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# Communication Education Transformations: Implications for Curricular Change

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**C**ONTINUAL transformation in response to new discoveries and insights about the world is the genius of the academy (Giamatti, 1988). Established curricula suggest the things that can be known through reasoned discourse and systematic observation and this process is ongoing. Renewal involves continuing re-examination of presuppositions about the real world and an evolving structure designed to impart refinements in knowledge (Bross, 1981). Departments considered indispensable to liberal education during one era are replaced with innovative administrative schemes in the next. Universities organize academic units that later re-cast themselves as new disciplines, merge with other fields, or dissolve entirely. In the field of communication, traditional humanistic studies are adjoined by scientific inquiry. Recently, educators, in discussing the future of public relations (PR) (Grunig, 1989; Walker, 1989), have advocated new directions for this emerging discipline (Wakefield, 1988). Administrators of communication programs should anticipate dynamic curricular change that will strain traditional conceptualizations of how best to manage educational changes for the discipline and how such paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1970) will effect the discipline's growth, organization, and curricula.

## DEVELOPMENTAL TRENDS

Traditionally, public relations has been viewed as a sub-category of journalism (Chrismore & Hill, 1978). Recent trends, however, have shown movement away from this earlier classification. Modern technological and societal advances require, of PR practitioners, greater facility with oral and visual communication methods (Hamilton, 1986, April) and not merely expertise in writing media copy (Williams, 1983). Differences in education

and training between public relations practitioners and journalists reflect, in part, effects of certain pressures brought to bear upon these professions. A college degree in journalism is an acceptable entry to both fields, but PR practitioners have a somewhat broader choice of preparatory educational background. A degree in public relations may be preferred by some PR employers, others may insist on specialized training in business, science, engineering, or other fields closely allied with the firm's operations. While editors prefer to employ reporters with college degrees in journalism, PR professionals' degree programs show more variety and many practitioners have no college journalism training (*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 1987). While differences in background and training do exist between the practicing professionals in these fields, basic research and writing skills acquired in academic journalism programs are essential to both.

Prospective employment opportunities and earning potential comparisons between PR and journalism provide further insight into the relationship between these disciplines. The movement of professionals between and among these and other related disciplines most likely will effect future comparisons. For example, the general outlook for employment opportunities is expected to favor public relations practitioners over journalists through the year 2000 (Davis, 1986). Turnover rates in PR are expected to be high with each turnover providing a window of employment opportunity for new applicants (Davis, 1986). Journalists are expected to move into public relations work for a number of reasons, including higher salary. In 1986, for example, the median annual salary for PR specialists was \$31,700 in nonprofit organizations and \$59,100 in consumer product companies (*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 1987). During this same period, average annual income for journalists was \$31,200 (*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 1987). If (1) journalism training continues to be deemed valuable in public relations work, and (2) if the salary differentials cited above persist, and (3) the actual number of available positions is higher in PR than journalism, it can be expected that journalists will, in greater numbers, work in public relations. To the extent that this occurs, the two professions will become more congruent and their training programs should be reflective of these trends.

The schismatic nature of these two disciplines, otherwise linked by common concerns, runs deeper than superficial dissimilarity in career preparation. One area of disagreement between public relations and journalism suggests the conflict between science and law. Science is interested in the "truth" while the legal system seeks "justice." Similarly, Jeffers (1977) observes that professional journalists see public relations practitioners as "obstructions in the newsman's path to the 'truth'...presenting only the 'good side' of the story, while newsmen are often characterized as 'watchdogs' of society." Jeffers also found that journalists believe that they are more skilled and more ethical than their public relations counterparts.

