Shared Goals in an Undergraduate Communication Curriculum: Using Q Methodology to Identify Community Expectations

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ABSTRACT: Communication, a diverse discipline that includes fields such as media studies, telecommunications, advertising, journalism, public relations and film, attracts both students and faculty with wide ranging interests and needs. This study employs Q methodology at a small communication department housed at a major private research university to identify shared goals, expectations, and interests among communication undergraduates and faculty. Through Q methodology, three distinct groups or factors emerged, and areas of consensus among those groups were identified that facilitated the drafting of a new, proposed mission statement for the communication department. The article concludes that Q methodology is a valuable tool to locate consensus and shared perceptions and values within university departments that include students and faculty with diverse interests and areas of study.

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The Need for Shared Goals

Among the most complex of issues associated with higher education is the curriculum, which finds its voice in the undergraduate major and general education requirements, and its relations to educational goals. Young people, many away from home for the first time and without workplace decision making experience, are expected to develop depth and breadth in a substantive major such as communication. Most students will change majors at least once and, lacking the perspective that comes with education and experience, few are likely to cross the undergraduate terrain with any clear sense of the relation between education and employment or other life goals. "Majors," wrote Erickson and Strommer, "are often selected with virtually no knowledge of the field and for the flimsiest of reasons" (1991, p. 32).

Undergraduates' confusion over the purposes of curriculum may well be rooted in the differences between faculty and student attributions about the goals of higher education. Virginia Smith, President *Emeritus* of Vassar College, stresses six purposes for general education beyond the narrow confines of the academic major, each of which falls into liberal arts categories such as the recognition of social heritage, the development of a sense of social purpose, and the creation of lifelong learning skills (1993, pp. 246-7). Rqsovsky identified five similar curriculum goals (1990, pp.105-107). Yet in their careful study of student attitudes in *Careerism and Intellectualism Among College Students,* Katchadourian and Boli find cause for the "mounting concern among educators that careerism and consumerism pervade American higher education" (1985, p. xiii). Not surprisingly, student interest in curriculum is often focused on jobs above all else.

Of course, few are prepared to argue with certainty that there is a direct link between curriculum and developmental outcome. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) reviewed over 2,600 studies conducted over a twenty-year period. "The college years are a time of student change on a broad front," they found, while adding the caveat that maturation, rather than a particular curriculum, may be the primary change agent. Sociologist Bernard Berelson is reported to have summed up some decades ago the issue of whether individuals change because of college as, "some do, some don't; the differences aren't very great; and it's more complicated than that" (Menges, 1988, p. 259).

When the major is in one of the fields associated with communication, such as media studies, telecommunications, journalism, advertising, public relations, or broadcasting, the complexity assumes

three added dimensions.

The Nature of the Field

First, communication as an academic discipline lacks the definition cohesion present in more established areas of study such as history, literature or psychology. Still present are approaches to the study of communication ranging from communication science to cultural and critical studies (Rogers, 1994), and from professional journalism to film studies that at their best complement each other, but at their worst lead to intradisciplinary warfare. In a review for the *Journal of American History*, a communication science scholar summed up his view of Simpson's (1994) *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960.* "An adherent of the 'critical' school of mass communication study, he is out to prove that the quantitative tradition of media effects research was conceived in sin (Chaffee, 1995, p. 345)" the reviewer wrote. Beyond commentary on Simpson's scholarship, Chaffee's observations underscore the tension generated by an intradisciplinary split over motive and method. As recently as the Winter 1995 issue of *Journalism Educator,* Carter's lead article could still pose as unanswered questions: "Was it wrong to go from profession to field?" "Were we wrong to venture into the realm of social science?" (p. 4). While no parallel study unique to communication exists, recent Carnegie Foundation research found that nearly fifty percent of the social science professors questioned agreed with the statement "faculty in my department have fundamental differences about the nature of the discipline" (Boyer, 1990, Appendix A).

Moving Targets

Second, even if we could agree upon a single definition of the study of communication, we would still be faced with the fact that communication at the end of the twentieth century is in a state of rapid change. The elements of the communication process itself are fluid. Digitization of information has done more than create new media. The flood of information technology has created new curriculum tributaries that spawn courses in information processing and visual literacy. While students in a journalism lab are using computers to practice Associated Press leads, others down the hall are exploring the possibility that humans apply the same social rules to their interactions with the computers as they do in face-to-face human relationships. Both labs are

inhabited by students majoring in communication, but there the obvious similarities appear to end. No wonder students appear to be selecting majors "for the flimsiest reasons." The communication curriculum once treated print and broadcast media as simple transmission tools necessary to the distribution of the journalist craft being taught. Now curriculum committees struggle with fundamental issues of how to treat media that no longer fit neatly under headings such as journalism, broadcasting or film.

