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From Paper to Praxis: Advancing the Discipline in a Small College Environment

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Curricular revisions are often difficult to endure for a number of reasons, not the least of which include a general resistance to change and the occasional turf war. In larger universities, the revision process is, relatively speaking, a nuisance to be dealt with, much like a three-year-old's incessant interrogations about why the sky is blue. But when that large nuisance is compacted into a smaller space, tensions are bound to rise. Thus, when one confronts curricular change in a small liberal arts college, one finds an even "stickier" situation to accommodate. And perhaps in few other places is this observation felt more profoundly than in the offices of communication administrators at these smaller institutions because, while we in communication see our discipline as central to a liberal arts education, many outside of our discipline do not.

In the small liberal arts college, one tends to find many faculty members who have had little or no experience with departments of communication. For some, the institutions at which they earned their degrees had no such department; for others, the incentives to specialize in their own fields discouraged familiarity with other disciplines. Further, many of the faculty who did encounter communication had done so *vis-a-vis* public speaking or other, more service-oriented courses and so are not now aware of the rich offerings of departments of communication. It should come as no surprise, then, that a larger percentage of faculty in the small college environment may not understand what our discipline encompasses now. They often see communication occupying the fringes of the liberal arts, not recognizing our relevance to the mission of a liberal arts college.

It is also plausible that some approaches to the study of communication may be deemed unsuitable in a small liberal arts setting. For example, given the monetary and institutional pressures of the small liberal arts environment, it is hard to imagine the students, faculty, administrators, and trustees of such an institution all favoring the same types of course work in areas of more advanced study. Consequently, revising a communication curriculum in this type of environment becomes incredibly complex because, in many small colleges (as in ours), all faculty vote on curricular changes in all departments. Still, as this paper hopes to show, curricular revisions along the lines proposed by the Becker

Task Force (1997) are not only possible in this kind of atmosphere, but ultimately are rewarding to all those involved.

INSTITUTIONAL DESCRIPTION

As a small, nationally-recognized liberal arts college in central Georgia, our institution finds itself more constrained than others of similar size because, since 1836, we have remained committed to single-gender education. As the first college chartered to grant degrees to women, we have continued as a pioneer and innovator in women's education, offering challenging curricula from the general education requirements to the major and minor programs our students pursue. In striving to maintain this reputation, our faculty are committed to developing programs that train women to further understand, appreciate, benefit from, and contribute to the liberal arts.

Of the approximately 600 full-time students who attend our college, the vast majority (92%) come to us from the Southeastern United States. Although the student body is predominantly white, students of both African-American and Asian descent have respectable representation (23%). Many of the women who attend our college are first-generation college students. The majority (72%) are between the ages of 18 and 21. The others, women who have chosen to defer their college education for employment or familial need, find an integrated Encore program to meet their educational demands. Regardless of their demographic backgrounds, however, all of our students expect that, upon graduation, they will be prepared to begin/continue with successful careers or to be proficient enough in their chosen field to pursue graduate or professional studies. Hence, aside from the demographic differences that arise from our commitment to single-gender education, we stand as a typical example of the small liberal arts college.

ADMINISTRATIVE EXIGENCE

To meet the demands of the millennial technological environment, the dean of the college decided to reexamine the communication major in terms of its scope and function on campus. Although the communication major had been designed ten years earlier by a campus-wide committee, the dean believed that the present major was not adequately drawing upon the college's resources and was thereby poorly reflective of the college's liberal arts mission. Faculty and administrators likewise saw a need to increase the size of the communication faculty, not simply to accommodate the number of student majors, but to expand the number of offerings in the discipline as well. Students, too, were eager for more courses that were discipline specific, pursuing in greater depth some of the topics they had discussed in their introductory communication courses. For all of these reasons, then, it was decided that a new communication major was in order.

