

OUTLOOK: THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION MAJOR

Michael Osborn

In brief, the answer is "good." The Speech Communication major should be increasingly valued in our high-gear, rapidly changing society precisely because it teaches flexibility, adaptability, and self-reliance. In such a complex social system as ours, communication across masses of people and specialized interests will become more and more difficult and a more valued commodity. The Speech Communication major will rise correspondingly in value.

There are, I believe, some cautions. I am concerned that too many of our academic programs for undergraduates may be out of balance. For a time this problem concerned the exclusively performance-oriented program which did not offer enough good, substantial nourishment for the minds of our students. Now the problem extends to programs which have reacted to the performance program by setting speech up as a purely academic study which sneers at the performance classroom. We need to avoid such extremes, and offer students curricula which balance study and practice, which nurture the mind along with ability in speech communication. We do need to stress more, I believe, the development of critical ability in our undergraduates so that they can separate the spurious from the genuine in the vast outpourings of communication to which they are subjected each day in the normal life of our society.

Another caution we need to be sensitive to is the tendency to let speech communication become isolated as a study, away from the mainstream of actual communication practice in our time. If we allow this to happen, we shall surely wither as a discipline. I look for the Speech Communication major to be oriented more and more to the great communication technologies of our time, television, radio, and the newspaper. Rhetoric and communication need to be taught as they converge, not as separate and distinct fields of study. Our own new College of Communication and Fine Arts at Memphis State University will give new impetus to the study of such convergence. This union of interests should give more depth to the study of mass communication, and more vigor and application to those academic studies traditionally associated with Speech Communication.

Finally, we need more than ever in our courses to be sensitive to unethical communication behaviors of our time. In a recent publication I identify a number of behaviors which are abusive to those engaged in communication.¹ In the face of such dehumanizing and belittling behaviors, we need to encourage a new kind of ethical communication that treats tenderly the humanity of those whom it addresses. If we assume this ethical task in the classroom, we ourselves shall grow in stature and the importance of the Speech Communication major will grow along with us.

G. Allan Yeomans

About one year ago, Kathleen M. Jamieson and Andrew D. Wolvin, both Professors of Speech Communication at the University of Maryland, contributed an article entitled, "Non-teaching Careers in Communication Implications for the Speech Communication Curriculum" to the November 1976 issue of Volume 25 of The Communication Education journal. Based on the premise that "higher education must change to survive the changing professional marketplace," the Jamieson/Wolvin article does a thorough job of assessing tomorrow's job market for Speech Communication majors. It also proposes some steps Speech Communication Departments must take to prepare people for the changing market, and relates this problem to the larger one projected by the United States Department of Labor Statistics which predicts that the supply of college-educated workers may very probably exceed job requirements by 10% or more within the next three to five years. More explicitly the Bureau of Labor Statistics is estimating that within three years, only about 20% of all jobs available in the United States will require college education. Moreover, estimates indicate that by that same time there will probably be a surplus of about 140,000 college graduates who will have no jobs! How many of these will be Speech Communication majors graduating from Tennessee colleges and universities?

This writer sincerely believes that the answer to the above question may be determined by the extent to which we are able to reconsider our traditional liberal arts curriculum and how clearly we recognize and accept our responsibilities to provide our students with marketable skills. We humanists must not let our lust for the concept of 'education for life' blind us to the hard fact that much of life involves earning a living.

In view of the changing marketplace for college graduates, our tenacious hold to elitist concepts of the "total liberal arts" education, along with the traditional view that a speech major inevitably prepares one to teach speech, is it any wonder that our career-minded students are querying with every-increasing skepticism, "What can I do with a major in speech?"

How many of our national SCA conventions can you recall having attended within the past ten years when a non-teaching career was represented at the interviewing tables in our ment service facility? How many non-teaching vacancies do you recall seeing listed in placement bulletins of either the SCA or ATA within the past five years? When was the last time your department invited campus representatives of major industries or businesses to come to your campus to interview your graduating speech majors? When was the last time your department revised its curriculum with express purpose of accommodating any discernible market other than the teacher market? The point is, our lack of focus on non-teaching jobs has been characterized

by our department curriculum designs, the courses we offer, the placement services our professional associations maintain, and even the voluntary counseling we extend to our students.

