

Memo To: Dean Charles Johnson

From: Jennings Bryant, Robert Hawkins, Sharon Strover, Consultants

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Re: Recommendations for the Department of Journalism

The historical context

The Department of Journalism at Texas A&M has faithfully served the State of Texas and the nation for more than half a century. During the bulk of that time, the department's primary goal has been to educate and motivate the next generation of professional journalists. By most criteria, the unit has been quite successful in accomplishing this goal.

The past decade or so has been a time of remarkable change in communication technologies and systems, with many attendant alterations in that have fundamentally altered the nature of media industries and the very process of modern communication. We cite only three instances of the profound impact of the communication revolution: new communication and information technologies have extensively redefined post-industrial societies into complex information economies and communities; convergence and consolidation have fundamentally altered the nature of traditional media institutions; and the Internet has revolutionized the way modern citizens communicate. Each has implications for a Journalism program.

Texas A&M University's Department of Journalism has made some significant adjustments to accommodate this communications upheaval. For example, the department has recognized the increasingly important role of public relations in society and has strengthened this aspect of its curriculum, establishing a minor in Public Relations in 1995. It has recognized the role and importance of advanced communications technologies and systems by launching an interdisciplinary major in Telecommunications Media Studies in 2001, as well as by creating courses in multimedia. And it has worked diligently to strengthen its commitment to global and international education.

As the Department was shepherding these and related developments, Texas A&M University was engaging in a bold new initiative entitled *Vision 2020: Creating a Culture of Excellence*. Launched in 1997, the goal of Vision 2020 is to accelerate the academic evolution of Texas A&M and to propel it into the ranks of the ten top public universities in America by 2020. Among the critical dimensions of this ambitious initiative is to conduct teaching and research of the highest possible caliber. The strengths and weaknesses of the Department of Journalism must be examined in the context of Vision 2020.

The current situation

At the same time that Texas A&M was launching Vision 2020, the Department of Journalism was facing numerous challenges. Perhaps the most severe problem has been a massive influx of students. If you include all undergraduate and graduate majors and minors, including Agricultural Journalism, the department currently provides a substantial level of service to approximately 1,000 students, more than 900 of whom are majors. This is a greater than 50% increase in majors in the past three years – a challenge under the best of possible circumstances. And the current structure of the curriculum, and the way in which much of it is taught in small sections by individual faculty, seriously exacerbates the problem. Furthermore, faculty report the sense that many of the majors are less than committed to Journalism, having turned to the major after not achieving their goals in some other major.

Unfortunately, the department's leadership faltered during this critical period. The department has had a succession of interim department heads over the past three years, and it concluded two successive searches for a leader without success. By seemingly mutual consent between the faculty and the interim Heads, the primary role of the interim Heads has been that of a caretaker.

A number of faculty lines currently are unfilled, adding substantially to the resource problems of the department. Moreover, other Journalism faculty have announced that they will be leaving the university in the near future; current searches for replacement faculty do not appear to be yielding outstanding candidates; and other extant departmental faculty are staffing programs on campus and can offer only limited teaching support to the Journalism Department.

Adding to the demands on the faculty, the Department of Journalism established its first graduate program, a Master of Science and Technology Journalism, in 1996. As best we can tell, this new graduate program was undertaken without any new faculty resources. The graduate program is small, and most of the graduate students are not employed as Teaching Assistants in the Department's courses. They do not appear to have a research orientation - most students do not undertake theses or original research.

As a result of this incredible demand and the labor-intensive way the department has responded to it, the remaining Journalism faculty members are absolutely overwhelmed. Extreme stress appears to be the norm, as was attested to in our interviews with students and faculty alike. Quite frankly, many of the faculty appear to be experiencing "burnout."

This widespread exhausting high level of stress has generated a condition that seems to approximate "battle fatigue," and the faculty are exhibiting largely "Can't do" attitudes and behaviors with respect to solving their problems. Perhaps this is merely that day-to-day demands are overwhelming, but instead of approaching the considerable problems they face creatively and positively, they appear to be "circling the wagons" and looking for reasons not to adapt and change. This exacerbates the serious – if not crisis – conditions in which the department currently finds itself. The leadership vacuum clearly makes things worse, yielding an organizational culture that is without direction. We believe the faculty understand their department's problems, even if they do not necessarily agree on how serious each separate issue

is. There has been considerable discussion among them, but without proactive leadership, neither solutions nor action plans have materialized.