In most instances, such a decision would prompt faculty members in the communication department to revise their curriculum and then seek approval for the revisions from the entire faculty. But at our institution, both the business and communication majors are overseen by an ad hoc committee appointed by the dean. Consequently, the task of revising the communication curriculum fell to a special interdisciplinary committee. Under the direction of the chair of the humanities division, the committee was composed of the two members of the communication department—a veteran existing faculty member, who taught courses in interpersonal and speech communication, and the new hire in media studies and rhetoric; a representative of the curriculum committee; the chair of the division of fine arts; the chair of the division of social and behavioral sciences; and the dean of the college. The representation by discipline was as follows: two from communication, two from English, one from art, one from history, and one from psychology.

DESIGNING A NEW COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM

The plan that was in place at the beginning of the 1997-1998 academic year resembled old Cajun gumbo. It contained a little of everything. Weighing out at 45 credit hours, more than one-third the required 120 hours for graduation, the major mandated that students take only 21 hours of courses in communication, but 24 hours of courses in other disciplines (see Table 1). The minor forced students into 200- and 300-level history and political science courses, but only 100- and 200-level communication courses. Further, a student choosing to major or minor in communication needed to use 15 hours of electives to meet prerequisites for the required upper-level courses outside the department, that in addition to the required 42 hours of courses in the general education curriculum. To further complicate matters, even if a student wished to take an upper-level or special topics course in communication, that course could count only toward electives, not toward the major or minor. In short, to graduate with a communication major or minor, a student needed to complete only 21 hours or 9 hours, respectively, in communication, a policy that raised spectres of illegitimacy from students and faculty alike.

Upon review, the interdisciplinary committee decided that the old plan failed on two counts. First, it allowed no room for maneuvering. That is, despite the existence of a new hire in communication, there was no room in the existing major to accommodate new communication courses or communication special topics courses. Of course, the number of elective hours could have been reduced or the 120-hour requirement for graduation increased. But doing so would have forced the administration to face two additional problems. Students were already uncomfortable with a major that required six to nine more credit hours than majors in other disciplines, thereby allowing little room for the elective communication courses that were regularly offered. Adding nine to twelve more would only exacerbate the situation. Further, with such a high credit load, it would be difficult to recruit new students to the very major the administration wanted to expand, especially given the college's lack of production and broadcast facilities. Thus, increasing course requirements and eliminating elective hours were dismissed as alternatives.

Another alternative was to eliminate some of the courses that were already being offered as part of the old plan and simply replace them with three or four new media courses. But this path, too, was fraught with difficulty. The courses that the old major offered focused on textual analysis, artistic expression, and information processing. In theory, it would be easy to substitute a textual analysis course in, say, media theory for a textual analysis course in political theory. But as the curriculum committee representative quickly observed, a plan that merely substituted communication courses for courses from other disciplines would probably be difficult to pass through the curriculum committee, turf wars being the likely result. For example, if a media ethics course were offered in place of the philosophy department's ethics course, the philosophy department could very easily make the argument that most of the same theories were being discussed, thus eliminating the need for a new course. And since such a path would run counter to the very thing that the interdisciplinary committee sought to do—to expand the major with new offerings—this second option was likewise abandoned.

A number of other options were discussed in committee, ranging from a two-track major to the elimination of old communication courses. But ultimately, all of the options that received serious discussion hinged on scrapping the old curriculum in favor of a new plan with greater flexibility. A lack of flexibility, however, was not the only reason the committee decided to create a new curriculum for communication. The growth of the communication field was also a precipitating factor.

In part because of the size of the institution and in part because the communication department had only one full-time faculty member prior to 1997, communication had not

ranked high on the campus' list of departments in need of formal reevaluation. But, as mentioned earlier, along with the campus' new commitment to a two-person department, there came a need to reexamine the role communication could/should play in the college's quest to fulfill its mission. The interdisciplinary committee noted that the field of communication had radically grown, altered, and shifted since it last took up the question of the communication major on campus. Consequently, it reasoned that, if the college wanted to remain competitive in its course offerings, a plan that was more in tune with the currents of the communication field would need to be devised. So it was clear to the various members of the committee that the old major must be abandoned. But what form the new major would take still needed to be determined.

