Commentary

Linking Communication Scholarship and Professional Practice in Colleges and Universities

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The 2004 recipient of NCA’s Gerald M. Phillips Award for Distinguish Applied Scholarship, Brent Ruben’s professional record spans more than three decades and has focused in four major areas: organizational development, communication/information systems, medical/health communication, and intercultural communication. His publication record and professional presentations are extensive. His work with the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers is especially noteworthy and serves as an example of his best applied work. The reviewers were especially impressed with his most recent book, entitled Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education. His use of Baldrige-based criteria by which to measure excellence is a fine example of applying well-tested standards to the field of higher education. His work represents some of the best in the field of applied communication.

No field has more to contribute to an understanding of human affairs than communication. Communication is the process through which the social fabric of relationships, groups, organizations, societies, and world order—and disorder—is created and maintained. It is also the means through which individuals present and connect themselves in and to that social fabric. Communication is the mechanism through which joint activity is made possible, the process through which cooperation and conflict emerge and are addressed, and the basis for the establishment and evolution of identities and cultures at all levels of human organization. Indeed, it is the universal and pervasive significance of communication that has drawn so many to

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the field, and is the basis for claims that, indeed, communication is the sine qua non of the behavioral sciences (Thayer, 1968).

The importance of communication is also apparent in everyday discourse. In a wide-ranging array of contemporary topics—from intimate couples to international conflict—communication is variously hailed as the problem, the solution, and often both. For laypersons and scholars alike, a fundamental appeal of the discipline is the sense that an understanding of communication can better equip us to comprehend and address the personal, professional, and societal challenges that confront us.

Considering the importance of the phenomena on which the discipline focuses, one would expect to find communication scholars and researchers at the forefront of suggested practice and policy discussions in a wide range of areas—economics, politics, leadership, education, family life, healthcare, intercultural relations, jurisprudence, and world development. Generally speaking, this is not the case. Some of the reasons for this state of affairs are quite obvious. As scholars, we are taught and encouraged to write for our peers, and academic recognition comes largely from our success in doing so. In the pursuit of these goals, precision, rigor, specialized language, and sophisticated method become predictable elements of the discourse. Unfortunately, lost in the process are simply written, widely accessible works that clearly articulate the relevance of a communication perspective for addressing the concerns of the day. Regrettably absent are writings that would usefully inform the thinking and decisions that leaders, policy makers, and citizens make as they negotiate the activities of their personal and professional lives.

To the extent that the primary efforts of many scholars involve intellectual exchanges within the field, the work of translating and applying theory is left to others, and sometimes that translation and application never occurs. When communication theory is addressed in practical and professional writings, all too often it is being done by authors from outside the field who do not have a scholarly understanding of communication. As a result, of the plethora of writings that provide practical and professional guidance, too few share the best thinking of our field with readers. The ultimate consequence of all this is that there is a large gap between the best ideas advanced in communication theory and research, and contemporary communication-related practice and policy.

For all these reasons, what we have come to call applied scholarship, or applied research, plays an increasingly vital role in our field. Applied scholarship provides a rubric for the diverse set of activities associated with field testing and validation of theory and research, translating general concepts for use in specific contexts, and, in general, for those activities dedicated to making our best thinking more broadly accessible.

The concept of applied scholarship has another benefit: It suggests that research, teaching, and public service need not—perhaps should not—be conceptualized and treated as distinct areas of endeavor. By implication, the phrase reminds us that each activity can be seen as an interdependent element in the process of developing, testing, disseminating, refining, and utilizing theory. Thus, applied scholarship,
broadly conceived, can be a call for a unified perspective on what communication scholarship should be about.

**Applied Communication Scholarship, Healthcare, and Higher Education**

Of course there are many excellent examples of integrated scholarship of this kind throughout the field, and the foregoing comments are not meant to suggest otherwise. This approach has been a tradition within the Department of Communication at Rutgers, in areas such as health, politics, technology, security, organizations, relationships, gender studies, and leadership; and a number of other scholars and programs have pursued a vision that embraces the linkage between scholarship and practice.

