chairs and deans alike can fulfill the role of resource for colleges and universities living in a world of “Deconstructing Academe.”³ This is especially true of claims that much of the work in these “critical university studies” occurs in the context of new/social media, where chairs and deans can draw on their own and colleague expertise to help others within the academy make sense of this increasingly active discourse.

Summary

In sum, a communication administrator fulfills many roles, most of them situational. But in each of these roles, the communication administrator can be an institutional source of discipline-based knowledge that can assist the university or college in the achievement of its mission. And by implication, the success or failure of a communication administrator in fulfilling that role may ultimately influence roles that the department, college and faculty are expected to contribute within the broader university community. For myself, I cannot think of better disciplinary background in preparation for institutional leadership.

² <http://policy.illinoisstate.edu/employee/3-2-16.shtml>

³ Jeffrey J. Williams, Deconstructing Academe: The Birth of Critical University Studies, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 19, 2012 <http://chronicle.com/article/An-Emerging-field-deconstructs/130791/>