The first draft floated in committee was one proposed by the communication department itself. The two members of the department met and agreed upon particular courses that could be taught within the constraints of semester loads. At our college, the typical load is seven courses, four in one semester, three in the other. Hence, with no multi-section classes, the communication faculty could offer fourteen separate courses in one academic year. Further, because the faculty-at-large would not allow courses offered in the May or summer terms to count as part of the regular two-year rotation of courses, all the courses that would count as part of the major needed to be offered in the fall and spring terms of any given two-year period.

With these constraints in mind, the department proposed a plan that would, in effect, create three tracks, one designated as Media Studies with 36 credit hours, one designated as Communication Theory and Research with 45 credit hours, and one designated as Rhetoric and Public Address with 36 credit hours. Each track would rest upon several (though not all) common core courses, different major courses, and different elective courses. The tracks would thus be distinct from one another, with only a few core courses and a few electives overlapping. So, for example, a Media Studies major could elect to take a 300-level course called Gender and Communication, whereas a Theory and Research major would be required to take that course. Similarly, a Rhetoric and Public Address major would need to take a 300-level Oral Interpretation course, but a Theory and Research candidate would not.

Because of the structure of the general education curriculum at our institution, several of the courses that had been designated in the elective sections overlapped the general education requirements. Several members of the committee observed that this overlap could pose a potential problem in the eyes of the college's accreditation agency when the college came up for review. The committee further believed that the new plan offered a great deal of repetition in terms of communication courses offered and not enough representation of the other departments on campus. Lastly, the committee noted that the different credit hour requirements of the different tracks might discourage potential majors from pursuing the Theory and Research track. All of these points were noted and, concurring with the committee's concerns, the communication department agreed to revise the proposal.

Other proposals offered by the committee members featured a two-track major, divided between Mass Media and Communication Theory and Research. These proposals were discarded or tabled for a number of reasons. For example, one preserved the 50%+ weighting in courses outside the department, whereas two others placed an overemphasis on particular theoretical approaches at the cost of other approaches. Hence, the committee found itself deadlocked.

Then, a moment of serendipity occurred. One of the revised proposals from communication featured a three-course specialization in Forensics and Debate consisting of a 300-level debate course, a 300-level oral interpretation course, and a 400-level independent study in forensics/debate coaching. On receiving this proposal, the chair of the inter-

disciplinary committee recognized that it would not pass. But the general idea was sound. Working from the initial proposal for a three-track major and combining it with some of the basic structure of the existing religion major (also interdisciplinary), the chair developed a rudimentary plan wherein communication would feature a number of short concentrations supplemented by associated fields of studies. One of the members of the communication department, upon seeing the proposal, suggested a few minor alterations, and together they presented the new proposal before the committee.

The new plan offered a major reduced in size to a manageable 39 credit hours. The 39 hours were divided into three sections: Core Courses, Concentrations, and Cognate Studies (See Table 2). While the core consumed only 12 hours of the total, it now reflected a sense of communication as a major discipline of study. The remaining credits were distributed relatively evenly between the Concentrations and Cognate Studies areas.

Taking the place of the initial track proposals were four new concentrations, each weighted at 12 credits. In each case, the student would be required to take three courses from one of the communication faculty members and one course from the other faculty member or a member of the faculty in a related department. So, for example, a Media Studies major would need to take three courses from the new media professor and a course in public relations from the other department member. An Interpersonal Communication major, by contrast, would need to take a 200-level core course in the communication department and a 300-level course in social psychology from the psychology department, and would then need to choose two of four other courses regularly offered by the established communication faculty member.

