

Academic Labor**IJoC**

The Uneasy Institutional Position of Communication and Media Studies and Its Impact on Academic Labor in Large Universities Versus Small Colleges

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The theme of the 2011 International Communication Association Conference in Boston was "Communication @ the Center," and there is certainly a strong argument to be made that the study of communication forms a nexus among the human sciences. Communications is, indeed, central to the processes of constructing and maintaining social formations, cultural structure, and political discourse, and an understanding of the essential social role of communication has arisen over time from far-ranging interdisciplinary and ethnographic studies of language and symbolic systems, social interaction, media institutions and production, and art and visual culture. This is echoed in the institutionalized teaching of communication studies (in the United States) across a range of academic divisions whose nomenclature include communication, speech, rhetoric, journalism, media, culture, and art. Communication studies spans and draws from numerous traditional academic disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, English and literary criticism, history, art history, and philosophy. Yet, in the realm of academic administration and labor, the elasticity and overlapping centrality of the field seems to foster fragmentation and marginalization, inviting challenges to program stability and increased uncertainty for long-term academic employment.

Faculty labor casualization has been an issue of growing concern for decades (Anderson, 2002; Miller, 2001). But the disciplinary history of communication studies seems to have facilitated this trend, both in large universities and small colleges. For 17 years, I taught at large research universities before moving on, for the last 12 years, to small, selective liberal arts colleges. Looking back, I am struck by the contrasting positions of communication-related programs in each case. At large research universities, especially the "Big Ten" state university model with which I am most closely familiar, communication studies seems institutionally Balkanized, often with three or more programs laying some claim to communication research and scholarship, yet with remarkably little interaction among the faculty and students of each separate program. In my experience at such institutions, there are usually three or four faculty in a given department (out of a total of 15-20 or more) who serve on graduate and undergraduate

student committees across several communication studies-related departments.¹ The majority of faculty, however, remains relatively insular in their perspectives and attitudes, proceeding with teaching and research as if cognate departments and programs were foreign territory. It is fair to say, I think, that the faculty in research universities where I have worked tend to view their scholarship and expertise as highly specialized, and the consequent divisions of labor that characterize these universities remain relatively narrow and rigid.² My colleagues in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, for example, tended to see little overlap between their scholarly interests and curricular responsibilities and those of faculty in the Department of Communication Studies on the same campus.³

From the point of view of university administrators, on the other hand, multiple departments and programs with overlapping interests in communication often seemed to represent cases of replication that presented salient opportunities for consolidation and retrenchment. What seem like obvious distinctions in subject matter and approach to specialized and insular communications faculty can appear much less distinct to administrators trained in political science or biology. The results are evident: Departments of speech, communication studies, and journalism and mass communication have been merged at dozens of universities across the United States, and where such departments have remained separate and intact, they have struggled to fend off recurrent consolidation pressures and proposals.⁴

Consolidation and retrenchment has occurred at smaller schools as well, but usually for different reasons in different contexts. The significant post-WWII expansion of speech communication, journalism and mass communication programs in public universities made communication studies (in various manifestations) a regular feature of large campuses, but had little effect on curriculum in small liberal art colleges. There, communications-related courses emerged only sporadically, usually appended to

¹ During one 10-year period at the University of Minnesota, I personally served on more than 100 graduate thesis committees across several departments and major programs, including journalism and mass communication, speech-communication (later communication studies), rhetoric (later merged into the Department of Writing Studies), American studies, history, sociology, anthropology, women's studies, film studies, and cultural studies and comparative literature.

² When I first arrived at the University of Minnesota, for example, I was routinely referred to by other faculty as "the photo guy" (I was teaching a course called "visual communication"), despite my graduate training at the Annenberg School for Communication at Penn being in communication theory and research, not photography. The "photo guy" label also did not reflect my publications, which involved ethnographic research on film and television production, children's acquisition of symbolic skills, media socialization, industrial influences on the naturalization of technical formats and media aesthetics, and critical theoretical writing on documentary film and television news representations.

³ It should be noted that in many cases these departments emerged from previously more integrated units. The post-WWII growth and diversification of communications as a field coincided with the expansion of universities and higher education funding more generally, facilitating increased specialization, and often separation, among faculties.

