

The Future of Undergraduate Education
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It's great to be back at a Council meeting! Thanks so much for inviting me, I'm honored to be here and was flattered to be asked. I look around the room and see lots of faces that were part of this Council long before I came along; but for me, it was exactly 20 years ago – April, 1988 – here in Florida that I attended my first Council meeting. I remember sitting in the back row (new guy...didn't want to be presumptuous even in my seat choice) and thinking about all of the bald white heads that I was looking at in the audience. Things have changed since then. We have a corps of corporate sponsors for the meeting, ASHA and AAA are presented and most importantly there are nearly three times the number of attendees.

That was my first Council meeting. My last one before today was several years ago. Given that lapse in attendance, my original thinking in preparing for today was not to presume to offer a prescription for change, but instead to offer some observations on our discipline and on undergraduate education from where I sit in the academy. But by the time I got done with these remarks I had in fact also created a list of suggested actions.

Some Observations

An individual's observations are, of course, shaped in part by their experiences, so to be fair, you should know that I've spent nearly thirty years in higher education and most of those years were at large research universities. I've also spent 20 of those years serving as an administrator (Chair, Dean, State System Head, and Provost) and those experiences have, no doubt, shaped my perceptions.

I have to admit that I laughed out loud when I asked about the current issues in undergraduate education in communication sciences and disorders. A liberal arts focus vs. a clinical focus, how to improve the quality of our majors (including the never-ending question of whether non-majors make better graduate students than majors), or whether we should even offer an undergraduate degree. I laughed because these topics haven't changed in all the years I've been involved in these discussions. But, having been away for a few years, I can say that some things have changed: the emergence of evidenced-based practice as an explicit curricular issue, the presence of UG programs and clinic directors here at this meeting (something that was just beginning in the late 90's), the discussion of a common master's application (an idea that makes great sense to me), even the level of agreement on communication sciences and disorders as a name for our field.

We often start discussions of the role and purpose of undergraduate education with the question: "What are our goals for undergraduate education?" I have my answer to this question, but first, I'd like to ask another one and that is "Why don't other disciplines spend as much time as we do debating the role and purpose of undergraduate education?" [For the moment, I'd like to avoid the discussion of what is the "best" comparative discipline for CSD – psychology? medicine?, etc. and think broadly across the entire university.] The point is that in few cases within the academy is this such a continually vexing question for a field.

My answer to why others spend far less time asking themselves this question is that they are all more secure in their disciplines (not professions, but disciplines) than we are. They don't question their discipline's core or its legitimacy in the academy, they understand the former and assume the latter. And, arguably, the most durable instantiation of a discipline's core is its undergraduate curriculum. Furthermore, this "security in the discipline" is not the province of large programs, nor small programs, nor clinical programs, etc.; for all of our competing disciplines (or complementary disciplines, if you're a Provost) are also found in all sizes of universities – many are even located at community colleges and in most cases other disciplines see a community college presence as a good thing because it is yet another mark of their academic centrality and legitimacy.

I would offer that we, in CSD, are not secure in our discipline and many (if not most) of our actions reflect that insecurity. Primary among those actions is our continuing focus on our "uniqueness" and our continuing attempts to define and/or justify our existence and our behaviors around that assumption. From my various seats in the academy, I can tell you, CSD is generally not seen as being that much different from many other programs on campus. For one thing, everyone in the University believes they're unique! (And in my more patient "Provost-listening" mode, I can agree with them.) This sense of uniqueness is not surprising when one considers that universities are merely collections of departments whose research protocols, curricula, and faculty credentials are all determined in large measure by their disciplines and not by the University. In fact, the term "discipline" in the way we use it here derives from its definition as a "set of rules or methods" or a "training that is designed to produce a specified character or pattern of behavior". That is, each academic discipline creates its own set of rules or methods and then applies those to each of us and we become "disciples"!

All programs have unique needs and expectations. But, to the extent that those are self-imposed (i.e. disciplinary expectations), they are simply part of the natural variation that exists across all units on a campus. Yes, we have unique aspects that make us different from chemistry, or geology, or anthropology; but my sense is that our perceived uniqueness demands more of our attention than it does in most other disciplines. We need to collectively move beyond the notion that we are unique, and all of the consequences that we attribute to that uniqueness, such as: a lack of understanding of our role and potential, a lack of respect for our field from others, insufficient funding, etc.