Last, the major proposal called for a series of cognate studies, each drawing upon existing courses in other departments on campus. For example, because the art department offered a course in graphic design and a course in photography, it was thought better to include those courses under the heading of Media Experience than to attempt to duplicate the courses in communication. Similar reasoning undergirded the other areas: philosophy courses under Critical Thought, history courses under Contextualization, composition courses under Written Expression, and literature courses under Intellectual Influences.

The proposal also created a new minor, satisfying the flexibility concerns articulated earlier. The minor would depend on a hybrid course to introduce students to a number of different sub-fields of communication on a public speaking course to introduce them to principles of structured oral performance. What the new minor offered, however, that radically differed from the old minor was a choice of four other courses in communication, two of which needed to be at the 300-level. So, in addition to leaving the choice of courses more in the hands of the students, the minor would now be entirely contained within the communication department.

At the subsequent meeting of the interdisciplinary committee, the members unanimously passed the proposal. It then cleared the curriculum committee with only minor discussion. And when the proposal went before the faculty-at-large, it was passed unanimously with no discussion.

DISCUSSION

In retrospect, one of the basic problems that we encountered in the early stages of our meetings with the interdisciplinary committee was that our institution conceptualized students as consumers. By contrast, the individual department representatives who composed the committee conceptualized students as collaborators. And although the difference between the two perspectives might seem to be conceptual hair-splitting to some, they are actually worlds—or more appropriately, world views—apart.

As anyone who has ever taken a basic public speaking course knows, when preparing for a given situation, one must take into account one's audience. But how one conceives that audience will have a tremendous impact on the materials and strategies selected. Consumers, by definition, consume goods and services, or as they are called in the marketing realm, products. By implication, then, if we as teachers want to produce effective consumers, we must both be and teach our students to be product-oriented (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 7). If, on the other hand, we want our students to be effective collaborators, we will take a more process-oriented approach to their education.

Since the college had only just begun to move away from a content-oriented, lecture-based general education curriculum to a more process-oriented, seminar-based general education curriculum, the communication representatives and the other committee members were forced to confront the lingering residues of institutional resistance. What animated the final proposal so much was the fact that it stressed collaboration, both on the intra- and inter-departmental levels, hence serving the interests of the departments involved and the college as a whole. The proposal was able to dislocate the metaphor of student-as-consumer and instead focus attention on both skill acquisition and critical motivation *vis-a-vis* its embodiment of a collaborative approach to the pursuit of knowledge (Carrell, 1997, p. 234).

Another problem that we encountered stemmed in large part from the makeup of the interdisciplinary committee. As noted earlier, the committee was composed of two members from communication, two from English, one from history, one from art, and one from psychology. Complicating this diversity were the relative positional strengths of each individual. The psychology representative was dean of the college, putting her in a stronger position than any of the division chairs and in a much more powerful position than either of the two communication department members. Similarly, the history representative was not only chair of the division of social and behavioral sciences, but had served at the college longer than any other member of the committee, giving her more institutional power than, say, the chair of the committee. In the initial plan floated by the communication department, these various factors had not been taken into consideration. What compounded this oversight even further was the fact that, because of the variety of backgrounds, there was a tremendous potential for misunderstanding as to the nature, scope, and functions of the communication discipline. In effect, the department had failed to follow the advice that it disseminates to students on a daily basis: it had not accounted for the dominant beliefs of the audience.

What the final proposal did, by contrast, was to emphasize the cultural values shared by the members of the committee. As Lee Artz (1998) recently argued, such a strategy allowed the two authors to strengthen their *ethos* to such an extent that, regardless of the attitudes the committee members held about the communication discipline, the authors were able to identify with the committee members enough *as individuals* to effect positive changes in the curriculum (p. 227). And through these curricular changes, the authors hoped ultimately to effect changes in the beliefs held about communication studies in other areas of the college environment.