For the last two decades, much of my own teaching, research, and service activity has been focused on this linkage in the context of healthcare and higher education organizations, and in this work, a number of interesting parallels between the two contexts have become apparent. My work in health communication focused initially on studying professional caregiver–patient relationships, and the contrasting perceptions and expectations of these two groups (Ruben, 1990a,b, 1992, 1993). The research consisted of thematic analyses of patients’ recollections of critical incidents in their own healthcare following treatment in a healthcare facility. Perhaps the most significant finding was that interpersonal communication and information sharing were generally the most remembered facets of healthcare. Issues relating to the complexity of dealing with hospitals and other healthcare facilities and clinical issues were also salient, but to a lesser degree.

This research and other studies (Cline, 1983; DiMatteo & DiNicola, 1982; Greenfield, Kaplan, & Ware, 1985, 1986; Korsch & Gozzi, 1968; Korsch & Negrete, 1972; Kreps & Thornton, 1984; Lynch, 1977; Omachonu, 1990; Pascoe, 1983; Stewart & Roter, 1989; Thompson, 1986; Waitzkin, 1984, 1986; Ware & Davies, 1983; Wertz, Sorenson, & Heeren, 1988; Woolley, Kane, & Associates, 1978) underscored the importance of communication issues for improving patient satisfaction, patient compliance with caregiver advice, physiological health indicators, and healthcare outcomes more generally.

As an outgrowth of this work, I was frequently invited to speak to physician groups about the findings of my research. I also consulted on the development and delivery of professional development programs for healthcare professionals, administrators, and staff (Bowman & Ruben, 1986; Ruben, 1985; Ruben & Bowman, 1986). In essence, the message to be conveyed through these talks and programs was that communication competence—personal and organizational—may be as important as clinical competence when it comes to patient satisfaction and patient well-being, as well as to inspiring public confidence in the quality of healthcare and healthcare institutions (Ruben, 1995).

During the course of conducting and presenting this research, it occurred to me that most if not all of these issues were generic.
As with the teacher and student, the advisor and advisee, the attorney and client, or the information professional and the information seeker, the caregiver–patient relationship is characteristically asymmetrical in that expertise and power are unevenly distributed. Although both parties... can be said to have a common purpose, they seldom share a common perspective on the reality they experience. (Ruben, 1993, p. 107)

I began to recognize a number of striking parallels between healthcare and higher education systems. Like physicians and other healthcare professionals, faculty members are trained and most often rewarded for their disciplinary knowledge and competence. Colleges and universities, like hospitals, are complex and multifaceted institutions replete with confusing structures, policies, and procedures that require a great deal of user knowledge and experience in order to function effectively and feel at home. Students, like patients, come to the institution and their encounters with its representatives, looking for assistance, insight, or guidance. They have little or no power or influence and, like patients, students—particularly undergraduates—generally lack the experience, expertise, and perspective needed to judge the competence of the professional staff with whom they interact based on their technical or disciplinary competence. Invariably, their assessments of providers (of education or healthcare) are heavily influenced by personal and communicative dimensions of the interaction—how they are treated as individuals, whether the individuals with whom they interact appear to be knowledgeable and articulate, and how interested in their case the faculty member or medical professional seems to be.

The commentary and comparisons I offered in several articles and campus talks came to the attention of the senior administration of Rutgers, and I was invited to begin a center, the mission of which would be to provide campus and national leadership in studying and addressing issues related to interpersonal and organizational communication within higher education institutions, and between institutions and their multiple external consistencies. The primary research site was to be Rutgers, and the goal would be to develop new approaches to organizational assessment and improvement that could be utilized and refined at Rutgers, and then exported for use at other college and universities.

