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Building Support for the Introductory Oral Communication Course: Strategies for Widespread and Enduring Support on Campus

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A strong introductory course is important for many communication departments, for the discipline, and for meeting our obligation to society. This paper utilizes the example of a recent curricular reform that threatened to eliminate a required oral communication course to reflect on strategies departments can use to build widespread and lasting support for the course. The paper reviews the events that led to the challenge and details the department's response, which offers lessons that may be useful for other institutions. Four lessons include: tailoring the introductory course to the institution's needs and mission, involvement in university work, making compelling use of assessment, and drawing on support from accreditation requirements.

Keywords: assessment, basic course, general education, supportive environment, lessons learned

The introductory oral communication course is important to communication departments and to the discipline itself. For many departments, the basic course generates sufficient credit hours to support necessary faculty lines for a strong major, and many faculty members financed their graduate education through a teaching assistantship (Pearson & Nelson, 1990). Beyond individual departments, the basic course is important as the face of the discipline and for the role it plays in strengthening individual departments. The health of the discipline is heavily influenced by departmental strength nationwide (Arnett & Fritz, 1999; Becker, 1999). Unfortunately, the introductory course in communication does not always enjoy strong support across campuses, and that can threaten its viability.

Lack of support is problematic even beyond departmental or disciplinary self-interest. There is a growing awareness that effective communication is among the most essential learning outcomes for today's students. The National Association of College and Employers (NACE) "Job Outlook 2012" survey shows that teamwork (4.60 on a 5-point scale) and oral communication (4.59) are virtually tied for skills employers see as most needed in college graduates (NACE, 2011). The Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U) includes effective oral and written communication among its essential learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2002, 2007). An older, but still relevant, survey of business school deans and corporate CEOs showed that both deans and CEOs considered oral communication skills *more essential than any business-specific skill* (Harper, 1987). If higher education is to fully realize its mission in serving society, communication needs to be a strong element in its curriculum. And for communication departments to fulfill our role in developing essential learning outcomes, we must develop widespread and lasting support across the campus, beginning with the introductory course.

The University of Dayton recently dealt with possible elimination of its university-wide requirement of oral communication. The threat to the basic course was triggered by a major revision to the university's general education program, but support had been eroding for a number of years prior to this event. In this case, the department was able to generate enthusiasm for a revised course, and emerged as a stronger contributor to the students' education. In this paper, the events that took place, the challenges the department faced, and the actions it took in response to the challenges are reviewed. Then four lessons communication departments can learn from this case are offered.

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Case History: A New General Education Program at the University of Dayton

Plan to Eliminate the Required Oral Communication Course

The University of Dayton (UD) is a private university located in a Midwest urban setting, with approximately 7,500 undergraduate students. Its general education architecture received its last comprehensive redesign in the early 1980s, and was updated in the early 1990s. But, the general education program at UD largely reflected educational thinking of the 1980s. In the early 2000s, the university administration decided UD needed to rethink general education in light of newer developments in higher education. But, as a Catholic and Marianist university, the leaders wanted general education not only to reflect the latest pedagogical thinking in higher education, but also the university's mission.

The university commissioned a working group of eight faculty, an associate dean, and the university's Vice President for Mission to develop a report of what outcomes should define a Marianist education. In the fall of 2006, that report, *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection* was presented to the Academic Senate, which voted to use it as a vision for revising general education. A subcommittee then produced a document for a revised general education called the Common Academic Program (CAP) in August 2008. This new moniker was chosen in part to reflect an attempt at closer integration between general education and the majors.

Since the current general education system was implemented in the early 1980s, UD has required a 3-credit hour introductory course in oral communication for all students. That course has undergone several revisions, most recently in 2001 when the course was split into three 1-credit hour modules. The modules were designed to allow just-in-time training on vital skills at the appropriate part of a student's education: Small group discussion in the first year, public speaking in the second, and interviewing in the senior year. Unfortunately, the just-in-time approach did not work effectively, as students took the classes whenever they could fit them into their schedules. Furthermore, many detractors on campus felt the modules did not contribute effectively to students' education. For those and other reasons, the CAP proposal eliminated the required oral communication modules in favor of allowing each department to address oral communication competency in whatever manner it felt most appropriate.