The final, and perhaps the most significant, problem that we faced involved the approach that the communication department had taken initially to bolster its image. Much like representatives of contemporary American manufacturing centers, the communication representatives knew what the communication field could offer to the small college setting. They knew that, through an innovative curriculum, the department could help the administration achieve its goals of recruiting new students and keeping the students it already had. They knew that the department could help the division achieve its goals by maintaining publishing and conference agendas. And the communication representatives knew the department could help students achieve their goals by providing them with

different perspectives on the cultural, social, and intrapersonal phenomena that surround them every day. The representatives knew all of these things, but they failed to convey them. In effect, the department dropped its proposals onto the committee table, expecting the other members of the committee to know *a priori* what communication is, what it does, and where it leads. But, just as a community is both a process and a product, so is a community's position relative to others both a process and a consequence (Buzzanell, 1995, p. 349). Fortunately, we learned that valuable lesson before drafting the final proposal. But we learned other lessons as well, perhaps in spite of ourselves.

The process of constructing the new curriculum has helped to shed new light on our understanding of recent theory. What the new plan implements is something very akin to the schema that Fern Johnson (1996) articulated in a recent article on women's studies' contribution to communication (pp. 324-325). The curriculum seeks to (1) promote diversity within cultural groups, (2) provide an approximately equal emphasis on local and global concerns, (3) instruct students in accommodating logics and epistemologies from a number of sources, (4) develop bicultural competence, (5) provide students with a background in information technology, and (6) eschew insularity. Having reduced the number of credit hours required in the major, we have made communication studies more accessible to larger numbers of students. In giving students the flexibility to choose four of the six courses in the minor, we have opened new possibilities for students in other departments to pursue one of the core concentrations and thus to gain a better understanding of what communication has to offer. By encouraging our students to pursue cognate studies, we are further encouraging them to work toward "an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equality" between and among other majors and minors on campus (Foss & Griffin 1995, p. 5). And via exposure to theory and criticism at a variety of turns, majors and minors are now potentially open to a greater critical awareness of the institutional forces that threaten to silence them (Jenefsky, 1996, p. 352). As a result, we fervently hope that what was previously perceived by students as a marginalized discipline will now continue to grow in stature on our campus, to challenge existing beliefs, to encourage other departments and divisions to follow our lead, and in the end to help in transforming higher education to meet the needs of the new millennium.

CONCLUSIONS

After a great deal of work and collaboration, we were able to effect positive changes in our institution. These changes did not come easily or painlessly, but they came. In today's academic environment, the trend seems to be one of division. The church from which our institution drew support is slowly moving away from us, as it is doing around the country (Becker, 1997, p. 16). University officials stand confused with regard to the potential contributions departments of communication can offer (Becker, 1997, p. 16). Students previously failed to perceive our department as an "established discipline," seeing it instead as more of a service department, as we suspect is the case in small colleges and community colleges throughout the nation (Becker, 1997, p. 16). Nevertheless, we have succeeded in developing a curriculum that encourages interdisciplinary collaboration despite a strong disciplinary foundation (Becker, 1997, p. 17). Although there are many more steps to be taken in renovating the department and its image, we believe this curriculum will further the perception of communication as a discipline of high quality, "central to the mission of its institution" (Becker, 1997, p. 15).

In all fairness, we realize that we could not have accomplished what we did without a commitment to diversity in our immediate community. The fact that this article is being written by a communication professor and an English professor should be testament to the depth of that commitment. We made several serious mistakes along the way, mistakes that

we would not like others to make as they, too, reexamine their departments. So, we have submitted this account to serve both as a guide and a warning. As the Becker Task Force (1997) observed, departments will need to mold themselves to the needs, demands, and standards of their respective institutions if they want to survive and prosper (p. 17). We would simply add that, as you find yourself bogged down in the practical political games that all departments play, don't forget the theoretical foundations from which you came.

