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Advancing the Communication Discipline in the Community College Environment

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE CONTEXT

Community colleges are the youngest sibling in the higher education family. As such, we have inherited a lot of "hand-me-downs," and not all of them fit. So I'll begin by describing the community college context, especially as it relates to our topic of advancing the communication discipline.

Many people in our field assume that speech departments, complete with chairs, exist in community colleges. My task would be easier if that were indeed the case. However, except in the largest of community colleges, rarely is there a speech communication department as such. Speech is often part of a communication or communication arts department that also includes writing and sometimes other disciplines. My Arts and Humanities department includes speech, art, music, theatre, foreign languages, philosophy, religion, and interdisciplinary humanities.

This rich mix of disciplines in a single department has advantages: interdisciplinary connections are a natural, everyday occurrence; territorial boundaries are happily blurred; and the life of the chair is never boring. But there are also disadvantages to blended departments, especially when it comes to advancing the discipline: the chair has a responsibility not just to advance one discipline, but many; speech faculty may be outnumbered by those in other disciplines, especially writing, so that there seems to be less urgency about advancing the cause of speech; and though the chair of a blended department may have a speech background, the chair is fully as likely to represent a different discipline.

Community colleges may or may not have a speech requirement for degree programs. Usually, the Associate of Arts transfer degree includes a speech requirement. Other degrees--the Associate of Science, Associate of Applied Sciences, Associate of Applied Arts, or Associate of General Studies--sometimes include a speech requirement, but often permit, instead, either a choice between speech and another course (usually a second writing course) or a combination writing/speaking course that is almost invariably taught by someone with a degree in writing rather than speech.

If a community college does not have a speech requirement, or requires speech only for the Associate of Arts degree, there is a chance that it will not have sufficient enrollments to require the services of even one full-time speech instructor—depending, of course, on the size of the institution and the size of its transfer program. Many community colleges assign their speech courses to faculty with degrees in English. Iowa law aids and abets this practice by requiring that community college transfer courses be taught either by someone with a degree in the discipline, or by someone with a Masters' degree in any discipline, plus at least 12 graduate credits in the teaching discipline. I recently surveyed administrators in all of Iowa's 15 community colleges. Although 14 of 15 require speech for at least one of their degrees, only 3 of the 15 require a graduate degree in speech as a hiring qualification.

Iowa's law reflects a "generalist" philosophy that is not uncommon in community colleges. (Sinclair Community College in Ohio, for example, is no longer hiring any full-time faculty who can teach in only one discipline.) Given that philosophy, community colleges often staff speech courses with either full time English faculty who also have some graduate credits in speech or communication studies, or with part-time faculty. Thus community colleges may not only lack a speech chair with a degree in the discipline, but may also lack a critical mass of faculty to serve as disciplinary advocates.

Two of the Iowa administrators I talked with in my survey mentioned another factor that enters into their hiring of English faculty to teach speech—the difficulty of attracting speech professionals to community colleges, especially those in rural areas. The life of the community college speech teacher may not be attractive to many new professionals just leaving graduate school. Community colleges' reputation as "teaching institutions" rests not only on the fact that we value teaching above research, and are good at it, it also reflects the fact that we do a lot of it! The typical teaching load for speech faculty at my college is five 3-credit courses each term, of which almost all are the basic course. Add to this gruelling and repetitive load the facts that community college teaching affords less professional status than college or university teaching, and that it is done for lower pay and poorer benefits, and it becomes clearer why my Iowa community college colleagues said that they have trouble attracting well-qualified speech faculty, even when full time speech positions are available.

I do not mean to suggest that life in all community colleges is bleak, nor are all community colleges alike. Community colleges are so named because they reflect the needs and priorities of the communities they serve and the states which support them. Isa Engleberg, of Prince George's Community College in Maryland, is working on a book that will provide a comprehensive picture of the similarities and differences among community college speech departments nationwide based on research she conducted in 1996. It is almost certain that by the time we describe ourselves, we will have changed! But for now, let us accept as a summary of the community college context these generalizations:

1. Community colleges often lack a "speech department" as such.
2. They often have no formal speech requirement—at least not for all degrees.
3. Various factors—state law, licensure requirements, availability of qualified staff—sometimes mitigate against hiring qualified speech professionals.
4. Community college teaching loads are almost always heavier than those in 4-year institutions.

5. The "chair" of speech in a community college often is not from the discipline.

Given those facts, I would suggest that community college department chairs have an imperative to advance the discipline in three major ways.

1. Fight for required speech courses on whatever grounds are most persuasive. The fight for required speech courses should not be difficult to wage, given the inherent worth of the discipline and its continuing perceived value even—in fact, especially—

outside academe. Chairs can and should argue for required speech courses based on the grounds of:

a. Transfer requirements (we rely on our colleagues in four-year institutions to stand firm here, and to work with us so that articulation is a seamless process).

b. Employer feedback; advisory boards continue to stress the need for speaking, listening, and group skills.

c. Published studies and reports, such as the SCANS report (Secretary's Commission, 1991), the Penn State studies on desired communication competencies (Jones et al., 1995), and books such as *Who's Going to Run General Motors* (Green & Seymour, 1991).

Community colleges answer not just to a single "community," but to many kinds of communities: the people who live within their service area; the businesses and industries that rely on them to train good workers; several agencies with which the community college may be formally or informally linked; economic development partners that need customized training of current employees; the states that support, accredit, and license us; and last, but not least, the higher education community—especially the transfer institutions to which we send our students. The good news is that not one of these "communities" fails to place great value on speech—or at least "communication." Although not one has the same expectations as any other with respect to what speech should be, together they give us a formidable power base from which we can boldly and confidently advance the case for required speech courses.

