

# On Practicing What We Preach

## National Communication Association Presidential Address

### Betsy Wackernagel Bach, NCA President

Betsy Wackernagel Bach, Ph.D., 2009 NCA President continued the tradition of delivering a presidential address at the NCA Annual Convention. The following is the text from her address delivered in Chicago, Illinois on November 14, 2009.

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Let me begin by thanking the membership for electing me to this post. While I would be lying if I said that it was conflict free, I would argue that it has been very rewarding, for without conflict, there is no forward movement or change. Bill Wilmot's study of conflict first attracted me to this field, and so I have embraced the challenges presented during my term and have learned much from my work as your association president. Thank you for the opportunity for both personal growth and the opportunity to "grow" the association.

Speaking of growth let me first talk about our accomplishments an association, as this year we have seen *tremendous* growth! Beginning with the able leadership of Art Bochner, we have developed a strategic plan, which was introduced to the membership at the LA meeting on Wednesday. It will serve us well as we bring the association to its 100<sup>th</sup> year.

We have worked hard to revise the Guidelines for Developing and Assessing Undergraduate Programs and will be testing them this spring at three different institutions (you can find them on the NCA website); we've formed four Member Working Committees: one on the Convention, a second on Leadership Development, a third on Internal and External Communications, and finally a committee on Member Relationships. If you're interested in serving on one of these committees please let me know, as we are always looking for volunteers. I also appointed a Task Force to investigate our current Unit Structure and how to deal with the growth and size of divisions (among many other things). We have formed a second Task Force to plan our 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2014. And, an important accomplishment to note is that despite these troubled financial times, and through the hard work of Jackie Taylor and our finance committee we continue

our tradition of remaining fiscally healthy — we have both a balanced budget and a rainy day fund. This year we have also engaged in international outreach to academic associations in Turkey and Cuba.

Through the efforts of Dawn Braithwaite, we are in the midst of one of the largest conventions we've ever had, despite the economic downturn and have established a new, and (frankly) much more sane process for electing association leadership. Finally, we have a wonderful new Executive Director in Nancy Kidd, whose strong business sense, knowledge of associations, understanding of and responsiveness to the breadth of NCA member needs, and savvy and acumen in dealing with NCA's external constituencies is already serving us well. You will be pleased to know that Nancy's credentials are impeccable. Her background as a manager and leader, her established connections in Washington D.C., and her Stanford Ph.D. provide us with all the qualities (and more) an association could ask from an executive director. And, at this time, I'd also like to publicly thank Roger Smither for his five years of dedicated work at the helm of our association.

I was initially attracted to this discipline as an undergraduate at Hope College because of its practical side. Our discipline, while of course built on theory, is one where we can apply what we have learned to improve our daily lives and the lives of others. As John Stewart noted in an early edition of *Together: Communicating Interpersonally*, the quality of our lives is directly related to the quality of our communication. That being said, we are uniquely positioned as communication scholars to take our research and apply it to everyday interaction. In our discipline, I encourage us all to make this effort—to apply theory to everyday interaction by practicing what we preach. While we could develop a very long list here, I am limiting my comments (in no particular order) to five ways in which we can and should practice what we preach.



First, and foremost, we are probably better suited than any other area of study to *celebrate our differences*. Scholars from across the discipline remind us to include all voices in our discourse, however difficult and uncomfortable that might be. It is my hope that we continue our efforts to include multiple voices in our decisions and actions. It is my hope that we continue our efforts to include multiple voices in our decisions and actions. As demonstrated in my Presidential *Spectra* columns this year, and as often seen in CRTnet, we have multiple and cacophonous viewpoints, and are not afraid to voice them. I featured just a few of these voices — Conservatives, individuals with disabilities, GLBTQ faculty, K-12 instructors, administrators, and those not otherwise in the majority as they all offer important perspectives. It is essential that we are cognizant of the fact that many different voices comprise our discipline and association. Let us work together to embrace and celebrate these multiple voices and perspectives that make up our disciplinary conversation.