In my opinion, we too seldom think of ourselves as an academic discipline in the same way that others on campus do, even though: we are all located on a campus, we spend most of our time talking to academics, and we spend nearly all of our time competing in the academic arena for resources and recognition. Some will see this line of argumentation as simply a re-visiting of the old "discipline vs. profession discussion", which is an argument that likely will never, and perhaps should never, go away. But my point here is not so much the dichotomy between discipline and professions as it is about

being complete in our consideration of how we manage our discipline in the context in which we live – colleges and universities.

Historically, as a field (intentionally avoiding the choice of either “profession” or “discipline”) we have focused too much on:

1. Undergraduate programs as preparation for master’s programs; and not enough on defining our field’s “canon”. What is the core body of knowledge in our field? In most other disciplines that core is instantiated in the undergraduate curriculum and thus becomes a means for others to examine the field and better understand it. As a result, we have not positioned ourselves well in the academy.

2. Clinician shortages and what to do about them; and by extension we have not focused enough on educational needs and opportunities. One of our most endearing characteristics as a group is our desire to help others. This, no doubt, helps to fuel our desire to respond to local and national clinical needs. As a result, however, we have not attended to the disciplinary base of our field; that in most other disciplines is codified in the undergraduate curriculum. So, in the rush to be sure that we are preparing clinicians, we have spent too little time on preparing future citizens, future students, and future scientists; things that are seen as primary roles of the undergraduate curriculum in many other disciplines.

3. The perceived threat of PT’s, OT’s and others; and not enough on safeguarding our lead on those professions. As an undergraduate student, I was impressed by the pride that my mentors had in our educational and scientific superiority to other professions, most notably OT and PT. In the ensuing 30 years, I would argue that we have lost most of that lead. Ironically, part of the reason for that regression is that we turned our attention to the competition, rather than focusing on ourselves and our future, not theirs.

4. On short-term clinical opportunities for payment enhancement (e.g. hearing aid dispensing and dysphagia assessment); and not enough on long-range scientific challenges in the field. Many other academic disciplines are seriously focused on the future and the questions that will vex society and the world to come. I see little of that discussion in our field and hence it has little influence on the nature and shape of our undergraduate curricula. Let me take genetics research as one example. Today, the discoveries in the news are about single-gene diseases – the gene for a subset of breast cancers or an aspect of Parkinson’s Disease. During this century, we will move beyond these simple mappings of a gene and a disease to the much more difficult and more interesting questions – e.g. the genetics of personality, cognition, and language. A very strong case can be made for our central role in that research, but I would venture that few of our undergraduates have ANY appreciation for that central role. More troublesome, however, is the reality that we are increasingly less well-positioned to assume that role, and that when the time comes we may be out of the discussion altogether. This is not what my mentors envisioned in the 1970’s when they boasted of the strength of our educational and scientific base.

Some Suggestions

Again, in the name of full disclosure here are **my biases**:

1. All things being equal, **fewer curricular requirements are better than more requirements**. I believe this for two reasons; first, we tend to create curricular requirements to “assure quality”. More correctly, it is to assure that the least able of students are held to some minimal standard by imposing a large number of hurdles for them to navigate. At the same time, these hurdles simple distract the best students from more interesting, or important things. My bias is that good students will do well if we get out of their way, and poor students will struggle to do well, regardless of what we do; so let’s get out of the way. The other reason I believe in fewer rather than more requirements is that the curriculum is arguably the most intransient aspect of a university (or college, or department, or program.) To allow for the creativity of the faculty and the students, tying fewer things down in the curriculum is preferred. [Think to yourself how often you’ve struggled to find someone to teach a course that you weren’t that impressed with in the first place, just because – “it’s required”!]

2. **Higher expectations are better than lower ones**. We all have examples of how we raised standards and gained students (rather than lost them), or have improved performance, or have saved time and resources rather than expended additional ones.

3. **You can’t require too much math or science**. I could go on here for an hour... The future of our discipline will depend on the mathematics and scientific preparation of our students – it’s as simple as that. The world of science is passing us by and I see little being done about it. We can raise our expectations and compete, or we can continue to fall behind. By the way, we could erase our concerns about low GRE scores by simply requiring calculus of all of our students. This may seem absurd to some (I didn’t mean it as a joke) but you might be interested in knowing that all preschool teachers in Japan have taken calculus...because all college graduates in Japan must take calculus.