The prospect of the new Telecommunications Media Studies Program is a potentially exciting development, but the Journalism faculty are disconnected from the endeavor, and no one we spoke with is prepared to be an enthusiastic participant. The same sentiment was expressed in the Speech Communication Department.

Further compounding the Journalism Department's dilemma in meeting the goals of Vision 2020 is a perceived lack of concordance in the department's culture with some of the initiatives in Vision 2020. Historically, the Department of Journalism has put the preponderance of its energies into educating journalism professionals. This seems to be in line with Imperative 5 of Vision 2020: Build on the Tradition of Professional Education. However, because so much energy seems to be spent addressing this imperative, cultivating excellence in research and scholarship has taken a backseat to teaching. In conversations with the Dean and Associate Dean of Liberal Arts, as well as in reading the Vision 2020 statement, it appears to us that substantial gains in visibility and scholarly reputation are essential for success for any and every academic unit. Although the departmental faculty members appear to have engaged in scholarship to the extent possible (the abbreviated resumes we were provided made it difficult to assess the quality and quantity of scholarship), a research culture has not been firmly established, nor have newer tenure-track faculty members been mentored into a culture of high expectations for programmatic research initiatives. It appears to us that major shifts in values and the attendant culture will be required before true excellence in scholarship will be likely for many faculty members in the Department of Journalism.

Along with uncertainties about the research culture within the Department of Journalism, it seems that ambiguities in values and culture also have seriously affected its ability to attract and retain quality junior faculty. Whether this is a specific problem with mentoring or simply a consequence of lacking a mature research culture is unclear, but the high turnover among assistant professors during the past decade is demoralizing to all concerned.

At the pragmatic level, the Department of Journalism also has significant support problems. Space is at a premium, computer and audiovisual technical support is inadequate (although computer-related material support is good); further help is needed in advising, and a new building is critically needed.

The environment of Speech Communication, a sister program substantively related to Journalism, is quite different. Although it too faces enrollment pressures, it has managed to move to national prominence in targeted research areas through a careful program of attracting and retaining senior faculty and through nurturing funded research programs, including putting high priorities on graduate education. Its approach provides a contrast to and possibly a model for Journalism. While there might seem to be easy similarities between the two programs and faculty interests, in fact, that is not the case, and each department views the other as foreign territory. We will refer to Speech Communication below in terms of some of those opportunities, particularly with respect to the Telecommunications Media Studies program.

Options

We have considered three alternatives for the Department of Journalism. The first is eliminating the department; the second is strategically strengthening the faculty and curriculum of the department; the third is combining Journalism with Speech Communication.

Option #1: Dissolve the Journalism Program

Given the history of continuing difficulties, and the inability of the department to deal with them for the past several years, one might seriously consider phasing out the department altogether. The present moment offers certain advantages. The number of faculty involved is now at its lowest point, minimizing the personnel disruption. Furthermore, of the present faculty, two are near retirement age, several could easily be placed in other departments or already have appointments in related departments, and one is an assistant professor. At worst, this would leave only a handful of tenured faculty to be placed, either by adding to the mission of some other department or by allowing them to continue to offer a small set of journalism courses as a service within the College.

However, despite the relative ease with which elimination could now occur, we think it inadvisable. An obvious drawback is the large and vocal statewide constituency of former students who would be outraged by such an action. Second, shutting down such a large undergraduate program would leave an enormous pool of students who would need to be served in some other way, presumably largely negating any savings. Most importantly, however, the combination of professional mass communication training within the liberal arts exemplifies the A&M mission for the state of Texas. It is simply hard to imagine a major university that emphasizes the application of knowledge in the service of its state not having a program in journalism and mass communication.

Option #2: Strengthen the Journalism Department

The Journalism Department has coped for several years with an undersized faculty relative to the number of majors. Obvious strategies for improving the situation include (1) increasing faculty lines, (2) trimming enrollment, and (3) altering curriculum. We think some combination of all three strategies is warranted.

