



Integrating Communication into the General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

As enrollments are declining both in mass communication programs and in small to mid-sized colleges more generally, many programs struggle to sustain enrollment especially in the elective courses that help support a well-rounded, robust curriculum. This essay argues that communication courses often are well-suited to be jointly offered as part of colleges' general education programs, bolstering course enrollments and acquainting students who may not have considered majoring or minoring in communication to our field. Claiming our place in the general education curriculum could also offer communication a path from the margins to the center of the liberal arts.

College enrollments have been gradually declining for at least a decade, with few expecting a recovery in the near future. The number of high school graduates has been declining, and fewer of those graduates pursue higher education (Marcus, 2022). As a result, several colleges have closed and many others are eliminating academic programs (Marcus, 2024; Moody, 2024).

Some have suggested that changes in policy to reach those who have historically been excluded from higher education might reverse declining enrollments—particularly significant reductions in out-of-pocket student costs, as well as stipends for the majority of the population who are struggling to survive in a changing economy (Kochhaar and Sechopoulos, 2022; Gould and Kandra, 2022; Bekken, 2015), but also active outreach to prospective students outside of the traditional college pipeline, childcare facilities, and programs to support students from substandard high

schools or who have not been in an academic setting for many years (Cummins, Gotlieb and McLaughlin, 2013). Economic challenges are also leading parents and students to seek out programs that they believe will better prepare them for a challenging job market as accountants, doctors, engineers, managers, and nurses. These are factors largely beyond the ability of communication faculty to address, at least in the short term. Instead, this essay explores ways faculty might increase enrollments in our classes through incorporating communication into college general education programs.

Evidence showing that a liberal arts education offers a solid foundation for a satisfying life (and the ready transferability of the core skills learned in a journalism curriculum to more lucrative pursuits) notwithstanding, the number of students entering college intending to study communication or jour-

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nalism seems unlikely to improve without broader societal and industry changes. Some colleges have retrenched or even terminated their communication programs, claiming that they are not well integrated into their strategic plans (Smith, 2023). Undergraduate enrollments in journalism and mass communication programs are declining across the United States, down 9.9% since 2018. More troubling, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded over the period declined by only 2.3%, suggesting that enrollments of first- and second-year students have fallen at a much higher rate (Cummins, Gotlieb and McLaughlin, 2013).

Reduced enrollments and inadequate resources limit many programs' ability to offer a robust array of courses. At least 50 U.S. undergraduate journalism and mass communication departments do not offer even a single course in media history (American Journalism Historians Association, 2019). Many smaller programs may struggle to offer courses in editing (Collins, 2023), ethics (Lee and Padgett, 2020), media economics, systems of representation, and other subjects vital to understanding the role of mass media in modern society. This is sometimes a result of a lack of faculty to offer more courses, which can be beyond the ability of departments to address. But at least as often, it may be a result of the challenges (real or perceived) in securing sufficient enrollment for such courses to run.

Faced with declining enrollments over the past five years, our four-person department in a small Northeast college has had to carefully manage the number of electives we offer each semester to make sure that all scheduled classes run. Faculty in cancelled classes may be reassigned to other duties, such as academic coaching for struggling students, or required to make up the courses in the summer or as future overloads. Either is disruptive to faculty schedules and to students whose course of study is interrupted. This can interfere with departments' ability to experiment with ways to address emerging media and issues, explore systemic issues in media performance, and offer students a robust educational experience. Left unchallenged, this can lead to a downward spiral in course offerings, declared majors, and student success. But our experience at a private liberal arts college faced with declining enrollments and severe economic challenges offers an example of how general education programs can be used as a resource to sustain programs and attract new students.

Nine years ago Albright College's communication department enrollment peaked at 108 majors in three majors (digital communication, journalism, and public relations and advertising); today we have 48 – slightly more than the number we enrolled in 2003 when I was hired as the sole full-time faculty member to revive a dying program. (More than half of those students were seniors. Today we have four full-time faculty, one a position we absorbed from the College's dissolved digital media department.) This is in part a result of a broader decline in enrollments from just over 2,000 students in our day and evening programs to about 1,300 today – itself the result not only of several years of consecutive entering classes that fell far short of enrollment targets, but especially of falling retention as students who once explored alternate majors after deciding that biology, business or psychology was not for them now withdraw from the College entirely. Another significant factor was the College's decision to leave our public relations faculty position vacant for two years even though that track accounted for more than half of our majors. Enrollments in public relations are only beginning to recover.

This long-term decline was greatly exacerbated by the Covid pandemic and by the administration's decision to respond by unilaterally shifting the academic calendar from 15-week semesters to seven-week terms and allowing students the choice of attending classes in person or remotely. The proportion of students receiving Ds and Fs skyrocketed with these changes, many withdrew, and after one year the College was forced to return the day program to the traditional calendar and in-person instruction, although the College's expanded graduate programs now operate entirely online in five-week asynchronous courses.

