

JACA
2(1997): 110-116

A "Glimpse" of the Status of the Discipline: Internal Identity of Speech Communication at a Small College

BARBARA J. ADLER

AT the 1993 Summer Institute for Faculty Development at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, Gary Kreps (1993) presented a keynote address that lamented the "lack of respect" accorded the communication discipline within academia in general. His meditations must have touched a nerve, because many at the conference "buzzed" about his concerns for the rest of the week. One could say his monologue served as an example of "What oft' was thought, But ne'er so well expressed": many of us have bemoaned the status of our discipline, but few have heard it articulated in such a humorous, yet thought-provoking, way.

Not long after this, Ellen Wartella's *Commentary* (1994) addressed a similar concern. She suggested that the "public presence of communication study on university campuses" faces a crisis and a threat to survival of the discipline. And at the 1994 Central States Communication Convention, Wil Linkugel's keynote recognized the problem and offered recommendations for improving the status of the discipline on individual campuses. It seems clear that this issue continues to irritate communication departments and scholars around the country.

Case examples of communication departments suffering from a "poor academic image" are far too abundant, as in a 1994 crisis at the University of Michigan (Cain, 1994). The Communication Department's future became questionable when the Literature, Science and Arts College decided the discipline deserved "little respect" because the major was "popular" (p. A10). Out-department academics concluded that grading must be "soft," in spite of the fact that the average undergraduate grade in the department is B-, the same as the rest of the college.

The problem exists at the small-college level as well, but may create different challenges to the small-size communication department. The challenges are different in that

interaction and interdependence across disciplines are more frequent and perhaps more influential on a small campus. Student attitudes, faculty influence, and administrative decision making are tightly woven together; thus, the attitudes held about speech communication studies by outside faculty members can have cross-departmental effects, easily influencing student attitudes, curricular revisions, and hierarchical decision making.

The reputation of the speech communication department at a small college relies heavily on out-department faculty perceptions regarding the integrity, usefulness, and substance of the discipline, and its importance to a liberal arts education. In fact, out-department faculty can directly influence student opinion and enrollment in speech communication courses or the major or minor.

In one such case a liberal arts student wishing to enroll in a debate class was told not to by a music department advisor because debate, he said, is "immoral . . . it teaches students to lie." Another student, with a secondary education major, wishing to take a minor in communication was told communication would not be a good companion to his music major (even though theatre courses are offered in the minor as electives). A third student was advised by two faculty members (neither of whom was his advisor) not to major in communication because "no one considers it a substantive subject in the liberal arts curriculum." (Students aren't the only ones hearing these pejoratives; one of my colleagues told me, quite casually, that communication studies are "just a fad"!)

These episodes illustrate out-department disregard for our discipline. While disturbing enough in practical terms (potentially lowering enrollment figures), these cases are at least as disturbing in ethical terms (limiting student choice-making and denigrating the speech communication discipline).

Of course these examples are only anecdotal. Are they unique? Are they examples of bad news traveling faster than good? What general level of respect would a more formal study reveal? This small case study was designed to provide initial answers to these questions, and to assess the attitudes toward the speech communication discipline at a small midwestern college. Although professional concern for our discipline's reputation has been expressed in our publications, it has never been "measured" in a quantifiable way.

Using a survey administered to faculty and administration at a small liberal arts college associated with the Lutheran Church, these results provide only a "glimpse" of the attitudes toward our discipline at one institution. The results may suggest that a broader survey should be conducted to develop a more complete description of the discipline's status.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

For decades, speech communication researchers have pondered the status of the speech communication discipline (Gouran, 1979; Petelle, 1980; Osborn, 1990; Zarefsky, 1993) and have explained the lack of respect accorded to the field as created by various factors. Marlier (1980), for instance, found that scholars "within and outside our discipline" view the discipline as lacking a "central focus around which our disciplinary identity could be established" (p. 327). Paulson (1980) noted the complaint that the discipline is inconsistent in methodology and theoretical approach. Others found that speech communication is criticized for emphasizing the development of skills, rather than knowledge (Hostettler, 1980; Lerstrom, 1988).

Lerstrom (1988) surveyed several midwestern college presidents and deans, and summarized their perceptions of the field of speech communication. Overall, they viewed it as a major that lacks the substance and depth for a sound liberal arts education, in comparison to a major in philosophy or history. The administrators expressed "a concern that speech communication courses lack substantial content, and that the field is too willing to respond to current fads" (p. 8). Indeed, Michael Osborn (1990) summarized the deans' opinions in

his often cited essay *A Defense of Our Discipline*, "He wrote, Communication remains for some academics an object of resentment and suspicion. For some, the popularity of a discipline appears to create a presumption that it lacks academic rigor" (p. A28).

Scholars note that these negative opinions are usually misconceptions held by the general academic community about our discipline; some criticisms are warranted, certainly, but others are either false, or exaggerated (Fischler, 1989), or not negative factors at all (Marlier, 1980). Nonetheless, if out-department faculty merely perceive these factors as negative, the results can be the same.

