



# NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

## **Report of the Hope College Conference on Designing the Undergraduate Curriculum in Communication**

During the week of July 31, 2000, a group of undergraduate faculty met at Hope College in Holland, Michigan for a special conference on designing the undergraduate curriculum in communication under the facilitation of Professor Stephen Littlejohn of Domenici Littlejohn, Inc. The 42 participants represented a variety of undergraduate programs in 18 states and Hong Kong. The primary concern was with how the small undergraduate college department of communication, with limited faculty and curricular resources, could implement a program representing our field's diversity.

The objectives of the conference were to:

- Identify the essential knowledge and skills all undergraduate communication majors should acquire.
- Identify and specify strategies to assure the essential issues of epistemology, methodology, theory and praxis characterizing the study of communication are accounted for in curriculum planning and evaluation.
- Describe a model curriculum that would function as a point of reference for undergraduate communication curriculum evaluation and planning.
- Provide insights into theory, research, practice, and skills that enable all participants to develop new visions, gain fresh insights, and increase awareness and understanding of the current theoretical and research issues in our field. Such insights should inform our curricular models and classroom teaching.

This conference echoed the purposes and objectives of the 1985 "Essential Curriculum Conference" at Hope College. The 1985 Conference had approved the following statement:

The ideal curriculum in our discipline concerns the understanding and views of spoken language and associated behaviors in a variety of contexts. As educators, we seek to assist people in becoming effective and ethically responsible communicators who can understand theoretical choices and who can design, express, interpret, and evaluate functional messages.

The curriculum model developed then became the basis for over 20 program revisions and dozens of program reviews.

Fifteen years later communication has changed. The 2000 conference was organized as both the

closing bookend on a 15-year program and the starting point for future initiatives in curriculum and faculty development. Relying upon a consensual decision making process in small group and plenary sessions, the participants defined what information they needed to develop the curriculum, framed the issues and set the week's agenda, identified the key questions to be answered, and clustered them into four areas that became the working document. These areas were curricular goals and core, disciplinary identity, driving forces behind curricular decisions, and tensions to be balanced. The curriculum design developed by these 42 faculty should provide direction for the future. Our report contains sections defining our disciplinary identity, the challenges and decision points encountered in communication, and curriculum goals.

### *Disciplinary Identity*

Communication is a multifaceted discipline that studies the processes, practices and products of human signification as its central defining characteristic. We are a broad and diverse intellectual community whose members study the symbolic processes of interaction in a variety of contexts and modalities. When we use the term communication in this document, we are including communication science, rhetoric, and aesthetics. We teach the ability to interact ethically, confidently, and effectively. We engage in systematic description, interpretation, and assessment of the products and results emerging as a consequent of communicative processes and practices.

### *Challenges and Decision Points*

As everywhere in the academy, many challenges exist in the communication discipline. All of them can be considered as decision points on a continuum. Small departments experience pressures in achieving an appropriate balance tied to the resources available. A particular program's situation depends upon local factors. Some of these philosophical and pragmatic decision points include a paradigm that bridges the knowledge communities of the sciences, social sciences, professional studies, arts, and humanities.

Other pragmatic challenges may include:

- Theory and applications (or study of applied communication)
- Exclusionary focus and cafeteria style
- Depth and breadth
- History (traditional definition of the field) and future (trends in the field)
- Rhetoric and social science
- Humanities and social science
- Employers' expectations and disciplinary expectations
- Liberal arts and professions
- Single and multiple realities
- Territoriality and collaboration
- Students' expectations and academy's expectations
- Situational forces and disciplinary expectations
- Tensions between technologies

## *Curricular Goals and Core*

We believe an undergraduate degree in communication should educate individuals to be capable of assessing situations and crafting appropriate communicative responses to interact effectively with diverse others and to participate as socially responsible members of their increasingly mediated and complex communities. The following nine goals in combination address this mission. The ideal communication curriculum achieves all of the goals.

Each goal can be met in a variety of ways, including requiring:

- A specific course OR
- A significant assignment component within required courses OR
- Significant topic coverage within required courses OR
- A capstone experience/senior thesis, portfolio, or scholarly service learning

*Goal 1: Understanding of multiple theoretical perspectives and diverse intellectual underpinnings in communication as reflected in its philosophy and/or history*

Options include:

- Take a course in communication/rhetorical theory
- Major, theory-based assignment in required communication course
- Major coverage of theories in required communication courses
- Capstone experience

*Goal 2: Competency in effective communication with diverse others*

Options include:

- Take an intercultural communication course or a communication course devoted to a different culture
- Major cultural assignment component in required communication courses
- Significant coverage of cultural communication in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or a cross-cultural experience with a communication-focused research project

*Goal 3: Competency in presentation, preferably in more than one format*

Options include:

- Take a presentational skills course. Examples might include: public speaking, listening, online presentations, web page, advertising campaigns, broadcasting, film making
- Significant presentations in required communication courses
- Portfolio and/or capstone experience

*Goal 4: Competency in analysis and interpretation of contemporary media*

Options include:

- Take a course focusing on media/rhetorical approaches to media
- Have a significant assignment in the analysis and interpretation of contemporary media in required communication courses
- Have significant topic coverage of the analysis and interpretation of contemporary media in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or scholarly service learning project that does media analysis for a community organization

*Goal 5: Competency in reflective construction and analysis of arguments and discourse intended to influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices*

Options include:

- Take a course that focuses on argument processes. Examples might include: argumentation, rhetorical criticism, persuasion, negotiation, conflict resolution or public address
- Have a significant assignment in reflective construction and analysis of argument in required communication courses
- Have significant topic coverage of reflective construction and analysis of argument in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or scholarly service learning project

*Goal 6: Competency in systematic inquiry (the process of asking questions and systematically attempting to answer them, and understanding the limitations of the conclusion reached)*

Options include:

- Take a research methods course in which students do research in communication. Examples might include: ethnography, rhetorical criticism, survey research, quantitative research
- Have a major research assignment in required communication courses.
- Capstone experience or a portfolio with evidence of communication research

*Goal 7: Competency in analysis and practice of ethical communication*

Options include:

- Take a course in analysis and practice of ethical communication. Examples might include: relational ethics, media ethics, and organizational ethics
- Have a major assignment in analysis and practice of ethical communication in required communication courses
- Have significant topic coverage of analysis and practice of ethical communication in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or scholarly service learning project

*Goal 8: Competency in human relational interaction*

Options include:

- Take a human relational interaction course. Examples might include: interpersonal communication, group communication, family communication, nonverbal communication, listening, leadership
- Have a major assignment in relational communication in required communication courses
- Have significant topic coverage of relational communication in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or scholarly service learning project

(Although it was not adopted by consensus, a sizeable number of participants favored inclusion of the following ninth goal.)

*Goal 9: Competency in analysis and practice of communication that creates or results from complex social organization*

Options include:

- Take a course focusing on communication in complex social organizations. Examples might include: organizational communication, family communication, political communication, rhetoric of social movements
- Have a significant assignment focusing on communication in complex social organizations in required communication courses
- Have significant topic coverage of communication in complex social organizations in required communication courses
- Capstone experience or scholarly service learning project

Conclusion

In recommending this communication curriculum, we are aware that opportunities and constraints vary among institutions. In preparing this document, we considered specific factors in developing the curriculum, including: the mission and resources of institutions; the role of departments in relation to general education and service courses; differing faculty roles and tenure requirements; and availability of professional staff. Although these factors vary, we believe this curriculum is appropriate for all communication departments.