



Reaching Out: Challenges and Prospects

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When Dale Leathers first indicated to the Administrative Committee that he was considering "SCA Reaches Out" for the theme for the 1991 convention, he struck an immediately responsive chord with the members. The level of participation in this year's convention and the percentage of programs reflecting the theme further attest to its appeal. In selecting the theme, Dale's feeling was that although as a discipline we have much to say about human communication, we have been saying it largely to ourselves. This year's convention, then, represents an important step in overcoming that condition--one I personally hope will lead to many others that will enable us to begin sharing more fully and broadly the value of our work and the opportunities it can create. To that end, I have attempted in the remarks that follow to identify several communities to which I think we can do a much better job of reaching out than to this point in our history we have.

One area in which our efforts to reach out clearly need to be expanded and strengthened is the community of underrepresented groups. The problem of underrepresentation is especially apparent among minorities, as the percentages from such groups entering the profession stand in sharp contrast to their numerical distribution in the population. The problem, in part, is a manifestation of economic and social conditions that contribute to the general underrepresentation of these groups in higher education and the professions, but that is not a fully satisfactory explanation. It is also the case that among underrepresented groups having exposure to our discipline in secondary and undergraduate programs, a relatively small percentage of their members see it as one of continuing identification. Such efforts as we have made to address the matter have tended to focus on achieving better balance in faculties, which, of course, is an important means of increasing our attractiveness. However, with insufficient numbers of individuals from underrepresented groups entering the field, such initiatives can do little to bring about the desired level of balance. Until such time as we have more members of underrepresented groups pursuing degrees in the field, efforts to achieve greater diversification will continue to show limited progress at best.

Although I have no immediate solution to the problem I have been discussing, it seems to me that we can begin making a more concerted effort to determine the reasons that greater numbers of undergraduate students from the community of underrepresented groups are not attracted to our discipline and move as aggressively as possible to address them. I suspect, for instance, that we might discover that far too much of our content is removed from the range of experience of underrepresented groups and excludes their interests from reasonable consideration. A more substantial commitment to curriculum integration, therefore, might go a long way in enhancing our appeal.

While it is likely that such previously mentioned cultural influences are an important factor, I further suspect that we might also discover that many representatives of these groups see career opportunities as being quite limited. In this respect, I feel that we can do a much better job of making clear what opportunities do exist, and especially in education.

In pointing to these possibilities, I do not wish to imply that they are the only reasons we have failed to attract greater interest among underrepresented groups. My purpose rather has been to identify a way in which we can begin to approach the issue and to suggest some related actions that may facilitate its resolution.

Another community to which I am convinced we can more effectively reach out than we have involves the non-academic professions. With the number of scholars we now have doing work in such areas as legal communication, medical communication, applied communication, political communication, organizational communication, and the like, we should be more visible in the professional community than we presently are. This year's convention represents a significant initiative in attempting to reach that community, and it would be unfortunate if we fail to undertake further measures to sustain the momentum. To date, however, our efforts to gain access to the professional community have been largely restricted to creating consulting opportunities for the more entrepreneurially inclined.

As a discipline, we have much more to gain from the association with this community. Various professions, for instance, provide an excellent context for research on real-world situations in which communication plays a vital role. We may be able to help such groups deal more effectively with the problems they face by addressing those matters that involve human interaction. In so doing, we ourselves may learn a great deal more about the role and functions of communication in specific social contexts. Finally, greater identification with the professional community can expand possibilities for internships and employment for students in our programs, most of whom at the undergraduate and M.A. level are not especially interested in pursuing academic careers, but nonetheless possess knowledge of communication that equips them to render valuable service in dealing with many of the disturbing and sometimes debilitating problems people in other professions confront.

One of the difficulties that limits our prospects for establishing stronger ties to the professional community is accessibility. For some reason, we do not actively encourage representatives of this community to become more aware of our field. Although we can point to instances of collaborative activity, by and large, one senses little involvement of members of the professional community in what we do, or even knowledge of it. We do not, for instance, find many lawyers, doctors, and corporate managers identified with those in our association dealing with legal, medical, and organizational communication.

A possible reason for this asymmetry is that we are not especially effective in making available what we know or think we know that may be of relevance to those in the professional community. This, in part, is attributable to the fact that our literature does not adequately address the implications of scholarly inquiry for the practice of communication. The recently created *Journal of Applied Communication Research* may help to alleviate this condition, but I am not convinced that the answer ultimately lies in the production of more journals that have broader appeal and less technical content or that are addressed to specifically targeted, non-academic audiences. Progress may be more readily achieved by having those who share interests with various constituencies in the professional community devote greater energy to determining the means by which we can better serve them and identifying the types of activities they would find most profitable.

Yet another group to which I believe we can do a better job of reaching out consists of representatives of the international academic community. One need not spend much time examining the international membership of SCA to determine that our work

is not well represented in other countries. The situation promises to improve as more international students who earn degrees in our discipline return to their countries and introduce courses and communication training into the curricula of the institutions in which they are employed. On the whole, however, communication is not a field of study that is well understood outside the boundaries of the United States.

