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Strengthening the Introductory Communication Course: An Opportunity through Better Alignment with Today's Needs

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More than a century after its inception in contemporary form, the discipline of Communication has encountered a tremendous opportunity—the chance to become an “essential discipline” in the academy, one like Math or English, which universities consider indispensable to the work they do. And yet, as a discipline, we have not sufficiently moved toward taking advantage of that opportunity. While such a move will require action in curriculum, scholarship, and service, one of the highest-impact areas in establishing the necessity of Communication is the introductory course.

In order to understand the opportunity that lies before us, we have to understand how higher education in the United States has evolved and how recent changes have created this opening. In this essay, I offer brief historical context to explain the relevant changes, then offer a path forward for the discipline respond productively.

CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 1800s were a period of significant growth for higher education in the United States, with the bulk of colleges and universities tracing their roots to that century. It is not

surprising, then, that in the late 1800s American higher education saw considerable development. During a 20 year span from the early 1870s through the mid-1890s, higher education took on the form we know today (Damrosch, 1995; Valenzano, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014).

Since 1900, higher education has only seen comparatively small evolutionary change (Damrosch, 1995). But a combination of factors set up the perfect storm for another period of revolutionary change, and the recession of 2008 was the catalyst that triggered what Bok (2013) contends will be another reshaping of higher education in America. These changes should be widespread, with the curriculum seeing some of the biggest impact. The nature of course delivery, financial models, relationship of higher education with government and industry, assessment, use of technology, administrative structure, nature of faculty work, and more are subject to change.

As is always the case in times of change, there will be winners and losers. Some disciplines will gain enrollment and credibility as others struggle to remain viable. Many liberal arts disciplines are currently on a downswing. But, external forces impacting higher education set up favorably for Communication—not so much for what it is now, but for what it realistically could be. To take advantage of this situation, the discipline needs to deliver what is needed, both in knowledge produced (research) and knowledge delivered (teaching)—and nowhere are the curricular contributions more important than the introductory course.

Higher education today. A large set of factors are forcing change in higher education. Many trace their roots to economic conditions, as less favorable financial times have forced administrators to consider all options

to keep their institutions solvent. Increases in tuition that have outstripped inflation for decades risk pricing higher education out of the market for all but the wealthiest Americans. Decreased government funding for higher education, and significant increases in costs of health care and compliance have compounded this problem.

Another major factor is new technology. Demand for online classes has sharply increased as a means of reducing costs and making an education available to new populations who could not easily attend college due to circumstances (e.g., single working parents) or geography (e.g., areas with low population density). Today's "millennial" students have a different relationship with technology than students of the past, and may be better served with some changes in instructional practices.

Additionally, numerous collateral forces are impacting higher education. These include an increase in students with enough pre-college credit (AP, dual enrollment, etc.) that they begin school partly or largely done with their first-year classes, significant increases in demand for assessment to demonstrate value to external stakeholders, a growing expectation that colleges will provide some vocational preparation that was previously provided by employers (Fischer, 2013), and an increase in university presidents who were never faculty (coming from government, corporate leadership, or advancement; Carmichael, 2012).

OPPORTUNITIES WITH BOUNDARIES

Among the most prominent responses are revisions to academic programs, as schools strive to meet chang-

ing demands, help justify the high price of attendance, and integrate newer thinking about education. Academic leaders are seeking ways to make their school's education distinctive and demonstrate value to students and other stakeholders.

This situation is fortuitous for Communication for many reasons. Strong and widespread support has emerged with a push from external stakeholders who see effective communication as an essential area of knowledge and skill for every college graduate. Annual surveys by the National Association of College and Employers regularly place effective oral communication—stated explicitly, and also manifested as activities that are communication-intensive, such as working in a team structure—as top qualities employers seek (NACE, 2015). The Association of American College and Universities' high-profile work articulating needs for college education also identified communication as an essential domain of knowledge and skill (AAC&U, 2007).

In short, employers and university administrators see the value of excellence in oral communication. A well-designed and delivered oral communication class that meets these needs and demonstrably improves students' knowledge and skill is appealing to administrators, who can showcase this success to both prospective students and university trustees, as well as to students and parents, who seek an education that helps them achieve career success. What is more, logistics work in the discipline's favor. Salaries in Communication are below average at most universities (Higher Ed Jobs, n.d.), start-up costs are negligible, and unlike some disciplines, there is an adequate supply of qualified full- and part-time instructors in most locations. So, there is

willing support for Communication to make a signature contribution to higher education.

However, to capitalize, we need to better align our teaching and scholarship with today's needs. At present, some of the most exemplary work is coming from other disciplines. Heath and Heath's (2007) best-selling book on crafting messages that people will remember comes from the field of Organizational Behavior. TED talks wow audiences as examples of great public speaking; these presentations come from across the academy. Much of the research on interpersonal and small group communication that is widely cited in popular media comes from Psychology and Management. Communication could contribute better if our research and curriculum better met the needs people are seeking.