Dennis and LaMay, editing a special issue of *The Gannett Center Journal* (1991), focused on Higher Education in the Information Age and began with the observation that "there is a crisis in higher education, a crisis of knowledge -- who produces it, controls it, uses, it, benefits by it. These issues are central to the character of both the university and the mass media" (xvii). Less clear to the editors was how communication curriculum, which by its nature embraces these issues, should respond.

Multiple Curricular Goals

And third, the difference between graduate and undergraduate education in communication generates not only differing curricular goals within a faculty, but the presence as well of faculties who share neither a commonality of education nor of goals. Perhaps more than most disciplines, the substantive and philosophical differences between graduate and undergraduate study in communication go well beyond simple questions of depth. Undergraduate study in communication is often, but not always, rooted in professional school preparation. Graduate study tends to focus not on developing the practitioner skills associated with the communication professions, but on research and scholarship for careers in academics and research.

On a practical level, this dualism of purpose has often resulted in bifurcated faculties modeled loosely along the lines of medical schools that distinguish between clinical and research faculties, or music schools that distinguish between the musicologist concerned with theory and the maestro focused on the bowing techniques of her protege. Even under the best of circumstances in which the two faculties complement each other, there are likely to be fundamental differences of opinion over the expectations for curriculum and emphasis of mission. "The very nature of professional education, " Soloski wrote, "engenders . . . criticism because it is caught between the demands of the academic world and those of the professional world" (1994, p.5).

Developing Shared Goals

The difficulties of developing field-wide agreement as to the nature of communication study, the recognition that technological innovation makes curriculum adoption in communication a moving target, and the multiplicity of faculty orientations and goals in communication departments and colleges -- these are all significant within the context of a set of priorities voiced by the late Ernest Boyer, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer wrote that, "Academic institutions, to be effective, must be purposeful." By purposeful, Boyer continued, "we mean a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus" (1993, p. 327).

Given the nature of communication study, which continues to justify Schramm's three-decade-old observation of the field as "an academic crossroads where many have passed, but few have tarried," (1963, p.2), where do we even begin the task of developing "shared academic goals?"

Q methodology is a powerful tool for examining the diversity of opinion within a small group and therefore, it may be used to facilitate a process by which faculty and students can share academic goals. It may be a particularly appropriate tool, then, for identifying and uncovering perspective voices or priority patterns of interests among faculty and students in communication departments and colleges in which a myriad of interests and values congregate. Of special relevance is the possibility, through Q methodology, to avoid the divisive winning-tally outcomes associated with survey methodology that can further isolate faculty and students from each other and further confuse students who already are unsure as to the practiced nature of the communication major they have selected. Inherent in this approach is the belief that disciplinary goals as represented by clear statements of mission and through what Smith (1993, p. 256) refers to as "unifying strategies" of curricula, are preferable to a culture of isolation.

The Study

We selected Q methodology as the appropriate tool with which to craft a statement of mission for a department of communication -- a mission that would aid in a coalescence around shared goals of a diverse group of faculty and students. Our subject department is a small academic

unit that graduates about 45 students per year. The undergraduate curriculum includes courses in a variety of communication processes and practices that are similar to the courses that comprise undergraduate majors in communication and journalism across the United States. Classes in print and broadcast journalism, film and video production, media law and history, and communication theory and research methods play a dominant role.

Our subject department differs, however, in other ways from the norm. It is part of a private research university with an undergraduate population of about six thousand students. Kosicki and Becker (1994), in a comprehensive national survey of journalism and mass communication programs throughout the country, note that the number of undergraduate degrees awarded in the majors increased 2.1 percent from 1991-92 to 1992-93 (p. 7). In contrast, the number of communication majors at our university appears to be in decline. For about a decade -- and as recently as 1992 -- the department graduated 45 to 50 seniors each year. The graduation figure dropped to 34 in 1993, and dropped again -- to the mid-twenties -- in 1994. Somewhat paradoxically, enrollment in individual communication department classes recorded a marked increase during the same period. When it came time to select a major, however, many students turned elsewhere. The drop in the number of communication majors provided impetus for an exploratory examination of the department's undergraduate curriculum. Our Q methodology study was the product of a doctoral seminar, *"Communication Curriculum Pedagogy."*

As an intuitive matter, it seemed reasonable to expect a strong interest -- certainly not a declining one -- in communication at our university, which is located within the heart of California's Silicon Valley. Combined with a nationally strong student interest in the information highway, we wondered why students appeared to reject communication as a viable undergraduate major. Many explanations are plausible. Our seminar decided, however, to concentrate on a single fundamental issue. What expectations do undergraduates and faculty hold and share for the undergraduate communication major? We reasoned that before hazarding a guess as to why students have turned away from the communication major, we should ask simply: what is the communication major?