Declining enrollments have created problems across the College, but the communication department has been especially hard hit. Our digital communication program never had a substantial number of majors, although its courses maintained acceptable enrollments (College policy caps most lab courses at 15 students and most lecture courses at 25), drawing from other majors that emerged out of the dissolution of the digital media department. The journalism major had long staggered course offerings in order to meet course minimums, and even our public relations courses now struggle to enroll enough students. There are not nearly enough majors in our department to support our curriculum.

We have responded by offering courses less fre-

quently (Writing for Public Relations used to be offered every semester, for example; it now runs once a year), designing a media studies major that we hope to launch next year, and creating new minors in journalism, media studies, strategic communication and visual design in the 2022-23 academic year. In 2023 we received a modest internal grant to engage students in collaborative work across classes to support campus media: a mostly online student newspaper, an arts magazine, and a broadcast radio station the College operates as a student-community partnership.

But the most effective instrument we have found for bolstering the number of elective courses we can offer and increasing enrollment in required theory-based courses is to integrate these into the College's general education program. In 2012, the College adopted a general education curriculum that replaced the previous distribution requirements (similar to many programs aimed at developing core competencies in language, math and writing and exposing students to coursework in the arts, humanities, and physical and social sciences) with a scaffolded approach:

the General Education Curriculum follows a progressive intellectual development program. The Foundations Courses introduce you to knowledge in the disciplines, and help you to develop the conceptual and analytical tools for accomplishing the more complex tasks of comparison and integration. In the Connections and Synthesis courses, you will bring your own questions and your own creativity to considering intellectual and practical issues and problems in the world (Albright College, nd).

General education requirements also include a first year seminar and two composition courses.

With the exception of the composition requirement, students select courses from an approved list to meet each requirement. Students may not apply courses both to their majors and general education programs, but departments can (and do) require up to two specific general education courses by making them prerequisites for classes in the major. Courses can simultaneously serve students seeking to fulfill general education or major requirements, although students must choose which they will apply the course to. Students can fulfill minor requirements with the same courses they take to meet their general education requirements.

This creates opportunities for departments to offer courses that enrich their offerings while enabling

students to fulfill general education requirements with a range of courses that speak to their particular interests. Some students also choose to take general education-eligible courses as electives in their major, enabling them to explore the field in greater depth.

The Foundations requirement requires all students to take six approved course that explore “different ways of knowing the world” through substantive classes within specific disciplines in the arts, humanities, natural sciences, quantitative reasoning, social sciences, and world languages and culture. (I set aside the question of whether there is in fact a way of knowing the world specific to, and common across, the humanities; it seems clear to me that there is not. I also question whether communication is a discipline that resides within one of these categories; it is in my view well-established that communication is an interdisciplinary field of study bridging several methodological and theoretical traditions and cannot be properly placed within this scheme. Fuchs and Qiu [2018], for example, note “the extraordinary pluralism of our field,” albeit repeatedly referring to “the discipline” and “its sub-fields.”) Our department had long been considering implementing a course in communication theory to better prepare students for our communication research seminar, and decided to situate this new course, Critical/Cultural Media Studies, within the Foundations: Humanities requirement, which we “capture” by making it a prerequisite for our senior seminar. We simultaneously refocused our mass communication survey course’s theoretical section on social science approaches in order to address the broader spectrum of relevant traditions.

Our department presently offers two or three first year seminars each year. The seminars provide new students with an introduction to a significant topic within the field while developing students’ “critical reading and writing skills and critical thinking,” as the criteria require. (The course is meant to accompany the composition requirement in students’ transition to college and help develop tools for success.) We presently have approved first year seminars in Media Literacy; Media, the Public Sphere & the Crisis of American Democracy; and Women, Gender & Mass Media. Offering these seminars is a service to the College and our incoming students, but also a means of reaching students who might become interested in further study in the field. Students select their seminar based upon their interests (and, no doubt, less pertinent concerns such as the time slot in which they

are offered).

Students are also required to complete at least two Connections courses (which must be taken in different departments). These courses focus

on different ways of living in, engaging with, and relating to the world[,] ... pull[ing] together knowledge from ... Foundations courses in order to develop better social and ethical engagement. At least one course will include global content and engagement (Albright College, nd).

Our department offers several Connections courses: Documentary Film, Latin American Media, LGBTQ Media, History & Culture (cross-listed with Women's & Gender Studies), and Media History. Proposals for Connections courses in fan culture, media studies and videogame analysis are in development.

We also offer a Synthesis class, Political Economy of Mass Media. The Synthesis requirement is an interdisciplinary capstone seminar that asks students to draw upon their general education coursework and majors in exploring a shared topic. Political economy is intrinsically interdisciplinary (Mosco, 2009), and so provided an ideal lens for a media economics course I had been advocating for several years. This course has proved particularly popular with students in business, fashion and music industry studies, and is now offered every year.