Add New Faculty Lines

The actual number of faculty contributing full time in the department currently numbers eight (one faculty member serves nearly full time as Director of the International Studies Degree Program), and the Journalism Department has the highest student/faculty ratio in the College of Liberal Arts (officially about 70:1, but in fact much higher given the actual number of tenured or tenure track faculty). This situation alone suggests that additional faculty lines are warranted.

More importantly, if the College is interested in improving regional and national reputations, greater research productivity is crucial. This can be achieved only if there are sufficient faculty so that current teaching and student contact loads are reduced. We also observe, however, that a critical mass or cluster of more senior faculty has the potential to offer improved mentoring to junior faculty, as well as opportunities for building research programs and infrastructure. Acquiring faculty members who have a well defined, proven research track record enables them to import mature research agendas and programs, contacts, and expertise without struggling with the unfamiliar and changing situation currently facing the department. Beyond this, there are crucial less-tangible benefits of a collegial climate that assumes a shared orientation toward research (the colleague with a coffee cup leaning against the door jamb, and asking, "What do you think about?"). Therefore, we recommend that the College increase the number of faculty lines by at least three (beyond the current two hires in process), preferably more, and that all of these hires be tenured, research-oriented faculty members, preferably with some practitioner experience as well. The presence of additional senior, research-oriented faculty also would have the advantage of boosting the credence of the research endeavor more generally.

We also suggest that new hires be considered in terms of their potential bridging function to the Speech Communication Department. SCOM is a strong department only slightly larger in terms of number of faculty members than Journalism, and Speech Communication has enrollment problems of its own. Although, as noted below, we do not endorse an immediate merger between these departments, we do believe that programmatic bridges could strengthen both units. The Speech Communication Department is interested in broadening its content areas, and some of their faculty members have expressed an interest in undertaking research with faculty from Journalism. Adding faculty who can catalyze this link would be beneficial. Moreover, these same faculty could feasibly contribute to the Telecommunications Media program as well.

Trim Enrollment

Even with a minimum of three additional faculty members, the level of enrollment is out of line with teaching resources. We recommend that the enrollment be radically trimmed to 400 majors. Whereas it is always difficult to shrink student numbers, it is imperative for this program's continued survival that it devise a workable solution to its oversubscription problem. Some of the student downsizing can be achieved through resequencing courses and instituting strict prerequisites (removing the option for students to enroll in just any Journalism course), and some can be achieved through adopting GPR or consent-based enrollment controls.

Journalism faculty report that they have been discouraged in all their attempts to restrict enrollment. For example, they say that GPR limits higher than 2.25 are not acceptable to the College of Liberal Arts, and that fixed quotas are also not an option. They could institute draconian grading in Journalism 102, but this would probably be quite difficult in 203 or the other lab courses – it is difficult to give a "D" or "F" grade to a student one has come to know and interact with regularly as an individual in a small class or section. Clearly, they would like guidance from the College about which methods of enrollment limitation are acceptable.

Enrollment limitations then present a public relations problem for both the Department and the College. An appropriate way to handle this with the students (and their parents) would be to

openly explain the goals of trimming enrollment, and to clearly delineate the benefits. The latter might be seen as a “contract” with the remaining or potential majors that the downsized department will offer superior instruction, better access to facilities, some new course offerings, improved advising, and improved career placement.

Curriculum Redesign

Even more important than adding faculty and limiting enrollment is restructuring the curriculum. There are both technical and conceptual dimensions to this goal. Of these, the technical can and should be done very quickly through establishing prerequisites and resequencing courses. Currently, the influx of both internal and external transfer students at the junior and senior levels wreaks havoc with the notion of a sequence. In a program that relies on lower level courses for developing basic skills, the transfer rates upset any attempt to rationally order courses and offer students a programmatically tailored experience. For example, faculty reported that students often take the basic writing course (203) their senior year (due to late transfers and major change, difficulty enrolling in the course, and waiting to pass the grammar test), but take more advanced courses earlier. Such students are unprepared for the advanced courses, which must then “dumb down” their content to match. This problem is currently pervasive in the major.

