The Future of Communication Education in the Community College

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RECENTLY, business and political leaders have begun to take note of the important role of community colleges within higher education. Bill Gates, chairman of the Microsoft Corporation, firmly stated that community colleges are becoming "absolutely critical" in the information age. He continued by adding, "The more I've learned about the community-college system throughout the United States, the more I've been impressed" (Jaschik & Young, 1999). President Bill Clinton's vision of expanding education for all Americans to include grades 13 and 14 moves the community college to a more visible location in the fabric of American education (Adelman, 1997).

Perhaps surprisingly to some, community colleges have become significant players in the educational arena. Over 9 million credit students are enrolled in our nation's 1,130 community colleges. Almost half (46%) of all first-time college freshmen attend community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 1999), while over 53% of all U.S. undergraduates attend community colleges (Phillippe, 1997). The majority of all African American students (46%) and Hispanic students (55%) in higher education are found in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 1997).

Historically, community colleges evolved from "junior colleges," providing access to higher education for local populations, into a more eclectic mix of institutions continuing to provide access, but with a wider range of options. As a result, there is no universal agreement regarding the role of the community college. Some contend the role should be to respond primarily to the educational and vocational needs of the community in which it is located, thereby emphasizing community-based programming (Boone & Associates, 1997). Others continue to support the notion that the community college's focus should be first and foremost an institution of higher education with a commitment to college-level work (Eaton, 1994). Regardless of in which corner a community college currently resides, the evolutionary process will continue to mold and reshape today's community colleges.

While transfer and occupational education are the primary missions of community colleges, the breadth, depth and scope of what is offered varies. Impacting the offerings are the needs of local employers, university demands for specific lower-division sequences of

courses, academic preparation of high school graduates, dropouts, immigrant students, the unemployed, older adults, and those simply seeking to enrich their lives through lifelong learning (Cohen, Brawer & Associates, 1994). Community college course listings may differ dramatically as a result of the variety of influences affecting them and the needs of each community's stakeholders.

THE HOME OF INNOVATION

Beyond serving the routine educational needs of more than half of our country's freshmen and sophomores, community colleges are often the site of innovative practices in higher education. Current reformation activities include shifts to competencies and outcomes, learner centeredness, and school-to-work initiatives.

A combination of factors influenced the current emphasis on competencies and outcome based assessment. It is anticipated that discussions of the role of competencies and assessment will continue. In our discipline, especially within the basic courses, competencies have been identified, assessments have been developed and both are continuing to be refined. The National Communication Association's Communication Assessment Commission will continue to spearhead efforts in this area. Departmental leaders will continue to refine program and course outcomes to meet accreditation and institutional requirements. Ideally, we will complete these activities in the spirit of continuous improvement, looking frequently and reflectively to identify process and product improvements. Identification of competencies allows community colleges to better serve their communities and their students. Paulson and Ewell (1999) argue that programs should be built around assessed competencies rather than traditional coursework. An approach such as this could allow more flexible ways of determining if students have met the requirements for a particular program of study. Department chairs and other community college administrators are beginning to look at alternatives that incorporate a summative assessment method beyond the relatively simple listing of grades for a given set of courses. Individual certification structured around competencies could dramatically alter the methodology students use to acquire skills and knowledge. Courses and transcripts as we know them may become nonexistent. What we may begin to see (and develop) is a more explicit identification of what a student actually learned while earning a particular credential.

Many community colleges are transforming from emphasizing teaching to actively engaging students in the learning process (O'Banion, 1997). One model, designed to aid the community college in its transformation to a learning college, is based on six key principles focused on learners rather than students (see Table 1)[1] (O'Banion, 1997, p. 47).

TABLE 1

Principles of a Learning College

1. The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners.
2. The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
3. The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
4. The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
5. The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
6. The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

As community colleges adopt the principles of the learning college, they will find that dramatic change will be necessary across all areas of the institution. "Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses" (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993, p. 14). If proponents of the learning college are to be believed, the community colleges of tomorrow will be dramatically different. Department chairs will be challenged as they have not been in recent history.

School-to-work initiatives have found a home in community colleges. One such program, tech prep, incorporates the principles of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, signed by President Clinton in 1994. The intent of the STWOA is to establish a national framework wherein statewide school-to-work opportunities systems, which are defined as a network of key players that combine work-based learning, school-based learning, and connecting activities, can be created (Laanan, 1995). Tech prep, and other school-to-work programs, rely on competency and skill acquisition to produce students who are prepared to step into a specific job at the completion of their learning. The incorporation of these programs on our campuses will result in an increase in students taking communication courses, as many of these programs are being created in conjunction with community employers who are identifying a need for communication skills in the employees they hire.