⁴ In the city where I work (Minneapolis-St. Paul), two universities and at least one college have merged communication, journalism, or rhetoric departments in the last six years.

established humanities departments. Courses in film studies appeared in English departments and theater programs. Occasionally, an English department offered a journalism course, usually taught by an adjunct instructor. The most common form of communications program found in smaller colleges is speech communication, although interestingly, very few highly selective liberal arts colleges feature such programs. Elite liberal arts colleges seem more likely to offer some version of cinema studies or media arts, if they have any communication or media programs at all. Media and communication programs are rare enough in private liberal arts colleges that they are used in admissions marketing to distinguish a school from its peer institutions.⁵

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the number of liberal arts colleges that experimented with or expanded media studies curricula grew, but the economic downturn since 2007 seems to have curtailed many of these efforts. Instead, communication and media studies departments have increasingly become targets for cuts. With relatively small faculties (and therefore few tenured faculty for whom to find new homes), these departments are vulnerable to being identified for elimination or for mergers with other small programs. While many communications programs in large universities can appear diffuse and redundant to outsiders, small college programs can appear relatively marginal and dispensable to deans searching for cost savings. This is true not only because communication programs tend to be small—sometimes only two or three tenure-line faculty—but because traditionally, communication and media studies have not been viewed as part of an essential core liberal arts curriculum, despite a growing consensus about the centrality of communication studies in an ever more networked and media-dominated world. This contradiction, between the values and inertia of traditional disciplinary formations and what nearly everyone recognizes as the contemporary relevance (indispensability, even) of media developments and communication issues, presents itself as a particular challenge for liberal arts colleges and their stated commitments to preparing broadly educated students for a life of civic engagement.

So, what does all of this mean for academic labor and the situations in which communications scholars and teacher find themselves? The same forces driving program consolidation, both at large universities and small colleges, have fueled the steady shift toward part-time, visiting, and non-tenure-track teaching appointments.⁶ During my time teaching in a Big Ten university, accreditation reviews at my university and others consistently flagged programs for utilizing too many part-time and adjunct instructors, eroding the proportion of contact time that students would have during their educational careers with full-time and fully integrated professorial staff. The tendency to hire growing numbers of adjunct faculty at these large university programs was exacerbated by external pressures to emphasize the more vocational and business-oriented aspects of curricular tracks. During the late 1980s and 1990s,

⁵ This was confirmed in my personal discussions with admissions officers at Carleton, Hampshire, Macalester, and Middlebury colleges.

⁶ For data on this steady increase between 1977 and 2000, see *Use of Part-time Faculty in Higher Education: Numbers and Impact*, a briefing paper prepared by Ross Miller (2001) for the Association of American Colleges and Universities and *The New Professoriate: Characteristics, Contributions, and Compensation* by Eugene L. Anderson (2002). The 2010–2011 AAUP Report on the Economic Status of the Profession presents the most recent comprehensive federal data on the growth of contingent academic employment and can be accessed at: <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/Z/ecstatreport10-11/>

in particular, there was a significant shift in big university programs toward greater emphasis on training in advertising, public relations, marketing, and business communications. By the early 1990s, preparation to teach advertising, "integrated marketing," or "strategic communication" seemed to be the single most prevalent criterion in job descriptions for communications faculty positions in all sorts of communication programs (Ross, Osborne, & Richards, 2006). Early in that same decade, an eminent senior colleague of mine stood up in a school of journalism and mass communication faculty meeting and asked, "Why don't we just change the name of the school to Advertising, Public Relations, Communication Management, and . . . oh, by the way, Journalism and Mass Communication?"