Heckhausen (cited in Paulson, 1980) and Paulson (1980) identified several criteria for a sound liberal arts discipline: first, the discipline must possess a level of theoretical integration; second, it must employ methods and analytical strategies which can construct interpretations or models; third, it must allow for applications to practice; and fourth, it must promote understanding of self and society (p. 322). That the study of speech communication possesses these criteria is not in doubt; what scholars may disagree on, and what is pertinent to the reputation of the field, is the level of integrity perceived and accorded to each criteria by academics outside of and within the field.

METHODOLOGY

To measure the status of our discipline as reported by the general faculty and administration of the college, a survey was conducted to assess the speech communication discipline according to its level of respect, its overall status, and its identity as a reputable academic field—three criteria identified by Heckhausen (cited in Paulson, 1980) and one emphasized by Paulson (1980). Based on the literature reviewed here, and in line with the criteria for an academic discipline, a survey form was developed. The survey was designed to measure faculty and administration perceptions of and attitudes about ten academic disciplines along seven criteria: respectability, research methodologies, body of knowledge, theoretical base, application base, necessity to liberal arts education, and promotion of understanding of self and society.

Participants

The subjects of the study included the entire faculty and administration of the college. Survey forms were distributed to all full-time faculty and to part-time faculty with at least a 75% teaching load. Although the number of subjects was small ($n = 56$), it included the entire population.

Procedure

The survey forms were distributed via campus mail. The forms were accompanied by a cover letter that briefly explained the project, provided instructions for completing the survey, and assured respondents of anonymity. Respondents were asked to return the completed form via campus mail or to a drop-off box on the researcher's office door. After two weeks, 45% of the surveys had been returned. A reminder was published in the faculty bulletin at the end of the second week. During the third week, a few more forms were returned, bringing the total return rate to 60% ($n = 34$).

Instrument

The survey contained three elements: 1) categories of ten academic disciplines (art, speech communication, English, history/political science, mathematics, music, psychology, religious studies, natural science, and sociology); 2) a list of qualifying descriptors ("highly respected discipline," "sound research methodologies," "substantial body of knowl-

edge," "theoretically based," "application based," "necessity to liberal arts education," and "promotes understanding of self and society"); and 3) a Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Respondents were instructed to consider the extent to which the descriptors applied to each of the ten academic disciplines, and to fill in the blank with the appropriate number (1 to 5).

Data Treatment

Interval data were collected and summarized to measure central tendency. The mean score was calculated for each criterion according to academic discipline. The results are reported in a ranking order of means for the ten disciplines. The placement of speech communication in relation to the other disciplines reveals its comparative status and its academic identity at a small private college.

RESULTS

The results of this study are divided into seven areas: ranking of disciplines according to level of respect reported (see Table 1), and the rankings of the disciplines along the six remaining criteria/descriptors (see Tables 2-7). In addition, overall rankings were calculated by summarizing the seven rankings of each discipline. The summary ranking may reveal the overall "status" of each discipline as perceived by faculty and administration.

TABLE 1
Disciplines rated as "Highly Respected"
Rank Ordered by Mean

Field of Study	Mean
1. Natural Science	4.71
2. English	4.36
3. Math	4.32
4. Psychology	4.25
5. Music	4.18
6. Sociology	4.18
7. History	4.14
8. Religion	3.82
9. Art	3.82
10. Speech Communication	3.60

DISCUSSION

This study examined faculty and administration perceptions of the respectability, identity, and status of the speech communication field of study. The results of the mean ratings and the rankings of disciplines along seven criteria are discussed here in an attempt to answer the initial research questions.

Speech communication received the lowest mean rating of the ten disciplines on the central descriptor "Highly Respected Discipline" (see Table 1). It received a "7" in rank for four additional descriptors: "sound research methodologies," "substantial body of knowledge," "theoretically based," and "promotes understanding of self and society" (see Tables 2, 3, 4, and 7). While these rankings do not necessarily substantiate the literature that sug-

TABLE 2
"Based on Sound
Research Methodologies"

Field of Study	Mean
1. Natural Science	4.89
2. Sociology	4.46
2. Psychology	4.46
4. History	4.10
5. English	3.89
5. Math	3.89
7. Speech Communication	3.60
8. Religion	3.32
8. Music	3.32
10. Art	2.82

TABLE 3
"A Substantial Body
of Knowledge"

Field of Study	Mean
1. Natural Science	4.89
2. Sociology	4.46
2. Psychology	4.46
4. History	4.10
5. English	3.89
5. Math	3.89
7. Speech Communication	3.60
8. Religion	3.32
8. Music	3.32
10. Art	2.82

TABLE 4
"Theoretically Based"

Field of Study	Mean
1. Natural Science	4.33
2. Math	4.28
3. Sociology	4.23
4. Psychology	4.13
5. Music	3.73
6. History	3.60
7. Speech Communication	3.39
8. Religion	3.16
9. English	3.14
10. Art	2.96

TABLE 5
"Application Based"