Within community colleges, the trend toward communication across the curriculum will continue, with or without us. Many alternative learning methods, such as collaborative learning, incorporating learning styles, and process education, which are being used in community colleges around the country, require additional communication skills beyond the presentational skills of a lecturer. These methods provide additional opportunities for communication faculty to lead the learning as faculty across a variety of disciplines transform their classrooms. It will be to our and to our discipline's advantage to serve as leaders within our colleges (and universities) in this area.

THE COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM

There is no denying that communication skills are critically important for all students. The results of a survey conducted in 1998 by the National Association of Colleges and Employers showed clearly the importance of communication skills in the workplace. When employers were asked what characteristics they seek in job candidates, interpersonal skills topped the list, with teamwork skills and communication skills following immediately behind. The remaining of the top 7 characteristics identified were analytical skills, computer skills, written communication skills, and leadership skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 1999). A skills based component in our curriculum will continue to be a needed, viable, and growing portion of a student's coursework. As community college educators, our mission will be to continue to help students also learn the theoretical underpinnings and foundations upon which the skills are based. Only then will real learning take place; learning not only how to do something better, but why it works better that way.

Communication courses in the community college are typically offered to fulfill a general education requirement for the college. Often, all degree seeking students must complete one oral communication course. The communication courses used to fulfill the general education requirement are heavily skills based, taking the form of either a hybrid, interpersonal, or public speaking communication course. With 53% of all undergraduates currently enrolled in community colleges and the community college as the entry point for many four year university students (Phillippe, 1997), often a student's only communication course is completed at the community college. It is incumbent upon those of us who administer and teach the basic course to ensure that students are exposed to the best our

discipline has to offer in the way of skills, and to help students understand the theory girding those critically important skills.

Curriculum planning in the community college often requires struggling with issues different from those of four-year institutions. Unlike many four-year institutions' speech programs, most community colleges serve few, if any, speech or communication majors. Rather, the community college's speech communication department's primary purpose is to provide courses fulfilling general education oral communication requirements. Thus, the success and survival of the department ultimately depends on the enrollment of students in basic courses, not on the number of students declaring communication as a major. Engleberg (1999) explains:

> The basic course is more than the bread-and-butter course in a community college; it is often the *raison d'etre*. The basic course in a community college is not necessarily a way to attract majors or to make sure that the department has a strong enough financial base to permit senior faculty to teach upper level courses. At many 2-year colleges, the basic speech communication course is why there is a speech program. (p. 123).

Furthermore, those courses must be designed to meet not only the needs of students enrolled at a particular community college, but also be included in articulation agreements with four-year institutions to which those students will likely transfer. The dual considerations of promoting the basic course and ensuring its transferability present unique challenges.

A speech department may find itself struggling to address the oral communication competencies needed by both students enrolled in vocational programs and those pursuing an academic transfer course of study. Approximately 80% of students report an intent to transfer to four-year institutions (Keener, 1994). Therefore, communication courses fulfilling the general education requirement at the community college must also be acceptable to the transfer institution. Further complicating curriculum decisions is that various transfer institutions may specify different courses as the "basic course," i.e. a hybrid course or a public speaking course.

Unfortunately, the degree of cooperation between a community college communication department and an area university's communication department varies greatly from institution to institution. The result is that a given communication course may be accepted by some four-year institutions yet denied by others. Engleberg (1999) observes that transfer credits are rejected for reasons ranging from "questions about the quality of community college instruction to an opinion that community colleges have no right to teach anything beyond the basic course areas" (p. 129). Despite research demonstrating that students who earn an associate degree at a community college are just as likely to complete a baccalaureate degree as are nontransfer university students, questions regarding the quality of education at community colleges still persist (Cejda, 1998).

Given the greater influence of four-year institutions in directing higher education policies within a state, community college curriculum is frequently dictated by area universities' decisions about their own curriculum. This is the case in spite of the fact that community colleges serve more than half of all college undergraduates across the U.S. (Phillippe, 1997). The community college's role in higher education becomes more revealing when freshman and sophomore enrollment is examined specifically. For instance, in the state of Texas community colleges enroll 44% of all undergraduates, but serve 70% of the state's freshman and sophomore students (Texas Association of Community Colleges, 1999). While clearer articulation agreements are resolving many of these issues, such enrollment

data suggest that community colleges should demand a greater role in formulating the undergraduate curriculum.