The growing emphasis on teaching to the job market inevitably led to greater reliance on working communications professionals as part-time instructors, as well as to greater demand for full-time hires with the experience to teach technical and applied skills—increasingly in the area of digital technology. Regardless of the merits of providing such practical instruction, this shift in the job requirements posted for communications faculty positions meant that that newly minted PhDs needed to sell themselves in the academic job market as eager and prepared to teach advertising, public relations, digital video, or web page design. During the decade of the 1990s, I worked closely with dozens of doctoral students at the University of Minnesota. With only one or two exceptions, each of those students, upon entering the job market, needed to foreground their ability to teach in an applied area to meet the requirements of available job postings. Given the scarcity of alternatives, each chose to accept the responsibility for teaching courses in advertising, public relations, news writing, video production, or web design, with the hope of devoting more time to their specialty areas of history, theory, and research as their positions became more secure. Such hires occurred not only at teaching-heavy regional colleges and universities where faculty members normally assume responsibility for large teaching loads and professional course tracks, but also at major research universities in every region of the country. At the same time, increasingly more programs were creating "clinical professor" positions, staffed by faculty with professional or technical experience, but not necessarily with substantial scholarly training or credentials. Clinical faculty normally occupy non-tenure track positions, contributing further to a more stratified faculty and shifting further away from the traditional model of a scholarly college. This has also, I believe, further fueled perceptions among faculty in other disciplines that communication and media studies, like other applied fields, are peripheral to the core scholarly missions of universities and colleges, leading to even greater pressures for consolidation, department mergers, and reductions in core faculty.

Small liberal arts colleges have not been immune to many of the same dynamics, but they start from a different position. Because programs of communication or media studies at small colleges tend to have small faculties and often much shorter institutional histories than do other departments, they tend to be organized around a relatively limited core curriculum taught by only a few tenure-track professors. The teaching and scholarship of faculty in these departments, perhaps by necessity, tends to be less specialized than that of faculty at research universities, with each member of the department covering a broader range of subjects and often living an intellectual life that is more generalist in orientation. Still, even a more general focus among core faculty cannot suffice to provide the breadth required of major degree programs, and these small departments frequently depend upon supplemental teaching resources to cover their curriculum. As with larger university programs, this often involves part-time and adjunct teachers, some hired for long-term part-time positions—especially, if they also work as lab supervisors or

undergraduate program advisers—and others hired for temporary, visiting, and postdoctoral fellow positions. The small college departments with which I have been affiliated have operated precisely in this fashion, regularly utilizing visiting and part-time faculty to sustain major and minor programs. These programs also rely upon affiliated faculty from other departments and upon cross-listed courses, a natural option for a discipline that transcends the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Yet, my experience indicates that college administrators (and fellow college faculty) rarely recognize or appreciate the interdisciplinary centrality of communication studies for the liberal arts, and they continue to view communication and media studies programs as newcomers, peripheral to the core of traditional disciplines and departments.

In the last decade alone, I have witnessed firsthand, as acting chair, the closure of a well-established communication studies department and the movement of its media studies courses into a merged hybrid program of humanities & media & cultural studies. Now, only a few years later, the reformed media and cultural studies department faces a review of the long-term viability of a department with only three tenure-line faculty. The curriculum has survived, as is so often the case, because of student demand and the presence and support of visiting faculty, temporary postdoctoral fellows, part-time adjunct faculty, and affiliated faculty from other departments. Despite its success in attracting majors, as well as the success of those majors in prestigious graduate programs in the United States and Europe, there is little sense that the college as a whole considers the program vital to the larger liberal arts curriculum. That college faculty in various related disciplines are strong supporters of the department seems to only bolster administrative notions that further mergers and consolidations are possible. This not only fuels department uncertainty about retirement replacements and potential tenured faculty transfers, but also keeps the long-time visiting and adjunct faculty—a group that has proved indispensable to the strength and continuity of the curriculum—unsure of even part-time employment.

At a second liberal arts college where I recently taught, a plan was launched to expand the two-person cinema and media studies program—originally an annex of the English Department—to create a more comprehensive program and free-standing major for undergraduates. Visiting faculty were hired to create new courses in visual culture, journalism studies, global media, social theory and the media, and environmental issues and the media, as well as to expand on existing course listings in film studies, video, and documentary and digital media production. Declared majors and minors quickly grew. However, college support for the expanded vision of the department faltered, and the decision was made to return to the previously tighter focus on cinema and video arts. Again, the hesitance of college administrators to view communication and media as central to the college-wide liberal arts curricula led them to pull back from a longer term investment in media studies. The end result was great uncertainty regarding future faculty positions and cancellation in midstream of long-planned faculty searches. Some faculty, hired for two-year visiting positions with the understanding that there would be an expanding academic program and new tenure-track positions in the near future, spent the two years designing and creating new courses and a new major curriculum only to have the new courses discontinued and much of the new major program scrapped.