Author's Position

I joined UD as chair of the Department of Communication. Prior to that, I spent 11 years at University of Missouri (MU), eight of which as Basic Course Director. My work at UD began in July of 2008, just as the CAP proposal was presented to the campus.

The Department's Response

Challenges. The Department of Communication realized that any attempt to get CAP revised to include a required oral communication course would be a difficult task. There were at least three major problems facing the department.

1. *Competition for credit hours.* Many units on campus felt that general education already required too many credit hours. This feeling was particularly strong in the three professional schools (Education, Engineering, and Business). Any move to increase credit hours would be met with strong resistance. Because the CAP proposal—by no accident—contained the same credit hours as general education, restoring an oral communication requirement would require either increasing CAP's credit hours or displacing something else. Adding more hours was almost certainly impossible, and displacing something else meant fighting other units for those hours.

2. *Lack of influence on campus.* In the years leading up to this event, faculty in the department had become increasingly disengaged from campus work and decision-making. Few faculty served on college or university committees, and the department paid little attention to campus governance. Thus, despite the fact that Communication was one of the largest majors on campus, the department had little impact on university policies. CAP was drafted by a subcommittee of the senate's Academic Policies Committee (APC). The CAP working group had members from nine departments, but not Communication. The APC was charged with vetting the CAP proposal and bringing it to the Academic Senate for a vote, and no one from the department was on either committee. Without a member in either body or close connections with anyone who was on these committees, the department had no vote and little awareness of what these committees were doing.

3. *Lack of support for the modules.* Because the modules had lost support across much of campus, they were easy to cut to make space for other classes. One administrator privately told me that the removal of the modules was a "vote of no confidence" in what our department had been doing. It was clear that there was no possibility of having the modules reinstated as part of the new curriculum.

Responses to the challenges. The department's responses came in three stages. Each is articulated below.

1. *Talking to those who make decisions.* In absence of any voice on the committees, we began by talking with those who had decision-making power. Another faculty member and I talked to each of our sector's representatives on the Academic Senate and on the APC to make a case for the importance of oral communication, taught by faculty with training in the field, and to find out what we could do to make our case heard. I also talked to both the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and to the college's Associate Dean for Integrated Learning, who was highly involved in the curriculum revision process. These conversations helped us to get some of our message out, and at the very least, made it clear that the department was going to fight hard for required coursework in oral communication taught by qualified faculty. These conversations with leaders who saw the department from an outside perspective also offered some ideas about productive directions we might take in our response.

UD has a culture of widespread faculty consultation on matters of academic policy—much more so than many universities. Although that approach slows the pace of progress, it offers the advantage of allowing the best ideas to surface and has generally served the university well. That situation worked to the department's advantage in this case. Upon release of the CAP proposal, the APC invited feedback from the campus community during the fall semester of 2008. This feedback was in the form of four campus-wide open forums and the invitation for written feedback on eight questions about the proposal.

The department sent three to five faculty to all forums to make sure its concerns were heard, as well as to see what other issues were being raised. These forums were poorly attended, and that also worked in our favor, as it gave our input more impact. Providing written feedback was straightforward. Armed with what we had learned from our previous conversations and participation in the forums, the faculty worked together to craft a departmental response. Some faculty submitted individual responses as well.

As part of the department's feedback about the oral communication component of CAP, we included several ideas for a revised introductory course. Although we knew the modules would not be supported, we had learned from our conversations that a proposal for an innovative and new introductory course might be considered if it could gain broad enough support. In our proposal we were clear that the ideas suggested were a sample of what we might do. We suggested that any design for an introductory course should be developed in consultation with others across the

university. That desire to listen widely and respond to input proved to be important factors in the eventual outcome.

The APC reviewed and discussed feedback throughout the spring semester of 2009, and decided to appoint a new task force to critically review the feedback and develop a revised CAP proposal. That task force decided that to better develop some elements, it would form working groups of faculty in those areas. The points that our department had made in its feedback (both oral and written) and our willingness to work with the rest of the university for optimal course design were convincing enough that they felt it was worth hearing what specific proposal the department would craft. The task force gave the department an opportunity in Fall 2009 to form an Oral Communication Working Group to propose a new introductory course that they would consider for the revised CAP proposal.

