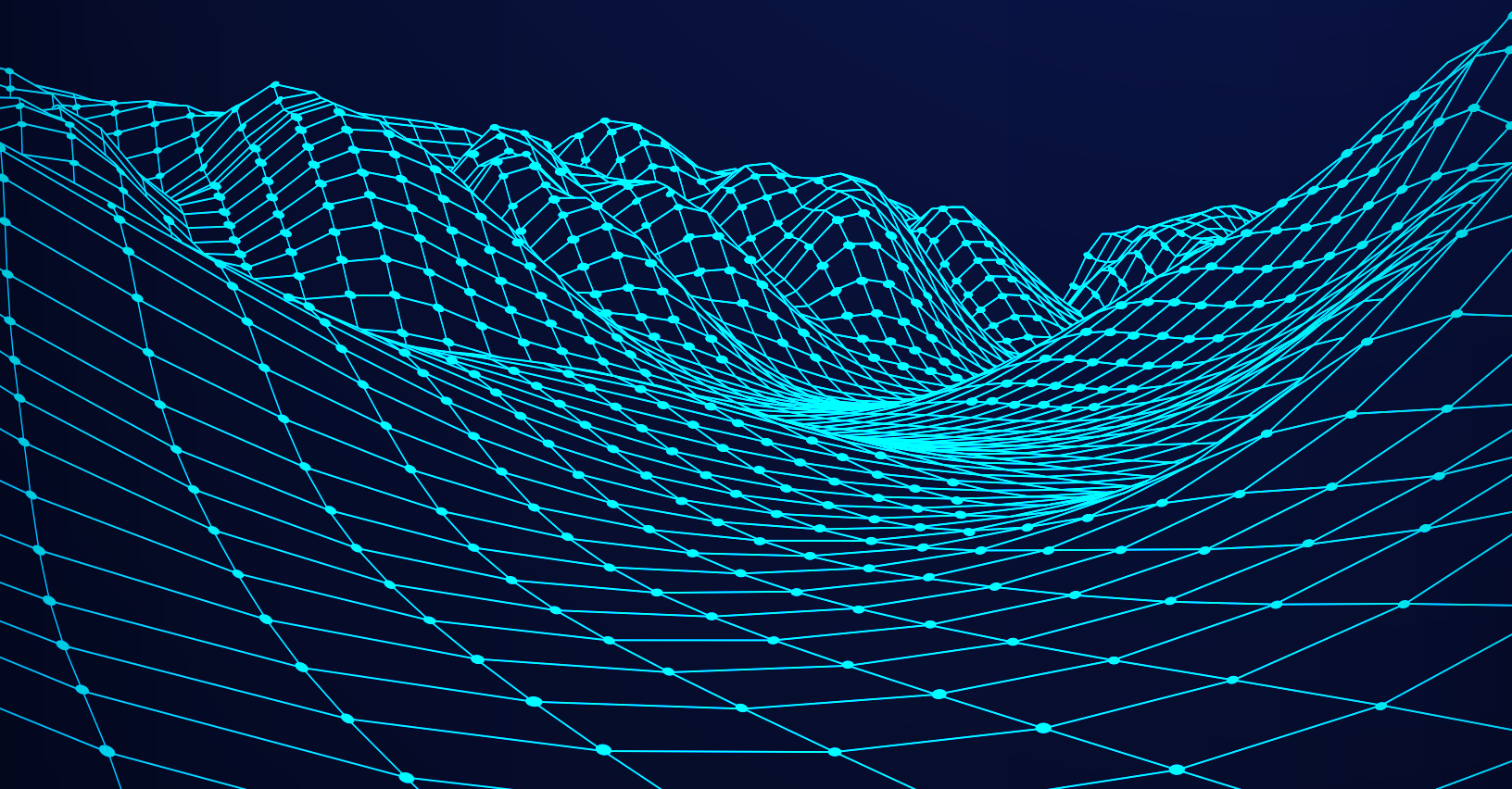


# Assessing and Advancing the Discipline

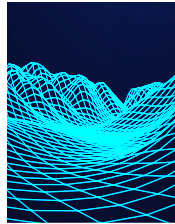
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MISSOURI WESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY



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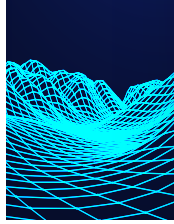
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NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION  
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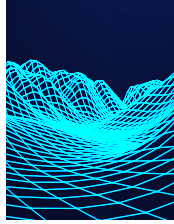
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National Communication Association  
1765 N Street, NW  
Washington, DC, 20036  
[www.natcom.org](http://www.natcom.org)