Mass Communication may be an exception, but as a subject of interest, the accent tends to be on the technology and institutions rather than on the broader theoretical issues involved. Even if that were not true, the fact remains that compared to such disciplines as psychology, sociology, history, economics, and anthropology, communication as an academic field is largely non-existent throughout much of the rest of the world. When people discover us, however, it is often the case that they find our work to be both of interest and relevance, albeit more limited than either they or we might wish.

A major difficulty in extending our reach to the international community is posed by the almost complete absence of scholarly literature in languages native to those in other countries who might otherwise feel that what we have to say is of value to them. This may be less a problem in some European and former colonial countries in which command of English is relatively widespread. Nevertheless, our extremely limited capacity to produce information in languages other than English will continue to hamper efforts to develop a broader base of interest in the study of human communication.

One possible way to begin addressing this problem would be to work more actively to identify individuals competent and fluent in other languages with whom we can collaborate to produce scholarly publications in those languages. Without this type of initiative, I am afraid that there is small hope of reasonably rapid progress in advancing the interests of our discipline beyond our own borders.

Another difficulty in reaching out to the international community is that far too much of our scholarship and pedagogical writing is culture-specific. We are prone to offer as universal principles of communication derived from studies that have been conducted within a very narrowly defined cultural context. Hence, much of what we claim is, or at least appears to be, alien to the experience of those having different cultural backgrounds. In respect to the universality of claims, we are not the same as the natural and physical sciences and must begin to recognize that much of what we can say about the nature of communication depends on the particular cultural milieu in which it occurs. To ignore such an important source of influence and variance is to provide a generally distorted view of the ways in which people interact to produce the states and outcomes in which we profess to be interested.

To the extent that an increasing proportion of our scholarship begins to reflect a broader cultural view, then it becomes more likely that larger numbers of those in the international community will develop a greater appreciation of our work. I should add here that adoption of a more encompassing view might also have a similar effect within the confines of the United States among those of varying cultural identity who find scholarly discussions of communication of less interest and relevance than we would like.

The final community I have identified consists of those in other disciplines with whom our interests overlap. It is only natural that we should seek to foster and advance such mutuality of concern whenever and wherever it may exist. Unfortunately, we do not at present appear to have experienced a great deal of

success in reaching out to those in other disciplines who presumably should find at least some of what we do to be of consequence to them.

Rather than emphasizing the complementary relationship of scholarly activity within our respective spheres, our approach to this community all too often has consisted of emulating their research agendas and the forms of inquiry in which they typically engage. Although imitation may be the highest form of flattery in many situations, in this particular instance, it has not served us especially well in attracting the attention of the rest of the scholarly community. I seriously doubt, for example, that representatives of other disciplines look to our work in nearly the same degree as we look to theirs. It is certainly clear that they are not proportionately as well represented in our professional organizations as we are in theirs.

We might do better in gaining the attention of other disciplines in those areas in which interests intersect if more of our energies focused on illuminating those aspects of human relationships and performance to which inquiry in cognate disciplines has not been specifically directed, and which, by virtue of those concepts that define their scope of concern, is not likely to be. Despite progress in making our discipline more message-centered than it was at the time of the New Orleans and Wingspread conferences, the focusing of distinctively communication issues remains a difficulty for us.

Some attribute this condition to the umbrella-like character of our professional organizations, but I am more inclined to believe that it stems from a lack of confidence in our ability to make claims that have the acknowledged significance of those in seemingly more mature and intellectually sophisticated fields of study. It is less threatening to imitate than to originate, but in choosing this all too frequent course, we leave ourselves in the position of saying nothing that those after whom we model our scholarly endeavors do not feel they already know.

A discipline does not advance very well under circumstances in which the objects of inquiry to which it can legitimately lay claim are secondary to those more appropriate to other domains. Such an orientation will serve only to perpetuate subordinate standing and status rather than lead to the equal partnership of which I firmly believe us to be capable. When more of our scholarship begins to exhibit a character uniquely concerned with the nature of human interaction, then its value as a complement to the knowledge produced in such disciplines as social anthropology, English, linguistics, sociology, psychology, history, political science, and philosophy will become more sharply apparent, and they will be able to see us as having a greater potential to enrich the understandings that their own special brands of knowledge produce. Under these conditions, we are much more likely to be successful in attracting not only attention, but also respect, elsewhere in the scholarly community and, thereby, to enhance the prospects for genuine and mutually beneficial collaborative activity.

My feeling that we should do more to reach out to the several communities I have identified has not been prompted by any sense of missionary zeal--at least, not any of which I am aware. Rather, my interest has been stimulated by a growing awareness that our discipline is neither as well represented nor as widely understood and appreciated as it is capable of being. Through better representation and stronger ties to relevant external communities, we stand not only to perform more vital educational functions, but also to profit from expanded opportunities to develop more meaningful understandings of communication and the obviously significant role it plays in the conduct of human affairs.