2. Getting involved. It was evident that the department had become too disengaged from decisions affecting the university's core work. Thus, a number of the faculty began seek ways to get more involved. In the spring of 2009, one faculty member was elected to the Academic Senate. That person was also placed on the APC, which meant he would be involved in all the conversations surrounding development of the revised CAP proposal. By having a faculty member involved in these conversations, the department became more engaged in thinking about the new curriculum being developed.

3. Mission- and need-driven change. The final element in the department's response was to generate a proposal that was so compelling it would generate deep and widespread support. We did this in two ways. First, several faculty conducted in-depth interviews with departments from across the campus—over 30 in total, spanning all colleges and every unit within each college. Our purpose in these interviews was to understand the needs and interests of each department and program.

The interviews allowed working group members to learn some helpful points about the needs of the different departments and programs. We found some similarities that were important, and some differences that we would need to address. The interviews provided indispensible information on what aspects of oral communication UD most needed in an introductory course. They proved formative in our course design, and they also generated goodwill from departments who saw we were serious about meeting their needs.

Second, all members of the Oral Communication Working Group spent copious time studying *Habits of Inquiry and Reflection*, so we could determine which elements of oral communication were most essential for fitting the vision for the new curriculum. This discernment was important, because we had to be able to argue that the course we proposed would help advance our mission. The group also paid careful attention to aspects of oral communication that were unique to our department so that we could identify topic areas that we alone could provide. For instance, the English Department was already covering analysis of persuasive reasoning in their basic composition sequence. Rather than duplicating their efforts, we were able to add depth to the curriculum by focusing on content we would provide that English could not, such as a focus on dialogue and oral arguments (specifics of the proposal are addressed in lessons, below, where they illustrate applications from this case).

Outcomes of the Process

Working group reports were due in December 2009. The task force then prepared a revised draft of CAP in January 2010. Over the spring semester, there were four more open forums and numerous open meetings of the APC. These forums and meetings were well-attended and generated considerable discussion for improving the CAP proposal. Throughout this discussion, support emerged for the new oral communication course. In April 2010, the Academic Senate

voted to accept the CAP proposal, including the new oral communication course, as the architecture for a new general education program.

Lessons from this Case

The lessons from this case are valuable for communication departments at other schools, regardless of the nature of those institutions or the level of support they experience. Each institution has unique circumstances surrounding its communication program, and thus, some of the strategies it uses to enhance its well-being must be tailored to the home campus (Becker, 1999). But, some of the specifics of this case may be transferable to other institutions. More important, there are several principles underlying the department's success in this case that should apply to all programs. The remainder of this paper articulates four largely generalizable principles.

This case should serve as both a warning and a cause for optimism. The introductory course at UD was threatened because it did not have widespread support. The ease with which such loss of support can take place, combined with the negative impact such losses have on departments, on the discipline as a whole, and on the quality of learning found at institutions of American higher education are sobering thoughts. On the other hand, our department was faced with a significant challenge. If we could overcome these challenges and emerge stronger, others can do likewise. Programs at other schools that successfully faced challenges have also reported that the process strengthened quality of their department and recognition across campus (e.g., Freeman, 1995; James, 1995; Lee & Seiler, 1999). Ideally, though, departments should be proactive in generating support, rather than waiting for a crisis to take action (Engleberg, 1996).

Lesson 1: Change the Introductory Course from an Island to a Continent through Mission and Needs

Islands and continents. In a keynote address at a 2009 institute of the AAC&U, Washington and Jefferson College president Tori Haring-Smith spoke about the danger of being on an island. Islands are isolated; they can erode, and they can easily be cut off from the rest of a community by the simple loss of a bridge. That lack of centrality and connection makes them an easy target for elimination when choices have to be made. Departments, programs, and courses are better positioned when they are so strongly connected with others that they are integral to the campus. Building bridges can help, but they can be torn down, leaving an island isolated and vulnerable again. Instead, Haring-Smith advocated turning islands into continents, by bringing them together with other islands and larger land masses.