I learned two lessons from my small college experiences. First, the life of communication and media studies in such institutions remains marginalized and tenuous. College administrators do not seem

to value communications as an essential part of a liberal arts curriculum. Of course, there are external pressures, given our rapidly changing media environment, to provide students with greater opportunities to gain communication skills, especially with new digital and visual platforms of articulation. There are even national movements in the United States for greater cultivation of media and visual "literacy" (Griffin, 2008), which have prompted initiatives at dozens of liberal arts campuses to expand opportunities in the media arts. Still, administrators seem to feel greater freedom to make sudden and unilateral cuts and changes to communication and media programs than they would when dealing with many other disciplines. In the early 2000s, new courses and programs in communication and media studies popped up on many campuses. But with increasing economic pressures, the last to arrive were often the first to go. Second, this means that academic positions in communication and media studies lack the permanence and reliability of positions in many other fields. The greater flexibility that many college and university administrators have sought by increasing the number of casual academic hires has already been playing out disproportionately in areas of communication and media studies. Whether adding a journalism course in the English department, a film studies course to art history, a popular culture class to sociology (or American studies), an African cinema class to African studies or a political communication course to political science, chances are greater that the course will be taught by a temporary or adjunct faculty member and that it may be trimmed in the first wave of retrenchment.

In both large universities and small colleges, the naturally close relationships that communication studies enjoys with related departments in the social sciences and humanities is intellectually enriching, but it can also prevent communication and media studies from establishing an autonomous institutional presence. Too many administrators seem to view such interdisciplinary overlapping as redundancy rather than a synergistic benefit. While communication studies is viewed as having much academic and practical value from outside institutions of higher education—particularly, in areas of business, politics, and among media organizations themselves—and while there is a substantial popular consensus on the importance of communication skills and the essential role of the media in social and political life, the view from within the university is more heavily shaded by the competition for scarce resources among established and often insular disciplines. Much lip service is paid to the value of interdisciplinary work in the academy, and the kind of interdisciplinarity that routinely characterizes communication and media studies is seen as a nice plus, but when push comes to shove, it is not a compelling priority. In research universities, the success with which particular departments or programs bring in external funding and grant money is a far greater factor affecting a program's perceived centrality and prestige, and, unfortunately, communication and media studies are not areas for which many large-scale funding sources exist.⁷ In research universities, this immediately puts communication and media studies departments at an internal disadvantage compared to better funded disciplines in the sciences and social sciences. At small colleges, internal, rather than external, funding and allocation processes seem to have the greatest impact on communication and media departments, with the creation and retention of faculty lines being the key

⁷ A search done by the research development office at the University of Minnesota to determine sources for research grants in media studies in the late 1990s revealed a dearth of external funding sources nationwide.

challenge.

Differing factors at both universities and colleges have contributed to a changing environment for academic labor in communication studies. The ratio of tenure-track to non-tenure-track positions continues to shift downward (2010–2011 AAUP Report). The presence of communication programs at small colleges remains highly variable, and at universities, the large number of program mergers and consolidations has contributed to the shrinkage and irregularity of position openings. Stable, tenure-tracked careers may no longer represent a normative model for academic labor. This is not just a result of the recent economic downturn, although this has drastically reduced the number of position openings in the short term. It is symptomatic of longer term institutional shifts and uncertainty, some of which pertain to academia more generally and some to communication and media studies programs in particular.

Since leaving the University of Minnesota 12 years ago, I have discovered that there is still significant demand for scholars and teachers in media studies at both large universities and at small colleges, as well as many opportunities to contribute to interesting and rapidly evolving programs at very good schools. However, unlike when I began my career, the majority of job postings are no longer for tenure-track positions and many are not full-time. Young scholars today must plan for the possibility of an academic career outside of the tenure system and be ready to accept high levels of mobility with fewer financial rewards. One should also prepare to be very nimble with regard to shifting academic concentrations and emphases—designing new courses, repositioning one’s work in new curricular tracks, and perhaps, starting all over again in a couple of years.

