

JACA
3(1995): 180-189

University of Arizona Phoenix in Tucson: Arizona's Department of Communication's Campaign for Fairness and Survival

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Crano's research is currently funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. His NSF-sponsored work is concerned with the manner in which minorities and the majority influence, and are influenced by, each other. His work for NICHD is concerned with the effects of different methods of information dissemination on different population segments in the fight against HIV/AIDS. More than 3000 school children and their parents are involved as participants in this research, which ranges across the states of Arizona and New Mexico.

Crano has written eight books, 25 book chapters, and more than 200 scholarly articles and scientific presentations. He is the past president of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, and is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the American

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THE DEPARTMENT

The faculty of Arizona's Department of Communication consists of four professors and six associate professors. The department uses few adjunct faculty. There are 55 graduate students and 550-650 majors. Most graduate students are supported by their work in undergraduate courses, extramurally funded research assignments, and advising. Typically, graduate students combine both teaching and research, and serve on a faculty member's research team (by mutual choice and as part of the role requirements of graduate students in the department).

The undergraduate curriculum is carefully constructed to provide students in the first year with an introduction to the field, along with courses on communication skills. The second year is focused on instruction in research methods — laboratory, field, and survey techniques. More advanced theoretical and empirical developments, and their applications, are highlighted in years three and four. The faculty is heavily research oriented, and opportunities for faculty/student research involvement are both available and encouraged.

Graduate training is focused on three areas — interpersonal communication, social influence/persuasion, and the social effects of the mass media and developments in high tech communication techniques. Although students typically focus on one of these three, competence in all is expected. Almost all graduate students participate in faculty members' research teams, where they gain valuable experience in conducting, analyzing, writing, and presenting the products of their research. Participation on multiple teams over the course of graduate training is common.

The research orientation of the faculty is clearly exemplified in the level of extramural support it has attracted. At this time, the department is working on more than \$6.5 million in extramurally funded research. The projects involve a wide range of communication-based research activities. In addition to the AIDS research already mentioned, faculty are now concluding a series of studies of deception for the Department of Defense. We are at the beginning of research on the effects of various communication strategies to persuade children to avoid too much sun, a major concern in the southwest, funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Also for the NCI, we are engaged in attempting to persuade people to include five fruits/vegetables each day in their diets, and thereby reduce the risk of colon cancer. And the list goes on. The faculty have won many University and College-level teaching awards, two of the faculty are Fellows of the ICA, and one is fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society.

Administratively, the Department is part of the College of Social and Behavior Sciences (SBS), which in addition to the usual cast of characters (e.g., Sociology, Psychology, Political Science), includes the Departments of History and Philosophy. The current Dean of the College holds tenure in Philosophy.

Ten years ago, the (then) Department of Speech Communication at the University resided in the College of Fine Arts. Owing to its lack of distinction, the Provost reorganized the Department and moved it to the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences with the admonition to become a credit to the University in short order. Many of the faculty in the department elected to stay in Fine Arts. With judicious hires and much dedication, the department soon found itself among the best in the discipline in its central areas of concentration. Reputational ratings placed the Department in very distinguished company, even though the ink of its early history had hardly dried.¹ Over the years, faculty members proved very productive, and were accorded the honors of Fellowship and editorships

appropriate to their contributions. In very short order, the Department placed itself among the best in the field, attracted a fine faculty, award-winning graduate students, and became one of the most popular and efficient majors on campus.²

In light of all of this, a reasonable person would expect that the department would enjoy high favor among the middle- and higher-level administrators at the University, and this was largely true until a few years ago. Then, things changed. To understand how and, perhaps why, we must consider some of the recent history of the University.

ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

To provide this context for this story, some important strategic administrative activities undertaken at the University of Arizona recently must be described. These activities, all laudable in principle, represent the University's attempts to renew, reinvigorate, indeed, reinvent itself in the face of an all too common contemporary problem in higher education — a hostile economic and political climate.

Two years ago, the University initiated an intensive self-study of all its administrative units, including all academic departments. The Program for the Assessment of Institutional Priorities, or PAIP, as it came to be called, required that each academic department submit a report on its activities, which was to include information on its scholarly accomplishments, student load, contributions to graduate and undergraduate instruction, extramural support, community service, and the costs associated with these contributions to scholarship, teaching, and service.

