

Walkover

Why Every Public University Should Offer Communication Study

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A great many students elect to major in communication-related fields, but it does not follow from this that a university must offer them the opportunity to do so. A university does not simply meet demand. A university is not a business: One of its distinctive attributes is that it defines its own mission based on qualified judgment of what is worth doing. I would like to explore the worth of communication study and explain why the University of Arizona should invest in this field.

Since about 1920, when the first Speech departments were formed as specialized splinter groups within English, academic work in communication has had as its central mission the elevation of public discourse within a democratic society. Yoked from the start to public rather than elite institutions, Speech has been a liberal and progressive area of study with strong connections to populism, to public participation, and to rational policy discussion. During the explosive social change of the twentieth century, Speech gradually evolved into Speech Communication, then more simply to Communication or Communication Studies. These academic identity transformations have been prompted by change in the "real" world. While it made sense in 1920 to focus on spoken discourse (especially public address) in contrast to written discourse, in the Information Age public participation takes radically different forms, and Communication as an academic enterprise has responded to these broad societal changes by broadening its scope beyond its original focus (public address) to include new forms of

discourse arising from new technologies. Like its predecessor Speech, Communication is a characteristically American field, pragmatic, practice-oriented, and anchored in the values and aspirations of our society.

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A common misconception is that the main business of communication study is the teaching of "oral communication skills" and that the public contribution of communication study is

to elevate the skills of as many *individuals* as possible. While improvement of communication skills is one component of communication education, this is not the *central* purpose of communication study as a research field or as a pedagogical program. Even at the outset, when communication study took place in Speech departments, the reason for emphasizing public address was to elevate public discourse, not to create a privileged class of effective communicators. The notion that communication study is *about* individual communication skill reduces higher education to a mechanism for advantaging certain individuals—making a few select students more articulate, more managerial, more employable. But this is directly contrary to the classical foundations of our field and directly opposed to all but the most cynical views of the purpose of a public university.

If communication study is not about helping individual students improve their own communication skills, what is it about? Put broadly, communication study aims to educate experts in communication: individuals prepared to recognize, analyze, and solve communication problems within families, groups, organizations, and society as a whole. Most communication professors who reflect on these matters hope that their students will confront serious societal problems armed with more than a strategy for getting their own way.

To illustrate my point, I would like to describe one of the courses I teach. Only a few dozen students have taken the course in the two semesters it has been offered, but by the nature of the material covered, it is not altogether unreasonable to think that the course may benefit many people who will never even know of its existence. The course is titled "Scientific Argument in Public Discourse," and its purpose is to explore the widely-acknowledged problem of how to bring technical expertise to bear within controversies that are fundamentally public and not technical issues.

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In this course, considerable attention is given to the development of individual competencies: How to extract an argument from broader text, how to spot fallacies, how to build a strong case in support of a proposition, and so on. But these are just tools for the main business of the course, which is to examine alternative societal responses to the problem of increasing technical specialization. For example, in detailed examination of the use of behavioral science to inform policy on such issues as regulation of pornography, we contrast several distinctly different methods of managing expertise within a public controversy: those based on expert testimony before the public (e.g., legislative hearings), those based on consensus recommendations by panels of experts (e.g., workshops commissioned to study a specific problem), and those based on adversary proceedings involving expert judges of expert advocates (e.g., "science court"). In detailed examination of controversies involving medical research, we see how expert fields come to develop "interests" that may come into conflict with the public interest, and we consider the intended and unintended consequences of various ways in which accountability to the public can be designed into (or out of) decision-making processes. Other cases illustrate other important lessons related to the role of expert fields in social conflict.

Looking at the way technical specialization affects public argumentation certainly contributes to the individual student's analytic abilities, but it aims to do much more. For one significant contemporary dilemma, the course shows how discourse can be dramatically altered by the manner in which participation is organized. It makes the point, for example, that decisions taken in secret by elites are very fallible and very dangerous for the broader community affected by the decision, but that opening expert fields such as medical research to control by the nonexpert

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public creates other risks and other opportunities for error. Concretely, the course describes many approaches to the management of technical expertise, and abstractly, it makes the point that discourse *can* be shaped by manipulation of context and participation formats. The view that discourse can be designed to promote or to obstruct full, free exploration of disagreement encourages not only a practical, problem-solving mentality, but also a commitment to the protection of certain values such as openness and rationality.

But what is a student equipped to do after completing this course? Not many of the students taking the course will be in a position to make policy for science funding or to influence the way in which technical expertise gets incorporated into high-level public decision-making. But most *will* be in a position to challenge or defer to authority, for good or ill. Most *will* be in a position to recognize the ways in which authority and other forms of inequality might threaten effective decision-making within

organizations. Most *will* be in a position to make choices about how to minimize the impact of authority and other forms of inequality on discourse within the family, the school, the organization, or the community. Most *will* have opportunities to create plans for collaborative work and for managing multiple competing interests within a decision-making process. And a few will be in a position to make original contributions to the growth of knowledge about communication: as for example identifying distinctively modern threats to rationality, such as the contemporary *ad populum* fallacy arising from the substitution of scientific opinion surveys for fact.

I have focussed on a single course to illustrate my main claim, that communication study has importance for society even if relatively few students actually choose it as a major. Notice that the point can be made even more dramatically for courses in social influence, where the potential for social change is built into the subject matter. In teaching principles of health communication, for example, we expect to improve not the ability of students to describe their own symptoms or persuade their physicians to prescribe a certain drug, but to prepare students to plan, implement, and evaluate campaigns aimed at improving the health and well-being of their communities. In teaching conflict, we expect to have impact not simply on our own students' gains and losses, but also on conflict management processes within the groups and institutions to which our students will belong.

*cultivating citizens with
intellectual skills for the
Information Age*

Communication study ultimately serves society, not just those students who elect to major in communication. It happens that many choose it as a major, and that is of course appropriate and expectable in the Information Age. But let's return to the question that frames this essay.

Why should the University of Arizona offer communication study? Because if it is to serve the public, one of its tasks is to cultivate citizens with the specialized intellectual skills needed for addressing our ever-changing communication problems. The point is to contribute to the public good by creating a community of experts whose expertise is not mere expressive skill but ability to spot and solve problems for all of us.