

**Relationship Strategies in a
Large Department of Communication**

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This paper presents a case study of a very large department of communication, created in 1999 to bring together traditional speech communication studies (rhetoric), media studies (print and broadcast journalism), and corporate and organizational communication (business/management strategies, public relations). A discussion of costs and benefits frames a description of several activities and events that contribute to department identity and cohesion.

Relationship Strategies in a Large Department of Communication

When analyzing the evolution of academic departments, usually the focus is on administrative, staffing and curricular issues. While these critical, baseline elements are at the core of strategic planning, budgets, and assessment, new departments should also focus on effective short and long-term "relationship strategies" (Bruning and Ledingham, 2000) among key internal and external stakeholders. This essay outlines how specific events to benefit students helped create a department identity at one particular school.

At the university level, identity is typically forged through the work of public information officers and development heads, under the auspices of the school president and top aides. Oftentimes, these leaders gauge "success variables" (following graduation) in terms of university donations and networking functions. However, a particularly significant audience, *current* students, really have little direct contact with university leadership; it is the faculty, their teachers and advisers, who develop the initial relationship that often determines the success, or failure, of the student's vision of the university.

Public relations helps establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and various publics (Cutlip, Center, and Broom 2000), and is a management function in which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals (Long and Hazelton, 1987). Faculty are often loath to stretch their sphere of influence beyond the critical (and tenure-dictating) tandem of teaching and

research. In fact, many institutions *discourage* a service component that might detract from the other faculty "roles."

Some schools, however, have espoused a service approach that, in effect, complements and enhances the teaching and research functions. Through a series of proactive and strategic events, departments -- through supervision by faculty members and delegation of tasks to student leaders -- can create an identity both internally, and to a number of interested external stakeholders. Broom and Dozier (1989) have outlined such traditional public relations roles as media relations, fund raising (Kelly 1996), community relations and legislative affairs. These roles are still performed by campus PR practitioners, but faculty can serve as facilitators in developing "newsworthy" tactics to promote departmental identity.

Having a strong department identity is important, particularly for a new department (McCroskey, 1982). The internal constituents (e.g., faculty, students) need specific events and activities so that they can coalesce their support for the department. Similarly, external constituents (e.g., administrators, other departments, alumni, donors) can better appraise the contributions of a department when activities and events appear on the campus radar screen. On one level, it is crucial to build relationships with constituents. On another level, the activities and events that foster such relationships can lead to a greater sense of identity.

At [institution's name withheld to maintain anonymity of authors], a liberal-arts institution of 9,800 undergraduate students, the Department of Communication separated in 1999 from the Department of English, within which the communication major had been incubated in 1993, until the number of communication students grew to 600. After the split, the communication major (see Figure 1) mushroomed into the College's largest, with nearly 900 majors in three concentrations: Communication Studies, Corporate and Organizational

Communication, and Media Studies. While department faculty had to adapt to increased advising loads, assimilation of new colleagues, and administrative headaches that accompanied rapid growth, they did so within a framework of "students first," at least prevalent at such "teaching institutions" as [institution's name withheld to maintain anonymity of authors].

Figure 1 about here

With the overarching mission of teaching institutions still being student-centered, the temptation to sacrifice long-term objectives (in order to adequately serve the status quo) is understandable. However, sentiment grew among colleagues that, for the department to evolve and forge an identity, it needed to expand its mission beyond the classrooms, and into the boardrooms.

In other words, the department embarked on a long-term public relations program, in which it established several events to extend its influence to key members of the external community, as well as on-campus service learning ventures. Upon hearing the proposed tactics, the response of an exasperated faculty contingent was, at first, "We understand WHY we are doing this, but WHO is going to do it?"

Since many university administrators must purge budgets -- especially in these times of economic stress -- they often look to faculty and student leaders to be creative with their monetary and time expenditures, and to further advocate departmental and university missions. In the case of a newer department, evolutionary aims are especially difficult because key relationships are still in the incubation process (Hickson and Stacks, 1991).

