

THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION MAJOR REVISITED

Ralph Hillman

In the Fall '77 edition of this journal, David Walker assembled 5 editorials on "Outlook: the Speech Communication Major" from academic leaders in our field. After reading, and re-reading especially the opening of those editorials I came away with the very optimistic feeling that the speech major will survive. Implicit with that sentiment is the nagging belief that those of us who teach in the field are therefore obviously secure where we are and as we are. Oh, we might need to deal with "relevancy," or placement, or liberal arts, or constant evaluation, but nothing too serious to cause concern. At least, that's how the editorials opened and the impression I retained.

Maybe in Tennessee we are looking at the problem with rose-colored glasses, but across the rest of the nation the Speech programs are in trouble. Over all, there are fewer students wanting the Speech Communication major; there are fewer majors graduating. There are fewer majors being placed in jobs where their speech communication training was a major variable required for hiring. All this really becomes a problem because of our constantly declining student population.

A recent survey of state-supported universities in Tennessee indicates the following data: Only one University has a major in Speech Communication. One University has no speech program at all. The remaining eight Universities

polled have Speech Communication as an emphasis or concentration or track in a larger department. Only one of the schools is showing any significant growth in the number of Speech Communication graduates. The other schools are holding constant. Only one of the schools has shown any significant growth in number of graduates from programs similar to the Speech Communication major.

The Board of Regents is now requiring as a guideline 10 majors graduating a year to justify a major in a degree program. One saving grace for most of the above programs is that they don't have a Speech Communication major. Those figures come from comparable programs with an "emphasis" (or some similar term) under a larger umbrella major such as Speech and Dramatic Art or Mass Communication. What I'm contending, pure and simple, is that the Speech Communication major, if indeed there is one, is in trouble; big trouble.

No longer can we afford the luxury of small classes. Our universities are screaming for student credit hours. No longer can we afford to offer the traditional speech courses. Students with other majors take our courses only when the direct application is obvious. No longer can we afford to sell our few majors on the traditional teaching-as-a-profession format. Most of our majors don't select the teaching profession as a career because we can't place them. No longer can we afford to teach our "first" course as strictly a public speaking class. That traditional format does not deal with negotiations, interviewing, interpersonal and other areas, and generally turns off

students from going after more courses and possibly being majors. No longer can we afford to respond to our students, peers, administrators, or the public as if we were sophisticated communicators. That smug dehumanizing approach is helping to kill us. No longer can we offer the public speaking class as the remedy for all communication problems. The generalization that "everyone will give a speech someday" isn't specific enough to meet the needs of everyone.

We must use our communication training to survive. We must change our communication behavior if we hope to stay alive as departments which have the potential to offer the speech communication major. We must be competitive in the market for students, a market which is declining. If we do not analyze the communication needs of those students in our majors and as part of other department majors, we lose the competition. We must analyze those needs and build our programs to meet those needs.

Most enrollment projections call for the student population to change. The age will increase. There will be more parttime students. More students will seek courses without desiring to be a part of a degree program. More students will want courses which have only direct, applicable, job related content and/or performance.

Each University in Tennessee probably has some unique factors to consider about their potential student population. We who support the speech major must deal with that student population with a very thorough analysis.

Once we have analyzed our audience we had better take a look at who we are as Speech Communication Departments and faculty. What skills in communication do we have to share? What skills in communication haven't we used? What new communication skills do we need to learn and be able to use? When and to whom do we make those communication skills available? Might it be possible that we need to identify negotiation skills in the evenings or on weekends to business groups or married couples planning divorces?

How many of our departments are still operating under a military model or the carrot-as-incentive mode? How many departments have not restructured themselves (or been administratively restructured) to keep up with the demands placed on department administrators? How many departments are now headed by Professors who shuffle papers just adequately, but never provide department leadership to allow for the kind of change necessary for growth? How many departments are locked into salary and tenure conditions that make these considerations almost a futile attempt?

We need to re-examine the whole Speech Communication idea. We need to deal with our potential student population, whoever they are and provide the kind of courses consistent with their academic desires. We must re-examine our departmental administrative structure. We must take a hard look at our faculty, the training they have and/or need and how best to use their instructional talents.

The outcomes of this whole re-evaluation process must be consistent with the changing priorities of our Universities. Are those priorities bound to Instruction, Public Service or Research? Or is there a combination unique (which is rewarded with reimbursement?) to each University?

Yes, I believe the Speech Communication major is in trouble. However, I'm not too sure that that is all bad. If we hold very tightly to the Speech Communication major as we have grown to know it, then I think we as faculty and departments are in trouble too.

NOTE

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