Community colleges serve a more diverse student population. Compared to four-year institutions, community colleges serve more minority, female, disabled, older, and at-risk students (Boone, 1997). The average age of a community college student is twenty-nine. Over half of all community college students are women (Boone, 1997). And, because of the open admissions policies of most community colleges, student preparation for college varies significantly, with many students requiring some form of remediation. Such diversity demands attention in curriculum decisions and issues of pedagogy in specific communication courses.

Inclusion of courses and material addressing multicultural communication has become particularly important at the community college. Minorities make up approximately 22% of all students enrolled in community colleges (Piland & Silva, 1996). This number is expected to double within the next ten years (Boone, 1997). If the current pattern of enrollment continues among minority students within community colleges, by the year 2020 minority students will comprise the majority of students (Story, 1996). Piland and Silva (1996) argue that minority students are often attracted to the community college's lower tuition, open admission policies, and sense of community. Story (1996) notes that "the ramifications of this change for the curriculum and pedagogy, as well as for organizational structures and staffing (particularly, of faculty) are obvious" (p. 85). Speech communication departments are ideally situated to address the needs of their institutions' minority students. In recent years, the communication discipline has produced a greater amount of research informing instruction related to issues of muticultural communication. Student diversity and availability of information are transforming the specific content of the basic communication courses. Faculty who are not prepared to address these issues may find themselves under increasing pressure to do so. In a survey conducted by Piland and Silva (1996), eighty-one percent of chief academic officers reported that they will be emphasizing an "infusion of multiculturalism/diversity material into existing courses" (p. 44).

In addition to diversity in regard to students' race, age, gender, etc., community college students also vary greatly in degree of communication apprehension. Hamilton and Frerichs (1996) discovered that community college students report a higher level of communication apprehension as compared to students attending four-year institutions. Thus, course design must be particularly sensitive to issues of communication apprehension. Since students with higher levels of communication apprehension are more likely to drop out of college, there are significant implications for the role of speech communication instruction within the college's curriculum and the extent to which it is addressed in the basic course (Hamilton & Frerichs, 1996). Attention to class size and adequate inclusion of instruction in apprehension reduction across the communication curriculum is necessary.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Additional initiatives at the community college level will affect professors of communication. Many community colleges are exploring the role of technology in the delivery of learning. Technology enhancements, which can include automated grading, television, videotape, electronic slide shows, use of course section list-serves, electronic bulletin boards, syllabi and other materials available to students via the internet, and e-mail messaging, provide educators the opportunity to "redesign the discourse of teaching and learning and to display to our students the fact that discourse is designable" (Jackson & Madison, 1999). Community colleges will continue to encourage faculty to make use of the variety of technological aids available for classroom use. As administrators for communica-

tion departments, we must ensure that technological resources, if used, are enhancing the learning process for our students. Despite widespread interest and use, there exists little in the way of actual research, qualitative or quantitative, about the effectiveness of such uses of technology in the college classroom (Ehrmann, 1999). More research is needed to discover the effectiveness of the technology being added to community college classes. As those areas of research are completed, a better focus can be provided for those interested in enhancing learning for students via the incorporation of technology.

Distance education is defined as any formal approach to learning in which "a majority of the instruction occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another" (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p. 8). While the concept of distance education is nearly as old as America—shorthand lessons were offered through the mail in 1728 (Bunker, 1996), what we have come to know as distance education involves delivery of learning through the internet, via videocassette, or real-time, interactive one- or two-way use of television delivery. An historical review of distance education illustrates its growth and the continual adaptation to new technologies in order to better reach potential students. Because community colleges are in the forefront of the distance education movement, many are quickly developing and offering courses in a variety of distance formats. Despite a goal identified by community colleges as serving the local community, these colleges are nevertheless pursuing students well beyond the local geographic area. The recently formed Community College Distance Learning Network plans national advertising to reach new students who will be able to earn degrees completely via distance delivery (Blumenstyk, 1998). Currently, at least one communication associate degree is offered via distance delivery, through the University of Southern Indiana. Listed on an internet web site for distance learning are 138 institutions offering "communications" courses (www.petersons.com). As more and more colleges add distance delivery options, communication departments will feel increasing pressure to develop courses and complete programs of study to be offered through distance delivery.

QUALIFIED PROFESSORIATE

One of the challenges that will continue to face communication departments at many community colleges will be the ability to recruit and retain qualified faculty. During the 1950s and 1960s there was a surge in the establishment of community colleges across the nation. Specifically, between 1965 and 1969 new public two-year colleges were opening at the rate of at least one per week (Lombardi, 1992b). Consequently, a significant portion of the faculty are approaching retirement within the next few years (Engleberg, 1993; Gibson-Benninger & Ratcliff, 1996). Unfortunately, qualified replacements may not be readily available.