When employers say they need better oral communication, they are referring to specific knowledge and skills needed in their industry, not just the ability to deliver a standard informative or persuasive speech. For example, a panel of industry leaders at the 2014 Basic Course Director's Conference (Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Valenzano, 2014) reported needs such as running meetings effectively, developing relationships with and trust of colleagues and clients, more effectively engaging in dialogue in a business setting, and recognizing and accurately interpreting others' nonverbal messages. When administrators seek curriculum they can promote internally and externally, they want to show that courses are meeting needs, not just covering a topic. And, when schools are looking for a curriculum that makes them distinct, they cannot do so with a generic course design.

To capitalize on our opportunity, scholars and educators have to determine the specific needs of their institutions and employers, then develop curricula and programs of research that meet those needs. The introductory course is critical for Communication. It has the ability to make a college- or university-wide impact, and it is the first—and often only—contact many students have with our discipline.

THE PATH FORWARD

To make the desired impact, I propose the following steps:

1. *Determine the specific oral communication needs that best serve your institution and its students.* Look at your school's mission statement and marketing. To determine what specific communication abilities would make your school stand out, listen to (even ask) your dean and provost what role oral communication plays in meeting your students' needs, the school's mission, its market niche, and its strategic plan. Odds are, rather than hearing generic subject areas like "public speaking" or "small group communication" you will start to hear knowledge and skills that cut across contextual boundaries, such as being able to engage in dialogue on controversial issues, explain complex ideas to non-experts, structure and run a meeting efficiently, work effectively across cultural diversity, or solve problems collaboratively (e.g., Hart Research Associates, 2013; Wallace, 2015).
2. *Determine the path to support at your university.* Each school is different, based on structure and his-

tory. At some schools a top-down approach to change might work best, connecting course design to general education reform or major funded university initiatives. Looking for programs upper administrators are promoting can sometimes offer inroads for support. Having a conversation with a dean or provost about how communication could meet the goals of her or his initiatives might offer a means to results. At other schools a bottom-up approach will be more effective. Developing a compelling course that gains support from a program or two at a time, can gradually build widespread support. And in some cases a top-down and bottom-up combination or some different approach might be best. Recent strategic plans that your dean or provost are promoting are a great place to start, as those documents tend to drive resources and support.

3. *Develop a tailored course.* Once you set a plan for an introductory course that meets the school's needs, establish just 3-4 concrete learning outcomes (LOs) the course will achieve. These must be written in plain language that anyone can comprehend at a glance, and they cannot include two or more outcomes under one heading. Then, design a course that develops your specific LOs. Think innovatively about assignments and readings. You may need to use a custom textbook. Many publishers allow you to piece together your own selection of chapters from across their inventory. Some publishers may even allow you to insert your own material into a custom text. You may need to write a chapter or two specific for your LOs to make your book work well (if you cannot add that to a textbook, you can self-publish it as a brief

supplemental text). Your dean may even be willing to offer summer pay to a faculty member to write that material and do other custom work needed to get a text ready to use.

An indispensable element of course design is doing assessment well. “Well” means treating assessment as scholarship instead of bureaucratic work. Ask what information you need in order to know whether students are making the essential learning gains, then collect sufficient student work to see whether they have truly advanced. If results are good, share your success; if not, figure out why results are lacking and modify the course materials, assignments, and/or delivery. Then re-assess and continue the process until you start to see striking results.

4. *Promote heavily.* Once you develop a course that uniquely meets your school’s needs and obtain evidence that students leave the class better for it, engage in a sustained public relations campaign. The most important audience are those who make resource decisions—administrators (dean and provost), curriculum committees, or others. Students, faculty, and advisors are an important audience as well, as they fill the classes and shape the course’s reputation among the student body. Your admissions office should also know, since they can promote your contributions to prospective students. Those in charge of university assessment should also know, as they will want to showcase your work to accreditors and others, who may in turn lend further support to your centrality in meeting the institution’s goals.

CONCLUSION

Present circumstances provide an opportunity for the Communication discipline, but, those gains will not just be handed to us; we need to make it happen. In this essay, I have summarized the nature of our opportunity and suggested steps we can take with the introductory course to achieve success.

While it is easy to see a gain in stature as a matter of disciplinary self-interest, the fact is that the well-being of humanity is strongly tied to how people communicate with each other. Whether we are solving national crises, addressing global environmental or socio-political problems, making good decisions in business, or simply maintaining successful relationships, the ability to communicate well is vital to human flourishing. With our opportunity to move toward a world of better communicators, the discipline needs to achieve the potential that is not fully realized.

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