The Department of Communication's mandated five-page report, bolstered by a 100-page appendix, provided a lucid and accurate picture of a vital and productive unit whose contributions to the teaching, research, and service missions far outweighed the University's investments, as compared with other units in the college or university. The Department's instructional costs were lower than any other Department's in the college; indeed, its efficiency was ranked among the very top in the University. Its undergraduate students graduated on time, a relative rarity in many departments in the University, and they appeared content with the education they received. Communication's perfect record of placement of graduate students obviously could not be beaten by anyone, and its scholarly productivity was recognized as exemplary in published ratings, which placed it among the elite research institutions in the field.

The PAIP reports were judged by committees composed of students, faculty, and staff drawn from all units of the University. The procedure involved an NIH-like approach, in which 2-3 readers were assigned responsibility for each department's essay, and reported their impressions to the whole committee, many of whose members probably had not analyzed the information as carefully as the assigned readers had. Units were graded on a three-point scale as having "exceeded criteria," "met criteria," or "failed to meet criteria."

The outcome of the procedure for Communication was somewhat bittersweet. The Department was adjudged only as having met criteria. The major stumbling blocks to the highest rating were threefold: first, the committee was not entirely happy with the department's tight focus on social scientific analyses, preferring that it concentrate more on the rhetorical, humanistic, critical, and literary approaches, which it adjudged to be the mainstream of the field.³ The second objection was that the Department had attracted rather little extramural support (more than \$4.5M at the time of the report, probably second highest in the college). And, given communication majors' low average GPA, it was clear that the Department was attracting the least able students.

The Department's response to the committee's observation was predictable, perhaps, but nonetheless valid. It argued that a relatively small department of 10 professors would be unwise to spread resources to the point necessary to cover all the bases in the discipline.

Given the recent history of the Department's birth, we could not take issue with the fact that we were tightly focused on social scientific approaches. However, this focus was completely and precisely consistent with the charge of the Provost who had presided at the birth of the new department. The issue, thus, was not whether or not we were provincial, but rather, were we a good province? On the basis of considerable objective evidence, the argument seems to admit only to an affirmative answer. And what about extramural support? Obviously, such support is the lifeblood of most institutions of higher learning, and it is clear that these funds must be sought assiduously. It is equally clear that the opportunities for funded research in communication are relatively rare. We have no formal program at NSF devoted to this discipline, for example, nor are our concerns likely to be high on the wish list of many programs in the National Institutes of Health (though, of course, there are notable exceptions to this observation). Nonetheless, at the time of PAIP, the Department was operating on more than \$4.5 million in extramural funds, a reasonable figure in any social science department, especially given the size of the faculty.

As for the charge that our students had low GPAs, and thus, we were attracting lower level students, we observed that these students were obtaining the lions share of their grades in Communication, and were meeting university-mandated criteria. We would not be criticized for not taking part in the grade inflation characteristic of much in higher education. Further, we showed that by rank ordering the students across all Departments in SBS on GPA and SAT scores placed our majors precisely where they should be. Thus, they were performing at approximately the appropriate level, and at that level they met University requirements. Significant deviations in rank order of GPA and SAT would have been a sign of trouble, but in the case of Communication, such deviations did not exist.

These observations were brought forcefully to the attention of the original rating committee. Predictably, they were disinclined to admit that they were in error despite the data. The Department was given the opportunity to appeal the committee's judgment to a new (appeals) group, but the wisdom of this tack was not entirely obvious, and thus, the Department settled for its grade.

At the end of the academic year, things appeared to have settled in the University. Financial difficulties were still apparent, but it seemed obvious that the PAIP process was not to be repeated. This perception proved incorrect, because in the following Autumn, the administration launched the Strategic Planning Budget Advisory Committee (SPBAC), an appointed council of 20 faculty, staff, and administrators who were to help guide the University through the perilous economic waters in which it was afloat. SPBAC took on the task of reviewing all units of the University, including academic units. Their informal charge appeared to be to eliminate units that were not sufficiently distinguished, or whose mission was not central to the general (i.e., Research I) thrust of the University. They were to effect cost savings, and to strengthen the University's stronger units by eliminating the weaker ones and diverting the resultant resources to the more distinguished groups. Obviously, the PAIP ratings played a role in this process, but they were used primarily as a starting point.

