

Presidential Address, 2002 NCA Convention

Responding to Opportunities and Challenges: NCA's Future as a Professional Association

By Bill Balthrop

Among the many things we tell our students in Public Speaking classes is that one option available to them is to use an interesting quotation in the introduction. We also tell them that, however interesting they find the quotation, they should also make sure that it is not considered a cliché by the audience to whom they are speaking. I want to follow that first piece of advice and to willingly violate the last. In the opening lines of his work—familiar to most of us from reading it during our sophomore or junior year of high school, Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities* that, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

I want to pick up on that theme in these remarks and talk, first, about my impression of the current state of higher education and the "discipline" of communication, and second, to discuss some of the challenges that environment poses for the National Communication Association.

Before doing so, however, I want to thank Judy Pearson for the very kind introduction that she just gave. In some ways, it is an excellent example of making the "worst appear the better." I do appreciate sincerely both her comments and the opportunity that I've had to work closely with her as a member of the Administrative Committee.

I also want to express my deep and heartfelt thanks to others who have made the past three years such a wonderful and invigorating experience. I want, first, to thank all my colleagues on the Administrative Committee—the other officers, Board chairs, and members of the Finance Board—for the incredible dedication and devotion they have demonstrated over the past years; and to thank them for the support they have given me in every possible circumstance. I always knew that I could ask for them for "one more favor," and it was freely and graciously given. The

National Office staff has also been there—whether it was bringing me up to speed on the latest project, giving me advice and counsel on new initiatives, or simply putting up with my tendencies toward procrastination. To all of them, I am grateful—but particularly so to Maureen Coleman who guided me through the details of convention planning and finance; to Donna Porter for her patience in learning how to deal with my idiosyncrasies as well as learning about conventions and meeting planning; to Sherry Morreale for her understanding and candor on virtually every issue on



Judy Pearson, NCA President presents the Presidential gavel to Bill Balthrop.

which I sought her counsel; and to Jim Gaudino—affectionately, I think, referred to by many as my "spousal unit"—for spending more time than he possibly had in answering questions, sharing his insights, and for his support throughout this period. I also want to thank Sharon Ratliff for her patience and for helping bring into reality the processes that were so important in moving NCA forward over the past three years; and thanks, too, to all the unit planners who made the Atlanta convention a success during very difficult, emotional, and turbulent times.

I also want to thank my incredible colleagues—faculty, staff, and students—in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill, commonly referred to as the "Southern part of Heaven," for the understanding and patience that they have granted to me as I have been involved—some might argue distracted—by my engagement with NCA. I want, too, to thank those closest to me as friends and partner who have endured many trips and weekends spent far from home.

Finally, I want to thank the many, many members of this Association who have worked so diligently and have given of their time and energy to make NCA into a more productive and effective professional association. You have assumed obligations and responsibilities that brought no personal glory but you have performed admirably out of devotion to our Association, to our intellectual discipline, and to our colleagues regardless of where they might be located.

In terms of higher education, it is, I think, the best of times and the worst of times. We are witnessing a period where higher education, whether at four year or community colleges, is more accessible to larger portions of our populations than at any time in history. At the same time, that increased access has created enrollment pressures that we are struggling to cope with and that also have been instrumental in forcing critical, in some instances crippling budgetary pressures as we seek to hire more faculty, adapt to new forms of instruction, and learn to cope with the promise and perils of information and communication technology.

It is, too, I think, the best of times and the worst of times in some ways for our "discipline" of communication. I want to take just a moment to comment on my use of the term "discipline," since I know that it is contested in many quarters whether we actually are a discipline, a field, whether we offer a transdisciplinary perspective that does not fit well

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within the traditional confines of how some would define a discipline, or even whether we are, in fact, anti-disciplinary. Regardless of where one falls in these debates, I think it is fair for the purposes of these remarks to borrow—and no doubt distort in some fashion—the idea of “strategic essentialism,” recognizing that use of the term “discipline” invokes a set of boundaries which many of us are continually exploring and redefining. Disciplinarity, too, is often characterized by invocation of a particular canon of literature and perspective that many of us resist and against which our “discipline” has far too long and frequently struggled. At the same time, there is political value in describing our learning and our scholarly contributions as constituting a “discipline” to other audiences and we should be realistic in recognizing this reality and using it to our advantage.

Regardless of whether one wants to use the term “discipline,” as I do here, or some other descriptor, we know that “communication” is increasingly visible both within the academy and outside. Some have called this the “communication age” and we hear constantly from leaders in business and industry about how important the ability to communicate is for individual and organizational success. We hear, too, about the “communication revolution” as technological advances bring us into proximity with populations and interests that would have been considered traditionally outside of our “normal” patterns of interaction. However, the visibility of “communication”—with or without the ubiquitous “S” added at the end—brings its own pressures and downsides. Among those, certainly, is awareness on the part of students and the tendency to identify with our departments and academic units when the time arrives to declare undergraduate majors. While we welcome their interest and enthusiasm, their choices force us to stretch already strained resources even further. Further, the term itself creates ambiguities about what we do as we recognize that almost anything—from computer science to

mobile technology to public and interpersonal communication—are included within the rubric; and we then are asked by fellow travelers on airplanes and by our administrators to explain—once more—what it is that we do and what it is that we study. We should also recognize that our own disciplinary visibility brings with a different set of challenges as we are confronted with the political implications that inevitably attend to such visibility. Just as our institutions have been caught in political issues as they have sought to become more engaged with surrounding communities, so, too, will communication and NCA become similarly entrapped as discussions about our partnership with AAHE and the Southern Poverty Law Center demonstrated so forcefully.