Graduate students in the communication discipline are rarely specifically prepared or even encouraged to teach at the community college level. First, graduate students receive little or no instruction in pedagogical theory. Rather, graduate programs tend to place a greater emphasis on generating communication research. However, community college faculty are first and foremost teachers, not researchers. Second, the typical member of a speech department within a community college must be a generalist. In any given year, an individual teacher is often expected to be prepared to teach a variety of courses from public speaking to interpersonal communication, from debate to intercultural communication. Thus, while community colleges need faculty with a broad range of expertise within the discipline, graduate programs increasingly encourage specialization within a course of study. Engleberg (1999) notes that community colleges "have not been very successful in convincing graduate schools to produce 'generalists' who can teach basic courses" (p. 131).

Additionally, graduate programs that do offer courses specifically related to community college education tend to focus on administrative issues rather than addressing the knowledge and skills necessary for effective classroom teaching (Gibson-Benninger & Ratcliff, 1996). Engleberg (1999) suggests that graduate programs can better prepare their students for employment in community colleges by encouraging internships or part-time teaching at community colleges, providing instruction for dealing with student diversity, ensuring a thorough understanding of basic courses, encouraging study of instructional education and communication education research, and treating the choice to teach at a community college with professional respect.

Fewer than a third of full-time faculty currently teaching in two-year institutions have completed a course specifically addressing community college education (Gibson-Benninger & Ratcliff, 1996). While most graduate programs neglect the preparation of future community college faculty, the graduate program at George Mason University is a notable exception. George Mason University has responded by offering a course of study specifically designed to better prepare faculty in various disciplines for teaching at the community college. The program requires a minimum number of credit hours within a student's primary discipline, core courses relevant to community college education, internship experience, and a graduate project (Engleberg, 1993; Boileau, 1996). In order to fulfill the employment needs of both community colleges and graduate students, more institutions must develop similar programs.

In addition to the lack of adequate preparation for working in the community college environment, potential applicants may perceive the job as less desirable. Community college faculty often bemoan the lack of respect afforded them by their university colleagues. Additionally, graduate students are rarely informed of or encouraged to pursue faculty positions at community colleges. Quite simply, research oriented scholarship tends to be more rewarded within the communication discipline and prestige tends to be associated with positions at research institutions. The community college places primary value on a faculty member's performance as a teacher. While research is not discouraged, it is typically not required or expected. This emphasis is counter to the high value placed on the generation and publication of research. Thus, many potentially ideal teachers avoid a community college position rather than accept a job of lesser perceived professional status.

Less prestige does not mean less work. While research is not required, a tremendous amount of teaching and service to the college is expected. The typical community college professor has a teaching load requiring fifteen student contact hours a week. On a semester system, that is typically five courses per semester (Engleberg, 1999), plus the hours required for class preparation, student advising, professional activities, college committee work, and possible responsibilities for cocurricular activities. In fact, available research reveals that the average community college professor works approximately forty-seven hours a week (Mayes, 1998). This workload is likely to increase in the next few years. In an effort to accommodate increased enrollment without hiring new faculty, many departments feel pressured to increase class size and course load. Some colleges are beginning to permit thirty-five or more students to be enrolled in communication courses. Given the skills-based nature of many lower division speech courses, such an unwieldy class size may jeopardize the academic integrity of such courses. Additionally, professors at some colleges are now required to teach more than five courses a semester. The challenge of administrators responsible for speech programs within community colleges will be to resist such increases in faculty workload in order to be able to attract and retain new speech faculty and preserve academic integrity.

Recruiting new faculty members to replace retiring professors presents many challenges. However, for many administrators the greatest challenge is actually securing approval to hire a full-time replacement. In order to reduce the operating costs of the institu-

tion, many community colleges have become increasingly reliant on adjunct faculty. Approximately two thirds of community college faculty are part-time (Engleberg, 1999). These individuals generally receive very little pay, no benefits, and frequently less access to institutional resources. Certainly, adjunct professors can be an asset to a college. Many part-time professors also are employed full-time in non-academic positions in the community. Such teachers bring a wealth of applied experience and knowledge to the classroom. They often have no desire to pursue a full-time teaching position. Other adjunct professors choose to teach part-time in the hope that a full-time position will become available at an area college. It is not unusual for these adjunct faculty members to teach part-time at several colleges during a given semester. Thus, by combining teaching contracts at two or three institutions, an adjunct professor could teach the equivalent or in excess of a full-time teaching load.