So, what should we do? First of all, let me be clear, we should be offering an UG degree – albeit not all programs need to offer one – but as a field the presence of a clearly articulated knowledge core is vital. As part of that undergraduate curriculum, I would recommend several revisions. First and foremost, **we should impose more rigor**. Not more “things to do”- we’re good at adding projects to classes – but higher expectations. We need to do a better job of challenging our students intellectually and not overloading them with information and not make-work projects. I believe that the undergraduate curriculum at most of our universities is embarrassingly easy. We can expect much more of our students than we do.

Second, **we should move away from courses that are defined by a skill set** (e.g. many phonetic transcription and audiometry); or at least assign these courses to their appropriate role in the curriculum. Too often they play a “defining” role, in that other courses are configured around them, rather than letting the content (e.g. articulatory

dynamics and psychoacoustics) define the curriculum and relegating the skills to a supportive role and probably not an entire course.

Third, **we should move toward real discovery-based instruction.** One of the most exciting aspects of our discipline is its accessibility. Any one of us can, in a few short minutes, demonstrate to a complete stranger on an airplane the value of our field. That's because nearly everyone in society has communicative experience, so we don't need a lab to demonstrate many of our most fundamental principles; we can just have them say (or listen) to something that we've said. As a discipline, we've failed to exploit this aspect of our field. We have the potential to be one of the leaders in the academy in reshaping how learning is achieved, but to do that we must move beyond lectures and simple projects and take advantage of the natural curiosity that most people have for the topics we study.

Fourth, **we must become truly interdisciplinary.** Despite our claims of interdisciplinarity, how many of our undergraduate courses are actually team-taught with someone from another department, or even co-developed with another department. I believe that "strong interdisciplinary work requires strong disciplines", so this is not a plea to become co-opted by others. Instead it is a call to be more fully engaged with others, in order: to strengthen our course offerings, to help others appreciate our potential contributions, and to help us better understand our own role in the academy.

Fifth, **I'm OK with undergraduates who never do any clinic;** observation should be adequate. But it will likely only be fully adequate within a new context. A context within which "getting a master's degree" is not seen as the primary goal. A context within which discovery-centered learning has allowed the student to understand the fundamental dynamics of the communication process and its vulnerabilities. A context in which our students are competing with others on campus for national scholarships (Rhodes, Marshal, Churchill, Gates, etc.).

While not an exhaustive list, I believe these changes could produce several important outcomes. They will likely attract **better students and a more diverse student body.** The lack of diversity in our field remains an embarrassment to us all. **They will create more able graduates.** They will create **better and more lasting interconnections with other units** on campus. At present, we do not receive nearly as many entreats from others on campus as our content and expertise would warrant. They will **increase the clarity of the distinctions between our undergraduate, master's and doctoral curricula.** At present, there is far too much redundancy between our undergraduate and master's offerings (in many departments they are almost parallel in form). And they will **reduce distinctions and tensions among us** (UG only programs vs. MA focused programs vs. PhD programs) by defining a set of commonalities that we can reinforce in our shared meetings as well as in support for each other on our campuses. We have made considerable progress in this area as evidenced by the continuing discussions of collaborative doctoral programs across departments, but we still struggle in part, because we do not have an agreed upon undergraduate core that unites us.

A likely reaction to these suggestions is “this sounds fine, but we’re just trying to hang on at our university, we’re not in a position to make these kinds of major changes and put our program and our resources at risk.” There isn’t sufficient time here for me to fully respond to that concern, but I would like to offer a couple of thoughts on the continuing question of how do we ensure our permanence in the university? Yes, there are some basics: maintain student credit hour production, stay out of trouble (don’t cause the dean and the provost problems), and be sure you can articulate your units’ alignment with the current presidential strategic plan (whether you’ve done anything to re-align, or not). But there are two more important items in my experience. **The first is excellence.** It is very hard to eliminate an outstanding program, even if you want to (and who would want to?). If you visit lots of campuses, you’ll often be struck with a department or college that seems out of place (e.g. a medieval language center at a polytechnic institute, or a department of nanomaterials at a traditionally strong liberal arts university) and when you ask why its there as often as not the answer is “they’re one of our outstanding programs”, or “they’re really strong”. One of the truism of the academy is that quality usually trumps everything else. So, first and foremost, be seen as being of high quality within the context of your campus. The other important item in preserving one’s future in the academy is **connections with others on campus.** If most of the other (particularly the strong) units on campus see you as important, your future is much more secure than if your sch goes up by 25% and you’re seen as isolated (there are always lots of other units that can generate credit hours.) Make yourself indispensable to other units’ research programs, curricular offerings, and faculty recruitment efforts. If you do, your role on the campus will be self-evident to those in a position to determine your future.