Patience is paramount, as is an emphasis on long-term public relations among stakeholders. These "publics" range from the internal constituency (administrators, faculty, students) to external (parents, prospective students, community, legislators), with media serving the gatekeeper function, a bridge to communicate proposed strategies and tactics. Targeting initiatives (fund raisers, pseudoevents, news releases) to specific publics (Benigni and Cameron, 1999) in a public relations campaign proves much more successful than a scattershot approach of broadcast faxes and e-mails, or the stray campus flyer. Stakeholders respond favorably (donations, involvement, advocacy) when the organizational mission is communicated so that objectives are mutually beneficial. In other words, departmental events must appeal to, and appease, audiences outside of the college lawn.

Cost-Benefit Considerations

A key to organizing any relationship-building campaign is understanding the cost-benefit relationship of the venture. In this case, the department weighed the pros and cons of several proposed events, such as an annual departmental career fair, an annual senior banquet, an annual majors meeting, formation of two student clubs (Public Relations Club and Communication Club) which would assist in logistics, staffing, and fund raising of key events, and a commitment to bring nationally-known speakers on a regular basis. The costs were easy to delineate: increased faculty involvement, possibly at the expense of traditional pedagogical and advisory duties.

One clear benefit of having activities and events is that constituents can be invited to contribute and/or attend. Visibility is key to attracting all kinds of support: financial resources, in-kind gifts, friendships, partnerships, and mutual participation. Another benefit is increasing

student involvement, which can be linked to increased learning. Students who care about their home departments are more likely to invest their full energies in them.

Fronting the costs of speakers, dinners, and trips is inadvisable without assessing the values derived from such endeavors. Oftentimes, public relations assessment is ascertained by simplistic measures such as fundraising dollars, media impressions/advertising equivalency, and event attendance. While these tried-and-true methods often justify expenditures of time and money to those who manage the department operating budget, the critical, long-term question is simply: Are special events favorable in the relationship-building process?

In short, the answer is "yes," at least with this case study. Public relations research (e.g., Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2001) shows that faculty are a critical variable in terms of student loyalty to an institution following graduation. It stands to reason that faculty immersion, through effective delegation of authority to evolved student and campus groups, provides an impetus of caring and consequence to beyond-classroom endeavors. A breakdown of this department's events further illustrates the fruits of this commitment.

Career Fair

The Communication Career Fair, instituted in 2000, allows majors to meet informally with representatives from area corporations, non-profits, media outlets, and other organizations in a professional setting. An off-shoot of the traditional campus-wide fairs, the departmental gathering allows a more structured, streamlined venue for students interested in internships or jobs. The event has spawned dozens of opportunities, and both parties (students and interviewers) benefit from the experience.

To sum up the event-planning process: key departmental stakeholders -- local/regional media outlets, organizations/companies that have recently supervised departmental interns,

graduate schools, and campus organizations (e.g., Career Services, College Relations) were sent formal invitations to the fair. Event publicists utilize several modes of communication to encourage student attendance, including e-mail, news releases to campus print and broadcast media, and direct communication (web site, flyers). However, students have commented that faculty advocacy -- in terms of class announcements and written assignments stemming from the fair itself -- has proved most beneficial in generating awareness and interest, two key objectives in any public relations program.

Held in an on-campus ballroom, the cost is minimal. Several years ago, before this fair was instituted, many departmental students drove a lengthy distance to attend a similar event at another university, where both student and "vendor" were charged a specific fee. The service is free to both stakeholders at our institution. Building relationships with campus organizations such as Student Life (ballroom), Office of Media and Technology (public address/video needs) and Academic Computing (internet hookups) has proven beneficial.

Senior Banquet

The departmental Senior Banquet debuted successfully in 2001. All seniors (not just those receiving awards) were invited for a free dinner, courtesy of donations from local organizations, many of which benefited from departmental interns and/or other mutually beneficial relationships. Awards were given for academic prowess, service to the College, student media contributors, and distinguished alumni, and entertainment was provided by several student members of the department. Hometown releases and photographs of award winners were sent, and prominently used, by newspapers.