The general progression of this evaluation was as follows. SPBAC reviewed all departments and reported its findings to the affected Deans. Typically, only the problem cases were brought forward, and the Deans were invited to come to SPBAC to discuss their plans for dealing with their problem children. Usually, the Deans would consult with their executive or strategic planning committees to determine how to assist their units in response to SPBAC's observations.

In the case of the College of Social and Behavioral Science (SBS), however, the process was different. At the beginning of the year, the Dean set up a strategic planning committee to review all of the college's units. Among all the Departments in SBS, only Communication had no representative on the committee. The dean's strategic planning committee gathered information, and met with each department once to clarify any issues they might have, and

to allow the Departments to highlight their particular strengths.

Despite its lack of representation, the Department of Communication had apparently little reason to worry. It had attracted yet more funding, maintained its strong contribution to undergraduate education, continued to place 100% of its Ph.D. graduates, and had received information from colleagues at Ohio State University that an internal review of all communication programs had placed the University of Arizona at the very top of the field in terms of publications, and second most popular in editorships, despite its size. This peace of mind was shaken to the core when, in an unprecedented move, the Dean of SBS went to SPBAC *before* that committee had acted, and reported that she had a few departments that deserved close scrutiny, and wished to bring them to the attention of the committee. Communication was one of the major targets of this preemptory move, an action that some saw as a means of closing off debate in SPBAC about the merits of the Department. The preemptive strategy came close to succeeding, but its lack of merit coupled with a fair-minded Provost and review committee (SPBAC) proved its undoing. It may be instructive to review this case in detail, to learn how these kinds of attacks are mounted, and how they sometimes can be thwarted.

In the face of readily available direct evidence, and considerable indirect data that too could serve as the base for confident inference, the Dean's committee concluded (*inter alia*) that (1) the Department's "social scientific" focus was narrow, and did not provide sufficient breadth to serve the undergraduate curriculum, (2) "oral" communication skills were taught in only a small portion of our courses, and hence this function could be taken over by anyone (this analysis was based on someone's reading of the catalogue, with no consultation with the Department, and no attempt to learn precisely what is actually done in the classroom), (3) the research methods employed by the Department were not distinctive, but shared by other social science programs, (4) the field was moving in a direction that emphasized "humanistic, critical, and literary methodologies," and thus, we might some day have trouble placing our students, (5) despite our success in attracting extramural (R01 — basic research) funds from highly selective federal agencies, the committee decided that the research program of the Department did not show particular promise of advancing "broad foundational knowledge."

The graduate program came in for the strongest criticism. According to the Dean's data, (6) the academic placements of our PhDs were of low quality, (7) the Department admitted 84% of all who applied, thus suggesting an extreme lack of selectivity, (8) there was an over-reliance on graduate teaching assistants, given the popularity of our courses, and (9) the graduate students probably did not have sufficient access to the faculty, given their numbers, and that of the faculty.

On the basis of all of these observations, the Dean's strategic planning committee recommended that the Department be restructured by phasing out the graduate program completely. Part of the extended rationale for this decision follows:

The principal reason for this recommendation is the Committee's sense of the lack of compelling intellectual importance of training graduate students in the areas and manner offered by the Department. This source of concern is coupled with specific areas of weakness in the graduate program, as compared to others within SBS...the comparative lack of strength of the graduate students as indicated by the low numbers of applicants, their entering GRE's, GPA's, the Department's poor selectivity ratio, and the level of eventual placements.

This recommendation was followed by a freeze on all new *undergraduate* majors, despite the fact that the recommendation had not been approved by anyone having the authority to ratify it, and that it was, obviously and certainly, only a recommendation.⁴

For many, these recommendations, and the evidence on which they were based, were so

preposterous that it was difficult to know where or how to begin to combat them. The profusion of incorrect analysis and inference evident throughout the SBS report was at first immobilizing, and then puzzling. The range response options was daunting. The department could attack the facts, in both public and intermural fora. It could attempt to educate the (SBS) committee that got things so wrong. It could appeal for justice from the Provost and his committee (SPBAC), and attempt to quash the apparent attempt to close-off debate in that committee before it had begun. It could appeal for help from SCA.⁵ It could go public, and use its media connections to prompt a more enlightened *public* discussion. It could mobilize its students, graduate and undergraduate alike, and through them, the parents of students, their legislators, and so on. It could use its political contacts on the Board of Regents, the State legislature, and the governor's office. The Department's decision was to do all of these, and to capitalize on its strengths in the process.