The 1993-94 edition of the University's official handbook on degree programs provides the purpose of the communication major in rather vague terms:

The undergraduate curriculum is intended for liberal arts students who
wish to build a fundamental knowledge of communication in society.

At a seminar, we concluded that this "mission statement" at best
provides faculty and student with very little information. What follows
represents our attempt to identify a more appropriate mission statement,
one that can provide students and faculty with an accurate -- and
perhaps more enticing -- description of the communication major, and
that can provide the faculty with a conceptual and operational vantage
point from which the substance of the major may be considered.

To gain the broadest perspective possible and to facilitate an
informational dialogue, we sought input from both faculty and students
using a "Q sort" of 61 statements. Q methodology asks members of
the group to sort a number of statements -- each of which refers to a
single question -- in order of importance. In this project, 10
undergraduate majors and eight communication faculty members
participated in the Q sort, conducted in April and May 1994. Each
responded to the following statement:

By graduation, a student majoring in communication should _____ .

Items covered a wide range of possibilities for the major, from
knowledge of specific disciplines to general skills, and from guarantees
of employment to the ability to hold a conversation about communica-
tion. Most of the items had been generated by faculty and undergradu-
ate students in response to an earlier questionnaire. The types of
statement could easily be supplemented or adjusted for evaluating the
communication program.

By identifying typical patterns of responses, the Q method allowed
us to : 1) identify distinct groups of views about the communication
major; and 2) identify specific points of both consensus and conten-
tion between these groups. In this report, we highlight both types of
points. While it is important for the department to be aware of the
unresolved issues within the major, it is through the identification of
consensus items that we will move forward towards a revised mission
statement, and concomitantly, towards other improvements in the
department.

Findings

When the responses of the ten undergraduates and eight faculty members who completed the *Q* sort were factor analyzed, three distinct priority patterns emerged. That is, three groups or factors of respondents were produced, with the individuals within those groups prioritizing the statements in the Q sort in approximately the same manner. We have dubbed these groups Students, Faculty A and Faculty B.

Before discussing these factors separately, it is useful to examine the consensus and contested statements among the three groups. A +6 ranking means that the respondent group considering the statement to be of the highest priority and most importance, while a -6 ranking means that the statement was of lowest priority. Using this scale, respondent attitudes toward the Q sort statements cluster in five categories ranging from most important to least important.

Statements classified as "Consensus Priority" were those ranked +4 to +6 by at least two of the three respondent groups. "Priority" statements were also ranked between +4 and +6, but by only one of the three groups. "Contested" statements were those ranked +4 to +6 by one group, but between -4 and -6 by another group. "Low Priority" statements were ranked between -4 and -6 by only one group. "Consensus Low Priority" statements were classed between -4 and -6 by two respondent groups. What follows sketches the contours of these five categories.

Table I below, "Consensus Statements by Priority," lists the statements by degree of consensus in each priority category.

Table 1
Consensus Statement by Priority: From Most to Least Important

Degree & Direction of Consensus	Statement	Groups
+2	Role of media in society	FA, FB, SG
+2	Intellectual tools of question assumptions about m.c.	FB, SG
+2	In-depth knowledge of at least one aspect of the field	FB, SG
+1	Critical thinking skills	SG
+1	Academic writing skills	SG
+1	Able to effectively discuss communication issues	SG

+1	Go on to graduate school in comm, film or journalism	SG
+1	Integrate knowledge across disciplines	FB
+1	Communication theory	FB
+1	Communication research methods	FB
+1	Media effects	FB
+1	Relationship between comm and democracy	FB
+1	Freedom of expression	FA
+1	Ethics and Journalism	FA
+1	Broadcast Journalism	FA
+1	Core curriculum beyond Communication 1	FA
+1	Relationship between comm & technology	FA
0	Skills for employment	SG+6,FB6
0	Career planning and counseling in department	SG+5,FB5
0	Social science perspectives on comm	FB+6,FA5
0	Race and communication	FA+4,SG5
0	At least one film, video or production class	FA+6,FB5
-1	At least one seminar in department	SG
-1	Screenwriting	SG
-1	At least one senior seminar in department	SG
-1	Film theory	SG
-1	Electronic data base searches	SG
-1	Gender and communication	SG
-1	Internship opportunities by department	FB
-1	Professional contacts from department	FB
-1	Equal number of theory and practicum courses	FB
-1	Interpersonal communication	FB
-1	Psychological processing & communication	FA
-1	Seniors honors thesis	FA
-1	Sense of community in department	FA
-1	TA opportunities	FA
-1	Individual, scholarship, one on one, with professor	FA
-1	Humanistic perspectives on comm	FA
-1	Opportunity to meaningfully evaluate dept curriculum	FA
-1	Opportunity to meaningfully evaluate dept teaching	FA
-2	Video production	SG, FB
-2	Film production	SG, FB

