Award Winning Communication Programs: Centrality or Confusion?

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INTRODUCTION

The NCA (formerly SCA) Task Force on the Advancement of the Discipline (1996) reported that "departments of speech communication need to strengthen their position within their institutions in order not only to survive, but to contribute to changes in higher education needed for the new millennium" (p. 1). The report further stated that the discipline suffers from a lack of centrality. This is not a recent phenomenon. In 1980, Marlier cautioned about the lack of "a central focus around which our disciplinary identity could be established" (p. 327). In 1983, the *Journal of Communication* published "Ferment in the Field" consisting of thirty-five original essays addressing curricular concerns, critical issues, and research tasks for the discipline. General curricular reform in higher education has been discussed for decades (Christ & Hynes, 1997; Blanchard & Christ, 1993; Association of American Colleges, 1985; Carnegie Foundation, 1977).

This study is a post hoc analysis of peer identified excellent departments at small colleges (5,000 or less undergraduates) to discover if they suffer from this lack of centrality. This type of school represents a significant part of undergraduate education. Of all four year colleges and universities in 1991, seventy-six percent were in this category (Smith & Turner, 1993). Similar findings are available in *Peterson's Guide 1999*. It is hoped that this information may be used to help departments plan curriculum, develop evaluation methods or write mission statements to strengthen existing programs or defend those under attack.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Centrality has been analyzed in several ways. Those methods listed in the NCA Task Force Report (1996) were: names, degrees and location of departments; curriculum in-

cluding subfields, specialties, and interdisciplinary focus; assessment methods; and relationship of department to institutional mission.

In assessing the names, degrees and locations of departments, the Task Force Report contends that there is "no consistent configuration of the disciplines, but rather different names, various subfields and specialties housed in different schools, divisions, and colleges in the university" (p. 20). According to Elmore (1993), communication is the most common degree given. Two hundred and fifty one institutions offered undergraduate communication degrees. Other degrees given and the number of institutions offering them were: Advertising 86, Film and Cinema 54, Information Service 26, Journalism and Mass Communication 226, Public Relations 125, Radio, Television Broadcasting Telecommunications 198, Speech 158, and related specialties 113. Smith and Turner (1993) found that communication departments in schools with enrollments of 1,000 to 5,000 consider themselves to be multi-disciplinary and offered the most degree options (1993). Additionally, many subfields of communication in these schools such as theater and journalism are often aligned or housed with Departments of Music, Art or English, complicating what constitutes a communication degree. As a result of this situation, the NCA Task Force Report (1996) argues it is hard to assume the "canonical" status for communication achieved by other disciplines and associated with centrality.

Curriculum is the most frequently studied area when determining consistency (centrality) between departments. The NCA Task Force (1996) concludes that departments must have a "strong interdisciplinary approach with strong disciplinary anchors" (p. 1). Smitter and MacDoniels (1985) found no common denominators across programs at small schools (p. 50). Several studies have addressed the issue of curriculum (Becker, 1992; Hay, 1992; Higgerson, 1994; Rakow, 1993; Report of Conference Proceedings: Essential Undergraduate Curriculum in Speech Communication, 1985; Williamson & Iorio, 1996). They have taken two approaches.

The first approach has been an attempt to determine the courses essential in a curriculum for a strong communication department. The Report of the Undergraduate Curriculum, referred to as the Hope College Report (1985), identified five core courses that should be required of all communication majors: public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication, understanding media, and communication/rhetorical theory. The Hope College Report (1985) also indicates that courses essential to an undergraduate program in speech communication should include (in addition to those above) ethics, issues and a senior seminar (capstone course). In a survey of programs, Smith and Turner (1993) reported the following communication skills are necessary to include in a successful communication program: interpersonal communication, small group communication, interviewing, communication theory and rhetoric, research methods, teaching methods, organizational communication, persuasion (debate, advertising, and sales), public speaking, performance of literature, broadcasting, public relations and internships.

The second approach has been to reject the listing of courses and take a holistic view. Rakow (1995) argues that the communication curriculum is gridlocked by obligations to students and employers, fragmented and overly specialized, incomplete, and passive in response to change. She believes that the curriculum of the future should be holistic—a need to integrate the subfields of speech, interpersonal, organizational and mass communication (p.157). She reminds us that Becker (1992) urged the field to remember that the goal of the discipline is understanding the whole. Communication studies should serve as a model in breaking down disciplinary walls. These pressures are particularly felt at small colleges where the curriculum, according to the Report on Small Colleges (1996), must be "more inclusive and more effectively integrated than at many large universities" (p. 7). Furthermore as Adler (1997) writes, the curriculum at smaller schools often relies on more "interdependence across disciplines" (p. 1).