What are these strengths? A thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of social influence, good relations with, and understanding of our students, their parents, the legislature, regents, and the media, and the ability to employ the techniques of scientific analysis of social data to make a point. The administration of SBS appeared to lack all of these qualities, as did members of the SBS committee. In addition, they were surprisingly ill-prepared for the resulting storm which enveloped them from all sides. They expressed disappointment that Communication had "gone public," despite the fact that the opening salvo of the clash was the Dean's press conference, at which she announced her committee's findings, and consequent recommendations, to the two major Tucson daily newspapers. Along with its communication expertise, devoted students, and analytic ability, the Department had another factor in its favor: data. The SBS committee had gotten it all wrong. It had based much of its analysis on hearsay; its recommendations were a strange admixture of rumor and innuendo, bolstered by analyses with results so preposterous that our undergraduates in their first research methods course would question their validity. Almost every negative estimate they made could be addressed with *data*, and thus transformed from subjective inference to objective fact, but they were unaccustomed to working with this, the common currency of the social scientist. This deficiency proved their undoing, and resulted in the perception of shoddy administrative practice by all who understood the use of information to inform decision-making.

It is not possible to go into the details of our rebuttal, but a flavor of our responses to the numbered points presented earlier may be gained from the following points:

(1) Narrow social scientific focus. The Department was fulfilling the bargain made at its inception, and doing so in an exemplary fashion. It struck many of us as curious that in a college of Social Science, the department was criticized as being too oriented toward social scientific approaches. Some wondered if the composition of the College itself blinded some of its constituents to the importance of the "science" component of "social science."

(2) No oral communication skills. This observation was based on an incomplete understanding of the field, and a massive misunderstanding of the first year experience provided in our communication courses. One cannot learn the true nature of a course by reading about it in a catalog. And whoever said that communication was solely concerned with oral communication?

(3) Methods not distinctive? Who else was teaching media content analysis and public opinion research, the analysis of dyadic interaction, replicated message design, compliance-gaining methods, video analysis, conversation/discourse analysis, network analysis, and nonverbal coding? Besides, if sharing methods is not suitable, then what of areas that rely heavily on such sharing (cognitive science, linguistics, etc.)? What some would consider derivative is viewed as multidisciplinary by others.

(4) Field moving in humanistic direction. This observation was based on a misreading

of the DeFleur/Freedom Forum report,⁶ which we had provided to bolster the case for the importance, indeed the necessity, of graduate training in communication. Selective reading/interpretation of this kind would earn our students a failing mark in most of our courses, but was a hallmark of the SBS report, which conveniently neglected information contrary to its desired conclusions, or misread it in such a way as to bolster its case. This approach sometimes works, if your opponent has trouble reading.

(5) Not advancing broad foundational knowledge. It is difficult to comment on this observation without appearing vain, but it should be obvious to anyone that external markers of quality and influence (e.g., extramural funding, editorships, publication in the most selective journals) all reveal that this ludicrous and insulting remark hardly deserves comment.⁷ Again, the data were contrary to the SBS committee's prescribed conclusions, so they were interpreted in a way that inverted the obvious interpretation of a substantial body of evidence.

(6) Low quality academic placements. Our apologies to Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Michigan State, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Texas A&M, UC: Santa Barbara, and a host of other fine institutions that have had the good sense to hire our graduates. It is not we who have characterized you as among the dimmer lights of higher education.

(7) Admitted 84% of applicants. The committee was working with faulty data, whose genesis is still unknown. The data with which SBS drew this figure actually indicated that Communication admitted more students than applicants! Having the wit to realize that this was impossible, the SBS committee simply reversed numerator and denominator to derive the 84% figure. This obviated the need for a phone call to the Department Head to clarify the issue.

