

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 313

HE 014 763

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**TITLE** Research on Organizational Communication and Higher Education: "Don't Ask Me; I Just Work Here!"  
**PUB DATE** 14 Nov 81  
**NOTE** 40p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Anaheim, CA, November 14, 1981).

**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** \*College Administration; \*College Environment; Communication Problems; \*Communication Research; \*Decision Making; Higher Education; \*Information Needs; \*Interprofessional Relationship; \*Organizational Climate; Teacher Administrator Relationship

**ABSTRACT**

A bibliography on organizational communication and higher education is presented, and conclusions from previous studies in the areas of information, organizational climate, and decision-making are reviewed. Additionally, suggestions for future research directions are offered. Three important communication issues pertaining to the administration of higher education that have been identified in previous research are: information flow, information quality, and the communication process itself. In higher education, it has often been assumed that everyone needs to be informed about everything, and information has been disseminated as widely as possible. The net effect of this approach is to increase costs of distribution, since a large amount of material is discarded without study. Administrators need to assess the information needs of subordinates and the methods of diffusion, including formal and informal networks. Organizational climates in academic departments have been observed to influence factors such as turnover, performance goals, and communication satisfaction. The information issues have a special impact on decision-making in colleges and universities. It is suggested that research is needed to describe: information required by those who occupy key roles in the institution, the organizational communication climate and the quality of life in colleges and universities, and approaches to minimizing win-lose orientations in faculty committees and other groups representing a wide variety of interests. (SW)

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RESEARCH ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND HIGHER  
EDUCATION: "DON'T ASK ME; I JUST WORK HERE!"

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Presented at the  
Speech Communication Association  
Annual Meeting

Anaheim, California

November 14, 1981

Academic institutions are social systems whose primary function is information processing, and as such, they are prone to communication problems common to other social systems. While these institutions have often devoted great energy to communication with external publics, their focus on internal communication problems has usually been assigned a lower priority. Several previous studies have examined external communication from an institution with emphasis on the public relations aspects of an institution's external focus (e.g., Hull et al. 1979; Williams 1979; Donovan and Schaier 1978), but analyses of the internal aspects of organizational communication in higher education have been relatively infrequent. This paper grows out of a nearly two year review of the literature on organizational communication and higher education. After reviewing conclusions from previous studies in the areas of information, climate, and decision-making, suggestions are offered for several future research directions.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

##### Information

Three important communication issues face every administrator in higher education. The first issue deals with information flow-- getting it, disseminating it to the people who need it, restricting the flow to people who do not need it, and improving the efficiency

and quality of the process. A second issue involves information quality. This issue includes both providing information that is persuasive and motivating and creating opportunities for communication that is intrinsically satisfying. The final issue involves the communication process itself. How does communication change? Under what circumstances and at what times are particular types of communication most effective? How does communication influence decision-making and decision-makers? The communication process reacts to change and produces change, and administrators must implement communication that is not only responsive but also capable of stimulating innovative actions.

Much of the information processing in higher education is not planned, but improvised (see Johnson 1976, 1977). Although significant amounts of time are devoted to planning for budgetary activities, personnel reviews, and other major activities, the majority of information disseminated on most topics within a college or university is communicated through telephone calls, chance meetings, after-committee caucuses, memoranda, or other comparatively spontaneous methods (see Holsenbeck 1977, Goetzinger and Valentine 1962). As a result, members who genuinely need information often do not receive it, specific roles and responsibilities remain unclear, and information frequently arrives in a distorted form and/or an untimely manner (see Goldhaber and Rogers 1978, Lockwood 1977, Gustad 1962). This unmanaged flow of information results in some organizational

members becoming seriously overloaded while others simultaneously suffer from inadequate information.

Problems of diffusion, distortion, and uncertainty all need further attention in colleges and universities. Many other types of organizations have long ago attempted to define which organizational members need to know what information. However, in higher education this problem has often been addressed by assuming that everyone needs to know everything, and information has simply been disseminated as widely as possible. The most common way of evaluating the success of current dissemination systems appears to be to assume that if no one is complaining about the information that is received, then everything must be operating well. However, most individuals have developed at least one sorting strategy for dealing with information that they believe is unnecessary, and they are far more likely simply to discard the material than they are to call to complain about having received it. The net effect of this dissemination system is to increase costs of distribution by providing a large amount of material that is simply discarded and, in a time of increasing overload, to risk having valuable material treated as unimportant and be discarded with the rest. College and university administrators must carefully assess the information needs of their subordinates, and administrators should conduct periodic assessments of the methods of diffusion employed in their areas, including a review of both the formal and informal networks. The use of a better

"information agenda" might help administrators plan communication more effectively.

### Climate

The organizational climate in a college or university also has a significant impact on the events that take place in that organization, and one important determiner of climate is the personal style of key individuals in the organization. Pressures to exercise close supervision and to adopt a bureaucratic personal style in a complex organization like a university may be great, particularly for a central administrator, but the research suggests that implementation of this kind of personal style is likely to increase the probability of lower satisfaction levels among other administrators and faculty (Astin and Scherrei 1980). The degree of specialization present in the institution also influences the organizational climate and the institution's communication agenda. Medium-differentiated institutions are particularly susceptible to conflicts between academic departments and the central administrative subsystems over the issue of whether the administrative or the professional subsystem will have primary authority (Darkenwald 1971).