+2=High Priority for two or more groups.   FA=   Faculty   A
+1=High Priority for one only one group.   FB = Faculty   B
 0=High Priority for one group. Low Priority for one group.SB Student Group
-1=Low Priority for only one group.
-2=Low Priority for two or more groups.

Consensus Priority Statement (high priority for two or more groups)

Three statements comprise this category: 1) knowledge about the role the mass media play in society; 2) the intellectual tools to question assumptions about mass communication; and 3) in-depth knowledge of at least one aspect of communication.

"Knowledge about the role the mass media play in society" was ranked highly by all three groups. It received a +5 by Faculty A, and a +4 by both Faculty B and the Student group.

Majors possessing "the intellectual tools to question assumptions about mass communication" was ranked +5 by Faculty B and +4 by the Student group. It was also ranked highly, although somewhat less so -- a +3 -- by Faculty A.

"In-depth knowledge of at least one aspect of the field of communication" was ranked +4 by both Faculty B and the Student group. It was ranked a fairly neutral -1 by Faculty A.

Priority Statement (high priority for only one group)

The 15 statements that make up this group may be broken down into two general categories: 1) statements reflecting the importance of intellectual capabilities such as critical thinking, writing and discussion; and 2) statements reflecting the importance of specific knowledge areas such as media effects, research methodology, ethics and journalism, and freedom of expression. Statements that privilege general intellectual capabilities were a high priority by the Student group, whereas statements privileging specific content areas were supported variously by Faculty A and Faculty B.

Contested Statements (high priority for one group and low priority for one group)

Five statements make up this group: 1) having the skills necessary for employment; 2) having been provided the career planning and counseling services by the department; 3) having knowledge about the ways in which social science considers issues of communication; 4) having knowledge about race and communication; and 5) having taken at least one film, video or journalism production course.

The employment skills statement was ranked +6 by the Student group and -6 by Faculty B, thus receiving both the highest and lowest priorities possible. The career planning statement was ranked +5 by

the Student group and -5 by Faculty B. The social science statement was ranked +6 by Faculty B and -5 by Faculty A. The race and communication statement was ranked +4 by Faculty A in contrast to -5 by the Student group. Lastly, the production class statement was ranked +6 by Faculty A while Faculty B ranked it -5.

Low Priority Statement (low priority for one group)

The 18 statements in this group may be broken down into two general areas: 1) content-specific material such as screen writing, film theory, interpersonal communication, and psychological processing; and 2) development and opportunity oriented experiences such as seminar courses, internships, honors theses, and one-to-one scholarship opportunities with communication professors.

Generally speaking, each group rejected both some content-specific statements and some development and opportunity oriented statements. The Student group, for example, ranked both screen writing and seminar courses with the lowest possible priority of -6 while Faculty A ranked a senior honors thesis -6 and psychological processing - 4. Faculty B, on the other hand, ranked both interpersonal communication and internship opportunities -4.

Consensus Low Priority (low priority for two or more groups)

Two statements comprise this group: 1) having knowledge about video production; and 2) having knowledge about film production. Video classes were ranked -4 by Faculty B and -5 by the Student group. Faculty A group ranked this statement neutral at 0. Film classes were ranked -5 by Faculty B, -4 by the Student group and neutral at 0 by Faculty A.

Analysis of Groups

One group or factor -- dubbed the "Student Factor" -- is comprised of seven students and no faculty members. The individuals within this factor are concerned primarily with obtaining and possessing the capacities, knowledge and skills necessary for their future, be that future a job in a communication-related field or graduate studies in communication, film, or journalism. For instance, the highest priority in this factor is to "have the necessary skills for employment in a communication-related field," while the fourth highest priority is "to be

able to go on to graduate school in communication, film or journalism." This group also places a priority on the department providing career planning and counseling services, and obtaining in-depth knowledge in at least one field of communication. The lowest priorities of this group relate to taking seminars and having knowledge about film and video production and film theory. In addition, this factor gives low priority to knowledge about the relationship between communication and race, as well as the relationship between communication and gender.