(8) Over-reliance on TAs. True. The department suggested that one solution to this problem involved increasing faculty size. Given the relative lack of familiarity with ratios and long division exhibited by the SBS committee (see (7), above), this possibility probably had not been contemplated. It should be obvious, however, that a highly research active faculty of 10 serving a department of 650 majors and considerable undergraduate demand from other academic programs would not be able to shoulder all of its undergraduate teaching demands. Should Communication have imposed arbitrary limits on enrollment, so that many students would be shut out of our offerings, even students who met University requirements? This option was not available to SBS units, which is just as well, because in the opinion of many in the Department, including its Head, such a tack represents an ethically questionable action.

(9) Inaccessibility of faculty. In light of the facts that Communication's graduate students were probably the most published in the college, had won more teaching prizes than students of most of the other SBS Departments' students combined, graduated on time, and that all prior PhDs had been placed (even if in rather low level academic settings — see (6), above) we suggested either that the assessment was wrong or that osmosis was a more powerful force than previously realized. The illogic of this particular criticism illustrates in stark contrast the faulty reasoning that characterizes much of the SBS report. Earlier, SBS argued that the quality of Communication's graduate students could not compare with that of other SBS departments (in terms of GRE and GPA). Further, they opined that the faculty was inaccessible, despite a large number of co-authored student/faculty publications and presentations, our well-regarded research team training program, and students' record of on-time graduation. The agglomeration of all of these facts does not jibe with the inaccessibility argument, but logic did not appear to intrude upon many of SBS's summary judgments.

Our arguments and observations, and their extended discussion, appeared to have had an impact on the Provost and his committee (SPBAC). Indeed, even the SBS committee ultimately decided that they had erred in terms of the quality of our graduate program. And

then, true to form, argued even so, that communication was not “central” to the University, with centrality being so ill-defined that high or low marks on this criterion were more attributable to whimsy than observable data. By then, however, the SBS committee and its leadership had been so thoroughly discredited that its mutterings about centrality, contribution, placement quality, etc., were readily dismissed by most within earshot.

LESSONS LEARNED

To respond to the distortions that had been created to justify the recommendation to close Communication’s graduate program (and thereby close the department, as we know it), required great energy, enormous work on the part of faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students, gathering and preparing data, and presenting our case in fora that were considered to have the greatest impact. Among other avenues of debate, the department asked to present its case to the Provost’s committee (SPBAC), a group with no apparent vested interest in anything other than the good of the University. It did so, presenting the information just described, along with facts that clearly countered the innuendo and rumors that so characterized the SBS report. Among other things, we showed that the department had been rated among the most productive in the country in a very recent internal survey conducted by Ohio State, along with other reputational measures published previously in our journals. Using data provided by the University’s Office of Institutional Research, we proved that our graduate students’ GRE scores were among the very tops in the college, in all three categories — verbal, quantitative, and analytical. Further, our own careful records, which we use to keep close track of students’ progress, showed that our graduate students earned higher grades in courses **outside** the department than they did within Communication, the implication of this finding being that if our students were dumb, the others in the College were dumber still. We argued, reasonably, that our perfect record of placement was not grounds for assuming problems in the future. On the contrary, the regression artifact notwithstanding, such a record is more legitimately viewed as a harbinger of things to come. Far from being nonselective, the department was and is highly selective (we typically admit about 17% of our applicants), and commonly attracts some of the brightest graduate students in the country. With more than \$6.5M in extramural funding in hand at the time of our presentation to the Provost’s committee, it was easy to maintain that SBS’s argument of noncentrality of the program was absurd. If federal agencies in highly competitive programs were willing to support the Department’s research efforts, then it was clear that its research was viewed as central and important. If we were not central to SBS, then it is SBS that should change, not Communication. A reasonable person would opt for this interpretation, backed as it is by millions in federal dollars, rather than that of the SBS committee that had no special claims to expertise in anything. The Provost and his committee opted for our interpretation over that of SBS.

After reviewing the evidence, including SBS’s retraction of its assessment of our graduate students (based as it was on “radically flawed data”),⁸ the Provost’s committee (SPBAC) observed the following:

Based on discussions with members of the Department, and the new data provided, the Committee feels that issues of the quality of graduate students in the Department of Communication have been fully resolved. We reaffirm our recommendation that the undergraduate program be downsized. Communication should be considered in the broader thematic context of information and communication.