The notion of being an island has been widely used as a metaphor for centrality and vitality. Makay (1999) describes his initial experience as an externally hired department chair, saying that

> Upon arriving as a new department chair at Bowling Green State University, I was asked by the dean to lead the department back into the campus community, as if I was assigned to a unit that had become essentially an island unto itself. (p. 134).

Engleberg (1996) observed that the consolidation between communication and journalism at Ohio State also resulted from lack of connections: "In the report of the 1994 State of the Field of Communication Conference, Thomas McCain blamed the Ohio State University department's survival crisis, in part, on its isolation. 'We created an island,' he said. 'Building necessary connections across the college is essential'" (p. 146). When faculty have talked about threats to their departments and criteria used in judging program retention, centrality to the mission (e.g., Fedler, Carey, & Counts, 1998; James, 1995) and ability to offer unique contributions are commonly cited (e.g., Fedler et al., 1998).

This point offers insight into how the introductory communication course can gain greater support on campus than is often achieved. Through the 1980s and 1990s, students and educators alike have seen general education (providing essential foundations) and the major (providing specific knowledge and training in the students' area of interest) as independent elements of a college education (Shoenberg, 2005). A significant trend in general education reform over the last decade has been to build more coherent connections in general education—across general education classes, and between general education and the major (AAC&U, 2002, 2007). The foundational abilities and skills learned in general education should be further developed in the major, as well as in elective classes. There has also been closer attention to how general education classes support the mission of the university, and how they are connected not just with the major, but with each other.

Because of the centrality of oral communication to the needs of a college education, communication departments are uniquely positioned to take advantage of the trend toward integration to transform the introductory course from a curricular island into a continent. The way to do this is through developing an introductory course that advances the mission of the institution and establishes the knowledge and skills that are essential for other general education and major-specific needs. The opportunity is ripe for our discipline, because many institutions are moving from a cafeteria style of general education curriculum, which requires students to select classes from different categories, to a more integrated curriculum in which institution-wide learning outcomes are developed across a range of general education courses. The widely acknowledged centrality of communication in work, civic responsibilities, and social relations gives communication departments an advantage not afforded to other disciplines. We must take advantage of this opportunity, not only for the well-being of our discipline, but for us to meet our responsibility to society.

Making these connections may require a re-envisioning of the course itself, but those changes are worthwhile if they help the course better meet the institution's and students' needs. Such positioning of the introductory course strengthens the course and the department because it is doing a better job meeting institutional needs. As Arnett and Fritz (1999) note, departments are judged by their home institution based in part on their contribution to the institutional mission.

Application at UD. At Dayton, interviews revealed that departments needed specific communication skills that were not context-specific. For instance, STEM programs needed students to explain complex concepts to non-experts, regardless of whether that was in a speech, meeting, or dyadic exchange. Social science and humanities programs expressed greater needs for students to be able to articulate and evaluate persuasive arguments. And all units indicated a need for listening skills, particularly where people had differing perspectives. The ability to engage in dialogue with those of opposing views is foundational to UD's mission as a Marianist university. Therefore, the department proposed an introductory course that focuses on dialogue and debate, with a small element of informative public speaking, in which students explain a complex concept to non-experts.

It was the combination of meeting specific communication needs across campus with demonstrating centrality to the university's mission that led to support of the new introductory course. That alone has helped transform the course offering from an island (the old modules, which were connected to nothing else in the curriculum or mission) to a larger land mass. However, there are further steps that can be taken. Once the course is pilot tested and fully implemented, the department will start to share what students are learning about dialogue with other units with the hope that they can then build on some of those skills in their own classes. If the course is successful at developing students' listening abilities and ability to analyze oral arguments, then instructors across campus can expect students to use those skills in upper level classes across campus, as well as in co-curricular activities. Conversations with Student Development and the Office of Multicultural

Affairs subsequent to the adoption of CAP have resulted in possibilities for integration of dialogue into the school's co-curricular programming. Such integration can further the centrality of the course at the university and can continue the transition from an island toward a continent.

