Protecting Communication Departments: Reflections on the Nebraska Experience

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Protecting Communication Departments: Reflections on the Nebraska Experience

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Eight years ago, in the first week of the 1991 fall semester, the Acting Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs announced a series of vertical budget cuts that included the elimination of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s department of Speech Communication (now Communication Studies). Over the next seven months the department fought against the proposed action. In March 1992, the Budget Reduction Review Committee voted against the Vice Chancellor’s recommendation. Later in the month, the Academic Planning Committee also voted to rescind the budget cutting measure. These actions ended the battle and assured the continuation of the department.

In an earlier JACA article, Seiler (1995) reported on the circumstances leading up to the Senior Vice Chancellor’s actions and detailed the various steps that were taken to counter the attempt to eliminate the department. In this essay, we move away from a discussion of crisis management to reflect on the vulnerabilities and strengths of communication departments in the larger university. This past April the department completed its second Academic Program Review (1993 and 1998) since the budget crisis. These reviews were, in large part, an evaluation of the legitimation strategies the department has consciously pursued over the last eight years.

In what follows, we consider the general strengths and weaknesses of communication departments in the context of thinking about the reasons for Nebraska’s vulnerability to budget cutting and its subsequent survival and growth. In a concluding section, we suggest a policy agenda for departments.

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT’S VULNERABILITIES

*Department size.* The relatively small size of communication departments makes them especially vulnerable to administrative budget cutters. In 1991, UNL’s department had ten faculty members, only four of whom were tenured. In the absence of a declaration of financial exigency, the university would have to retain the tenured members of the department. Given Speech Communication’s small size and high percentage of untenured
faculty members, the department became an inviting target for an Acting Senior Vice Chancellor who was trying to make a name for himself by making the "hard decisions" to reject proposed horizontal cuts and make serious programmatic cuts in UNL's academic program.

There is a second dimension to the vulnerability posed by faculty size. University administrators, at least at Nebraska, frequently discuss the importance of what they term "critical mass." The creation of academic reputation depends to a considerable extent on the number of productive scholars working in a given area of disciplinary specialization. Graduate programs in communication studies often support four or five major specialties with fewer than fifteen faculty members. As a result, two or three scholars may cover a huge area of specialization. Such an organizational arrangement may lead administrators to view communication departments as undefined, unfocused, and shallow. Administrators understand that without "critical mass" in particular specialties a department cannot establish a definable reputation that will bring prestige to the university.

Third, small size restricts a department's influence in the university for some obvious bureaucratic reasons. For instance, UNL's Communication Studies department is one of eighteen departments in the College of Arts & Sciences. The College's Executive Committee—consisting of the Dean, the Dean's representative, and elected faculty—is the most powerful committee in Arts & Sciences. The Executive Committee votes on tenure and promotion and serves in an advisory capacity to the Dean on important policy matters. Membership of this elected body is distributed among the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Even a strong candidate from communication will have a hard time winning an election because the home department has so few votes. By contrast, a nominee from English, a department nearly four times as large as communication, enjoys a tremendous advantage. Obvious, too, is the effect sheer numbers have on university visibility. Faculty members in other departments have a much greater likelihood of knowing an English professor than they do of knowing a communication professor. Lack of familiarity leads to ignorance about the nature of the discipline and the work of the department.

Essential discipline. For a complex set of reasons, particular disciplines have become defining elements of the American university. Without departments of Economics, English, History, Political Science, Philosophy, Chemistry, and Biology, for instance, a university is not a university. These departments are taken to be the academic units that constitute the essence of an institution of higher education. Unfortunately, communication departments have not achieved such status. As a result, administrators at the University of Virginia and the University of Oregon feel free to eliminate their communication departments.

At UNL, in the Senior Vice Chancellor's justification for eliminating Speech Communication, he said that it was not "central" to the university's mission. He described the discipline as redundant with psychology and sociology. The Vice Chancellor admitted that basic communication skill instruction was necessary to undergraduate education, but he believed such instruction could be provided without maintaining the department. In other words, the Vice Chancellor put some value on skill instruction, but saw little of value in the communication discipline per se.

Interestingly, the Vice Chancellor had previously been the Dean of the College of Engineering. All engineering students are required to take one or more communication skill courses (either the hybrid course Fundamentals of Human Communication, Public Speaking, Business and Professional Communication, or Interpersonal Communication). Unfortunately, many units of the university connect with communication only at the level of oral communication skill instruction. These courses, even within the discipline, are often notorious for lack of rigor and theoretical orientation. The best-selling public speak-
ing texts are composed at seventh-grade reading levels. The challenging art of eloquence is too often reduced to recipe-like formulations. As a result, our departments are often not thought to represent an intellectually essential discipline.