An underlying theme in centrality is assessment. The NCA Task Force Report (1996) indicates that for a department to be strong it must be familiar with the standards and evaluation within the institution. Quality of programs, accountability of funds and improvement and reform of education depends on assessment (Hay, 1994; Higgerson, 1993; Litterst, 1994; Makay, 1997). Assessment can document, both to individual universities and to communication programs, centrality or confusion.

The last issue of centrality addressed in the Task Force Report (1996) is the centrality of the department to the university mission. The Report states "the most fundamental step for a department or program to take then, is to match its mission to that of the institution. Successful departments not only match, but also demonstrate how their goals contribute to the institutional mission" (p. 12). The Report on Undergraduate Education at Small Colleges (1996) contends this relationship is critical to departments at small institutions.

This study addresses the following research question: *What characteristics do these award winning departments have in common that indicate centrality in the discipline?*

METHODOLOGY

A survey was sent to the fourteen schools that had won the Central States Communication Association (CSCA) Programs of Excellence Award from 1988-97. These schools have been chosen by their peers as having obtained excellence in small undergraduate departments of communication. Awards are given both for overall program excellence and special areas such as curriculum development, imaginative research, community involvement, and fulfillment of mission. Fifteen awards have been given: seven for overall excellence and eight for special areas of excellence. One department won the award twice; once for overall program excellence and once for a special program. These schools are limited to four year colleges/universities of 5,000 or fewer undergraduates.

Thirteen surveys representing fourteen winners were used, a return rate of 93%. The schools ranged in size; eleven were between 1,000 and 5,000 undergraduates and two were under 1,000 undergraduates. In terms of the number of majors, all of the departments were in the top 50% at their institutions; four schools were in the top 25% and three were in the top 10%. Of the respondents, seven schools won for special programs, seven for overall excellence. Since one survey represented both an overall award and a special award, information from that survey was used in the explanations for both types of awards. Consequently, although thirteen surveys were used in the explanation of the data, it could appear that fourteen surveys were used since one of the surveys represents one of each type of award. Surveys were written based on the work of Hay (1992) and Smith and Turner (1993) and included four parts.

The first section of the survey asked for information about the program as currently operated. This included the subfields of communication that are taught (i.e. interpersonal, mass media, rhetoric, etc.), co-curricular activities, the number of faculty, the types of degrees offered, the number of majors, the department rank on campus and courses required of all students for graduation. Also included were questions related to descriptions of the institution and enrollment.

The second part of the survey asked specific questions about the award. These questions included how the award was used by the institution and by the department, and how the department may have changed since winning the award.

TABLE 1
Programs of Excellence Award Winners

Year	School	Area of Excellence
1988	Butler University Hope College DePauw University	Overall Excellence
1989	Albion College	Overall Excellence
1990	Wooster College	Curriculum Development
1991	Hope College St. Mary's College University of Findlay	Innovations in Teaching
1992	Concordia College (Moorehead, MN) University of Indianapolis	Imaginative Research
1993	Northeastern State University	Community Involvement
1994	Alma College St. John's University	Overall Excellence
1995	John Carroll University	Overall Excellence
1996	Concordia College (Ann Arbor, MI)	Fulfillment of Mission

The third part of the survey concerned assessment. This section asked schools to report the sources of assessment information, the purpose of the assessment and the person(s) responsible for the analysis of data.

The fourth section of the survey gathered data on the description of the department and the institution when the award was received as well as department philosophy and curriculum. Copies of the catalogue from the year the award was received were requested.

RESULTS

Five aspects of centrality emerged from the post hoc analysis. Four of these areas (names, degrees, and location of departments; curriculum subfields and interdisciplinary approach, assessment, and mission) were elements mentioned in the 1996 NCA Report. One other area of centrality that resulted from the analysis was cocurricular activities.

Names, Degrees, and Locations
The first post hoc analysis revealed that department names, degrees, and locations indicated centrality. Communication was part of every departmental title (Communication and Theater 4, Communication 4, Speech Communication 3, Communication Arts and Sciences 1, Communications 1). All of the schools offered a general communication

degree. In seven of the schools this was the only degree offered although there were minors. Six schools offered additional degree tracks; four offered two degree tracks, one had three degree tracks, and one had seven degree tracks. Although a variety of specific degree areas were offered, there appeared to be more similarity than confusion in these offerings as eleven out of thirteen schools offered only one or two degree tracks. None of these departments were combined departments with other fields such as with English, sociology or humanities.

Curriculum

Disciplinary anchors. The second post hoc analysis revealed departmental curriculums indicated centrality. Twelve of the thirteen schools had a broad based curriculum. Although their curriculums were not reflective of all of the courses suggested by Smith and Turner (1993), the emphasis on areas as described by the Hope College Report (1985) was clearly reflected in these schools. Courses were offered in at least three of the five common areas: mass communication (radio/television, journalism, or media studies), interpersonal communication (including small group), and rhetoric. In seven of the thirteen schools, public speaking, a fourth area, was taught and six of the thirteen required a senior seminar or capstone course as suggested by the Hope Report.