I sincerely believe that CSD is **better positioned than almost any other discipline** as we move into the 21st Century, but our position is at risk. Why am I so bully on our future. Yes, there are the obvious indicators that we all cite – an aging population and their need for communication services, the value of communication to humankind, growth in emerging nations for communication services, etc.; but there are other more fundamental academic dynamics for us to respond to. As I noted earlier, I believe communications research will be at the center of some of the most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century. But, right now, we’re not even on the radar screen of most biologists, so when they move to unlocking the genetics of communication and language, they’ll be talking with the psychologists, not us! We must change that. With the correct supporting undergraduate curriculum, we have the potential to become a “gateway” major to the rest of the natural sciences. I can think of no better way to improve the quality of our students and to ensure our role in the academy.

Similarly, we have the potential to become **the** leader in innovation in student learning in the coming decades. Every student of higher education that I know will tell you the 21st Century will be about discovery-focused, contextually appropriate, interdisciplinary learning. Unfortunately, we don’t do that nearly as well as should; but we have the potential to do it as well as, and I would argue better than, most anyone else. We must revitalize our undergraduate experience as a model for all of higher education in the future. As I see it, one of our frustrations in CSD is also one of our strengths; and

that's our diversity. With over 300 members in a wide range of colleges and universities, we can be a player on the higher education scene. (It's always surprising to me how many people are surprised when I say there are over 300 CDS programs in the country.) And despite some of our continuing debates, we have much better relationships among us than many other disciplines do across institutions. We need to make something of these relationships and use them to influence the academy.

If we really want to assert our role as a discipline, now is the time. The United States, in large measure, defined higher education for the world in the 20th Century. We created the modern research university, we crafted a model for government investment in university research, we democratized student access, and we created many of the academic disciplines that emerged in the 1900's. In the 21st Century, the center of this activity will shift to other nations. They will be the ones defining relationships among disciplines; they will be the ones deciding which disciplines are core and which are superfluous. In the future, it will not be the U.S. that decides what a discipline is, or if it should be maintained, others will make those decisions for us. So, your status in the eyes of your state coordinating board for higher education may become much less important to your long-term future than the view of those in other countries. We must work now to secure our place in the academic world in ways that are much more fundamental than we have in the past, so that as the world outside of the U.S. grows in influence, we are in a position to participate in that new dynamic.

Suggestions for the Council

One last observation: We have done much better at creating a unified sense of ourselves clinically than we have academically. Our clinical certification and accreditation standards are the best evidence of that success. While the latter are nominally academic standards, they are, in fact, driven almost exclusively by clinical training requirements, not a disciplinary core of knowledge. In fact, we, as ASHA, have done much better in defining our role and scope, than we have as the Council. As a council, our conversations and our self-perceptions of our roles as academics has not yet fully evolved.

At the same time, I give the Council high marks for its evolution to date. It has come far since my first meeting in 1988. We've moved from a group of Program Directors only to Program Directors, Clinic Directors, and others; we've moved from being primarily a support group and an idea-sharing group to an advocacy group with ASHA/AAA/etc. Now we need to set an agenda that is truly determined by academic issues – those of curriculum (not professional preparation), relationships with other disciplines (not just other professional associations and employers), pedagogical innovation, and leadership within the academy.

Specifically, I'd ask the Council to consider:

- 1) Leading a discussion on the future research questions facing society and the world and how the discipline should best prepare for them.

- 2) Leading a discussion on the definition of the knowledge-based canon that sustains us – and to challenge that conversation, I'd suggest we do so initially, without reference to speech-language pathology or audiology.
- 3) Leading a discussion on curricular reform that is rooted in contemporary notions of student learning, not our traditional course offerings or the needs of entering master's students.

Curricula are arguably the most visible descriptions of a discipline and what it believes is important. They are also the most static aspects of most universities. My challenge to all of us is to revisit our undergraduate curriculum with the goal of positioning Communication Sciences and Disorders as the leader in 21st Century pedagogy and behavioral science. If we achieve these two goals, issues of the quality of student preparation, majors vs. non-majors in graduate programs, undergraduate clinic experience, and the very viability of many of our departments on campus will disappear.