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Dawn O. Braithwaite

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

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2001 Presidential Address: Do More with More

Dawn O. Braithwaite

Dawn O. Braithwaite (PhD, University of Minnesota) is Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln

As I have listened to, and recently reread the addresses of our WSCA Presidents, I have been moved and challenged by their words and their wisdom. And their speeches are challenging. They have exhorted us to embrace quality discourse, to welcome change, to maintain the centrality of communication in the university of the 21st century, and to avoid becoming out-of-touch whiners. I wondered, what can I add to their words in my own address?

Over this past year, I have thought about my life as a communication professor. How are my times similar and different from those who have come before me? I was born the year Disneyland opened. During my formative years, I watched movies and TV showing the life of the professor. This was a person, usually a man, who enjoyed great respect, worked in a large book-lined office with comfortable leather furniture, and lectured to enraptured students coming to class after the pep rally. Students lined up after class to gain just one more pearl of wisdom. These professors appeared to have ample time to think and write while smoking a pipe, and they left campus by 5:30 PM in a sporty English touring car, arriving to a spacious, comfortable home.

When I compare this 1950s vision of the professorate to my life, and I suspect, to your lives as well, at first glance, reality seems much different. And, in fact, when I gather together with academics, we seem to regale each other, not with stories of how wonderful our careers are, rather, with those things we wish were different or better. The theme seems to be that we are tired of trying to do more with less—to teach more, to adapt to changing economic and political environments, to publish more, and to cope with all the challenges my Presidential predecessors mentioned. In so many ways, it does feel like we are always expected to do more and do it with less.

And yet, when I sit quietly and talk one-on-one with communication professors, I have yet to meet a single person who has told me they hate their job. They'll complain all right, and I'll join in with them. Yet, when we think about it, I suspect that most of us could not imagine a life that we would love as well as being a professor. For you students who are joining the professorate, it feels like your day cannot come soon enough.

Why do we love what we do so much? Searching for an answer, I picked up the trusty WSCA convention program and thumbed through it. And, there I found my answer, not in the Presidential addresses, nor from the compelling, if esoteric, titles of convention papers, but rather from another event on the WSCA program. In fact, this event will take place just a few minutes from now, here at the WSCA luncheon—the Distinguished Service Award ceremony. I know that for many of us, besides the Sock Hop, this is our favorite part of the WSCA convention. Why? Perhaps because we enjoy the opportunity to look back on the careers of some extraordinary people. We get a vision of the academic we wish to be. When we look at the winners of the Distinguished Service Award each year, I believe that what we see are people who are not focusing on doing more with less. Rather, what these precious colleagues have in common is that they are people who are doing more with more!

What does it mean to do more with more? To me, this becomes a personal challenge and one we can rally around collectively. How can we do more with more? Where will our resources come from in the 21st century as a discipline, within universities and departments, and as individuals? As several past WSCA Presidents have so wisely challenged us, if we look to legislatures and/or administrators to provide us with the “more”—the resources we believe we need, we will be nothing but disappointed, waiting for a train that will never come. I certainly don't mean to imply that we should not establish some limits for ourselves concerning what we can and will do in our lives to meet ever-increasing demands. What I am concerned about is finding different resources that we need to enact excellence and keep loving what we do.

So what do our Distinguished Service Award winners have to teach us? How do we find “the more” to do more with more? I believe that we will have to be creative in finding our own resources—in our discipline, in our departments and universities, in our communities, and, finally, in ourselves.

First, put simply, I believe we can find “the more” in the discipline we have chosen. I can think of no topic more worthy of study than communication. And, like my presidential predecessors, I believe Communication Studies can, and must, be central to the university of the 21st century. This will take a collective effort on our parts to meet the challenges that our presidents have laid out for us over the years.

In addition, I have come to appreciate the anchor that the discipline provides us. No matter what happens locally, we can make a lasting contribution through our scholarship and our associations. Knowing that my work is valued by my colleagues nationally and beyond becomes a valuable resource, then. If you want to see someone who has discovered “the more” in our discipline, you'll need to look no further than the Distinguished Service Award winner who will be named in a few minutes.

Second, we have to find “the more” in our own departments and universities. So often our own campuses represent untapped resources to us. Our local colleagues are some of the smartest and more creative people we will ever meet. It is so easy to take these people

for granted and not see the resources they bring to us. We get so busy that we rarely have time to talk with one another, trade ideas, and support one another's efforts. If you want to see an example of this resource, you have only to think about what 1987's Distinguished Service Award winner, B. Aubrey Fisher, brought, and I suspect, still brings, to the University of Utah and beyond. In addition, our students, both undergraduate and graduate, are constant sources of energy, wonder, and wisdom. If you cannot find joy in your students, then you are in the wrong job. Finally, "the more" comes to us from across disciplinary boundaries. Some of my most rewarding research relationships are coming from colleagues from outside our discipline and the work we are doing together is truly exciting.

Third, "the more" in doing more with more exists in our communities. Sandra Petronio exhorts us this year to translate our scholarship—both teaching and research—into practice. This resource comes to us in the forms of investing ourselves in our communities—and I believe we have a responsibility to do so. Think of the work so many are doing in our states and communities, for example, previous Distinguished Service Award winners Nancy McDermid, Jody Nyquist, and Lucy Keele, come to mind. If the research and other work we are doing as communication scholars cannot reach our communities, we are doing something wrong. And, remember, it is not just what we have to bring to our communities. Many of you will recall our keynote speaker last year, Dr. Jody Rretzmann, talked of opening ourselves up to the resources and change the community can bring to the university as well.

Last, I believe "the more" must come to us from within ourselves. We need to find our own resources and make our lives satisfying. This does not mean that we abdicate our responsibilities of scholarship, teaching, and service. It does imply that we must be willing to go beyond old ways of measuring and understanding our own success as communication professors. For me, I have come to understand what we do as more of a lifestyle than a career. That has actually helped me frame what I do. There are new models of faculty life out there. If you need any role model for the rewarding faculty life, I suggest you sit and have a conversation with last year's Distinguished Service Award winner, David Natharius.

It is a funny thing, but as I think back to that 1950's view of the professorate, my life is really not so different. I have enjoyed respect for the most part. I do have a book-lined office, and, while the chair is not leather, it is, at least, ergonomically correct! While my students rarely attend pep rallies, they are taking part in service learning projects. I am fortunate to be a researcher—to discover things about communication that can make a difference in people's lives. And, while I never have enough time to think and write, few of my contemporaries have jobs that allow as much creativity and freedom. While the compensation for a professor does not make us wealthy, most of us have homes and lives that many Americans can only dream of.

While I do not wish to paint an overly rosy view of our lives, my friends, I think most of us would be hard pressed not to be able to point to "the more" in our own lives and careers. The "more" is already there for us. And we are challenged to become a resource—"the more"—for others as well. I thank the Western States Communication Association, and all of you for being "the more" in my life. Many of the most precious resources in my life are right here in this room—my husband, my dear professors, my colleagues, my students, and my friends. Thank you for the opportunity to serve WSCA as your President.