

## APPLIED GRADUATE EDUCATION: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR THE FUTURE

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For the past two decades, graduate education in communication has focused on two primary objectives: (1) to produce enough high-quality graduates, particularly at the doctoral level, to fill an ever-increasing demand for instructors in the nation's colleges and universities, and (2) to prepare graduates in the "newer" epistemological approaches and content areas that reflect the dramatic changes occurring in the field. The first objective has been met. We are now more likely to hear about "surpluses" than "shortages." The second objective has been met less fully, but major changes which have occurred in graduate programs promise the early achievement of this objective.

For the generation of scholars now assuming positions of leadership in the field of communication, expansionism is the only guiding principle we have known. While "retrenchment" is a term we bandy about at conventions, it is a term we generally are willing to apply only to programs at institutions other than our own. But retrenchment in traditional graduate education is a fact of life that all of us are going to have to face in the near future; some of us have already confronted it. It is not a pleasant confrontation. Retrenchment has some very undesirable associates, such as "steady-state" or declining budgets, aging and overtenured faculties, inability to bring in young faculty members with new ideas, and lessened opportunities for advancement.

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Such unpleasant prospects are clearly on the horizon, and they will be visited upon us unless we are willing to re-examine our objectives and to find new directions for graduate education. The purpose of this paper is to suggest one alternative approach, a shift from a single-minded emphasis on research and theory generation to one which recognizes the importance of both knowledge generation and the application of that knowledge. Such an approach is not only a pragmatic alternative to retrenchment, but also deeply rooted in the philosophical bases of our field which stretch back over 2000 years.

### THE MARKET FOR APPLIED GRADUATE PROGRAMS

There are a wide variety of potential markets for applied graduate programs in communication. However, the potential markets may vary sharply from one institution to another and from one state to another. I will not attempt to present here an exhaustive list of such markets but rather will note only some that are most widely available.

*Health Care Professionals.* Health care professionals (e.g., physicians, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, dental assistants, and paramedics) typically receive little training in communication prior to receiving their terminal degrees. While there are notable exceptions, the typical health care professional concentrates in the sciences prior to admission to professional school and then follows a highly specialized program that includes little, if any, communication instruction. The result often is an inarticulate pro-

fessional, a person insensitive to the impact of her or his communication on the patient. Many of these individuals now need to continue their education after graduation in order to maintain certification. This provides a potential clientele for those communication departments willing to develop an appropriate program. Such a program may lead to a degree or may involve only one or several courses designed to service these individuals.

*Business and Government Administrators.* This group of potential clients probably is the largest of any category and the one which has received the greatest attention from professionals in communication. However, the response to the needs of these individuals has largely been a product of individual entrepreneurship, the part-time consultant, and independent consulting and training firms. Such responses reflect vastly divergent levels of quality and generally do not fall under the collective guidance of communication departments. An outgrowth of our field's ignoring the needs of this client group has been the generation of a whole profession of communication trainers, most of whom are not adequately prepared to provide respectable training in communication within organizations. Concerted efforts by communication departments, particularly those in or near large metropolitan areas, will generate an almost inexhaustible demand for communication instruction from industry and government. Such programs may lead to a degree, but more likely will involve a series of courses directed to the various subsets of this client group.

*Elementary and Secondary Teachers.* Across the nation, elementary and secondary teachers are required to continue their education beyond the B.A. in order to retain certification. For many of these individuals, taking more "edu-

cation" courses is a dismal prospect. Although far from a universal reaction, many teachers find that most education courses do not meet their needs for improving classroom teaching. While some teachers receive some communication training in their undergraduate years, many do not and many others receive such training early in their schooling, long before they are able to relate it to their professional concerns as teachers. In short, members of this client group are (1) undertrained in communication, (2) dependent on communication for success, and (3) required to continue their education—the ideal ingredients for applied communication programs at the graduate level.

The three occupational groups discussed above are illustrative of persons needing instruction in communication but who already have received college degrees. Certainly, there are others. Presuming that we wish to serve these people, how should we do so? There is no pat answer to that question. Every client group needs to be served differently. The resources of the communication department will restrict decisions concerning what groups can be served and how best to serve them. To illustrate what can be done, at least with one client group by one communication department, the program for elementary and secondary school teachers implemented by West Virginia University is outlined below. It should be stressed that no such program is fully exportable from one institution to another. Thus, this program description should be examined in terms of the options it illustrates rather than as a "package" readily usable elsewhere.