Field of Study	Mean
1. Music	4.46
2. Art	4.18
3. Speech Communication	3.96
4. Sociology	3.80
5. Psychology	3.63
6. Natural Science	3.56
7. Religion	3.53
8. Math	3.46
9. English	3.18
10. History	2.96

TABLE 6
"Necessary to a
Liberal Arts Education"

Field of Study	Mean
1. English	4.82
2. History	4.75
3. Math	4.64
4. Art	4.60
5. Speech Communication	4.57
6. Natural Science	4.55
7. Music	4.48
8. Psychology	4.20
8. Sociology	4.20
10. Religion	4.14

TABLE 7
"Promotes Understanding of
Self and Society"

Field of Study	Mean
1. History	4.44
2. Psychology	4.38
2. Religion	4.38
4. Sociology	4.27
5. English	4.15
6. Art	4.11
7. Speech Communication	4.07
8. Music	3.93
9. Natural Science	3.69
10. Math	2.63

gests the field lacks substance, they do suggest that, in the case of the faculty at the focal college, it ranks lower than others in all categories.

Speech communication received its highest ranking for the descriptor "applications based," matching the perception that the field is dominated by utility courses that teach students "how to give a speech." It ranked fifth for the descriptor "necessary for a liberal arts education," but since all ten disciplines were rated above 4 for that descriptor, no inference can be drawn. The close ratings for that descriptor suggest, perhaps, a perception that all ten disciplines are of equal importance in the liberal arts curriculum—a result that suggests contradictory attitudes, which seem puzzling.

The disciplines receiving the highest cumulative rankings were natural science (1), psychology (2), and sociology (3). The disciplines receiving the lowest cumulative rankings were religion (10), art (9), and speech communication (8) (see Table 8). The overall low cumulative ranking of the speech discipline, and the low rating on the descriptor for "respectability" do not coincide with the results of Table 6—the discipline was rated higher (5) for "necessity to a liberal arts education."

TABLE 8
Cumulative Ranking of Disciplines

Field of Study	Mean Cumulative Rank
1. Natural science	3.57
2. Psychology	3.85
3. Sociology	4.00
4. History	4.85
5. Math	5.00
6. English	5.14
7. Music	6.00
8. Speech communication	6.57
9. Art	7.14
10. Religion	7.28

CONCLUSION

In his address to the Hope Summer Institute, Kreps (1993) suggested several actions for developing respect for the field on individual campuses. These actions included team-teaching courses with faculty from other disciplines (i.e. business, sociology, theatre, English); talking to department chairs and administrators about one's research and pedagogy; offering workshops for the inclusion of speech across the curriculum; maintaining public speaking standards in all classes within the communication curriculum; bringing excellent scholars to campus as guest lecturers; and sending along articles from our journals that would be of interest to colleagues in other departments.

Other small college speech faculty who face cutbacks or low status on their campuses, and who may be called on "to defend their claim to a place amid the liberal arts" (Hostettler, 1980, p. 332), might be especially interested in further research on this issue. They may seek to develop a strategy for defending their existence and reputation in local faculty forums and administrative councils.

Implementation of just a few of these suggestions could work to educate colleagues about the substantive, and necessary, study of communication in the modern world. As scholars and consultants within the discipline enact the advice of Kreps, Wartella, and

Linkugel, the liberal arts education of our students and the respect of our colleagues can only heighten.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Barbara J. Adler (Ph.D., Wayne State University, 1993) is Professor of Communication at Concordia College, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Central States Communication Association Convention, April 1994.

- Blanchard, R., & Christ, W. (1993). *Media education and the liberal arts*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cain, S. (1994, March 20). U-M department in political, ethical turmoil. *The Ann Arbor News*, A1, A10.
- Fischler, A. (1989, August 2). From the inferno: Reflections on a sojourn in a communication program. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A28.
- Gouran, D. (1979). Speech communication: Its conceptual foundation and disciplinary status. *Communication Education*, 28, 1-8.
- Hostettler, G. (1980). Speech as a liberal study II. *Communication Education*, 29, 332-347.
- Kreps, G. (1993, July). Keynote address to the Institute for Faculty Development: Conference on Communication Theory and Research. Hope College, Holland, Michigan.
- Lerstrom, A. (1988, April). *Perceptions of speech communication as a discipline: Conversations with the presidents and academic deans of four small colleges*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Schaumburg, IL.
- Marlier, J. (1980). What is speech communication anyway? *Communication Education*, 29, 324-327.
- Osborn, M. (1990, January). A defense of our discipline. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, A28.
- Paulson, S. (1980). Speech communication and the survival of academic disciplines. *Communication Education*, 29, 319-323.
- Petelle, J. (1980). Speech communication: Status, distinctiveness, and the educational hierarchy. *Communication Education*, 29, 357-360.
- Wartella, E. (1994). Challenge to the profession. *Communication Education*, 43, 54-62.
- Zarefsky, D. (1993, April). Does intellectual diversity always serve us well? *Spectra*, 29, 2.