

# STRATEGIES FOR HELPING THE COMMUNICATION ADMINISTRATOR COPE WITH PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND VISIBILITY

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To begin, let us face some brutal facts. Many communication departments have no identity. They are what they are by chance and, as circumstances change, they change. There is little planning and direction for their future. Similarly, many departments have little visibility either in the field at large or on their home campuses. For many, that lack of visibility is a blessing rather than a curse since increased visibility could lead to increased problems.

The identity of a department should never be left to chance. It may be the most important factor in the success or failure of that department, and certainly a prominent factor in the department's visibility. While all faculty in a department share some responsibility in the development of a department's identity, it is the department chairperson's primary responsibility.

Not all communication departments are alike, nor should they be. Thus, it falls to the department chairperson as the intellectual leader of the department to lead it to a desired identity and to implement policies that promote the advancement of that identity.

## Departmental Identities

There are many identities which a department may choose to seek. For purposes here, I have chosen four as illustrative examples. I will refer to these as the "research department," the "majors department," the "service-course department," and the "community service department." Let us consider each in turn.

The "research department" identity is one to which only a few departments in our field should aspire. These are departments in universities with a major focus on graduate education, particularly doctoral education. This is an identity that generally is very positive in the profession and in institutions with a graduate focus, but which ranges from neutral to negative in many other institutions. The choice of this identity should be made with great care, for it is a very difficult identity to achieve. It cannot be accomplished in a short period of time and it may require foregoing other possible identities as well as requiring a major reallocation of departmental resources. If a faculty is dominated by tenured, non-productive individuals, the achievement of this identity may be impossible. Setting this identity as a goal requires the adoption of a "publish or perish" orientation by faculty. A department chairperson who is unwilling to pay this price, and it is a high price, should either reject this identity as a goal or step down from the position as chair.

The "majors department" identity is one which in recent years an increasing number of departments in this field have chosen. This is an identity which is common among many of our sister disciplines. It is an identity which is received positively on many campuses but which is received in a rather neutral fashion by the profession. The choice of this identity as a goal also requires a high price. It

requires a major commitment of departmental resources to advisement and to the teaching of undergraduate classes. It requires extensive efforts, at least initially, to recruit students to become majors. If the faculty has a strong commitment to graduate education and research, the department may find this identity to be incompatible with the interests of its faculty.

The "service department" identity is one which many departments in our field have whether they want it or not. A very large number of communication departments have neither an undergraduate major nor a graduate program, and others which have one or both still have over 90% of their enrollments in service courses for non-majors. For a profession that argues that everyone needs to study what we have to offer, it is difficult to look at such an identity in a negative manner. However, on some campuses such an identity is distinctly negative and the view from the profession is, at best, neutral. While this identity helps us to "bring communication to the masses," it also raises problems for the department. Teaching restricted to service courses is viewed very negatively by many people in the profession and seen as a barrier to intellectual and professional growth. It also raises a question as to the need for faculty with advanced degrees. If graduate assistants can teach such courses well, why should someone with a Ph.D. be hired to do it? While this question can be answered in a positive manner,

it continues to be asked in these days of declining budgets and the answers are inadequate.

The "community service department" identity is one that is chosen as a goal by many departments located in urban areas, particularly those housed in two-year institutions. This identity is particularly rewarding to individuals who want to see communication move from the classroom into the "real world." It also often leads to substantial financial benefits to the faculty involved. This identity, however, requires extensive time commitments beyond the confines of the campus and, thus, tends to be incompatible with interests reflected in the identities discussed previously. It is, nevertheless, an identity that is viewed very positively by the community outside the campus and is receiving an increasingly more positive response from the profession.

#### Narrowing Focus

To achieve any of the identities noted above, as well as others not discussed, it is imperative that a department narrow its focus in line with its resources. No department can be all things to all people. It is far better to do a few things well than to do many things poorly.

This narrowing of focus may involve limiting the number of areas taught or the number of levels at which they are taught, or both. To achieve departmental identity and positive visibility, it is essential that the department do something well. How many things which can be done well, of course, depends both on the quality and quantity of the department's resources, particularly its faculty. A faculty of ten to fifteen members, a common size in our field, simply cannot develop an identity of excellence in research, undergraduate majors, graduate programs, service courses for the entire institution, and community service across all the intellectual areas represented in the field of communication. Even a collection of the fifteen most outstanding faculty members in our field could not accomplish this objective.

To illustrate how this narrowing of focus can help build a department's identity and visibility, let me point to a few examples.

- 1) Ohio University has built an identity and visibility in the area of organizational communication. They have large numbers of students in this program at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. They are respected both on their own campus and in the profession because of this strong identity with organizational communication. It is not that this is all they do, but this is their identity and it has provided them high, positive visibility.
- 2) Michigan State University built a strong identity with empirical approaches to the study of communication. Again, this is not all that is done at Michigan State, but this is the MSU identity and it has generated high, positive visibility.
- 3) The University of Illinois has developed the identity as a center for constructivist approaches to the study of communication. Although Illinois has other very positive identities, this identity has given them high, positive visibility.
- 4) At West Virginia University we have devel-

oped an identity as a center for the study of communication in instruction. With a doctoral program focusing in this area and a masters program with over 600 majors, this identity has provided high, positive visibility, particularly on the campus and statewide. Of course, this is not all that we do, but this is one of our major identities.

I could go on with many additional examples, but the above are sufficient to illustrate the point. Each of these examples point to a relatively unique and significant identity which has led to high, positive visibility. Of crucial importance is the fact that none of these identities occurred by chance. They were the product of deliberate choices and extensive effort on the part of the departments involved. Also, each identity choice precluded the possibility of developing a strong identity in some other area or areas. This focusing of resources is what produces an identity with high, positive visibility. The number of identities which a department can seek is only limited by the resources available to the department, but every department has its limits. No department can excel in every area at every level.

#### From Identity to Visibility

Not all visibility is positive. Some departments become highly visible because they are bad or because of some scandal. Thus, the promotion of visibility should be preceded by the achievement of excellence. Movement from lack of identity and low visibility to their opposites rarely is a rapid process. Too often departments, in attempting to speed up the process, over-promote themselves and are unable to deliver what they promise. Such change must be taken one step at a time--select the identity to be achieved, establish quality, expand quantity, seek to publicize the identity.

The role of the departmental administrator as the leader in this process has already been noted. This person, because of her/his visibility both inside and outside the department, often has another vital role--a model of the identity. If the chair is going to ask members of the department to concentrate efforts to build an identity, that person's credibility will be greatly enhanced if he or she also exhibits the desired behavior. If the identity is research, the chair should be an active researcher. If the identity is service courses, the chair should be willing to teach service courses. If the identity is community service, the chair should be active in community service. While it is not universally the case that the chairs of departments which have built strong, positive identities and visibility have been active role models, this has been the case in most instances.

Departments which build high, positive visibility on their home campus have an insurance policy against the budget cutters and retrenchers. The premiums on the policy are paid by building a strong identity of quality. It is the department administrator's responsibility to see that the premiums are paid regularly.