Second, as one faculty member said, the current curriculum “tries to be all things to all people.” With its large number of highly specialized courses, the curriculum is based on a traditional understanding of the mass communication professions that is rapidly disappearing through convergent trends in the industry. The underlying technology systems have blurred so that practitioners use multiple techniques and move from job to job across what used to be strong specialization boundaries. These changes in the professions served by the Department of Journalism present it with challenges it has tried to meet by expanding its graphics and multimedia offerings. These efforts are well-motivated, but far more can be done. And fortunately, the convergence of mass communication professions offers great opportunities for mass communication educators to consolidate rather than proliferate courses. Other universities (e.g., Kansas State, University of Wisconsin) have been able to drastically cut the total number of different courses, but offer their new set of courses in a planned and coordinated way that directs limited faculty resources to student needs and maintains a coherent and cumulative progression from course to course. Beyond this, both faculty and students are generally quite excited and energized by the interaction of methods and content in these convergence curricula.

Third, although we may be inferring this, it appears that the department currently treats teaching and research as competitive activities. Part of reaching a higher level of quality will come about not just from increased research productivity, but from a reconceptualization that understands how research and teaching enhance each other. That is, a characteristic of leading universities is a cyclical impact of research activity making teaching more current and its conclusions dynamic, with teaching stimulating new research questions. Thus, it will be necessary to build an improved understanding of how research and methods of inquiry in general contribute to the practice of journalism. Getting students involved in the creation of knowledge and applying lessons from that activity to contemporary problems can enhance the learning environment.

Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Make 102 a required first course for all majors.
- Make 203 the second required course for all majors, and temporarily hire enough assistants to offer several sections of it so that it does not function as a bottleneck in the program.
- Establish and enforce a structure of logical prerequisites for upper division writing/skills courses (for one year, seniors may need to be excepted).
- Structure studies or "concept" and consumer-oriented media studies courses in a sequence that allows students who do NOT want a professional career in journalism - apparently the majority right now - to follow that track after they have completed 102 and 203.
- Reorient skills courses in line with cross-media industry practices. This would probably drastically reduce the total number of courses by defining them as broader collections of skill sets. Otherwise the department must face dropping some clusters of courses (i.e., photojournalism, broadcast, advertising, etc.).
- Find ways to make faculty resources go farther than the current labor-intensive teaching that occupies so much of their time. This could well involve employing graduate students (from Journalism and possibly English as well) under faculty supervision in beginning writing courses.

We are doubtful of the utility of the GSP test as a screen for competency in writing. The department may want to examine its utility more closely and consider designing a better screening procedure. For example, a specialized type of Journalism ACT test could be designed, tested, and implemented.

The Telecommunications Media Program

Neither the faculties of Speech Communication nor Journalism are invested in the new Telecommunications Media Program. The Engineering Technology faculty likewise seem to view the program primarily as a way to nurture improved writing about telecommunication, but particularly as a way to fund a needed laboratory and partially fund an additional faculty line. All acknowledge the program was largely the brainchild of the former chair of Journalism, and now it appears to be an orphan.

We see little possibility that this program as currently configured will flourish. First, no program is championing it. Indeed, no one has a clear, much less consensual, vision for the program. Adding two more faculty members (to Journalism) specifically tasked to Telecommunications Media Studies will help, but the program configuration only entails three new classes – telecommunication policy, principles of media management, and a seminar in telecom media (TCMS 409, 459 and 490). This seems to be a thin gloss on the broader field of telecommunications.

An interdisciplinary program can offer the chance for collaboration across Speech Communication and Journalism, and tailoring a program toward mass communication interests may offer a fruitful avenue. We encourage the Department to develop useful interfaces with Speech Communication through media studies programs (c.g., communication studies, mass

communication-oriented courses) that can extend the telecom offerings and achieve more interdisciplinary synergies.

Improve Support Services for Students

We understand that the College placement efforts are not sufficiently targeted to this field (particularly with its current large contingent of students interested in Public Relations), suggesting a better mechanism might be to support efforts undertaken directly in the department. We recommend that the College investigate ways to improve career placement options for Journalism majors. A "placement fee" might be assessed for Journalism majors that would support concerted efforts by this department (or its student associations) to bring potential employers to campus.