Held in the same ballroom as the Career Fair, costs are manageable. Printed programs, certificates and awards, and other ancillary expenses are negligible. The key fund raising

element is the meal sponsorship program. Targeted stakeholders were sent personal letters from the department chair, requesting "table sponsorships" with two donor levels (\$250 and \$150 per table). Sponsors are invited to, and feted at, the banquet, and are recognized in all event publicity. Key campus relationships include the university development office (which oversees the scholarship program and sends a representative to award winners at the event), the media relations office (news releases, photographs), audiovisual offices, dining services and the assistance of the two student clubs (registration, door prizes, set-ups). Like the career fair, the banquet is designed as a departmental service, but more as a congratulatory event than one of application.

Student Clubs

Student clubs offer participants opportunities to plan and implement special events that benefit the department and the larger institution. Aside from making several local field trips to media and corporate outlets, the clubs make an annual pilgrimage to a nearby major city (Atlanta and Washington, DC, in recent years) to tour communication offices such as CNN and the Freedom Forum Newseum. The student groups also plan a special fundraiser to benefit a local charity, garnering the clubs and the department news coverage, and assist in the event management of the aforementioned fair and banquet.

As at most universities, student clubs are designed to be autonomous in nature, but advisers can help set an impacting course for members. For example, through strong relationships with the alumni office and the media relations office, advisers could communicate to student leaders the names of key contacts for CNN, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and USA Today. Also, on the annual student trip, members of the alumni office coordinate a meet-and-greet session with university graduates.

Student clubs are funded by university student government, and augment initiatives through fundraisers. Departmental faculty routinely assist in club activities. In turn, club members are key contributors to departmental functions, both in the planning process, and in the event management stage.

Majors Meeting

The Majors Meeting, instituted in 2001, is a forum for majors to meet with department faculty in an informal setting. Professors and key administrators use audio/visual technology to supplement important points regarding scheduling, internships/career choices, curricular changes, and advising tips. Students are afforded the opportunity to exchange ideas and concerns about various issues.

Costs of the event are negligible, with snacks/drinks provided to guests, and small ancillary expenses. Benefits are difficult to gauge in the short-term, but potential measurable objectives from such gatherings would be increased awareness about internship opportunities, advising needs, and course offerings, to name a few. More important, a sense of identity and belonging is fostered by such meetings. Rituals contribute to group identity.

Event coordinators forge relationships with key campus stakeholders such as the academic advising center, career services/internship office, and branch-campus leaders, who join departmental faculty in presentation opportunities and question-and-answer forums. The student media center (which coordinates the campus newspaper, broadcast stations, and yearbook) uses the meeting as a primary awareness and recruiting tool. For example, representatives from student media showed a video that first aired at the inaugural senior banquet.

Evaluation

These and other events can be evaluated through aforementioned media/attendance measures, but also through more evolved survey/comment card assessment. For example, both students and participating organizations fill out surveys that measure variables such as event publicity/exposure, preparedness of student, interest levels, and attitudinal concepts. Feedback generated can be utilized to improve events in the future.

While potentially the most critical element of a campaign, assessment is frequently overlooked because of the energy expended through phases of planning and communication. Many academic departments struggle with assessing basic prerequisites for accreditation purposes, such as job placement, salaries, and course availability. Yet, it is essential to ascertain -- at the very least -- through measurable, motivational objectives. Counting of raised funds, media impressions and web site hits is a start. Informational objectives such as awareness and attitudinal/behavioral changes may best be served for the long term. It is only through strong, consistent relationships among publics that departments can analyze, and capitalize on, the cumulative effect of educational and entertaining events.

Friend-raising versus Fundraising

It is important to reiterate that relationship-building events should not be perceived as attention-getters and future cash cows for academic departments. In fact, internal friction is inevitable if relationships delve much beyond academic benefit and into areas of development and structured capital campaigns. Yet, departments should not be short-sighted either, and limit potential influx of resources to traditional, campus-wide funding sources.

Through strategic meetings with development officers, departments can forge significant relationships with donors, without sacrificing necessary scholarship and funding scenarios that

benefit the entire institution. By using traditional, direct communication devices such as regular newsletters and an effective web site, stakeholders remain aware of continuing developments within the major, and/or departmental needs that can be targeted and funded through selective messaging. Again, students are critical facilitators of such projects; two graduating seniors wrote and co-edited the inaugural department newsletter in Fall 2001.