While adjunct faculty will always be necessary, an over reliance on part-timers threatens the academic integrity of a communication department. Gibson-Benninger and Ratcliff (1996) argue that part-time faculty are often "subsumed by their noncollege job demands" and "lack oversight, evaluation, and professional development" opportunities resulting in an inadequate quality of instruction (p. 155). Unfortunately, as institutions choose to rely on a part-time faculty pool, communication departments may find that an increasing proportion of their courses will be given over to individuals with less teaching experience, less professional involvement in the discipline, less academic preparation in pedagogy, and less commitment to the institution and its communication department. This will not serve the best interests of speech faculty, students, or the discipline.

Most community colleges attempt to address the challenge of maintaining qualified faculty by offering professional development opportunities. Colleges frequently offer a series of workshops prior to the beginning of a semester or throughout the year that address issues of concern to the teaching faculty and to the institution at large. Workshops generally cover a variety of topics ranging from adapting to student learning styles to designing your own web page. In an effort to promote individual professional development, faculty are expected or required to attend. Additionally, many community colleges encourage and sometimes reward innovation in the classroom, e.g., incorporation of new technology, unconventional scheduling formats, team teaching, etc.

While many professional development opportunities may be available, most are not discipline specific. Furthermore, unlike their university counterparts, community college faculty are provided with little in the way of financial resources for pursuing professional development opportunities beyond their institution's campus. Thus, given the expense of regional and, in particular, the National Communication Association's conventions, many community college faculty find participation in these associations financially prohibitive. Very few community colleges fully fund a professor's attendance at a convention. Thus, most who choose to attend do so with little or no financial compensation. The result is a faculty who may be up to date on pedagogical approaches appropriate for the community college classroom in general, but less aware of recent developments within the communication discipline. The opportunities for part-time faculty professional development are even bleaker. Many institutions offer little or no professional development opportunities for their part-time professors. When opportunities are available, part-time faculty may be unable or not required to participate. Lombardi (1992a) noted that most part-time faculty members "receive hardly more than an hour or two of advice from a department chairman or dean" (p. 62). This is particularly disturbing given the large proportion of part-time faculty responsible for teaching communication courses.

As community college enrollment increases and faculty retire, communication administrators must be committed to hiring faculty qualified in the discipline and prepared for the unique challenges of the community college. As Hammons and Barnsley (1996) aptly

observe, "the ultimate success of the community college will largely depend on the competencies of the men and women who serve as instructors" (p. 322). Despite the many challenges, community college professors report a greater degree of job satisfaction compared to university professors (Gibson-Benninger & Ratcliff, 1996). Generally, community college faculty find the job personally satisfying and are highly involved in their roles as teachers (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Since the job allows for a high degree of contact with individual students, many faculty report that they believe that what they do makes a difference. Furthermore, while the teaching load is greater, faculty are not pressured to generate research and publish. Promotion and tenure are generally granted based on teaching performance. Cohen and Brawer argue that community college faculty seem to be willing to tolerate less than ideal work situations because they "believe that they are striving for a higher cause" (p. 74). However, if such job satisfaction is to continue, communication departments within community colleges must more adequately meet the challenge of attracting and retaining a full-time faculty pool.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the challenges facing community colleges are and will be similar to the challenges in four-year institutions. Yet, differences exist that will continue to cast community colleges in a different light. Community colleges embrace instructional innovation, are at the forefront of the development of technology as it relates to higher education, are exploring curriculum issues, and are generally committed to maintaining a qualified faculty. However, as community colleges continue to evolve, communication administrators will be faced with even greater challenges. Communication departments must be able to adapt to institutional innovation while remaining true to the discipline and preserving the academic integrity of their courses. Faculty will need to continue to adapt communication courses to better serve an increasingly diverse student population. As faculty retire, communication administrators must tenaciously seek approval to hire full-time replacements. In addition to responding to such issues within their institutions, effective administrators may find themselves venturing beyond their community college campuses. In order to protect and promote enrollment in their basic communication courses, administrators must pursue cooperative relationships with colleagues at area universities and seek a greater role in the development of their states' general education policies. Additionally, communication graduate programs should be encouraged to offer courses of study that better prepare their students for the option of community college teaching. The future of higher education per se is assured, however, the look of tomorrow's community colleges, and those colleges' communication programs, may be very different from what we see today.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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