#### THE WVU GRADUATE PROGRAM IN INSTRUCTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Planning for the WVU program in in-

structional communication was begun during the fall of 1972. Initial meetings involved the provost for off-campus education, dean of the college of education and human resources, coordinator of continuing education, and the department chairperson. These meetings resulted in the decision to implement one pilot course (Communication in the Classroom) to be taught in two off-campus locations during the summer of 1973. This course focused on general communication theory, communication apprehension, teacher expectancies, nonverbal communication, small group communication, and student perceptions of teachers. All were applied to the interpersonal communication process occurring between students and teachers.<sup>1</sup> Both classes were team-taught by two instructors; one class enrolled 12 students, the other 32.<sup>2</sup> This same course, although much revised in content, now enrolls between 500 and 600 graduate students in 12 locations around the state each summer.

The success of the first course led both to the expansion of the offerings of that course and to the piloting of additional courses, one in 1974, two in 1975, and one each in 1976 and 1977. These six courses, each offered for three graduate credits, now constitute the foundation of the instructional communication program. The courses that have been added since 1973 include: communication problems of children, nonverbal communication in the classroom, media in

communication and education, communication in educational organizations, and interpersonal and small group communication.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of overwhelming student demand, the department decided in 1975 to implement a full degree program leading to a M.A. in Instructional Communication. This program may be completed on-campus or entirely off-campus in any of 12 locations throughout the state. The program requires a total of 33 semester hours (18-21 in the department; 9-15 in education; 0-6 free electives), a written comprehensive examination, and an oral comprehensive examination. The program is open to any elementary or secondary teacher eligible for admission to the WVU Graduate School. All classes are taught by regular graduate faculty members of the department, graduate faculty from other institutions who have been trained by graduate faculty of the department, or advanced graduate students who have been trained by the graduate faculty of the department.<sup>4</sup>

As of January 1, 1979, the department enrolled over 300 graduate students majoring in Instructional Communication. During the 1978 calendar year, there were over 2,000 graduate enrollments accounting for over 6,000 FTE credit hours. Over 50 individuals have received terminal masters' degrees in instructional communication. The de-

<sup>1</sup> In the early stages of development, the classes described here were modeled on a successful program for teachers developed at Pennsylvania State University. For a description of that program, see Douglas J. Pedersen, "The Teacher Workshop Program at Penn State," *Today's Speech*, 20 (Fall 1972), 55-57.

<sup>2</sup> The instructional method employed in the early offerings, which has continued to the present, was based on the approach employed in the communication seminars taught for the Agency for International Development by Michigan State University.

<sup>3</sup> For additional discussion of the development of this program, see Virginia P. Richmond and John A. Daly, "Extension Education: An Almost Inexhaustible Job Market for Communication Graduates," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication*, 2 (January 1975), 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> A significant supplementary benefit of the program accrues to the WVU doctoral program in Instructional Communication. All doctoral candidates obtain extensive experience as team teachers in the program. This not only provides an unusual degree of graduate teaching experience but also places the doctoral candidates in a position to develop similar programs in other institutions after they graduate.



partment is now the largest producer of graduate credit in the College of Arts and Sciences (a unit composed of 17 academic departments) and has the largest number of graduate majors. During this same period of development, graduate enrollment in the college declined by approximately nine percent.

While the figures reported above are impressive and are reported to encourage other departments to explore applied graduate programs, such results are not easily obtained and cannot be garnered without sacrifice. Therefore, before considering some steps that need to be taken to develop and implement applied programs, we need to consider some of the major problems confronting a department contemplating such a move.

#### PROBLEMS WITH APPLIED GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Applied graduate programs have a high potential for success, but they also have a high probability of failure unless certain potential problems are recognized and necessary steps taken to overcome them. Let us consider the seven most basic problems a department is likely to confront.

*Faculty Commitment to Applied Graduate Programs.* After two decades of focus on other objectives, the reservoir of faculty who are both qualified to teach at the graduate level and committed to applied communication education is very low. In fact, a mark of status in the field has become a teaching assignment which excludes undergraduates, thus permitting more "time for research." Faculty members must believe in applied communication education and want to be a part of it or the program cannot succeed. The faculty member who considers teaching nonresearch-oriented students unprofitable or unwise will undercut the program. If the de-

partment is dominated by such faculty members, no program should be attempted.

*Faculty Commitment to Specific Program.* While the faculty may support applied programs in general, they may not support specific ones. To the extent feasible, the faculty should decide collectively what applied program should be developed. A faculty member well prepared to work in a program designed for business may be woefully unprepared to work in an instructional communication program. If faculty members are not initially qualified to participate in a program, they must at least be willing to admit that and to accept remedial training from their colleagues. Similarly, faculty members in one department may find the prospects of working with teachers fascinating but working with pharmacists a bore; the faculty of another department may see things in the opposite manner.