This last sentence provides some hint of the future. It suggests that the quality of the department has been recognized by central administration, and that the department may be

emplaced in a context in which communication and information science might mutually enhance and reinforce one another. It suggests that in the future, communication might not have to persuade its overseers that the field, in general, has merit, and that the department, in particular, has done well. It suggests that the high quality of its faculty will be recognized and rewarded, that its graduate students will be accorded the esteem they have earned, and that the financial support afforded academic units will be based more on achievements than old-boy relationships.

The battle appears to have been won, but that fact that it even had to be fought has provoked a lasting sense of anger and disappointment, along with a mistrust in the wisdom of some administrators that will endure. We won because we went to our strengths. This department is quintessentially a social science department. We do not denigrate other approaches to the discipline, but are not large enough to give all voices equal time. We live and die by data and its scientific analysis. In this case, the data were on our side, and we were able to demonstrate the strength of our argument to responsible and conscientious people. In large part, this demonstration was fueled by faculty members in the Department, graduates, and undergraduate students. This latter group profited enormously from the experience, in that they used the battle to test the utility of the communication skills they had learned in their classrooms. As a natural learning experience for undergraduates, participation in the contest between Communication and its critics was hard to top. Our multifaceted approach would not have succeeded if the data were not supportive of our position, or if the ultimate decision makers were not honorable. It is unfortunate, but true, that the same arguments that persuaded the Provost and his committee fell on deaf ears in the Dean's committee. Tactically, it made little sense even to approach this latter group, but a sense of propriety forced this futile action despite its psychological costs.

Where do we go from here? It is hard to say for certain, but clearly the value of the department is now recognized among those in higher (if not middle) administration. The Department's ability to attract funds is appealing, and its promise to help the University usher-in the new information age is even more of an enticement for support. It is my hope that we will be given the charge to see just how much we can do, unfettered by those whose vision of the future is tied to the dead past, where philosophers could be kings, and inconvenient realities banished via faulty logic and spurious analysis.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

¹ See, for example, the ratings of departments, programs, and individual researchers published in the *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin*, 1989, 67, 37-45; *Communication Education*, 37; *Journalism Quarterly*, 1988, 65; and *Communication Quarterly*, 1992, 40, 350-356.

² Lest the reader choke on this apparent self-indulgence, let me hasten to add that I had little to do with any of this. The success of the Department's growth and development from the ashes of the old Speech Communication Department is attributable to my predecessor in the Headship, Michael Burgoon. Any successes we have had of late were built on the solid foundation that was in place on my arrival. It is also the case that Judee Burgoon is largely responsible for the development and success of the graduate program. Thus, it is not surprising that she would have been at my side as an invaluable ally throughout the long discussion of the fate of the Department.

³ Importantly, no member of the Department was tapped to serve on any PAIP evaluation committee.

⁴ The imposition of this moratorium on the basis of an unendorsed recommendation was but one example of the many violations of proper procedure evident in SBS's actions. This

procedural irregularity was brought to the attention of the Provost, and rectified forthwith. Even so, months later, we found that a letter announcing the precarious position of Communication had been inserted without any proper authorization into every graduate catalog being sent out from the Graduate College. This violation of the Provost's wishes, corrected immediately upon discovery, was attributed to oversight and accident.

⁵Special thanks to Jim Gaudino, who proved exceptionally helpful and encouraging. His work on our behalf was powerfully persuasive, and helped move many in the higher administration to the side of the Department.

⁶M.L. DeFleur (with the assistance of T. Herling, K. Holmes, and D. Merskin). (1993). *The forthcoming shortage of communications Ph.D.s: Trends that will influence recruiting*. Working Paper, The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, Arlington, VA.

⁷I am not taking advantage of an absent opponent in making this intemperate assessment. I have made the same observations, more forcefully, to the committee (and its leader) who made this senseless and moronic attack on my faculty.

⁸ Indeed, the data were so "radically flawed" that people of good faith must still wonder how they were ever entertained seriously, without even a word to the affected department, which could and would have dispelled the errors instantaneously.