The second factor, Faculty A, is comprised of three faculty members and two students. This factor prioritizes knowledge of journalism, both print and broadcast, and feels strongly that undergraduates should have completed at least one film, video, or journalism production class. The statement receiving the strongest priority was that communication undergraduates should have knowledge about ethics and journalism. However, this group also emphasizes placing this knowledge about journalism within a larger context, as it values communication undergraduates having knowledge about free expression and communication, race and communication, and -- like the other factors -- the role the mass media play in society. With respect to the department, however, those respondents in this factor give lowest priority to undergraduates feeling a sense of community with others in the department, completing a seniors honors thesis, as well as working with a communication professor on a piece of scholarship. Likewise, this factor gives a very low priority to providing students with a meaningful opportunity to evaluate the teaching in the department as well as the curriculum.

The final factor, described herein as Faculty B, is comprised of five faculty members and one student. This factor emphasizes the social science aspects of the field of communication undergraduates have knowledge about the following: the ways that social science considers communication issues, mass media effects, communication theory, communication research methods, and the role mass media play in society. Like the respondents in the Student Factor, those in this factor also give high priority to undergraduates achieving in-depth knowledge of at least one aspect of the field of communication, as well as having the intellectual tools to question assumptions about mass communication. Specifically, statements of lowest priority are that students have the skills necessary for employment in a communication-related field, that students be provided by the department with career planning and counseling services, and that the department provide undergraduates with both internship opportunities and opportunities to contact commu-

nication professionals. Finally, the members of this factor also show relatively less interest in students having completed at least one film, video or journalism production class.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the Q study, our seminar made three recommendations to the communication department.

1. We recommended a new mission statement that is reflective of the agreement we found among both faculty and students as to the value of an undergraduate communication major. We believe that the proposed new statement has two advantages over the existing statement discussed above:

• The proposed mission statement provides a conceptual framework in which to organize future discussion of undergraduate major requirements. Toward that end, we noted that the University's Commission on Undergraduate Education was stating forcefully that majors must provide depth as well as breadth, and that they must provide a coherent set of courses designed to enable students to meet major, as well as course-specific, goals.

• The proposed mission statement provides a description of communication department purposes and practices.

We proposed as an undergraduate statement of mission:

The undergraduate major in Communication examines the role the mass media play in society; provides the students with the intellectual tools to question assumptions about mass communication; and provides students with in-depth knowledge of at least on aspect of the field.

2. We recommend increased, systematic attention to advising. Given the broad range of approaches and issues reflected by the faculty and the field, it is vital that students are directed with care towards courses and professors best able to meet their needs. Such decisions must be the result of on-going dialogues between faculty advisers and students. In making this recommendation, we recognized advising as an element of teaching, and an opportunity for individual mentoring, every bit as important to an undergraduate's education as formal classroom and directed research opportunities.

3. We recommended in line with our first recommendation and finding, that the faculty resolve two important issues:

● What areas should students be able to select from to meet the "in-depth" requirement?

● What does the faculty consider to be "in-depth" work that meets the proposed requirement?

Discussion

Damrosch (1995) poses the question in *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, "Just what is the modern university?" He responds, "The university is what its members do" (16). Our goals as a graduate seminar interested in relationships among curriculum, pedagogy, and academic goals was to consider the associated question, "what is the communication major at our own university?" Our query was driven by an immediate interest in why student commitment to the major was shrinking while enrollments within its courses were expanding.

In a broader sense, however, our investigation allowed us to examine several associated educational issues that ranged from Erickson and Strommer's (1991) concern that majors are "selected with virtually no knowledge of the field and for the flimsiest of reasons," (p. 32), to Katchadourian and Boli's (1983) dismay that "careerism and consumerism pervade American higher education," to Boyer's prescriptive that to be effective, academic institutions must be places in which "faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus" (327). In other words, while we were indeed interested in knowing," what is the communication major at our university?", we were even more interested in generating among all of the members of our community, a conversation in which concerns would find a voice, in which ideas would be generated, and in which learning would be seen as a process rather than as an outcome.

Beyond the implementation of our suggestion for an enhanced university bulletin statement of our department goals, we were gratified as members of an academic community with another outcome of our Q methodology study. Our report became the impetus for a searching departmental forum composed of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty. We found the Q methodology especially appropriate to our needs because it was used to locate consensus and to tease out shared perceptions and values. In this sense, our Q methodology was used not as a piece of descriptive research as might be the case for a similar survey instrument, but as a means of facilitating a process in which faculty and students were engaged in an active teaching and learning

environment.

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