## NCA PRESIDENT DAVID T. McMAHAN

DAVID T. McMAHAN is a Professor of Communication at Missouri Western State University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2001, with research focusing on the social aspects of media and technology, personal relationships, and rhetorical criticism. He has published more than ten books, including *Internet Communication*, *Introduction to Communication Criticism*, *Relational Communication*, *The Basics of Communication*, and the bestselling *Communication in Everyday Life* series. His research and other works have been published in numerous academic journals and anthologies, and he was named a Centennial Scholar by the Eastern Communication Association. His extensive record of service includes serving as President of the Central States Communication Association, Editor of the *Iowa Journal of Communication*, and Consulting Editor of the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*, along with membership and activity on a vast number of academic committees, executive boards, and editorial boards. He has taught courses which span the discipline of Communication and has received several awards for his work in the classroom.



# Assessing and Advancing the Discipline

*Following is a transcript of the 2021 NCA Presidential Address as delivered.*

I ATTENDED MY FIRST NCA ANNUAL CONVENTION 25 YEARS AGO in San Diego. It was particularly memorable, because as someone fresh from the rural Indiana countryside, I was not exactly a seasoned traveler. It was also memorable because my mentor, Jim Chesebro, was NCA President that year, and I had the opportunity to listen to him give the Presidential Address. Being one of Jim's students was a remarkable experience. Jim wanted his students to not only develop an understanding of Communication but also contribute to the continued advancement of the discipline through their own scholarship, teaching, and service. I think he would be pleased that 25 years later, his student who sat in the audience that day would be up here giving the Presidential Address. And, the continued advancement of the discipline is what I want us to discuss today.

Emerging from one of the most tumultuous periods ever experienced by the academic world provides an opportune time to assess the state of the discipline and consider its future. The discipline of Communication is strong. From my vantage point as NCA President, I continue to be amazed by the expansiveness of the discipline, the strength of its scholarship, and the quality of its instruction at all levels and in all types of institutions. Above all, I remain amazed by the dedication to scholarship, teaching, and disciplinary and public service expressed through the remarkable efforts of the members of the discipline. Degree completion, job and salary reports, graduate student placement numbers, publication impact factors, and other such measures all indicate that the discipline of Communication is strong and growing in many areas. At the same time, if we are to continue advancing the discipline, we must be mindful of areas in need of development and must be prepared to adapt to fluctuating academic environments.

Foundationally, inclusivity, diversity, equity, and access must be at the forefront of all our efforts. We must also champion free expression and public discourse. We must additionally welcome and support scholars from multiple types of academic institutions, with different theoretical and methodological interests, with different perspectives, and with different objectives for the study of Communication. These foundational actions should be taken because they are right and because they are necessary for the continued advancement of our discipline.

With those foundational elements in place, three particular challenges demand our attention if we are to secure, strengthen, and further develop the discipline of Communication.

First, we must do a better job of promoting the discipline.

Second, we must strive for convergence in the discipline.

Third, we must encourage change in the discipline.

In what follows, these challenges, introduced and developed through my *Spectra* columns this year, will be examined, along with ways in which they might be addressed through personal efforts and broader disciplinary endeavors.



## OUR FIRST CHALLENGE

### WE MUST DO A BETTER JOB OF PROMOTING THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE.

What we study is beyond essential and fundamental to every aspect of life. Few other disciplines, if any, can match the centrality of Communication. Our discipline is significant, is impactful, and has a great deal to offer, and we should not keep those facts to ourselves. Disciplinary promotion is especially necessary in increasingly challenging academic environments, which are fraught with rising competition for both majors and resources, program restructuring and elimination, shifting notions of the purpose and value of higher education, and myriad other concerns.

Here, I want to discuss which groups we might be targeting through such promotion, and discipline-specific issues to consider when doing so.

**First, we should promote the discipline of Communication to students.** This group may seem obvious, but we must continuously recognize the importance of both recruiting and graduating majors. Idealistically, recruiting and graduating majors is a good thing because we know the positive impact that a degree in Communication will have on the lives of students. Pragmatically, recruiting and graduating majors is a good thing because decisions about funding and program preservation or elimination are often dependent on raw numbers of students. Our discipline, more than most others, enables students to make a positive social impact and secure good employment, beyond the personal and relational development and other benefits received from our courses. We must promote all of these qualities to students.