**Addressing the Challenges of Higher Education**

American higher education is widely acknowledged for academic excellence; indeed students come from all over the world to study in U.S. colleges and universities. At the same time, however, our colleges and universities are often criticized for their unwieldy bureaucracy, organizational inefficiency, and a lack of service orientation. To the extent that these circumstances are present within a particular institution, they contribute to the critique of higher education in general, but also more directly undermine the perceived value of faculty and staff work, weaken financial and political support, and create barriers to fulfilling the mission of the institution. Some of the challenges facing higher education are purely economic, but many of our problems—and their potential solutions—involves communication.
There is no shortage of lists of the contemporary challenges. I have identified eight in which the role of communication is central: (a) broadening public appreciation for the work of the academy; (b) increasing our understanding of the needs of workplaces; (c) becoming more effective learning organizations; (d) integrating assessment, planning, and improvement; (e) enhancing collaboration and community; (f) recognizing that everyone in the institution is a teacher; (g) devoting more attention and resources to leadership; and (h) more broadly framing our vision of excellence (Ruben, 2004).

The Research University: Blending Academic and Service Values

Research universities can be viewed as a system composed of two interdependent components each with its own associated activities and culture. The first is academic. This is the domain of the faculty in which excellence is primarily measured by achievement and recognition within one’s academic discipline. In the case of individual faculty members, this is generally accomplished by activities that take place outside one’s own university—such as publication in journals reviewed by outside disciplinary peers—and by being selected for leadership roles within one’s field, or by success in securing grant support for research. Academic accomplishments are generally measured by the geographic reach of their reputation. Thus, faculty members or programs with an excellent reputation in a region are generally regarded as more distinguished than those with an excellent reputation limited to the institution, and a national reputation is better than one limited to a region, and best of all is being prominent internationally.

The second component of the university is the systems, facilities, personnel, and support functions necessary to create and maintain the kind of service-oriented environment in which academic excellence can be realized. These internal and external support services are necessary to support the scholarly activities of the academic community and other constituencies. In some instances, the academic and service components of research universities are viewed as distinct and even unrelated, and tension and competition may exist between them. Should limited funds go to improve teaching facilities or research laboratories? From an organizational perspective, however, academic excellence and service excellence are inextricably linked. If students or their families are dissatisfied with their university experience for whatever reasons, student, alumni, public, employer, and legislative support erodes, and the reputation of the institution is affected. Ultimately, this reduces the resources available to support the work of the institution and faculty scholarship, and the pursuit of academic excellence in general. Yet without the continuing academic distinctions of a faculty and its programs, the status and prestige of the institution is compromised, excellence in teaching and student satisfaction are diminished, recruitment of outstanding students and faculty becomes more difficult, and support among external constituencies wanes. Thus, a university’s success in achieving its instructional, scholarly, and public service goals requires excellence in academics, as well as excellence in the development and maintenance of relationships with
stakeholders (Ruben, 2004). Communication—interpersonal and organizational—is fundamental to the development of the realities and perceptions upon which these outcomes depend.

The Center for Organizational Development and Leadership

The Rutgers University Center for Organizational Development and Leadership (ODL; “Rutgers,” 2003) was created to address these issues. Rutgers is a large, geographically dispersed, and complex institution. The student body of more than 50,000 is distributed among the three campuses (Newark, 10,500; New Brunswick, 34,500; Camden, 5,200); there are 8,500 faculty and staff, and 29 colleges. The university offers approximately 16,000 courses and maintains 46 dormitories, 6 dining halls, 5 health centers, and 800 administrative and class buildings.

From its earliest days, ODL provided a rich and robust context for applied scholarship relative to these issues. It provided opportunities for conducting and testing organizational communication theory and research, for developing new courses and programs for faculty and staff from across campus, and for outreach beyond my own academic department, and indeed well beyond the usual terrain with which faculty have familiarity (extending to the physical plant, human resources, computing services, alumni affairs, the university foundation, office of scheduling, and many other units).