Our general education courses have significantly higher enrollments than do our major courses. In Spring 2024, the communication department offered eleven courses. The three that met general education requirements had an average enrollment of 23 students; the eight that did not averaged 10.5. Enrollments for Fall 2024 are still taking shape, but at this point (before incoming first year and transfer students enroll), we are averaging 17 students enrolled in courses meeting general education requirements, and 12.5 in those that do not. The only course (Media History) approved as a general education course after it had previously been offered solely in the major saw average enrollments increase only slightly after that approval, from 19.7 (8 sections – one of which had 32 students) to 20.7 (9). However, that transition happened after the department's (and the College's) enrollment had peaked, when the department had fewer faculty and so offered fewer electives. As enrollments in other communication courses declined and we reduced the frequency at which some required courses were offered in order to ensure that they had suffi-

cient enrollment, Media History maintained healthy enrollments, as did our other courses that met general education requirements.

There are also other possibilities for collaboration. Our Media Law class was recently accepted as an elective for the Legal Studies major. Many students in Music Industry Studies and Fashion Business take Media Law or Political Economy. Our public speaking course is required in some science majors, though it is no longer required in any communication major. And ours is one of three departments that collaborate to support the College's interdisciplinary Women's and Gender Studies program.

Each institution's general studies program will have unique characteristics. But communication is well situated to offer a range of courses across most general education programs. As Craig (2018) notes, "The communication field is both disciplinary and interdisciplinary," with an intrinsic emphasis on praxis well-suited to developing students' critical faculties and exploring issues in representation and participation at the heart of contemporary debates. Our colleagues are fully qualified to offer courses in cultural studies, democratic theory, information and media literacy, systems of representation and a host of other subjects central to contemporary debates and any conception of a liberal arts education. Many of these would fit easily into distribution-based general education programs, but careful examination of most institutions' general education program should yield opportunities either to develop new courses that can meet both departmental and general education needs, or to adapt existing courses.

At Albright College new courses must be approved by a College-wide curriculum committee, and general education courses must demonstrate how they meet specified learning objectives for the requirement and also be approved by the General Education Committee – a process that can usually be accomplished within two or three months if the required form clearly links the syllabus to the requirements.

In addition to already existing classes in ethics, journalism and democracy, media history, representation and other subjects (which may require some tweaking and a bit of paperwork to become part of your college's general education program), first year seminars offer many opportunities for new courses that should appeal to incoming students.

More than three-fourths of U.S. colleges require some sort of first year seminar (Jajiram, 2016).

While some seminars feature standardized curricula focused on the transition to college, even these can offer an opportunity to introduce media literacy and analysis skills and expose students to department faculty and offerings. Many colleges that initially created seminars organized around student success programming have subsequently evolved these courses to feature more substantive academic content, having learned that this better promoted faculty and student buy-in. Such courses often require proposals demonstrating how the course will meet specified learning objectives and familiarize students with a range of college resources, but offer wide latitude as to specific course content.

Many subjects at the forefront of current social debates fall well within the field of communication, and so our faculty are well positioned to design seminars that should prove attractive to students. These seminars will provide genuine service to our colleges and their students, but also serve as many students' first introduction to communication as an academic discipline – and for the large numbers of students who have not yet settled on a major may encourage them to consider our field.

A much smaller number of institutions have adopted junior or senior interdisciplinary seminars as part of their general education program. Where these exist, communication's interdisciplinary foundations and traditional focus on praxis make our faculty natural choices to develop and teach such courses.

More broadly, communication occupies an interdisciplinary space that often fits poorly into traditional college organizational structures, but offers a strong vantage point for reclaiming the fundamentally interdisciplinary focus of a liberal arts education (Frey *et al.*, 1996). Whatever the logic of specialization for students' career prospects – and while many students seek programs specifically tailored to the career paths they imagine for themselves, Frey *et al.* note that the rapidly changing nature of communication industries demands a different approach – a praxis-oriented approach fits more naturally into the liberal arts:

a praxis-oriented curriculum ... implies an emphasis on practices that are not merely effective, but effective towards the end of social transformation. This requires not a set agenda for transforming society according to a specific program, but, rather, the recognition that questions about effectiveness always need to be framed as questions about effectiveness toward

what ends. This means always being reflective about those ends, rather than seeing them as taken-for-granted (Frey *et al.*, 1996, p. 83).

Critique, analysis, critical practice and self-reflection are essential life skills, as well as being central to any intellectual discipline. In the face of the difficult economic circumstances they face, many colleges have recently drifted toward more “practical” pursuits. But there is nothing less practical than pursuing the chimera of reconciling the fickle demands of career training with the liberal arts mission.

[A] human-focused education which, through broad-based and pluralistic subject matter and philosophical enquiry into the questions of human existence, can begin to nurture students with the aim of fostering a resilient and intellectually rounded graduate. A post-foundational liberal arts education which embraces difficulty, complexity and uncertainty does not patronise students or give them false belief in the stability of the world. It is able to be fluid and adapt to the conversations which derive from the teaching and learning experience (Smith, 2018).

Cultivating habits of critical thinking and praxis is the historic mission of the liberal arts college. Communication is as well situated as any department or “discipline” to stake out a leading role in supporting the general education curriculum that serves as the foundation for this mission. Embracing this role not only responds to the immediate crisis facing many communication programs, it also offers the prospect of moving the field from the margins to the center of the liberal arts.

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