Application at other institutions. Other universities have different needs, and different foundational courses would be called for. In my first year as Basic Course Director at Missouri, I interviewed the chair or undergraduate director of every department that required the introductory oral communication course. Those conversations revealed that all programs wanted a course on public speaking, but most wanted it to include some element of group decision-making. And, as a public university, part of our mission was to prepare responsible citizens. A course that blended small group decision-making with presentation and analysis of persuasive arguments—particularly those related to public policy—might provide a strong contribution to the school's mission of developing students as engaged public citizens and effective leaders. MU's proximity to the state capital (just 30 minutes away) would make a course that emphasized public speaking in civic engagement all the more relevant, and that department's strong scholarship in political communication would offer natural support for such a focus and a means of helping connect that scholarship with other "land masses" at the school.

Other schools will have different needs, missions, and priorities. The task is to examine the specific needs and mission of the institution and build on those elements to establish the basic oral communication course, and the department as a whole, as an essential component of the major continents at that institution.

Guidelines on building a continent. Three actions are important in building a continent. The first two are essential; the third is helpful where possible, but is much more difficult to achieve.

1. Design. Identify the specific needs on your campus and the elements of its mission that depend on effective oral communication. Going to other departments and listening widely across campus is essential to this process. Then, develop a course tailored to meeting those needs. It is possible that a department might even offer a choice of introductory course options that appeal to different units.

2. Communication. Communicate with the units and show how the course will help their students. Administrators are important audience, because if those who control resources see oral communication as a continent, it is more likely to receive resources. But, unless oral communication is a campus-wide requirement then that course will lose backing if majors or units do not encourage or require their students to take it. So, gathering campus-wide support is important.

3. Integration. Be open to working with other units (departments, programs, or even co-curricular units) to help them utilize or build upon the introductory course in ways that benefit their students. If other units draw on the knowledge or skills that an introductory course in oral communication provides, then this connectedness makes the introductory course in oral communication essential for their work. Many faculty will be too busy with their own work or simply uninterested in seeking this integration, so it is unreasonable to expect that every department can achieve total integration. In general, smaller and more teaching-driven institutions are likely to see more success in this integration than larger, research-driven universities. But any ways in which success can be built here can generate support that may be significant in developing a continent.

Lesson 2: Get Involved

Involvement and politics. Involvement in campus decision-making is often confounded with campus politics. To some degree, politics and involvement are one in the same, except for the connotations attributed to the term *politics*. Many people associate politics with "self-interest, dirty deals, and disloyalty" (Hess & Piazza, 2005, p. 157)—behaviors we see modeled by politicians and

corporate leaders on a daily basis. The academy is not immune to these behaviors, and decisions made with politics in mind often have principle trumped by self-interest. This connotation of politics is a far cry from Aristotle's use of the term. Aristotle saw politics as "the master science of the good" (antiquity/1962, p. 4), because political involvement affords the opportunity to work for the good of the whole population rather than just for a few. If we use *politics* to refer to the business of managing a state or organization rather than using the term to refer to unprincipled application of self-interest, then *involvement* and *politics* are almost synonymous.

It is the former use of *politics* that Engleberg (1996) and others use when they advocate political involvement for communication departments. Lee and Seiler (1999) and Makay (1999) note the importance of having faculty on important committees, and Engleberg also includes activities such as "co-directing major grant projects with faculty from other disciplines, serving on critical, campuswide [*sic*] committees, volunteering to conduct communication workshops for administrators, faculty, staff, and students, and working in interdisciplinary programs" (p. 146) as relevant in political involvement. Strength in scholarship can even be a form of political influence, if done in ways that support a department's and institution's goals (Arnett & Fritz, 1999; Phillips, 1994). Faculty who are recognized as leading scholars, who publish research that helps shape their field and even public policy, and who are called upon by the media or decision-makers for comment on public issues maintain higher credibility than those who are neither active nor accomplished.

Departments need to know who is influential and how power is wielded (Phillips, 1994). It is essential to be part of any formal discussion and to participate in informal conversations, where ideas are often tested and where people learn more about each other's positions. Doing so assures that the department's interests can be considered when decisions are made.

