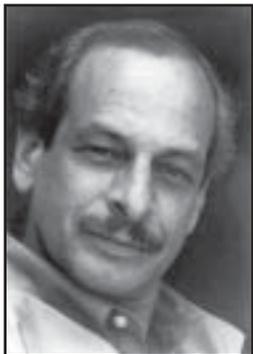


Rating and Ranking Our Ph.D. Programs



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It's a mark of our institutional maturity, I suppose, that the National Research Council (NRC) now promises to take seriously the claims that "communication," defined broadly and inclusively, ought to be recognized as a separate and distinct discipline with its own traditions of inquiry. But the perils of this legitimacy if in fact the NRC decides to rate and rank our Ph.D. programs deserve as much attention as the obvious prestige associated with any decision that finally elevates our work to the status accorded other established fields of study in the social sciences and humanities.

Charles T. Salmon of Michigan State University, chair of the AEJMC Task Force on the Future of Ph.D. Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which I appointed a year and a half ago, and Charles Self of the University of Oklahoma, chair of the task force's committee that's focusing on the implications of including communication in the NRC's forthcoming study of the status of "research doctorate" programs, will prepare for a subsequent issue of *AEJMC News* a full and detailed account of the importance and consequences of NRC recognition. Meanwhile, I want to use this column to initiate a discussion among AEJMC members about what NRC recognition might mean, a dialog that can continue on these pages and through other venues.

At the outset, then, let's be clear about

what the NRC does: It evaluates only "research training programs" that award a Ph.D. The NRC does not evaluate programs, whatever degrees they grant and however rigorous their curricula might be, that prepare "professionals" whose careers amount to service to clients. Accordingly, the NRC assesses programs in sociology, but not social work; programs in psychology, but not counseling; programs in political science where students might study international law, but not law schools; programs in biochemistry and molecular biology, but not schools of medicine. In its last study of qualifying doctoral programs, in 1993, the NRC rated and ranked 3,634 programs at 274 universities.

The NRC's latest but still tentative taxonomy of disciplines includes "communications" as one of nine social and behavioral sciences. We appear to have passed two threshold tests: Most of our Ph.D. students (94 percent) do indeed end up in academic, as opposed to professional, positions; and we are "sufficiently robust" in that we now have more than enough graduates from more than enough programs to meet the NRC's requirement of "a minimum of 500 degrees in about 50 programs" over a five year period of time. Between 1995 and 1999, according to Stephen Lacy's survey of doctoral programs in communication, published by AEJMC in January 2000, 108 universities granted 2,200 doctoral degrees. This makes us larger than two established disciplines, geography and agricultural economics; and roughly comparable in size to linguistics although more universities award Ph.D.s in linguistics than communication, overall more students receive Ph.D.s. in communication than linguistics.

But these data do not speak to the important differences between Ph.D. programs in the tradition of speech and Ph.D. programs in the tradition of journalism. Although programs in both traditions share an early history as underappreciated elements of departments of English teachers of public speaking apparently enjoyed about as much prestige as teachers of news writing they established themselves in different

place on campus, often with different internal and external constituencies, and with altogether different sets of key journals. If these differences matter less today than they did a few decades ago, no one is proposing that the National Communication Association, which was once called the National Association of Teachers of Public Speaking, merge with the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which was once called the American Association of Teachers of Journalism or that as a compromise both groups fold into the International Communication Association, which was once called the National Society for the Study of Communication.

If we gain NRC recognition, will we eventually need a new national association or at least a credible hierarchy among our existing associations in order to better understand and promote the needs of our suddenly unified discipline of communication?

Will NRC recognition foster intramural squabbles on campuses with two or more Ph.D. programs in communication? Will it act as a barrier to the cooperation and collegiality that might otherwise characterize relations between units that have never had to compete for national attention? Will it prompt central administrations to reconsider the logic of supporting separate Ph.D. programs in communication?

Among schools and departments in the tradition of journalism more than 30 but probably fewer than 40 of the 108 identified in the Lacy study will NRC recognition of their Ph.D. programs bring about a shift in resources away from professional programs that might soon matter less to deans, provosts, and vice presidents who, understandably, want to improve their institution's national standing? Does it matter that we have no group prepared to rate and rank our professional programs with anything close to the methodological rigor the NRC uses to evaluate Ph.D. programs?

None of these questions amounts to an argument against NRC recognition. But they along with any number of questions I haven't raised remind us that there's a difference between unintended consequences and consequences we simply didn't take the time to consider.