Imagine our surprise on the Knoxville UT campus a couple of years ago when we commenced to survey randomly what was happening to our Speech graduates, only to learn that FIVE OF THE FIRST SEVEN GRADUATES WE LOCATED WERE IN NON-TEACHING POSITIONS! "Those devious little nonconformists had defied our course offerings, curriculum design, counseling, placement service efforts, and letters of reference and by some ingenious, devious, circuitous pandering, located an assortment of non-teaching jobs and had somehow become gainfully employed!" We argued, "How could that be? There were no non-teaching careers available for speech communication majors! Or were there?"

What had happened to our wayward ones? One was holding down an administrative position in a regional office of the Headstart Program. Another was selling air time for a major broadcasting corporation in East Tennessee. A third was in a public relations post with a major corporate industry in the St. Louis metropolitan area. A fourth had found her way into a local major advertising agency. Another venturesome soul had organized his own advertising agency, and with a staff of five subordinates (four of who are speech majors graduated from other schools), generates a healthy advertising business with a number of substantial accounts. Still another is in a junior executive position with a state training agency. Another recent speech

major has accepted a position in the public relations department of a major utilities company. A recent MA graduate has an administrative post with the Louisiana Department of Public Education. Two of our graduates have recently worked with political staffs in statewide campaigns - no doubt aspiring to permanent positions as professional speech writers, or media managers for state or national legislators. A number of our majors have gone into direct sales, sales counseling, and/or sales training. Others are in the broadcast media.

What are the implications of all of this? Despite our own retarded or reluctant efforts to design our curriculum, tailor our course offerings, or shape our professional services to prepare our students for the changing marketplace, they have taken their teacher-oriented degrees and, with indredible diligence and some ingenuity parlayed them into job placement in non-teaching careers. Surely they would go better equipped and the placement would come easier had we ourselves prepared them more appropriately.

These recent experiences should persuade all of us involved in Tennessee speech communication departments that our responsibilities are at least two-fold; (1) we must comprehend and meet the demands of the current job market; and (2) we must actively wage a statewide campaign to persuade Tennessee employers that a degree in speech communication is insurance that these potential employees will be knowledgable, educated, in a broad humanistic sense, but at the same time will bring to

employers useful, marketable skills which will enhance the growth and productivity of businesses, institutions, corporations and general economy throughout the state. At the same time, of course, we must continue our efforts to persuade school administrators of the intrinsic values of training in communication skills.

What we must not do is to "conceptualize new thrusts" in the preparation of more teachers for more vacancies that simply are not out there! As Edwin S. Newman once warned: "Beware the conceptualized thrust!" He added, "I saw one that had gone berserk one time, and it took four men to hold it down!"

Larry V. Lowe

The future of Speech Communication as a discipline and, in turn, as an academic major in our institutions of higher learning depends on the ability of those teaching the discipline to convince students, faculty in other disciplines, and administrators of the relevancy of the discipline. As teachers in the discipline, we are quick to point out to our students that a subject being dealt with must be relevant to the needs of the audience if the interest and involvement of that audience is to be sustained. However, we are not so quick in actively pointing out the relevancy of the discipline in meeting the needs of students nor in relating the speech Communication discipline to other disciplines and thus stimulating interest among faculty members in those disciplines nor

working ourselves into a position of justifying the continuation of the discipline to administrators.

There is no doubt in my mind that the relevancy can be established in a meaningful way on all three of these vital levels, but it will require, among other things, a sincere dedication on the part of the Speech Communication faculty. This dedication must, in turn, produce a great deal of hard work in evaluating the existing programs and instituting changes, where needed, to create relevancy. In undertaking this venture, it should be noted that such evaluation has to be of a continuous nature if the relevancy established is to remain current. I think perhaps our greatest need to-date is to dedicate ourselves to this task and be willing to exert maximum efforts in the establishment of relevancy on all three levels.