**We should also promote the discipline of Communication to other disciplines.** The centrality of Communication in personal, professional, creative, and civic worlds means that our work can inform and enhance the work of other disciplines in profound ways. However, we should not expect other disciplines to recognize the value of our discipline and come to us. Rather, we need to inform and reach out to them. Other disciplines may be less likely to engage in such action, and you might question why we should be expected to do so, but most other disciplines do not have Communication's expansive and multifaceted impact. Promoting the significance and value of our research in helping to answer the questions posed in other disciplines will ultimately bolster and enhance our own research and discipline.

**We should further promote the discipline of Communication to our institutions.** Our institutions should be made aware of the value of our courses and degrees, the achievements of our graduates, and the successes and contributions of our faculty, staff, and students. Above all, we must ensure that our institutions recognize and understand how the discipline of Communication supports their respective missions, values, and goals. Though institutional missions and strategic plans vary, there are often common elements, especially with the latter, which the discipline of Communication supports quite well. We must promote how our programs support the philosophies and priorities established by our respective institutions and how our programs assist in achieving our institutions' objectives and goals.

**Finally, we should promote the discipline of Communication to our communities.** In part, the promotion of the discipline to our communities involves engagement in community support and service. The ability to use our skills and expertise to assist and support our communities sets us apart from other disciplines, with their areas of study not as readily transferable. Extending beyond public service, the promotion of our discipline to our communities also involves establishing links with businesses, nonprofits, government entities, and media outlets. Informing them about our work and creating connections with them will assist in increasing recognition of the scope of our discipline and the extent of its impact.

We cannot keep the significance, impact, and contributions of the discipline of Communication to ourselves, especially given increasingly challenging academic environments. We must share the discipline's value with others.



## OUR SECOND CHALLENGE

### WE MUST STRIVE FOR CONVERGENCE IN THE DISCIPLINE.

Few other disciplines can match the expansiveness of Communication. Such expansiveness can be regarded as one of the many strengths of the discipline. This particular strength, however, is also one of the discipline's potential weaknesses, sometimes resulting in the separation of scholars and the subsequent disconnection of scholarship. Communication scholars quite often study one area of the discipline while devoting little attention to other areas. For many disciplines, focusing on a single area of study at the expense of the others may not be particularly detrimental. However, the interconnected nature of Communication necessitates that attention be paid to many areas of the discipline. The interaction between many of our areas is so significant and the symbolic systems composing them so enmeshed that legitimately distinguishing them as separate entities becomes impossible except through artificially constructed boundaries.

The separation of Communication scholars in institutions potentially hinders the ability to develop a unified front within institutions and potentially places them in direct competition for increasingly scarce funding, faculty lines, and other resources.

This separation also promotes the intellectual fragmentation of scholarship. Given the interconnected nature of Communication, a more complete and accurate understanding is hindered when areas are studied in isolation. Voids in research are possible when topics near perceived boundary lines are viewed as the purview of scholars in other areas. And, a lack of cross-citation of resultant separate literatures results in missed opportunities to promote and develop our own discipline's work.

Associations might promote the convergence of areas of study by increasing the number of interest groups to which a member can belong—a measure recently enacted by the National Communication Association—and by developing special programming, events, and publications that encourage and support the connection of scholars and scholarship in various areas. However, fostering the convergence of areas of study and attending to potential issues arising from separation are most effectively addressed at the individual level. Here, I will examine four activities in which we might each engage.

**First, forge connections with other Communication scholars within your institution.** The availability of such connections and what those connections might entail will naturally vary depending on the composition of specific institutions and your position or role. Even within single departments, though, establishing connections among colleagues becomes challenging, with members from different areas isolated and occasionally even placed in opposition. Seek out opportunities for discussion and explore avenues for collaboration in teaching, research, university matters, and community engagement. Such collaboration can enhance personal professional endeavors and strengthen disciplinary bonds.



**Second, develop opportunities for student engagement in multiple areas of study in the discipline.** Faculty should examine their programs to make sure that students have opportunities to experience courses from multiple areas of the discipline through established tracks of study, encouraging students to take courses in multiple areas, or perhaps establishing colloquia to bring students from different areas together. Despite existing program constraints and any departmental pressures, students should seek opportunities to experience classes in multiple areas so that they broaden their understanding of the discipline and consequently enhance their understanding of their primary area of study.

**Third, seek out professional opportunities that will give you the chance to experience other areas of study in the discipline.** Time is limited at conventions, of course, and it is important to remain current on recent developments in your primary area of study. Nevertheless, we all should strive to schedule attendance at panels that address topics that fall outside our own primary area. Beyond increasing appreciation for the expansiveness of the discipline and the quality of work taking place, experiencing new ideas and approaches can inform and reinvigorate our own research and teaching.