Promoting a broadened vision of excellence—one that embraced communication as well as academics—meant working to foster a more service-oriented culture, a more welcoming physical environment, and a more friendly, supportive, and respectful social environment. It also implied helping to create more responsive, integrated, accessible, and effective systems and services, and a sense of community (“Rutgers,” 2003).

Success in effectively addressing these needs has a number of important implications for the groups that are vital to the university. Examples of key constituencies and corresponding goals include: (a) students—pleased to be attending their college or university, feeling they are valued members of the community with the potential and support to succeed; (b) families—proud to have a family member attending their college or university, recommending the institution to others; (c) alumni—actively supporting the institution and its initiatives; (d) employers—seeking out graduates as employees, promoting the college or university among their employees for continuing education; (e) colleagues at other institutions—viewing the college or university as a source of intellectual leadership; (f) the public—valuing the university as an essential resource, supporting efforts to advance excellence; (g) faculty—pleased to serve on the faculty of a leading, well-supported institution and enjoying respect and recognition locally, within the state, nationally, and internationally; and (h) staff—regarding the institution as a preferred workplace, where innovation, continuing improvement, and teamwork are valued; recommending employment to others.
With this guiding framework, ODL developed a method for organizational assessment and improvement. The basic objectives were: (a) identifying best practices and standards of excellence in higher education and other sectors, and translating these into the language and culture of the institution; (b) identifying or developing programs, models, and approaches based on expressed or anticipated need; (c) helping departments implement the program or approach on a pilot basis; (d) providing ongoing support and an incubator for the program; (e) ensuring the institutionalization of the program, and core competencies necessary for its continuation; (f) promoting information sharing relative to organizational innovations and improvements throughout the university; and (g) encouraging and supporting the adoption and implementation of effective practices, programs, and approaches by other units.

ODL Core Programs

In support of these objectives, we developed six core program areas based on: (a) conversations with leaders of higher education institutions across the country; (b) benchmarking with leaders in the education, business, and healthcare sectors; and (c) expressed needs from faculty and staff within the Rutgers community.

Organizational assessment

This core area focuses on assisting academic and administrative departments in identifying organizational strengths and improvement opportunities. A signature program, developed early on in our work, is the Excellence in Higher Education (EHE) Assessment Program (Ruben, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). EHE is a self-assessment program for academic and administrative departments. It provides a systematic, high-level, and comprehensive organizational self-examination, based on accepted standards of organizational excellence. The framework and process, which were adapted for higher education from the Malcolm Baldrige model of organizational excellence, helps units clarify organizational strengths and establish priorities for improvement. The newest version of the framework (Ruben, 2005) also draws from the assessment frameworks of the regional accrediting associations, providing an integrative framework for ongoing review and renewal in colleges and universities. To date, more than 30 academic and administrative departments at Rutgers have participated in the program. Approximately 25 other colleges and universities have found this program helpful in their assessment and improvement efforts, among them: University of California at Berkeley, University of Wisconsin, Madison, University of Texas, Austin, State University of New York at Buffalo, and MIT. Like the Baldrige National Quality Program (2005) framework on which it is based, the EHE model covers seven categories (leadership; strategic planning; beneficiaries and collaborators; measurement and knowledge utilization; faculty/staff and workplace; programs and services; outcomes and achievements). Recent research (Ruben, Connaughton, Immordino, & Lopez, 2004) indicates that participants in the EHE program find that they have increased knowledge and awareness of the key factors
that are necessary for organizational excellence, better understand the importance of these factors for the effectiveness of their own units, and have a much clearer sense of the improvement needs and priorities within their organization.

Leadership and strategic planning
Activities in this area include workshops, materials, and coaching related to enhancing leadership effectiveness, and sharing effective practices. A higher planning model, which provides a comprehensive approach to creating, organizing, and implementing a strategic plan in higher education, was developed (Tromp & Ruben, 2004). Our strategic planning program provides workshops and materials for clarifying mission, vision, and goals; developing priorities; establishing measurable goals and action plans; implementing plans that create organizational commitment and follow-through; and managing change.