In an effort to establish relevancy of the discipline in the mind of the student, it is essential that the discipline be examined and, in turn, molded in a way to allow students to gain instruction which will prepare them for a wide variety of vocational possibilities. This will in some instances mean massive curriculum changes and a general up-dating of the discipline. It most certainly should mean involvement of the student by way of the faculty actively seeking input from the student. It may also mean designing of interdisciplinary programs in cooperation with departments of business, journalism, and mass communication, as well as other potential interdisciplinary ventures. In fact, the last of these possibilities may

very well hold the key to the future of Speech Communication as a discipline.

The interdisciplinary potential serves to introduce the importance of establishing relevancy for the Speech Communication discipline in the mind of faculty members in other disciplines. In fact, it is more than merely important, it is imperative, that faculty in other disciplines be exposed to and come to understand the potential for students in their discipline of receiving instruction in oral communication in and through the Speech Communication discipline. It would seem, on the surface, that such an understanding would be readily apparent but not necessarily so. At best, it requires a concerted selling effort and in doing so never forget that you are very much involved in the act of persuasion. In working toward achieving this second level of relevancy, one must remember that the Speech Communication discipline is not a single discipline but rather a discipline within and of other disciplines. When so viewed, the instructional potential for students in other disciplines becomes more relevant.

Relevancy of the discipline at the third level, that of the administrator, is becoming increasingly difficult to establish and sustain. This is understandable in view of the ever increasing emphasis on accountability. There is only one way to sustain relevancy at this level and that is to maintain your academic program at a level which will justify continuation of the program. In other words, have enough

students enrolled in your courses which, in turn, produces enough student credit hours which, in turn, justifies the expenditures necessary to offer the courses and programs in the first place -- at best, it is a vicious circle but a necessary one.

Thus relevancy at these three critical levels is most necessary if one expects to have a healthy program in Speech Communication. You ask -- how do you accomplish all this. Well, you work at it personally, you have a faculty who is dedicated and willing to work at it, and most importantly, you sell the relevancy of the discipline -- you sell it to your students in the classroom, you sell it to your fellow faculty members in other disciplines, and you sell it to your administrators.

Relevancy can be marketed -- to put it in business terms. In my opinion, it should be approached as a product to be marketed, and it is up to those in the discipline to explore every possible buyer and to establish relevancy in the mind of those buyers. One final thought -- remember that as in any business venture, you must present the product in the most favorable way possible. In our case, the Speech Communication discipline depends on our effectiveness in doing so.

Joe Filippo

In the past decade, universities across the nation have witnessed a proliferation of programs in many areas of

of education. Not surprisingly, a corresponding proliferation in Speech Communication has resulted in educational opportunities heretofore unseen in this field. The traditional areas of Public Address, Theatre and Drama, and Speech Science and Therapy have experienced the addition and development of programs that are becoming increasingly important due to their size and their relevance to the present student. Interpersonal Communication and Mass Communication serve as striking examples of mushrooming disciplines.

Primarily due to the growth of new programs, the Speech Communication major is still in demand. Many students see the opportunity to apply themselves in the relatively new area of communication theory that will involve them in behavioral studies. Others, with one eye on the market-place, prefer to become involved in studies, i.e., radio and television, that equip them for a seemingly more specific future. Contrary to national trends in enrollment, Austin Peay State University has experienced significant growth in recent years, and the Department of Speech and Theatre has kept pace and contributed to the increase in student population--one example of the continued demand for Speech Communication in the state of Tennessee.

While the demand for Speech Communication majors continues, the job market appears to have become restricted in certain areas. Mass Communication, almost always a tight market, weighs heavily in favor of "the buyer," although future efforts in cable television may serve to modify the trend. In contrast,

teaching positions in Speech Communication, while by no means as available as they were in the sixties, continue to demonstrate some measure of promise for opportunity in the near future, perhaps especially at the local level.

One of the Speech Communication major's most optimistic notes pertaining to job opportunities is the fact that business seems more willing than ever to cast Speech Communication graduates in nontraditional roles. For example, a number of public relations firms as well as other areas of employment that require interpersonal or public contact seek the Speech Communication graduate. In other words, business appears to be increasingly aware that Speech Communication attempts promote the ability to reason, to provide the ability to communicate more effectively, and to produce a strong, enduring impression among those it serves. Furthermore, this change in attitude on the part of business in general is due in large part to the increased realization that their primary contact with the public is essentially persuasive in nature, and that the Speech Communication major is among the best equipped to accomplish the business objective in a persuasive situation. An even greater change in the climate of public opinion and business should increase the necessity for a Speech Communication degree.