The current facilities for Journalism are rather old, although several classrooms have been updated and the labs possess good computer equipment. Students report that it is difficult to actually use equipment because of the high numbers of students in the program. Trimming enrollment will remedy this problem to a certain extent. However, if the program truly embraces the potential of the new Telecommunications Media Studies sequence, a new building with improved facilities for faculty research and graduate student offices would be beneficial.

Option #3: Merge the Department of Journalism with the Department of Speech Communication

This option has some potentially large advantages, particularly given the quest for greater national recognition. SCOM already has established a reputation for excellent research within its three areas of concentration (rhetoric, health communication, and organizational communication), and yet has managed to do so while maintaining a unified approach to undergraduate education. Despite these achievements however, SCOM's potential for national recognition is currently hampered by its relative narrowness: nationwide, some communication scholars recognize its quality and others (from specialties not represented here) scarcely know the department exists. A combined department that covered more intellectual territory, adding mass communication in general and telecommunications policy and media structures in particular, would cover almost the full range of Communication (the remaining important exception being the subfield of interpersonal communication). If these added areas could grow to match the quality level of SCOM's current areas, a combined department truly could achieve national prominence. And it is probably more likely that these areas would achieve quality, or at least achieve it more quickly, within a departmental culture that values and nurtures research, both explicitly and as an assumed part of academe.

There are also benefits to be had by creating a unit that provides both theory and practice of communication in a variety of ways and contexts. Journalism currently provides training for a number of very specific professional mass communication contexts (i.e., newspapers, broadcast, public relations, advertising), while SCOM teaches public speaking. But there are tremendous potential synergies among these when conceived as general skill sets (effective communication through the spoken and written word, or through images, variously conveyed). Students should be able to recognize the similarities and translate skills from one context to another more readily when the principles are framed in general theoretical terms. In other words, SCOM students

would benefit from a broader base of practical communication skills while Journalism students would benefit from seeing a broader range of theories and contexts to which to apply their skills.

Creating such a combined unit would not be easy. The current missions of the two departments overlap very little, and although there are some potential savings to be had in a single administrative structure and shared technology, the lack of overlap also means that there is little currently shared ground on which the two could easily cooperate. On the other hand, the argument above about complementary Communication subfields means that the two current departments are at least "adjacent" in multidimensional disciplinary space, with no real gap between them. And the emerging Telecommunications majors provide a potential sphere for cooperation and mutual creative effort that could allow them to jointly elaborate and expand on the mass communication expertise that Journalism would bring to the new unit.

We recommend highlighting the similarities of the two departments through a number of strategic initiatives designed to facilitate convergence incrementally and relatively painlessly. A first initiative might be the development of a shared center for research in health communication and risk assessment. Both departments have excellent faculties in this crucial research area. Combining their talent pools should permit the proposed center to be highly effective in obtaining major federally-funded grants, which should permit highly visible programmatic research.

Still, the current state of the Department of Journalism poses perhaps the major obstacle to any merger. SCOM faculty worry about their department being dragged down from all it has achieved by the problems currently besetting Journalism. They also have enrollment management issues to contend with, and a merger with Journalism would add to those problems. And the Journalism faculty are themselves too consumed by those problems to contribute to the work of a merger. Even if the College decided that a merger were desirable, it is probably not achievable in any practical way until Journalism has made substantial progress on its own redefinition and restructuring.

Thus, although there is much to recommend a merger, or at least some closer linkage, of these two departments, we recommend that such steps await progress under Option #2.

Resource requirements for our recommended options

In order to achieve the goals of our recommended options within *four* years, the following new resources are recommended:

- A commitment of at least three new senior faculty lines to journalism and at least two new entry-level lines to Speech Communication;
- Enhanced staff support for Journalism to improve its registrar and records, advising, placement, technical support and former student tracking and nurturing functions;
- Provide enhancement funds to create a major research center jointly operated by Journalism and Speech Communication;

- Allocate budget for the architectural and strategic planning requirements of a new facility housing Journalism and allied units.

To achieve these goals within *eight* years would not substantially change our recommended resource commitments for the first four years. The changes recommended need to be implemented immediately. The primary addition of resources for this longer transition period would be the inclusion of fiscal resources to build and equip a new facility to house Journalism and its allied units.