Interdisciplinary approach. The third post hoc analysis indicated a strong interdisciplinary focus in these programs. Whether given the award for general excellence or a special program, twelve of the thirteen departments stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the field. The only program that was not interdisciplinary was at the regional public university, the largest institution in the study. Interdisciplinary focus was shown in two different ways. One approach was to require courses across the sub-areas of the discipline. For example, all students in the department must take radio/television, interpersonal communication and rhetoric. In these programs, all of the courses were in the department. A second method was to require all students to take supporting courses to complete the major from other programs in the university where components of the communication sub-areas were taught. Departments most often listed were sociology, political science, business, psychology, and English.

In the general excellence category, three of the programs followed the first approach of essential courses, integrating the sub-areas of the discipline by requiring students to do course work in three to five sub-areas for the major. The other four programs in the general excellence category used the second approach, requiring courses for breadth that were housed in other departments. The main difference in approach seemed to be dictated by the size of the department and number of faculty. Schools with more faculty in the department taught all courses in the department; those programs with fewer faculty used other departments and faculty.

In all of these programs the interdisciplinary approach of the major across various sub-fields of the discipline was a key component in their program descriptions. In fact, chairs from two programs indicated that they tried not to let students identify themselves by a sub-area specialty, but rather to focus on the overall communication degree.

For the special program awards, the interdisciplinary focus was again critical. Of the seven programs responding, six stressed the approach of involving other departments. One department was even an interdivisional program set up with only two communication faculty in the department to co-ordinate department courses with those outside the department.

Programs in both general and special award winning departments stressed merging areas of communication and emphasizing common goals as a component of excellence. For example, one program offered a capstone course that examined general principles of communication across several sub-fields. Other departments had capstone courses in each

sub-field, but indicated that common questions of inquiry such as audience, ethics, and message were addressed in each course. Still another department had identified six questions that were discussed in five required introductory courses in various in sub-areas to show how the subfields were related across the discipline.

Assessment. A third post hoc analysis was assessment. Eleven of the thirteen schools had an assessment program in place; nine of the schools reported that these were mandated. Sources of assessment information and the number of schools reporting using them were: student course evaluations 12, alumni surveys 11, portfolios 9, capstone course 9, senior thesis 7, exit interviews 6, internship 1, ACT scores 1, graduate school acceptances 1, employer surveys 1, and outside consultants 1. Most schools used several of these methods.

Responsibilities for analyzing assessment data included a variety of groups. Most often analysis was done by the department faculty (8), chairs (7), and deans or administration (7). Most institutions had at least two groups or people responsible for the analysis. One additional method used by all the schools was the application for the award itself. In applying to the CSCA Small College Interest Group, all programs had to identify, describe and evaluate their departments. Furthermore, their evaluation as a part of this process was then reviewed and evaluated by a panel of peers.

Mission. The fourth post hoc analysis indicated the importance of the relationship of mission to the department. These departments tried to directly relate their courses and goals to the mission of the school. In one case this meant that the department altered basic courses to highlight particular areas, for example religion. Three programs specifically mentioned mission in their materials or application for the award, two indirectly mentioned it by referring to the reputation of the school and their goals and one department received the award for fulfilling the University's mission.

The majority of award winners had courses required or optional within their institution's core. Of the overall excellence winners, four of the seven had a communication course in the general core. Six of the seven schools that won for special programs offered courses in the general core. In some institutions, students chose core courses from a list of options while others schools required specific courses. Required courses were either basic public speaking or a "blended" course that combined public speaking, interpersonal and group process. Optional courses included communication and culture, classroom communication, and self expression in the arts. Getting courses accepted into the core is one method of gaining recognition for the discipline at the institution and demonstrating that the department contributes to the mission.

Cocurricular Activities. A fifth post hoc analysis revealed the importance of cocurricular programs. Cocurricular activities played a role at every institution. Twelve of the thirteen schools had internship programs. Other cocurricular activities were radio 9, theater 7, debate 6, television 5, forensics 4, newspaper 3, PRSSA 2, advertising club 1, honorary society 1, literary magazine 1. These activities seem to provide visibility for the department and aid in projecting a positive image both inside and outside the university.