English departments, by contrast, have created a quite different image of the intellectual content of writing instruction. We are not suggesting that there is not often widespread discontent about the quality and focus of freshmen composition courses. At Nebraska, faculty members frequently express dissatisfaction with the English department's pedagogical approach to writing. These arguments are largely ideological. The university community is engaged in a discussion of the proper approach to composition; it is not questioning the intellectual importance of the task. We should all wish that basic communication instruction was deemed important enough to engage the larger university in such discussions.

**External funding.** UNL is a relatively recent designee as a Carnegie Research I university. It sits uncomfortably close to falling back to Research II status. The Carnegie criterion that has been most troublesome for Nebraska is the number of federal research dollars it must acquire each year to remain a Research I institution. As the Senior Vice Chancellor pointed out, Speech Communication has never made a significant contribution to the external research dollars the university receives.

As we thought through our reply to the external-funding charge, we talked with the chairs at a number of the nation's most distinguished communication departments. We also went through five years of Spectra reports of grants awarded. These data revealed a clear pattern. First, few communication departments garner any significant federal research money. Second, those departments that receive federal grants largely do so by focusing on health communication. On occasion, a department will receive money for some pedagogical innovation or an educational outreach effort.

Little external funding is available for the discipline's mainstream social-science research agenda. On only the rarest of occasions have scholars received external funds for the discipline's humanities research (rhetorical studies).

The reasons, we suspect, are relatively obvious. Our research does not tend to carry high price tags. Unlike political science and sociology, communication scholars, excluding those in mass communication, rarely carry out expensive survey research. Unlike psychology and the natural sciences, communication scholarship typically does not require expensive equipment or sophisticated laboratories.

**Departmental organization.** Most disciplines are reified in a standard departmental form. Departments of chemistry are generally organized pretty much the same among different universities. By contrast, communication departments take on many different organizational forms.

In a recent planning exercise at UNL, the chair was asked to gather comparative data from communication departments at peer institutions. This is a surprisingly difficult task. At Nebraska, in addition to our department there is a College of Journalism and Mass Communications and a Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication. Our department, located in the College of Arts & Sciences, offers emphases in rhetorical and communication theory, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, instructional communication, and communication and culture. Other university units at UNL offer courses in public relations, advertising, broadcasting, mass communication theory and research, and leadership training. At other universities, these various curricula are frequently offered under different organizational arrangements (King, 1998).

During the budget crisis, the Senior Vice Chancellor was so confused by the various organizational arrangements and nomenclatures for communication that he asserted in his justification document that neither Michigan State University nor Purdue University (two
official Nebraska peer institutions) had departments of speech communication. In part, these errors were due to poor research (the written justification was filled with an enormous number of factual errors on almost every issue). Yet, we suspect that his difficulty was attributable to the myriad of organizational arrangements. UNL is configured quite differently than Michigan State and Purdue. To an outsider, they may not even appear to be in the same discipline. Our discipline has never entered into a serious discussion about the optimum organizational arrangement for communication faculty.

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS' STRENGTHS

Efficiency. Communication departments are typically among the most efficient producers of student credit hours at the university. Mathematics may be the only other discipline that is as consistently efficient. Given high student demand and relatively low overhead in salaries and equipment, communication departments are a very good buy for the university. Our department frequently is the college leader in student credit hours per FTE.

The great myth of higher education is that departments with considerable external grant activity are the university’s cash cows. In fact, departments of communication, even with little grant activity, are much more profitable than the sciences. We must make clear to administrators that they have to think about grant activity in more than one way. Since communication departments have low overhead, grant activity is much less important. When we do get grants, they are more profitable than when colleges of engineering or medicine receive them.

Placement. Placement of Ph.D.s is one important indicator of the health of a graduate program. The demand for communication Ph.D.s in higher education is perhaps the strongest among all humanities and social-science disciplines. For example, since the budget crisis of 1991, virtually every Ph.D. produced at UNL has obtained a tenure-track position. Just this past year, nine of our graduate students were on the market; eight accepted tenure-track positions and one accepted a one-year, full-time instructor position (this was largely due to the fact that this student’s spouse is finishing a Ph.D. in another discipline and this limited the geography of her search).

The discipline’s outstanding Ph.D. placement record is probably attributable to many of the same reasons communication departments are vulnerable. First, we have only about fifty Ph.D. programs in communication (narrowly defined as “speech communication”). Disciplines like English and history have well over a hundred. Second, the small size of communication departments has kept the number of graduate students per department relatively low. At Nebraska, we generally have twenty graduate teaching assistants, of whom about sixteen are doctoral students. In a typical year, we graduate from three to five Ph.D.s. Third, the high demand for basic communication skill instruction has created a strong market for communication professors.