The speech requirement not just for the transfer degree, but also for occupational programs—is the backbone for advancing the discipline in community colleges. Once it is in place, even relatively small community colleges need to offer from twelve to fourteen speech courses each academic year—more than enough to warrant hiring a full time person in speech. Here, the second imperative for chairs comes into effect:

2. Hire to teach speech courses only those people who are trained in the discipline.

Chairs must challenge state or local hiring practices—including overuse of part-time instructors—that place economic concerns over quality concerns.

When opportunities to hire full-time speech faculty arise, chairs should aggressively seek to hire the very best—not practitioners who lack the theoretical base of training in the discipline and also not nearsighted theorists who lack the ability to place the discipline into a practical context that will work with community college students.

Chairs must push leaders of the discipline in four-year institutions to produce great "people products," first by having high standards for admission into the discipline and then by training them in ways that are appropriate to futures in community colleges as well as in research institutions.

It may seem presumptuous of community college chairs to believe that they can and should hire the "best" products of our nation's graduate schools for positions in community colleges, but it is not. Community colleges are educating an ever-increasing share of our nation's undergraduates. With the baby boom "echo" preparing to hit college, with demands for workers to increase their skills, and with the enactment of the HOPE tax credit legislation, enrollment growth will continue.

Enrollment growth creates job potential for people who want to define their professional lives primarily by teaching rather than by research. The potential is heightened by the fact that the faculty who were hired in the boom years of the late 60s will be retiring within the next 10 years. A group of community college presidents recently estimated that more faculty members will retire in the next ten years than have retired in the last twenty. These faculty members have been the standard bearers of the community college movement; it is they who have helped to define community colleges as "teaching institutions." Now, we will lose them, but we must not lose their legacy.

This brings us to the third imperative for community college chairs who would seek to advance the discipline within a community college:

3. Supervise in such a way as to advance not only the discipline, but to advance the cause of teaching and learning.

Share with faculty the responsibility for quality of teaching and learning. At its most basic level, this means conducting regular classroom observations as a springboard to dialogue about curriculum and instruction; it means keeping in touch with an ever-changing student population; it means passing on the core values that have made the community college movement successful. Live up to the promises made in arguing for speech requirements. Assess speaking, listening, and group skills. At-risk students continue to flood through the community college's open door, and they present a special challenge to those who teach required courses. While developmental courses in reading, writing, and math are common, developmental courses in speaking and listening are not. We neither assess students for speech placement nor employ effective ways of assessing students' exit competencies. Increasingly, community colleges are defining themselves more as "learning colleges" than as "teaching institutions," but meaningful assessment is the key to understanding and improving learning. We need to do better at assessment, and chairs need to insist upon it if the promises we make for speech requirements are to have any credibility.

Provide opportunities for the faculty's professional growth, such as travel to conferences, encouragement to teach more than just the basic course, support for in-service activities, training for new faculty that builds on the legacy of retiring faculty, and be willing to adjust schedules to allow professional activities in business and industry.

Ante up. Acknowledge institutional priorities, meet institutional expectations, anticipate and address critical institutional issues such as accountability, distance learning, pay, load, status, standards, and staffing turnover. Faculty must prove the worth of our discipline to students; we as chairs need to use all of the skills and tools of our discipline to prove *our* worth to the administration and to the community.

Chairs must be aware of the work being done by our "shirttail" colleagues who are working as trainers and communication consultants in business and industry. In the last five years, American industry has divested itself of an estimated 50 percent of its in-house training programs, with community colleges picking up the lion's share of this responsibility. This development creates new opportunities to become more in touch with the needs of business and industry, and that in turn should affect what and how we teach in traditional speech communication courses.

Spend time with students. If possible, teach. The only reason, I believe, sufficient to justify a chair's not teaching on a regular basis is if there is a waiting line of adjunct faculty whose need for classroom teaching experience clearly and significantly exceeds that of the chair's. [This, by the way, is why I no longer teach.]

The three imperatives I've advanced have been based on the assumption that the chair of the community college speech "department" (if there is one) is a speech professional. But remember that this may not be the case. What then?

In the event that the chair of the communication department does not have a speech background, the discipline needs a faculty champion to act, in effect, as a speech "chair"—a role that is likely to be assumed rather than assigned, a role that may seem even to other speech colleagues as presumptuous, and a role that is almost never rewarded with either extra pay or release time. The unofficial but needed duties of such a faculty champion would include taking the lead in discussions of text selection and curriculum, keeping abreast of trends within the field, sharing one's syllabus and teaching knowledge with adjunct faculty members (who in many community colleges teach most—sometimes nearly all—speech sections), and being an advocate for the discipline within the department and across the college. This is not an easy role, but it has at least two great advantages: a) a

faculty champion has the advantage of peer power that a designated department chair does not, a truth-from-the-trenches kind of credibility that is often absent in faculty-administration relationships; and b) a faculty member who chooses to become a disciplinary champion in a community college has an opportunity to exercise academic leadership much more quickly than would be possible in the departments of most four-year institutions.

Although we in the community colleges are the youngest higher education sibling, we're a pretty big kid. Half of all the students enrolled in undergraduate education today—about 11 million—go to the nation's 1200 community colleges. Some are starting to call us "the new graduate school," because almost a quarter of our incoming students already have Bachelors degrees. We're outgrowing hand-me-downs, but we love our place in the higher education family and have no desire to run away from home. Advancing the discipline in our new millennium is going to mean saving the best of what the discipline of speech communication has always meant, while adapting it to an ever-more-complicated community college mission.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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