But from my point of view, the most important ramifications of these shifts in academic labor involve their potential to diminish long-term faculty investments in programs, schools, students, and communities. Irregular employment inhibits the kind of long-term involvement in, and loyalty to, an institution that has been a hallmark of the tenure system. Visiting or limited-term faculty are not likely to involve themselves deeply in faculty or college governance, assume active roles in alumni and donor relations, or become the faces of an institution in professional service or community relations. Perhaps even more important, sustained student mentoring suffers; the bonds faculty members forge with students not only encompass the years of a student’s educational career, but frequently continue after graduation and are a key component of an institutional identity linking faculty, students, and alumni. Faculty, at many small colleges, exhibit the same personal and long-lasting relationships with undergraduates that university professors so often enjoy only with graduate mentees. And I have personally seen these connections extend to alumni families, with siblings, cousins, and even parents having taken classes over the years with the same teachers. For this reason, faculty continuity may be even more crucial for the networks of relations that support and sustain private liberal arts colleges. The history of a college or university resides in its faculty. As faculty become more transient, the very identity of an institution erodes.

The lack of a (relatively) permanent academic home is hard on faculty morale as well. How will faculty members feel genuinely invested in a program when their contributions to that program are not sustained over time? How can they feel fully invested in a home institution when they know that their time there will be short-lived? And how will they ever feel valued by college and university administrators, or

appreciated as an important contributor to the institution, if they haven't the time to build longstanding relationships? This is an issue for higher education in general, but because the field is so much in flux, it seems a particularly acute problem for communication and media studies. Moreover, because the field of communication studies is so inherently concerned with public issues that transcend the academy, many communication scholars, and especially those with temporary appointments, devote more of their attention to the daily cycle of contemporary developments in media and politics than they do to the internal politics of their universities and colleges. This does not work to integrate them more fully in the center.

What can be done to address these already established trends? At the small college where I now teach, the faculty, which meets as a committee of the whole, initiated discussions concerning the integration and fair treatment of non-tenure-track colleagues. These discussions led to a Resource and Planning Committee Report on Full-time and Part-time Faculty, submitted in December 2010 that affirmed the unique value of non-tenure track faculty for the college.⁸ In particular, the study noted that "Long-term faculty," whether full or part-time, tenure-track or not, "establish relationships on campus that spur contributions beyond solely their teaching to their Departments, the College, and the student experience." Since the release of the study, faculty discussions have continued, aimed at fostering greater recognition and institutional support for non-tenure-line faculty, including the possibility of new appointment categories, such as "senior lecturer," that might better accommodate renewing contracts and reflect the contributions of long-term instructors.

Increasing casualization of academic labor has also been a topic of intense debate in Canada, where it is an issue of government policy and collective bargaining.⁹ Both cases suggest that the problems generated by casualization will only be addressed by college and university administrators when faculties themselves draw attention to the issues and provoke action. However, in the case of small colleges this seems more likely to involve grass roots lobbying by the faculty itself for more egalitarian integration of non-tenure-track colleagues and direct, persistent pressure in college faculty meetings for administrative reform of faculty appointments. Also, because the communication and media studies departments in small colleges tend to have fewer faculty members with less narrow specializations than those of large universities, there is more incentive to build a common culture of academic work.

In large universities, the issue seems less likely to be addressed through channels of faculty governance and more likely to involve bureaucratic and legal negotiations between faculties and administrators, in some cases in the form of collective bargaining. Also, the more directly vocational missions of many large university communications departments seem likely to foster continuing hyper-specialization of teaching and heavy use of professional adjuncts in the foreseeable future. Already, non-regular faculty at small colleges are more likely to participate on college committees and in college life, as

⁸ According to the report, the committee was assigned the task of examining the role of short-term and part-time faculty in the college at least partly as a response to the college's lower than average ranking among its peer institutions for percentage of courses taught by full-time tenure-track faculty.

⁹ For an introduction to this debate, see papers and commentaries at The York Democratic Forum, <http://www.yorkdemocraticforum.org>

well as to receive more reasonable compensation and at least partial benefits. I am betting that small colleges will continue to lead the way in creating collegial atmospheres for academic work in communications—in those colleges where communications and media studies survives.



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