Individuals throughout the organization have an impact on the communication climate, particularly when their job responsibilities place them in linking roles between the organization and others. Care must be taken to match the personal communication styles of individuals with specific communication requirements of

particular jobs or to provide appropriate communication training for individuals in positions with significant communication demands (Goldhaber and Rogers 1978).

An organization's climate influences the people in the unit, and climates in academic departments have been observed to influence factors such as turnover, performance goals, and communication satisfaction (Shulman 1976). At this level as at the central administrative level, person-oriented climates have yielded more positive consequences than system-oriented climates (Hendrick 1976).

#### Decision-Making

The information issues and problems described earlier have a special impact on decision-making in colleges and universities. Gathering data for decision-making is often characterized by an information overload related to the uncertainty of the task (cf. Galbraith 1977). Computer information support has been more helpful at the institutional and inter-institutional levels, with the day-to-day decision-making processes of many college and university groups characterized by weak information bases, a wide range of communication links, and very flexible boundaries (Cohen and March 1974, Holsenbeck 1975, Smith 1979). These problems are compounded by discrepancies in power that members attribute to various positions and by ambiguous role definitions for key administrative positions (see, for example, Adams 1977; Admire 1978; Hanser and Muchinsky 1980; Goldhaber and Rogers 1978).

Specific examinations of the faculty committee system have suggested several communication problems including the limited resemblance between the nominal organizational hierarchy and the actual functioning of university committees, the use of committees in inappropriate situations, and the tendency of many committee members to employ a win-lose orientation (Tucker 1973, Balderston 1974, Likert and Likert 1976).

Proponents of both participative management and MBO applications in colleges and universities have suggested that certain communication benefits will accrue from these approaches (Anthony 1978, Harvey 1976). In both participative management and MBO applications, improvements in attitudes about an institution's communication and decision-making systems have been more apparent than indications of improvements in actual performance (see, for example, Rossano 1975).

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

##### Information

One major problem in the existing research on information in colleges and universities is the absence of a systematic attempt to describe the information needs of people who occupy key roles in the communication system we call a college or university. Another major area where additional research is needed involves the diffusion of information in higher education systems. More research on communication networks is needed to pinpoint



discrepancies between actual communication roles and the roles suggested by the formal organizational structure. The effectiveness of various networks used to deliver quality information also needs to become the subject of further study. Additionally, investigation needs to be initiated on the ever-increasing impact of problems of information overload. The suggested "information agenda" for academic administrators represents one possibility, but various other approaches to these information processing problems deserve study. Further research must be conducted to identify the best approaches for given conditions.

#### Climate

Questions related to the organizational communication climate in colleges and universities may become a greater focus for research in the next several years. The system is, after all, a human system, and human responses to the organizational communication climate deserve additional attention. In an earlier time, many faculty members and others working in colleges and universities were willing to accept salaries lower than were available in the business and professional world partly because of the climate available in the academic world, the "quality of life." More recently, in an era of dramatic growth and sharp increases in demands for accountability, bureaucratic structures and demands for objective indicators of achievement as a prerequisite for rewards have become more common. An attempt has been made in many settings to replace what was basically an intrinsic

rewards structure with an extrinsic rewards structure. Now, as resources diminish, competition for tax dollars becomes more acute, and extrinsic rewards in general become harder to attain, attention may again have to be focused on the organizational communication climate and the "quality of life" in colleges and universities.

Additional investigations of specific relationships between personal communication style and other influences on the organizational communication climate (such as institutional size, institutional diversity, etc.) are also needed. Finally, the area of the impact of the organizational communication climate on performance outcomes in higher education would appear to be a particularly valuable area for research.

#### Decision-Making

In the area of decision-making, both research concerning the better use of data at lower operating levels in academia and general studies of decision-making in academic institutions remain appropriate topics for further investigation.

Communication in higher education is all too frequently conducted in an improvised manner. When institutions have moved beyond an improvised manner, they have usually chosen a bureaucratic model which, although it does improve documentation, is typically characterized by limited responsiveness and by limited sensitivity to the human characteristics of the system. More sophisticated project management and matrix approaches have been

far less frequent, and these forms certainly merit further study to explore their communicative impact on decision-making in colleges and universities. Methods for improving the information environment for the many small, decision-making groups operating throughout most colleges and universities deserve attention, and approaches to minimizing win-lose orientations in faculty committees and other groups representing a wide variety of interests should also be made.

Organizational communication and higher education include many areas where topics of common research interest are available, and a great deal of additional research in these areas needs to be undertaken. The development of a typology of communication conditions and behaviors for the purpose of increasing the available repertoire of communication responses for administrators in higher education could be an extremely valuable contribution, with many long-range benefits for both organizational communication and higher education.

The attached bibliography includes both studies of organizational communication and higher education and general sources that help to provide a theoretical framework for reviewing these studies. A comprehensive review of this literature is forthcoming in the form of an AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report titled "Organizational Communication and Higher Education."

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