Demand. Communication remains a strong and growing major among undergraduates. Nebraska has about 280 majors and a large number of minors (an exact count is unavailable because UNL institutional research does not count minors). Our courses are required by virtually all the professional schools at the university, including architecture, business, education, engineering, nursing, and the various agricultural and natural resource programs. Some of our courses are elective options for a variety of majors and many others are part of the general education requirements. As a result, we have thousands of students take our classes every year. As enrollment has declined for some Arts & Sciences departments (for instance, there is a national downward trend in political science), student demand has generally increased in communication.
As Seiler (1995) reported, in the fight for survival in 1991-1992 a large and vocal constituency came to the support of the department. Communication departments touch almost every student at the university. Our graduates are often well positioned in the community. Business and professional leaders highly value communication education. Even though we have small faculty numbers, we have a relatively large impact on the student body and larger community. These are assets that we can exploit in fighting battles within the university. Since our successful battle for survival, colleagues and administrators frequently make mention of the large outpouring of support for the communication department.

Interdisciplinary work. As residents of the academy have learned, the term "interdisciplinary" has an ambiguous emotive force. In the last few years, there has been much discussion of breaking down disciplinary walls in order to tackle intellectual problems that no longer respect the political boundaries of departments. At the same time, interdisciplinary scholarship—women's studies is perhaps the paradigmatic case—is too often deemed soft and lacking in rigor by tenure and promotion committees.

There is some reason to believe that this old prejudice against the interdisciplinary may finally be waning. Interdisciplinary work from biochemistry to cognitive science is beginning to achieve status in the academy. If this is in fact the case, communication departments are well positioned to take advantage of this new intellectual climate.

In Nebraska's case, we have eagerly sought opportunities to interact with other units of the university. We believe that familiarity with the discipline is an important avenue of legitimacy in the wider university. Four years ago, the College of Arts & Sciences began a series of interdisciplinary initiatives. These initiatives were designed to find places where the College might distinguish itself and its programs. Four of these initiatives were relevant to communication and we are participating actively in three: Public Discourse and Human Values, Family Research and Policy, and Human Rights and Diversity. These initiatives fit with the department's foci. Our rhetorical studies faculty has taken a leadership role in the Public Discourse and Human Values group. The Family Research and Policy initiative fit with our own developing interpersonal focus in family communication. The Human Rights and Diversity group intersects with our growing focus in intercultural and international communication. As we have hired new faculty, we sought scholars who bolstered our position in these interdisciplinary initiatives. These opportunities help us overcome our limitations in size and achieve "critical mass."

We have also taken advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other disciplines on the development of curriculum. Recently, we created an interdisciplinary M.A. in marketing, communication, and advertising. This terminal degree is designed to meet the needs of working professionals who seek advanced instruction in communication. This program is a joint effort of the Department of Marketing in the College of Business Administration, the Department of Advertising in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, and our Department of Communication Studies in the College of Arts & Sciences. We have also started an undergraduate concentration that permits communication majors to acquire an emphasis in public relations through the College of Journalism. In entering these new relationships, there are both costs and benefits. On the cost side, this new program pulls us away from what has been our core mission in graduate education. It forces us to expend resources on an applied professional Master's program. On the other hand, we benefit by making the discipline a central component of a program that promotes the state's economic welfare. We also become aligned with two powerful political units on the UNL campus.

Finally, the department has assumed a leadership position in an interdisciplinary Graduate College program (the director is a member of our faculty). The Preparing Future Faculty program brings together graduate students from eight different departments (Chemis-
try. Communication Studies, Educational Psychology, English, History, Mathematics & Statistics, Political Science, and Sociology). This program has had the side benefit of making communication’s strong placement rate widely known throughout the university. It has also increased the frequency of our contact with other units on campus.

**Quality teaching.** Perhaps because of the nature of our discipline, communication departments tend to have strong teaching records. We suspect that our scholarly interest in performance, messages, and audiences helps fill our ranks with fine instructors. As the drive for quality teaching has become more than public relations, communication departments are positioned to strengthen their standing in the university.

In Nebraska’s case, the high quality of our graduate student teaching has helped distinguish the department. A frequent refrain from critics of higher education is that universities place too much reliance on poorly prepared TAs. Our TAs have frequently won university-wide awards for their quality instruction. We have tried to build on this strength rather than become self-satisfied with the caliber of our instruction. First, we have asked doctoral-program applicants to include evidence of quality teaching in their packet of materials. One selection criterion is whether the prospective graduate student will teach well. Second, we have created a developmental teaching sequence for our graduate assistants. We move them from courses that are tightly controlled (common syllabi, tests, textbooks, and assignments) to courses that they may largely own. Third, we offer our teaching assistants opportunities to learn about the best pedagogical thinking, especially in educational psychology.

**Technology.** Communication departments ought to benefit from the digital revolution. The issues the cyber world raises about the changing nature of texts, altered forms of personal relationships, reconfigured communication networks within organizations, and the reconstitution of what the term “public” implies, for instance, present us with unique research and teaching opportunities.