Current Status. From current descriptions, it appears these programs continue to be viable departments at their institutions. No department reported any type of threat to their existence. As Nelson suggests (1995) sustaining a communication program is helped when there is an established identity. Clearly, these programs demonstrate departments that have developed and established their identities within their institutions.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the award winning programs demonstrates more centrality than confusion. Although these departments may have slightly different names, sizes, and configu-

rations within their institutions, they offer a similar approach to the study of communication with the exception of the large university regional branch. This centrality is seen in two ways. First, they all stress a broad based communication curriculum with similar courses required. Second, these are all strong integrative programs requiring the student to study various communication subareas. This centrality of the discipline is further enhanced by common goals or questions in each communication course. The subareas can either be within the department or created by requiring specific courses outside the department. Independent of the method chosen, all programs use the communication discipline as the central focus for coordinating the interdisciplinary development.

These programs, with one exception, seem to favor the holistic view of communication and the case for the more "general" communication department rather than separated departments of sub-areas such as theater or radio/television. Additionally, these programs make the case that even with limited size (1-2 faculty), the focus can remain on a communication department that develops its programs with other departments rather than combining the study of communication with another larger department such as English. These programs clearly identify a communication focus and perspective as the central unifying factor that connects subareas.

One concern is that when communication or communication subareas are placed within other departments such as English or Humanities, the focus may reflect more of that field than the communication discipline. This change may lead to the confusion that the NCA Task Force Report (1996) discusses. These programs demonstrate that there must be a central communication perspective that forms the focus for the curriculum. This issue is particularly important as departments face the pressures of the post modern university structure and economy constraints. According to the Report of Small Colleges (1996), this "unique communication perspective needs to be articulated to avoid communication departments doing service work while other disciplines deal with more intellectual issues and implications" (p. 7).

These "general" departments provide the breadth of focus for students and also offer some economic/political advantages. Politically, the department is larger if sub-areas are together and can therefore offer a more formidable opposition to attempts to change or reduce the department curriculum, faculty, or resources. This strength is particularly helpful when the department can clearly articulate, as these schools could, a standard philosophy that ties the sub-areas together and demonstrates the relationship between the department's philosophy and the institution's mission and core. Economically, a broad based department also provides more students and faculty and allows for the sharing of departmental resources among sub-areas.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study of award winning programs is limited to schools with under 5,000 undergraduates students. One area of future research would be to examine these indicators of centrality at large institutions (over 5,000 undergraduates). As the NCA Report of the Subcommittee on Advancing the Discipline in Small Undergraduate Colleges (1996) states: "Quality is difficult to define and achieve, particularly in small undergraduate programs where the indicators utilized in large research institutions are not easily applied" (p. 3). If the factors in assessing quality may vary by the size of the school, then the way in which the indicators of centrality are developed or implemented may also differ.

A second research area is the relationship of the curriculum structure to institutional size and budget. This study found consistency at these smaller schools in the principle of disciplinary anchors with interdisciplinary focus although the departments did use different methods to achieve the balance. If the regional university (the largest institution in this

study) is an indicator, inclusion of larger schools may result in a greater diversity of courses and less interdisciplinary focus. The results of this study support the idea that a long term goal for future research should be to articulate not only a consistent core of courses for communication programs, but also a standard set of optional courses (Smitter & MacDoniels, 1985).

CONCLUSIONS

The winners of the Small College Interest Group's Programs of Excellence Award provide directions for achieving centrality and the goals outlined by the NCA Task Force on Advancing the Discipline (1996). They have similar names, degrees, and locations within their institutions, and they favor a "holistic" department and curricula that are interdisciplinary with strong department anchors. Most have assessment programs in place to maintain this quality. In most cases, they have identified themselves with the mission of their institution through courses and goals. Additionally, they all have cocurricular programs associated with the department.

These programs can provide some guidelines for departments in schools of 5,000 or less undergraduates to use in conducting self evaluations to determine if their programs have centrality. The following questions are suggested for this type of self study:

1. Does the departmental program allow for at least three areas of the communication field to be studied as suggested by the Hope Report? The format can be either within the department or with the department utilizing selected outside courses.

2. Is there a common theme, set of questions or focus running through the courses in the established subareas?

3. Can the department identify and articulate the common focus to students and administrators? This is critical if the subareas are to be seen as a part of the communication discipline rather than as a series of loosely related areas. This philosophy is also helpful in identifying how a communication course is different from a course covering the same material offered by another department.

4. Can the department relate its theme or focus to its institution's mission? Critical to answering this question is the department and institution's history. Why and how was the department formed? What factors have stimulated its growth within the institution? Can these issues be strengthened or enhanced? Can this focus relate to the institution's mission and core?

5. Is the focus found throughout the department's literature and assessment procedures?

"The communication discipline covers a broad spectrum of inquiry and we need to demonstrate the questions we ask and seek answers to that are central to the future of education" (Report of the Sub-committee, 1996, p. 1). The post hoc analysis of these award winning schools provide a starting point to the questions we ask. Our future depends on articulating unique answers that qualify our discipline as necessary to the academy.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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