**Finally, explore and incorporate scholarship of other areas of study in the discipline.** Time is limited not only at conventions but also in all of professional life. Incorporating additional reading into already busy schedules is a luxury many people might see as unviable. Nevertheless, reading work that addresses topics that are outside our primary areas of interest will lead to greater appreciation of the discipline and a better understanding of our own areas of expertise.

Calling for convergence in our areas of study does not mean arguing for a unified field of study, abandoning specialization, or forcing connections that have no true merit or purpose. It does mean appreciating the interconnected nature of Communication, recognizing the issues that may arise from existing disconnections in our areas of study, and recognizing the potential advantages of developing better connections in our areas of study.



### **OUR THIRD AND FINAL CHALLENGE WE MUST ENCOURAGE CHANGE IN THE DISCIPLINE.**

One of the strengths of the Communication discipline is that the changing nature of what we study requires continued inquiry and innovation. Academic pursuits within the discipline have the potential to be continuously active and dynamic, and the potential for new pathways and development are infinite. More than in most other disciplines, what we study, what we teach, how we study, and how we teach should be in a state of constant development and transformation.

Unfortunately, we do not always engage in sufficient development and transformation of our research and teaching. Emerging technologies are not studied as readily as they should be by the discipline that should be leading the way. Exclusionary definitional boundaries of human relationships and expectations of appropriate interaction persist and are insufficiently challenged. Theoretical and methodological approaches reflect the values, experiences, and perspectives of those who have traditionally made up the professorate, a group that lacks sufficient diversity. Likewise, the populations and symbol systems we study have been limited and restricted.

Beyond our propensity to cover customary topics in our classrooms, our methods of instruction remain stagnant, often failing to respond to changes in our students. New styles of teaching, new styles of assessment, and new understandings of outcomes and goals remain untried and unincorporated, in spite of their potential to enhance learning.

In fairness, all academic disciplines are resistant to change. However, we cannot simply maintain that similar impediments are confronted by other disciplines, or that we are not as bad as other disciplines in this regard.



The nature of what we study demands change and transformation; we simply must be better than other disciplines. Here, I will examine three perceived characteristics that impede academic change and offer some approaches to overcoming them.

**First, academic change seems difficult.** Two factors make academic change seem especially challenging. First, many of us have been trained in a particular way and understand the discipline in a particular way. Second, scholars seeking to do anything straying too far from an artificially developed and maintained norm or standard often struggle to have their work fairly considered or evaluated.

Changing the way we perceive change can be beneficial and effective. Rather than focusing on the potential difficulty that may be encountered with academic change, we should focus on the potential reward that may be achieved. There is the potential to influence a discipline, to advance an area of study, and to make a meaningful academic and societal impact. Academic change is difficult, but it also is rewarding.

**Second, academic change seems risky.** Engaging in any sort of change comes with a certain degree of risk, the extent of which depends on just how much change is sought and the degree to which that change challenges established norms. Above all, there is the possibility of experiencing personal failure or even embarrassment, something to which most people are naturally averse.

Once again, a change in perspective can be valuable. Rather than focusing on the potential threat from academic change, it is more beneficial to focus on the opportunities that can be derived. Attempting academic change could result in failure, but the potential success that might be realized is worth that risk.

**Third, academic change seems isolating.** Doing something different means doing something most people are not doing, which can lead to feelings of isolation. New ideas and scholarship may not seem to fit. In some cases, change can result in separation from colleagues and mentors, interrupting support networks that often are essential to academic work.

Perhaps the best way to combat feelings of isolation is to seek out like-minded people. Regardless of how unique an idea or approach might be, multiple people may already have thought the same thing, engaged in similar endeavors, or may be interested. It is also important to avoid becoming frustrated when people do not express appreciation for or even denounce work that is being accomplished to bring about change. Encountering such obstacles is frequently an indication that a person is on to something right.

The changing nature of Communication requires a constant state of development and transformation. However, such development and transformation are hindered by structures and forces that reinforce academic norms and also are hindered by the challenges that are generally associated with academic change. On a personal level, we must acknowledge and seek to overcome obstacles to academic change. At the disciplinary level, recognizing and altering disciplinary barriers to change will be necessary if we are to continue to develop.

Beginning to conclude, I am heartened by the strength and impact of this discipline. The future of the Communication discipline is bright. Yet, we must always be mindful of areas in need of improvement, and we must never be complacent. I encourage you to consider the issues offered here and to think about ways in which they might be addressed through your personal efforts and through broader disciplinary efforts. I will continue doing likewise and remain grateful and honored to be a member of this discipline as we advance the discipline of Communication together.