Should Departments of Speech Communication, then, continue to solicit students for the major? Essentially, the answer is "yes." It is my firm belief that, so long as there is a reasonable demand for the major among students as well as

among prospective employers, and so long as the Speech Communication major continues to justify itself on social and economic grounds, not only should we solicit the major, but we should consider any other course of action utterly improper. The passing of time could alter judgments on the status of the Speech Communication major, but the near future dictates with firm hand that we sustain the major.

Jim Quiggins

The study of human communication has had a long, but at times uneven history. It has been studied with diversity of method and under such names as rhetoric, elocution, speech, and perhaps now most commonly, speech communication. The "discipline" (?) of speech communication, and as a result our majors, continue to suffer an identity crisis of sorts. Unlike many identification problems, however, ours is a healthy condition. Because our interests are often pursued across disciplinary boundaries, we are in essence "multi-disciplinary"; not non-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary as some may have contended, but rather inextricably involved in any and all disciplines that increase our understanding of "man as communicator." While it is my contention that the inconsistencies this situation sometimes arouses is a healthy thing, it does require us and our majors to learn to live creatively with our condition.

In spite of our multi-disciplinary nature, we still can

claim autonomy and uniqueness as a major field of study. In fact it is this very nature that makes our field and our majors the distinctive and relevant entities they are today. There is a great demand in many contexts for individuals with the training our majors acquire. An increasing proliferation of workshops and seminars in group process, effective communication skills, assertiveness training, self-awareness, presentational speaking, listening, improving relationships, etc., being offered in all kinds of organizational settings is an indication of the heightened awareness and need for trained communicators. This should be an encouragement to our profession. However, although the demand for what we have to offer is great, it unfortunately seems that the demand for "Speech Communication majors" is not so great. What I am saying is that our label is not necessarily identified with what we do by those outside academia, and often not even by our colleagues or prospective students. Al Golberg of the University of Denver in a recent issue of "Spectra" (August, 1977) dealing with the survival of our profession stated it this way:

Although I have not been an advocate of a name change, the phrase speech communication does not help us. It conveys little positive information and since it "carries" so little meaning, it makes us appear peripheral on the face of it.

This is not so much a problem for the purer divisions of our field (e.g. theatre, broadcasting, speech pathology), but a growing number of our programs are producing majors whose interests and training are not this focused.

Perhaps our undergraduate programs need some rather drastic revision so that our students are prepared for a variety of

jobs and post-graduate experiences in a more direct and precise way. I'm not suggesting that we become vocational-oriented departments as such, because our strength lies in the liberal and generalized knowledge and awareness that our majors possess. We do need, however, to place greater emphasis on application as well as the comprehension of new information and knowledge. We must be willing to "let go" of our students and encourage them to choose second majors if necessary which are more marketable and readily identified by the work-world. A better alternative, but less feasible perhaps because of our professional myopia, would be to utilize and combine learning experiences available through other departments or disciplines, as well as learning opportunities beyond our institutional walls. Some of our programs might be temporary and highly individualized and combine courses and field experiences from a number of areas. The kind of programs I envision would attract students because they would address themselves to contemporary problems and needs and to the existing job market. This approach calls for a flexibility and willingness to experience frequent change or structural upheaval. This can be especially threatening to a discipline or professional who may feel somewhat insecure and uncertain of his identity in the midst of so many long-standing disciplines and college departments. This idea of a temporary system or program somehow runs against our grain and our image of what colleges or higher

education should be. Furthermore, the concept of multi-disciplinary, temporary programs has great potential for causing anxiety and stress in our own personal and professional worlds. But it is in this arena that our discipline has historically thrived. If we could but allay our fears we may find a new and stronger identity which we could impart to our majors and the increasingly more versatile student who will come our way in the future.

NOTES

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1

Orientations to Rhetorical Style (Palo Alto: SRA, 1976).

2

With the exception of one year during the current decade, Austin Peay State University has shown an increase in student enrollment. Since 1970 the number of Speech Communication majors has nearly doubled.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

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