Despite burgeoning enrollments, PR programs have not received proportionate enhancements in faculty or resources accorded to their journalist counterparts (Fedler & Smith, 1992; Grunig, 1989). Moreover, PR faculty feel discriminated against by their counterparts in journalism and by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (Fedler & Smith, 1992). Ryan and Martinson's (1988) survey highlights the antagonism between journalists and PR practitioners in this regard. Clearly, philosophical differences divide proponents of the two disciplines, as does the sometimes unfair distribution of institutional resources (Ryan & Martinson, 1988). Some PR programs have chosen to associate themselves with communication rather than journalism departments. Calls for expanded intellectual focus have provided impetus for a substantial migration of academic talent. For example, Grunig (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) has suggested using a theoretical framework, such as systems theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1986), for the discipline. Similarly, Olasky (1987) argues that, as an academic enterprise, PR must expand its role and scope. Specifically, Olasky (1987) advances the notion of a multi-dimensional discipline involving

relations with governmental bodies, advocacy on behalf of corporate management, as well as various educational initiatives. Pointing to the experience of microeconomics professors who, failing to convey broader perspectives to their students, doomed graduates to make inaccurate predictions, Olasky (1989) suggests that the PR discipline should promote studies at the macro-level. Additionally, because the effectiveness of PR practice is often impeded by the perception that its practitioners present biased information, the PR discipline should focus on communication ethics (Olasky, 1989).

Such proposals provide meaningful extensions to PR curricula. However, because academic disciplines cannot exist without academic departments (Heidegger, 1968), strategic shifts in focus of academic disciplines are eventually accompanied by corresponding structural changes in their administrative units. Expansion of the field's knowledge base has sometimes been deemed secondary to the growth in PR programs during the past ten years. Neff (1989) has reported that PR is administratively housed in communication departments more often than in journalism and mass communication programs combined. Neff (1989) concludes that this trend will continue because of philosophical compatibility of the two disciplines (McKinsey, 1990; Murphy, 1990), and because of an interest in the research of PR educators as reflected by their appearance in speech communication journals. Earlier survey findings showed movement away from journalism providing little indication as to which departments might benefit from the trend (Neff, 1989). Among departments included under the general rubric "communication" Neff (1989) lists forty with either the word speech or *public communication* in the title, Substantially more were listed under the titles *Communication* (51 departments), *Communication Arts* (39 departments), and *Communications* (75 departments) labels under which speech communication courses are also offered (Neff, 1989). Departments of speech communication most likely will see increased demand for PR courses or the establishment of PR sequences.

### THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PRESSURES FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE

Students are always interested in academic training that leads to employment and/or career development. In his job-hunters and career-changers manual, Bolles (1993) explains the positive relationship between career success and *talent* identification and enhancement. He underlines the importance of developing various communication centered skills enhancing interpersonal, linguistic, and logical-mathematical faculties. The primary argument is that career success is based upon the identification, development, and utilization of one's job-related talents. Depending on how these talents are defined and perceived to be related to communication careers, pressures will be exerted on administrators of communication programs to make such programs more responsive to these changing perspectives.

While any changes are most likely to occur incrementally, *dramatic* theoretical or societal changes could evoke commensurate changes in educational programs. For example, theoretical and applied developments in behavioral psychology in the late 1960s brought about, for better or for worse, major contentive and methodological changes in communication studies. Precise statement of objectives in behavioral terms and empirical measures of observable results are prime examples of such changes. The new movement of expanding the notion of "talents" and "intelligences" to include more categories than the conventional *logical mathematical* and *linguistic* ones holds significant, possibly dramatic, potential for refocusing and restructuring academic communication programs. For example, Edwards and White (1992) have demonstrated that journalism and PR students would profit from instruction emphasizing intuitive rather than analytic skills. Such expanded multiformity of approach is epitomized by the work of Boston School of Medicine neurologist and Harvard University educator Howard Gardner. While including linguistic and logical mathematical

abilities in his new paradigm Gardner (1983; 1993) expands, to seven dimensions, the earlier conceptualization of intelligence or native talent. He includes, in this perspective, several areas, long considered central to the communication discipline, such as *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* factors. Gardner's new bodily-kinesthetic dimension actually includes most of communication's nonverbal studies curriculum. Structuring and re-structuring communication curricula according to Gardner's paradigm places new focus on the development of combinations of talents and skills that, in concert, will increase the students' competitiveness, marketability, and essential value as employees.