Next, (and while this is not admittedly reflected in our research, but in our practice of making connections and outreach), we must *embrace our K-12 and*

*community college colleagues*, as they are an active and very important part of our discipline. Including K-12 and community college teachers is what distinguishes us from ICA. Frankly, I become very distressed when I hear some NCA members question out loud the credibility of NCA because we include “these people.” This perspective is myopic at best. In these hard economic times (and also in good economic times), to exclude those individuals who are the best suited to recruit students to our major through both forensics and teaching the basic course is nothing more than academic suicide. Our high school and, for that matter, our community college instructors are the educators responsible for introducing our undergraduate students to (and helping them develop a thirst for) the study of communication. We should not only privilege the work and concerns of university faculty, but endeavor to include these K-12, and all, voices so we remain a diversely rich discipline.

Third, and on a related note, those of us in a position to do so must *mentor our graduate students so they are prepared for the changing needs in the academy*. We do our doctoral and Master’s students a great disservice if we lead them to believe that the majority of jobs are in doctoral-granting institutions. They are not. Rather, as Jolene Koester notes in her November *Spectra* article, “most of the communication faculties (and jobs) are not in major research universities. Instead they are in public comprehensive universities, community colleges, and private colleges and universities.” Moreover, many of our recent Ph.D. graduates are working as adjunct faculty, and do not often have a single academic home. We need to prepare our students for the reality of work in the academy, rather than (intentionally or unintentionally) making them feel like

second-class citizens if they do not land a job at a doctoral granting institution.

Fourth, we should demonstrate what we have to offer by actively *working at outreach on our own campuses*. We are well positioned to provide mediation services, and to assist with speechwriting, in addition to demonstrating how to lead productive meetings, collaborating on projects and grants, and providing communication training those in the STEM disciplines (among others). I encourage us all to pull together a discussion of what our departments can offer in both training and research, and visit other units on our campuses to inform them of how we can assist in their teaching, grant writing, research, and the like. It could very likely lead to inclusion in an IGERT grant (as it did on my campus), as well as serving the general purpose of promoting and explaining our discipline to others.

Finally, one of the best ways that we can practice what we preach is by *engaging in civil discourse*. This is central to our continued future success as a discipline. I often wonder what those outside of our discipline would think if they walked by a Legislative Assembly meeting or read CRTnet regularly. We are at times less than civil with each other. A perfect example is provided in the events that surrounded last year’s dissention over the convention location at the Manchester Hyatt. I wonder how civil some of the emails flying back and forth would be perceived by those unfamiliar with either the situation or the credos of our association.

Given both our credos, and coupled with our new mission statement, we must lead the way in promoting and engaging in civility in societal, interpersonal, and classroom discourse. The fifth goal of

our strategic plan calls for a commitment to civility, by “fostering and modeling civil discourse and open and ethical communication.” Specifically, our three objectives under this goal are to:

1. Maintain ethical standards for research, teaching and service by fully articulating ethical standards for publishing ethics, classroom teaching and ethical service, and continuously updating internal policy to reflect monitoring of ethical standards.
2. Maintain ethical standards for all NCA communications by developing policy for reviewing all of our communications and developing a structuring to encourage self-monitoring of communications.
3. Promote the enactment of the NCA Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society and the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication through our advocacy for teaching the principles in the Credos and engaging in public dialogue about these principles.

This is our calling as a discipline and should be our goal as keepers of the discipline—to recognize, reinforce and reify civil discourse and ethical communication. I urge us to model this method of communication whenever possible on our campuses and in our communities.

We are uniquely suited as a discipline to practice what we preach in order to celebrate our differences and embrace all of our colleagues, and in the ways in which we mentor our students, promote our departments, and engage in civil discourse. Because of what we study, it is imperative that we model these practices in society, in our communities, and on our campuses.