TABLE 1

Outline of the Communication Curriculum in Place Before the Revision

Major Requirements, A.B. Communication (45 hours)	
COM 103: Fundamentals of Speech Communication	3 hours
COM 202S: Public Speaking	3 hours
COM 215: Mass Media	3 hours
COM 310S: Rhetorical Analysis and Speech Writing	3 hours
COM 340S: Persuasion—Theory and Analysis	3 hours
COM 402S: Senior Seminar in Communication	3 hours
COM 452: Field Study (Internship)	3 hours
ART 225: Computer Graphic Design	3 hours
ENG 2—: A 200-level course in literature	3 hours
ENG 356: Advanced Expository Writing	3 hours
<i>Either</i> HIS 315: Contemporary America <i>or</i> HIS 401: The Contemporary World	3 hours
PHI 223: Ethics	3 hours
PSY 303: Social Psychology	3 hours
<i>Either</i> SOC 309: Formal Organizations <i>or</i> SOC 340: Social Stratification	3 hours
<i>Either</i> POL 304: International Politics <i>or</i> POL 311: Comparative Politics	3 hours
Minor Requirements (18 hours)	
COM 103: Fundamentals of Speech Communication	3 hours
COM 202S: Public Speaking	3 hours
COM 215: Mass Media	3 hours
ENG 356: Advanced Expository Writing	3 hours
<i>Students choose one of the following:</i>	3 hours
POL 304: International Politics	
POL 311: Comparative Politics	
HIS 315: Contemporary America	
HIS 401: The Contemporary World	
<i>Students choose one of the following:</i>	3 hours
ART 225: Computer Graphic Design	
PHI 223: Ethics	
PSY 303: Social Psychology	

TABLE 2

Outline of the New Curriculum Adopted by the Interdisciplinary Committee

Major Requirements, A.B. Communication (39 hours)	
Core Courses (12 hours)	
COM 103: Foundations of Communication	3 hours
COM 202S: Public Speaking	3 hours
COM 402S: Senior Seminar	3 hours
COM 452: Field Study (Internship)	3 hours
CONCENTRATIONS	
Rhetoric and Public Address (12 hours)	
COM 310S: Rhetorical Analysis and Speech Writing	3 hours
COM 315S: Oral Interpretation of Literature	3 hours
COM 320S: Discussion and Debate	3 hours
COM 340S: Persuasion	3 hours
Interpersonal Communication (12 hours)	
COM 224: Interpersonal Communication	3 hours
PSY 303: Social Psychology	3 hours
<i>Students also select two of the following:</i>	6 hours
COM 208S: Family Communication	
COM 300S: Gender and Communication	
COM 331: Small Group Communication	
COM 333: Health Communication	
Media Studies (12 hours)	
COM 203: Journalistic Reporting and Writing	3 hours
COM 215: Introduction to Media Studies	3 hours
COM 311S: Public Relations	3 hours
COM 328: Communication and Social Theory	3 hours
Film Studies (12 hours)	
COM 215: Introduction to Media Studies	3 hours
COM 242: Cinematic Imagery and Society	3 hours
COM 325S: Film Criticism	3 hours
SOC 330: Media and Society	3 hours
COGNATE STUDIES	
<i>Students choose one course from each of the following clusters:</i>	
Media Experience	3 hours
ART 225: Computer Graphic Design	
ART 275: Photography	
Critical Thought	3 hours
PHI 223: Ethics	
PHI 224: Logic	
Historical Contextualization	3 hours
HIS 315: Contemporary America	
HIS 401: The Contemporary World	

Written Expression	3 hours
ENG 261: Creative Writing	
ENG 356: Advanced Expository Writing	
Intellectual Influences	3 hours
ENG 201: Historical Survey of English Literature I	
ENG 202: Historical Survey of English Literature II	
ENG 213: Survey of United States Literature	
Any one of the Humanities (HUM) courses	
	Total = 15 hours
Minor Requirements (18 hours)	
COM 103: Foundations of Communication	3 hours
COM 202S: Public Speaking	3 hours
12 hours of COM courses, at least 6 of which must be at the 300-level	

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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