Bahls (1992) reveals that some PR practitioners regard journalism as too narrow a discipline while viewing PR degrees as lacking sufficient intellectual rigor. In addition, Wakefield and Cottone (1992) report agency and corporate public relations executives consider training in diverse academic fields essential to successful practice. Some curriculum reformers argue that PR sequences should stress a broad range of intellectual abilities alongside a traditional course of study (Poplin, 1992; Neff, 1991). Any edge which graduates may have in the current marketplace will depend, largely, on the extent to which their communication programs have focused on (1) initial detection and measurement of related talents, (2) skill development and enhancement, and (3) discovery of communication-related careers that depend on the integration and application of these skills. Administrators of academic communication programs are in a prime position to advocate and, with faculty approval and support, implement curricular changes based upon these new market pressures.

Another template for restructuring communication curricula is "university tradition." Blanchard and Christ (1988) call for an expanded search for commonalties. Such reform requires more integration and consolidation of the communication disciplines on both conceptual/theoretical and applied levels. Following the lead of other disciplines such as business, engineering, and computer science, communication faculties should refocus on "determining their points of commonalty" (p. 7). PR educators at the University of South Carolina's College of Journalism and Mass Communication have received greater recognition and acceptance from such dialogue (Bovet, 1992). McGlone (1987) states that administrators, or department chairs, will be most effective when implementing changes for which the department is ready. Developing a "shared vision" for needed change is a primary function of the administrative arm of the academic program. The disquieting possibility that journalism schools may no longer be able to justify their existence, because only the minority of graduates find positions for which they were primarily trained, in part, led the Task Force on Integrated Communications (1993) to advance recommendations for preparing advertising and public relations students for the communications industry in the twenty-first century. They concluded that many public relations and advertising programs should reconsider their training goals and objectives in order to better integrate and coordinate their various training functions in broader administrative structures, such as communication departments. In addition to a strong focus on liberal arts, the task force recommended more training in oral, written, and visual communication and in strategies and techniques of problem-solving and in basic research. Focus will be stronger on information gathering, translating, analyzing, planning, presenting, and counseling skills. That list of skills does indeed suggest a more complex involvement of various department and/or school components if maximum training efficiency is to be achieved. Involving PR and other communication faculty in discussions of possible mergers and collaborations, discussions of possible joint ventures with business schools, increasing corporate research support, joint publication projects among faculty from various communication areas, searches for more integrative textbooks, involving professional groups and organizations, as well as business leaders, in restructuring discussions, are some of the meaningful suggestions discussed in the Task Force's report.

With respect to faculty placement, infusing PR faculty into existing communication programs will produce creative collegial associations among scholars serving to stimulate

innovative lines of teaching and research. Speech communication and general communication have produced an extensive array of scholarly societies and research publications. As a host discipline, "communication" may be uniquely qualified to enable faculty in the quest for expanded theoretical perspectives (Neff, 1989). For example, the Department of Communication at California State-Fullerton was established in the 1960s as a multidisciplinary department of communication studies (Bovet, 1992). Despite housing sequences in advertising, print/broadcast journalism, radio/TV/film as well as PR, the PR program enjoys equal standing with its fellow communication disciplines.

In the case of PR research and teaching, many of the limitations and restrictions in journalism departments will exist in departments of communication as well. According to Whitmore (1988) the academic department, while it is the bedrock of the academic institution and the heart of all academic enterprise, is often intellectually parochial avoiding the new and the unknown. Clearly, as Wakefield and Cottone (1988, p. 43) have articulated, "The key to survival in academe is not in student numbers but in faculty numbers." Increases in the ranks of PR faculty have consistently lagged behind student enrollments. Thus, PR faculty will be forced to compete with the faculty of the host department for precious institutional resources. The University of Maryland's College of Journalism has taken the courageous step of holding down enrollment as a means of upgrading instructional quality (Bovet, 1992). According to some, the first and best hope for emerging PR programs is the free-standing department (Walker, 1989). The solution, according to Applbaum (1986), is that we must continually anticipate the shape of higher education, in general, and communication programs in particular. He holds the faculty largely responsible for the creation and design of the curricular landscape. But administrators must exert the leadership required to "facilitate the curricular and organizational metamorphosis that will be needed for survival in the 21st Century" (pp. 18-19).

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