Newsletters, department web sites, and other forms of direct communication are effective conduits of communication for potential special projects. Potential campaigns could focus on necessary additions such as more departmental scholarships, funding for faculty-student research collaborations, seminar/presentation rooms for classes and client relationships, and/or contingency foundation funds for departmental use.

Conclusion

In sum, new departments should not lose sight of their primary objective: to forge academic strength through diverse curricula, and a healthy combination of theoretical grounding and application. However, the learning experience is enhanced when faculty involve students and colleagues in relationship-building endeavors, whether being a service-learning component (e.g., public relations campaigns course) involving campus organizations, or encouraging participation in mutually beneficial events.

In three years, the department for this case study has been able to accomplish many of its goals. The campus is more aware of the department, alumni are more likely to get involved, students feel a greater sense of belonging, and faculty benefit from a stronger campus identity. One example of success has been that Student Life advisers have formally requested that other departments hold Senior Banquets, following the model of the Department of Communication. All of the activities have been deemed a strategic success, and none has generated a high cost.

As beneficial as relationship strategies seem to be, there are some important cautions and considerations. First, there is the problem of spreading a department's energies too thin. As a result, activities and events should be rolled out over a longer period of time; two or three new events per year are plenty. Second, there is the problem of keeping initiatives going into successive years. It is wise to delegate the responsibilities out to the entire faculty, using one or two key people to get ideas started and then counting on other faculty to act as subcommittees that can follow through with the plan in successive years. Third, there is the problem of focus. Too many events can drag down the contribution of all. A department must prioritize its efforts, based on the contribution of the activity or event to overall goals. For example, students and faculty needs must be served, instead of creating attention for the sake of raising awareness. Above all, careful research and planning are essential to the success of any department initiative.

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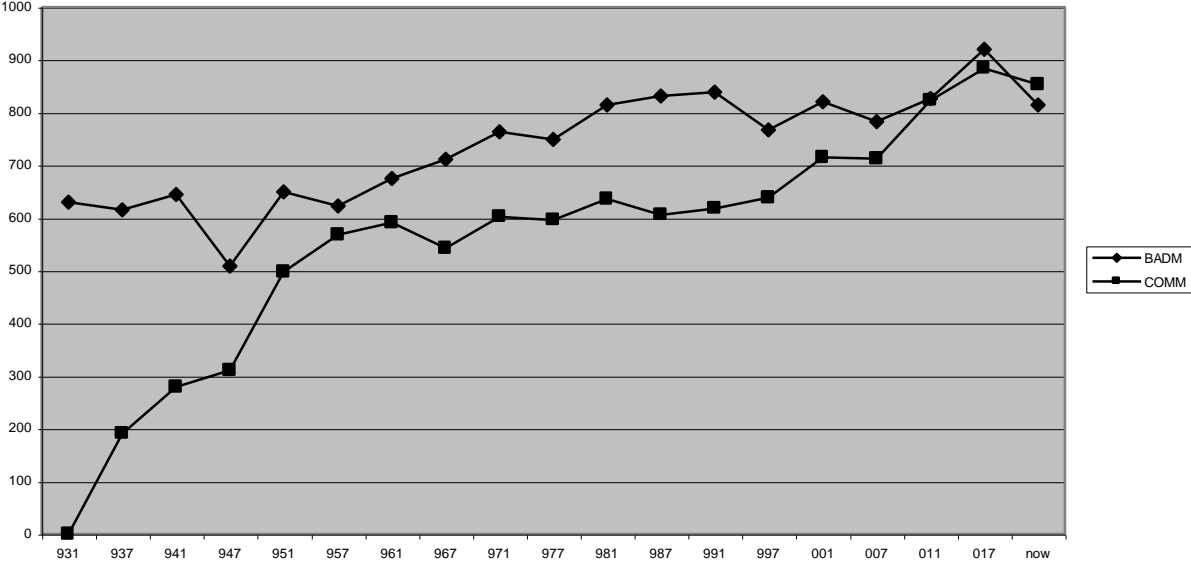
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Figure 1

Enrollment 1993 to 2001



Note: BADM (Business Administration) is the other large major on campus

Semesters are coded by year, e.g., 941=spring 1994 and 017=fall 2001