Most obviously, it presents us with opportunities to retool our basic communication skill courses. We need to teach our students how to do research effectively on the Internet. Distinguishing good from bad sources absent the traditional markers of scholarly quality (publication, academic publishing house, refereed journals, etc.) requires sophisticated consumers of argument and critical readers of public discourse. We also need to make our students comfortable with the new technologies of presentation. The well-worn recipes for the use of visual aids need to be rethought and adapted to this new high tech environment.

Like many other communication departments, Nebraska has begun to grapple with these issues. We have been able to garner resources from the university to create a new computer laboratory. We have started to incorporate instruction in computer presentations into our basic courses. We are increasingly taking up issues of the digital culture in our core undergraduate and graduate curricula. This poses a considerable challenge for a faculty largely trained in a pre-cyber world.

**Diversity.** At the time of the UNL budget crisis, Speech Communication was the only department in the college that had achieved gender equity. In the fall of 1999, out of eleven faculty members, the department will have four women and seven men, three African Americans and eight European Americans. Communication Studies has the most diverse faculty at the university. This diversity was achieved by forging a relationship with the Institute for Ethnic Studies. We were given permission to hire faculty members who would serve one-third time in Ethnic Studies. As a result, our department got a little bigger, we were able to strengthen our emphasis in communication and culture, and we have been able to create a faculty that more accurately reflects the face of America.
A POLICY AGENDA

Communication departments need to think through their vulnerabilities and strengths in the politics of the larger college or university. The outcome of such deliberation would certainly include strategies of legitimation. To some extent, NCA has already addressed these issues with collected materials on defending the discipline. We need to move beyond crafting rhetorical strategies and think about how we might best address some of our structural weaknesses.

(1) Organizational configuration. Is there an optimum way to organize communication within your university? At Nebraska, we have already heard the concept of “right-sizing” departments floating around the upper echelons of the university, although it seems to have been put on hold at the moment. As a smaller department, communication is ripe for some kind of merger with another unit.

We know from our experience and the experience of colleagues at other universities that Journalism has a different and often incompatible culture (Bettinghaus, 1995; Keel, 1995; Nelson, 1995). We also realize that moving out of Arts & Sciences into a professional-oriented unit may lead to the loss of our traditional identity in the liberal arts. National leadership on this issue may either help stave off undesirable organizational configurations or make these mergers more hospitable. NCA and AEJMC (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication), for instance, ought to talk through these issues of culture. There may, in fact, be ways for us to help each other. Although such a unit is not present at UNL, similar initiatives might be undertaken with library and information sciences.

(2) External funding. Departments need to do seemingly contrary things at the same time. First, they need to make the pursuit of external funding a more prominent dimension of their culture. In other disciplines, graduate students have extensive experience working on faculty members’ externally funded projects. As a result, they come to understand the process of grant acquisition. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case in communication. Despite our present lack of external funding, departments should maximize the experience that they do have to make grant writing a part of the graduate curriculum. Second, departments need to craft a discourse that explains effectively the economics of communication. Communication departments are cost-efficient and they are an important financial asset even with modest grant activity.

(3) Continuing education. The scholarly life is a perpetual exercise in continuing education. Each of us is expected to read, teach, and write constantly about new developments in our area of specialization. Despite this feature of our professional culture, we fear that the broad effects of computerization on our discipline cannot be adequately addressed by individual effort alone. The digital revolution not only affects our particular specialty, but also the discipline’s larger pedagogical mission.

Our professional organizations need to do more than offer the occasional workshop; they ought to make a concerted effort to help departments maximize the discipline’s opportunity to take advantage of this new communication environment. If we do this effectively, communication departments can become increasingly valuable to students and become ever more essential to the university.

CONCLUSIONS

Few of us enjoy university politics. We entered the scholarly life to pursue our intellectual interests in writing and teaching. Unfortunately, the external world of budgets, enrollments, and personnel has a decisive effect on our ability to follow these pursuits. Obviously, local conditions and how effectively individual departments deal with them
are usually decisive. But there are some things that we can confront as a discipline. Mathematics, for instance, realized that they faced a pedagogical crisis. Large numbers of American students were not succeeding in math classes, especially in calculus. Over the past decade, mathematicians have launched major national reform efforts. Communication can take similar collective action to grasp opportunities and ward off threats.

The threat of departmental elimination is a sobering experience. In the past seven years, we have looked at nearly every issue with an eye to how it can better position us in the college and university. Although we have every reason to believe that we are now on firm ground, it is hard not to think of nearly every new development at the university as a potential threat. We are not suggesting that the discipline reside in a perpetual state of paranoia, but we do think that every faculty, as well as our professional leadership, must take a proactive posture toward the future.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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