*Faculty Qualifications.* Since most doctoral programs today are focused on producing people who can do scholarly research (even though most never will), finding qualified graduate faculty with training in and experience with applied graduate programs is very difficult. A good persuasion, interpersonal, or mass communication researcher will not necessarily make a good faculty member in an instructional communication program. Most faculty members will need to be retrained. This can be an expensive, time-consuming process, and one that does not guarantee success.

*Financial Support.* Applied graduate education is expensive, just as are other forms of graduate and undergraduate education. While such programs eventually can generate sufficient resources from enrollments, this is often not the case initially. If outside support is not available, the department may need to reallocate resources internally during the

initial phases of the applied programs. The department may have to decide whether to cut the forensic program in half, reduce the number of nonapplied graduate courses by one-third, or offer undergraduate major courses half as often as normal. Vested interests may need to be compromised for at least a limited period of time. Such decisions are never easy and are seldom made without some acrimony.

*Graduate School Regulations.* In some universities, graduate school policies and procedures are designed to encourage the development and expansion of applied programs. In others, the graduate school is an almost insurmountable barrier. New programs may need extensive levels of approval or they may be implemented with courses offered under "general" numbers. Each institution has its own graduate school policies and procedures which must be understood and followed in order to implement an applied program. Typically, but not universally, land-grant universities are more sensitive to the need for applied programs than are other institutions.

*Other Departments.* For many applied graduate programs to succeed, the cooperation of other departments is necessary. In some cases, the other departments are enthusiastically supportive; in other circumstances, the sister department will see any such attempt to be encroachment on sacred turf. It is vital, therefore, that cooperation and input from other university units be sought early in the planning process. Programs can be implemented in the face of opposition from other departments, but usually not without great difficulty.

*Instructional Inflexibility.* Applied graduate programs usually are significantly different from most other instructional programs. The students are adults with full-time employment. While such individuals are interested in

"theory" (or can be encouraged to be so interested by a skilled instructor), they are looking for ideas relevant to their everyday lives as professionals. What is taught to aspiring researchers cannot be presented with equal luck to working, adult practitioners. This implies both a change in content and a change in instructional method. We have found the one-hour class so typical of undergraduate education to be the *least* appropriate schedule for the working adult. In general, we have found that the more intense the instructional program, the more positive the results, both in terms of affective and cognitive learning. Six consecutive days, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., is optimal; six Saturday's, 9-5, is next; two evenings a week, 7-9:30, is next; and so on. Such concentrated periods, of course, require instructional variety. Lecturing must be kept to a minimum and student involvement to a maximum. Such requirements may make instructors uncomfortable at first, particularly if they have spent many years in traditional graduate and undergraduate programs. They may feel that it takes a better teacher to work with adults in applied programs than it does to work with undergraduates or graduates in required courses. Actually, both need high quality teaching, but if the adults do not get it, they won't return for further instruction!

#### TOWARD IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM

From the above discussion, it is probably obvious that many pitfalls mark the road between the point at which a department decides it wants to implement an applied graduate program and the point at which it has a successful one. The department considering traveling this road should, at a minimum, consider the following steps.

1. *Decide on the program collectively.* No matter what the program is, it will face problems and cause difficulties for the department. Faculty support is vital, or the program will terminate with the onset of the first major problem.

2. *Obtain or reallocate funds early.* A commitment to finance the program must be made, either from outside or from within the department. Pilot phases may be carried out with limited resources, but nothing is free. Inadequate resources can terminate an otherwise good program.

3. *Employ team teaching.* Two teachers cost more than one, but the internal training provided by team teaching will more than pay for itself as the program develops.

4. *Hire with program participation as a criterion.* If the department decides to implement a program, future hiring decisions should be based—in part—on the program. With the academic market place the way it is today, it is possible, for example, to hire someone to serve as a debate coach *and* to work in the applied organizational communication graduate program as well. Such options should not be overlooked.

5. *Insure program quality early.* "Applied" is not another term for "second-rate." Objectives should be set for every course and students should be tested to be certain the objectives are met. While

the typical library research paper often is not appropriate, that does not mean that writing assignments should be eschewed. Applied programs should require written applications of the content learned, especially as that content relates to the student's immediate professional experience. Nothing can terminate a program more quickly than a reputation for inferior instruction. Quality must be an early and continuing concern of any graduate program.

6. *Move slowly.* Trying to do too much, too soon, can only lead to unnecessary problems. Time must be taken to insure cooperation of other units, to pilot courses, and to train faculty. Most problems encountered in applied graduate programs are at least partially a function of having moved ahead too quickly and, as a result, of having overlooked something that will haunt the program later.

Applied graduate programs offer rich opportunities for our field, ones which are both philosophically consistent with our heritage and programatically feasible. Communication is indeed a discipline with something for everyone. Applied graduate education is an exciting part of this discipline's future. Applied communication education is not the stepchild of communication theory and research. It is the true reason for their existence.

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