Work process design
Programs in this area are designed to assist with reviewing, improving, and monitoring work processes. The approach emphasizes the importance of systematic review of programs and services, measurement, and process redesign and improvement strategies. The center provides facilitation, materials, and training. Specific areas of focus include: root cause analysis, process effectiveness (a higher education adaptation of the corporate Six Sigma model), organizational development facilitation, and benchmarking and comparative analysis. ODL has conducted 150 workshops and 30 individual consultations in this area.

Faculty/staff workplace culture
The center has initiated a number of activities and programs aimed at helping to make our campuses friendlier and more welcoming, cordial, and cohesive places in which to learn and work. These include an enhanced faculty/staff welcome program, initial impetus and continued support for the Retired Faculty Association, the university faculty recognition program, and an employee orientation program. ODL has also developed web-based organizational climate inventories (with versions for faculty and staff) that are available to departments.

Excellence measures and outcomes
To assist departments in defining and using measures to evaluate their effectiveness, programs are offered in: measurement approaches, performance indicator (scorecard and dashboard) development and benchmarking, monitoring and tracking strategies, and measurement analysis and utilization. ODL conducts workshops and offers individual consultations in this area.

Organizational research services
An array of pre- and post-assessment consultation services are offered that assist academic and administrative units in identifying and implementing methods for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and integrating feedback into planning and
improvement processes. Assisting with this research are graduate students participating in yearlong internships. Participation provides students the unique opportunity to combine the traditional graduate school experience with the application of organizational assessment practices beyond the classroom setting.

The Community and Beyond

Community and Regional Outreach

ODL has formed partnerships with the Johnson & Johnson Process Excellence Center and Knowledge Networking Group, and AT&T, which have provided faculty, staff, and students with additional opportunities for information- and knowledge-sharing, cross-organizational learning, and the development and application of organizational communication theory. The partnerships have offered direct support to 32 graduate students from various units throughout the university, and have supported graduate-level courses, internships, and faculty research. Combined in-kind and direct contributions from these partnerships have exceeded $1 million over the last 10 years.

The center has also worked with a number of community groups. One such group is New Brunswick (New Jersey) Tomorrow (NBT). This private, nonprofit group is dedicated to fostering public/private networks of agencies, institutions, and volunteer organizations within the city in which the largest campus of Rutgers is located. It serves as a catalyst in developing and supporting programs that improve the quality of life in the New Brunswick community. The center has assisted NBT with its assessment, strategic planning, and vision development initiatives for the last two years.

ODL has also formed a partnership with the K-12 Education Community. New Jersey is the first state in the nation to adapt the Baldrige criteria as an alternative to State Department of Education certification. A proposal submitted to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education was approved allowing Rutgers ODL and Hunterdon Central High School (a past recipient of the Governor’s Quality Award) to create a partnership with Asbury Park High School that would result in a model of improvement for urban districts across the state.

National Outreach

During the 11 years since it was established, the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership has become nationally recognized for contributions to higher education organizational assessment and improvement. In 1999, an informal study conducted by the Chancellor’s Exploratory Committee on Continuous Improvement of the University of California–Berkeley ranked ODL as one of the leading programs of its kind in the country, and the national leader in organizational assessment. ODL has received hundreds of requests for information, guidance, and consultation from institutions around the country and internationally. From 1998–2000, for instance, the center has received requests for assistance or
consultation from 55 state, national, and international institutions. ODL has also played a leading role in the Conference Board and the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI).

Final Comments

For me, and a number of faculty members, students, and staff, the Rutgers Center for Organizational Development and Leadership has created a unique and enriching venue for applied communication scholarship. It has provided a setting in which to test and refine theories; pursue an interesting research agenda; engage in teaching (and learning) with faculty, administrators and staff; and undertake meaningful public service and outreach—for the campus, community, region, and beyond. At the same time, this work has also provided a significant and visible opportunity to showcase the discipline of communication and its potential for addressing some of the most fundamental challenges facing higher education today.

References


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