

## Department of Speech Communication--Response to 1997 Review Committee Report

October 10, 1997

The findings and recommendations of the Review Committee for the Department of Speech Communication and of the external members of the Review Committee were discussed in meetings of the Department faculty in early June and early October of 1997. The Department's faculty was pleased by the Committee's emphasis on the Department's strengths--its national reputation, its teaching effectiveness, the quality of faculty research, and its academic standards. The Committee's very favorable description of our graduate program's strengths in preparing and placing its graduate students and its comments on our contribution to the general education of students in the College and University were also well received. The purpose of this document is to respond to certain of the Committee's recommendations.

Many of the initiatives within our purview which were recommended by our review committee were also identified in our self study document as goals for the immediate future, and we agree with them. For example, one of our most immediate priorities for the 1997-98 academic year is to work on revising our curriculum--updating course descriptions, proposing new courses, and removing courses that have not been offered in some time or that are no longer appropriate in light of current staffing and departmental mission. We also plan to form and meet with a Visiting Committee for the department, and a faculty committee has been appointed for that purpose. We will give some attention to revising our undergraduate curriculum and to constructing course clusters oriented toward career goals. And we will continue to develop our relationships with other units, including appointment of adjunct faculty with the Departments of English, Political Science, and Women Studies, development of cross-listed or joint courses, and continuing work by the Joint Committee of faculty from the Department and the School of Communications.

We would like to address two issues raised in this review. The first is our relation to the School of Communications. Discussions with the School which have continued during the Spring and Summer of this year indicate that, while both units are interested in developing closer ties, both also recognize that there are basic differences in their respective identities and missions that should be kept in mind. Thus, we concur with the Review Committee that the two units "are sufficiently different entities that any merging of the units should be considered carefully and some measure of distinct identities or administrative responsibilities should be maintained." The School's research and teaching focus on media channels and effects and on preparing journalists and communication professionals. The Department of Speech Communication is a liberal arts department emphasizing theory and criticism in the education of its undergraduate and graduate students. The missions, curricula, and research of each of the two units are quite different. The School and the Department through the Joint Committee have, in the past two years, identified three undergraduate courses that they jointly list, as well as areas of collaboration at the graduate level. These areas of mutual interest and activity comprise, however, only a small portion of each unit's activity. The Joint Committee will continue to discuss issues related to graduate

education, research mission, and other areas and to propose other possible joint ventures on which the two units could collaborate.

A second issue raised by the Review Committee was that of departmental focus. Certain members of the Committee felt that we have avoided “difficult decisions with regard to Departmental direction and definition,” and that the graduate program lacks focus. We have discussed this at length in an effort to identify issues that require further definition and direction. Our own view of our present department configuration differs somewhat from that of the Review Committee, and here are some points on which we would like to respond:

1. The area distribution in our department reflects a distribution quite similar to the field as a whole. The recent doctoral program ranking survey conducted by our national association identified rhetorical theory and criticism, communication theory and research, and instructional communication (communication education) as three recognized areas in the field. Despite our small numbers, we were ranked highly in those areas, and we have been very successful in attracting fine graduate students to pursue work here in those areas.
2. While our program has a national and international reputation at the graduate level, we are also cognizant of our role in the Pacific Northwest Region. We are the only doctoral degree granting program in speech communication in the Pacific Northwest, and we also place our graduate students in faculty positions in Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Northern California (as well as throughout the nation and internationally). Graduates of our program are prepared to teach a range of courses in liberal arts programs because of their broad and solid preparation in the field. Our situation is different from that of programs at institutions such as Indiana and Northwestern located in geographic areas where there are multiple doctoral programs in the field and departmental identity and uniqueness are therefore at issue. Our view is that the present configuration of our graduate program best serves the needs of our region and of the state of Washington, in part because of its comprehensiveness.
3. Our present configuration of areas enables the research traditions that grow out of rhetorical and communication studies to inform each other. The links between our faculty and graduate students tend to be conceptually based rather than area based. In an age when the demarcations between humanities and social sciences are becoming increasingly blurred as their respective research traditions cross fertilize each other, the condition in our program seems very appropriate. For example, John Stewart, whose area is communication theory and research, has brought his rhetorical training to bear in service on graduate committees of students in rhetoric; Barbara Warnick (a humanist) and Valerie Manusov (a social scientist) plan an empirical study of cross cultural argument practices; and Ann Staton’s work has taken a rhetorical turn as she studies metaphoric constructions in educational reform advocacy. Our most recent hire, John Gastil, offers expertise in small group and organizational communication, both of which contribute to

and complement our existing interests in communication theory and research and instructional communication.

Graduate students who are attracted to our program often come here precisely because of the interanimation between research areas and interests and because of the Department's widely recognized research collegiality and cooperation. At the time they leave our doctoral program, our Ph.D.'s have a well developed research specialty but are also viewed as comprehensively trained and versatile. We therefore consider our present configuration of areas and research interests within the department to be a strength rather than a problem. Area rivalries and intellectual turf wars characterize the academic scene far too often, and they consume an enormous amount of energy and attention. We believe that our mutual respect for varied perspectives and approaches to the study of human communication in face to face and computer-mediated environments provides the malleability and flexibility that will prove necessary to informed study of communication in the new communication environments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As we contemplate future hires, however, we will keep in mind the review committee's concern about departmental focus. In a department as small as ours which competes successfully in national rankings with departments twice our size, it is essential to deepen and strengthen existing areas of departmental emphasis. The future positions and areas of development described in our self study would complement and strengthen our present emphases in rhetorical studies, communication theory and research, and instructional communication. The third of these areas, in which we are ranked third nationally but in which we have only one faculty (the other being removed to administration) is presently our first priority. We do hope that the College will consider "appropriate additional tenure-track positions" as the review committee recommended. We are presently staffed by only 11 tenure line faculty, which makes us the smallest top ranked doctoral program in our discipline in the nation. We have made excellent hires in the past two years, and will continue to do so and to consequently strengthen our program if given additional positions.

Finally, we were glad to see that the Review Committee's report provided a needed postscript to the report of our ad hoc review committee in 1995. That committee's report emphasized our department's excellence in graduate student education and in undergraduate teaching. This Review Committee's report also emphasized our department's role of intellectual leadership as recognized in discipline-wide awards, national ranking, publications, and editorial activity. We believe that the recent admission of our national association to the American Council of Learned Societies along with this disciplinary recognition are positive factors in our review process. We are also very appreciative of the Review Committee's constructive recommendations and its general support of our program.