Importance of integrity. What is most important about involvement in decision-making is that department's actions are characterized by integrity and commitment to the good of the whole, not just its narrow interests. Given the connotation of politics noted above, "politics with integrity" sounds naïve at best and like an oxymoron at worst. But, integral politics are not only possible in a university setting but are the most powerful form of politics *when done well*. People are more swayed by the arguments of someone who is committed to principles, who is transparent in her or his values, and who is seeking to better the whole university than they are by someone who is narrowly self-interested, untrustworthy, and manipulative. Political action that is the mere expression of self-interest breeds resentment and antagonism; it fails to generate deep and lasting support the way that integral politics can. And, politics enacted by selfish or unethical actions might be effective in the short run, but in the long term, typically cuts a person off from broader support and is vulnerable to the challenge of someone powerful who is better respected.

Rather than using involvement as a means of "getting ahead," the involvement advocated here is to first consider the institution's needs, and then articulate the manner in which your department can contribute to that larger good. As noted, communication programs are uniquely positioned in this regard, because our work is among the most important areas of learning a university can offer (e.g., Diamond, 1997; Harper, 1987; NACE, 2012). No other field can claim the importance to employers we enjoy, and we are negligent if we do not respond to that need. The department's curriculum proposal at UD was supported not because of deals or manipulation, but because offered a proposal that people could see was better than the alternatives. The department showed how its course would advance the university's mission and improve students' education. In short, the department simply did what departments should do all the time: It did a better job.

Widespread faculty involvement is needed. Involvement is a task for the entire department. A chair or an influential member cannot create the needed level of involvement by her- or himself. Many members of the department must be active in committee work and other service

to the university in order for the department to have the necessary visibility (Engleberg, 1999), for it to have a collective understanding of the department's role in the university, and for the department to understand the decision-making processes sufficiently to know when and how it needs to act.

Lesson 3: Make Compelling Use of Assessment

While communication has a natural advantage in the importance of our field of study, we also have a somewhat persistent problem that undermines us: Oral communication classes are often seen by faculty in other fields as "easy-A" classes with little substantive content (Makay, 1997). Some of this sentiment may stem from experiences with basic courses that were not as strong as they should have been in content or instruction. Lee and Seiler (1999) observed,

> These courses, even within the discipline, are often notorious for lack of rigor and theoretical orientation. The best-selling public speaking 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. (pp. 138-139)

Other discontent may result from thinking that knowledge about communication is all subjective and thus contains little *Truth* to teach, or that because it is done daily, others know as much as we do and could teach it as well. Regardless of the source of this reputation, it is hard to summon support for a class—even on an important topic—if people do not believe the course will offer useful instruction.

The solution to this problem comes in the form of *assessment*. Assessment is not a favored word among many faculty, and many see it as a waste of time (Beld, 2010). This judgment is not without merit. At many schools assessment is done hastily and with minimal effort, because the faculty's focus is on their scholarship and the administration pay little attention to assessment. A three-year term on the university assessment committee at a former institution was consistent with that view. Although the committee met several times when I first joined, that was prompted by an upcoming accreditation review. Once that review was over, we never met again. And, the conversations in meetings were quite open about the fact that assessment was not a priority on campus.

Why should faculty spend time on assessment when it seems to matter so little? First, some institutions take assessment more seriously, particularly those schools driven by teaching and student tuition, and those nearing or having just having had an accreditation review (e.g., Duff, 2010). And, most institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that students are making adequate learning gains (Middaugh, 2010), especially public institutions who must justify their worth to legislatures whose budgets are rapidly decreasing. However, there are good reasons to take assessment seriously even in the absence of institutional pressure. The emphasis in assessment is not just to document success, but to use the information as a means to improve the program (Makay, 1997). These reasons become apparent if faculty replace the word *assessment* with *evidence*. Assessment can benefit a department both in its impact of its arguments, and also in helping improve the product. As *evidence*, assessment can be a force that departments can use can levy support in compelling ways. When programs have credible data showing their course is having the intended effect, they find it easier to gain support and draw resources (e.g., Arnett & Fritz, 1999; Carey, 2010). And where assessment shows a course is not achieving its intended outcomes, the department has an opportunity to fix the problems and then produce evidence of effectiveness.

Assessment is best done when it is planned during curriculum design. Experts on assessment emphasize that good assessment can be informative without being overly time- and energy-intensive (Suskie, 2004; Walvoord, 2004). Evidence that students are actually improving the desired communication skills, as well as understanding the theory and reasons behind the behavior

can be a powerful antidote to claims that basic oral communication courses fail to advance students' knowledge and abilities. However, building evidence through assessment takes time—at least a semester, and typically more than a year. Communication departments need to work on good assessment for their basic course *before* the course is challenged or before they seek additional resources so that they can have the evidence they need.

Lesson 4: Take Advantage of Accreditation Demands

Communication departments often have a helpful ally in developing support for a strong oral communication course: The campus's accreditation agency. Increasingly, accreditors are recognizing the importance of oral communication, and many are pushing schools to provide meaningful instruction in that area. Although accreditors typically allow the college or university to determine how best to meet this need, the pressure from such an agency can help a communication department to strengthen its case.

Arguing that trained experts can do a better job than non-experts is the first step to using accreditation demands, and should be a point on which communication departments never back down. Several recent examples on the communication list serve CRTNET provide relevant cases to illustrate this point. One writer said,

> [Our institution] is in the process of redesigning its general education requirements and is set to drop public speaking from the general education curriculum. However, we want to find ways of satisfying Middles States, the accrediting institution that requires competence in writing and oral communication. (Naaeke, 2009)

Without more information, it is impossible to draw conclusions about the merits of this proposal, but based solely on the information presented, this response seems ill-advised. It sounds as though the communication program is complicit in eliminating a public speaking requirement in the face of an accrediting mandate that they provide sufficient instruction in that area. Communication departments staffed by instructors with advanced degrees in the field should be able to teach public speaking better than faculty in other departments. Departments need to fight for that opportunity for the sake of the students whose education they have been entrusted to provide, and they need to provide a course that justifies the faith the institution places in its ability to provide instruction that meets university and societal needs.

Accreditation agencies are sometimes direct in insisting that oral communication competencies are provided by faculty with appropriate training. Another faculty member wrote:

> When our college considered cutting the public speaking requirement for all graduates, we looked into adding a speech or two into an existing course or seminar, and we looked into spreading public speaking across the curriculum with several courses adding an oral report or speech. It's my understanding that our regional accrediting group SACS would not accept either option as 'enough to satisfy the requirement,' so we kept the required speech course. (Jefferis, 2009)

However, not all schools receive such direct support. Basic oral communication classes are sometimes dropped, and unfortunately, even communication departments are sometimes threatened, merged with or absorbed into other departments, or eliminated altogether (Lee & Seiler, 1999).

Communication departments need to be aware of what accreditation agencies are asking, be part of conversations related to accreditation, and then shape arguments in ways that support the department. This demand connects with the importance of campus-wide involvement, because if faculty are not aware of what is happening, and are not helping shape the arguments, others will shape them—sometimes in ways that are not optimal for student learning outcomes. An example shows how easily this can happen. When developing the CAP proposal, some of the professional schools were strongly opposed to increasing credit hours in general education. Senators from one

college said that the intensive requirements from their disciplinary accrediting agency meant that any increase in general education would make it impossible for their students to graduate in four years. However, the demands of accreditation they cited were not the true problem. Their disciplinary accreditation requirements related to general education were both minimal and flexible. The faculty in that school did not want to change their major curriculum, which was extensive, and *if their own requirements* were held constant, then the accrediting demands would make increases in general education a hardship for students. This claim was refuted only when an informed faculty member from outside that college exposed the misleading nature of the argument. But without that knowledge, such a faulty argument would likely have been accepted.

Conclusion

Although communication programs at every institution have different circumstances, one constant is universal—our subject matter is accepted by employers and accreditors as an essential learning outcome for today's students. This gives us the advantage of being uniquely important, but also come with a responsibility to meet that needs. Application of the lessons from this case can help communication programs develop deeper support at their institution. Ultimately, support is gained through making essential contributions and helping others recognize that importance and quality of the work. The lessons in this case offer a guide for how programs can do that.

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