The transdisciplinarity of our “discipline”, too, can be problematic; for as institutions of higher education pay homage in some instances, lip-service in others, to the virtues of interdisciplinarity—frequently without either the administrative or financial support that such efforts require to be innovative and successful, we find that we are among the most successful in forming relationships with other disciplines and scholars in those associational clusters. That, too, can sometimes add to the confusion about where we are “different” or “unique” from those other areas of study with which we connect.

It is also the best of times, as well as the worst of times concerning the scholarly work that is done not only in communication but across the academy. In our own Association, for instance, the work of our established and emerging scholars is more solid, rigorous, and engaged than perhaps at any time in our history. We are producing more scholarship, better scholarship, and scholarship that can make significant contributions as we address the “grand social issues” of our time. And yet, like other disciplines, we are subjected to criticisms about the accessibility of our work to those beyond the academy and about our ability to speak in plain, yet still forceful and intellectually challenging ways, to populations who can bene-

fit from our intellectual work. I want to make it quite clear that I am not saying that all, or even most of our work falls within the realm of such criticisms, but it is a critique that we along with virtually all other “academic” voices must endure, acknowledge, and respond to.

As our scholarship grows and has increased value for more groups, we also must confront the tsunami that is developing off the coast of academe. We need more journals, more books, and more internet sites to distribute our scholarship at the very time when the economics of academic publishing are under pressures and stress that potentially invite catastrophe. Academic publishers are forced into relationships where more areas of specialization demand more specialized journals while facing increased competition for shelf space in libraries along with demands from investors, accountants and corporate officers for greater profitability. More academic presses are finding that the subventions they have relied upon to publish small press runs of important intellectual work have become imperiled, resulting in choices that sometimes lead to marketing decisions grounded more in profit and loss statements than intellectual contribution. The areas under greatest pressure are in the humanities and social sciences, those that are most directly related to our own scholarly endeavors. Further, Universities are asking critical questions, such as “Why are we having to pay higher subscription fees to commercial publishers in order to gain access to the very work that we supported through faculty salaries, research assistants, and facilities and laboratories?” And throughout higher education, libraries—along with other parts of the academy—are forced to make difficult choices among valuable programs to comply with mandated budget reductions. The problem involves not only access to our scholarly product, but it confronts those in our profession when they are at their most vulnerable; for as economic pressures reduce publishing outlets and challenge the increasingly expected “first” if not

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"second" book before tenure, we will be forced to reassess the criteria upon which we have become so comfortable in making personnel decisions. And, while I have concentrated here on the pressures facing higher education, the turbulence confronting our colleagues in elementary and secondary education are at least as frightening, if not more so. All of us are caught among conflicting trends that offer no easy solutions. But working together, I do believe we can steer a prudent yet still innovative course.

We do live then, in some respects, in the best of times and the worst of times. And yet, within this turbulent world of education, the National Communication Association faces enormous opportunities as an association dedicated to serving the professional needs of our members and our discipline. Important steps in preparing us for a more proactive role were taken with the development of NCA's strategic plan in which three major goals were articulated: to advance the discipline, to promote the visibility of our discipline, and to strengthen the Association.

The recent planning process, involving officers, Boards, members of the Legislative Council and, more critically, broader segments of our membership have continued this work and helped create a more thoughtful balance as we select among the many activities and initiatives that serve our members and discipline while using the resources required to support those activities most productively. The visibility given to "communication" generally has helped create an awareness among other professional associations, government agencies, foundation, and other private entities that make it possible for us to enter into partnerships that share our knowledge and expertise with other communities, and that also help advance our discipline. Our ability to work across disciplinary boundaries has led to valuable partnerships with the American Association of Higher Education, the National Science Foundation, the Council of Graduate Schools, other professional

societies, foundations, and private organizations. The increasing visibility of communication, along with the record of our scholarship and increasing number of doctoral degrees conferred—not to mention some very hard work by dedicated members of NCA and other associations in the Council of Communication Associations—has increased the likelihood that we will be included in the next study of doctoral education by the National Research Council.

I mention these visible successes because I believe that every person and program in our discipline will benefit from these efforts. As communication is seen as more important and a more "accepted" and recognized discipline within the academy, it will make it easier for us to claim our proper and legitimate role in our own institutions. I grant that this benefit is more significant to some, perhaps, more than others, but all of us share in the progress. Other opportunities abound. As the climate in higher education demands changes in how we go about our work, the professional development initiative currently being developed by the Educational Policies Board—modeled in some ways upon the enormously important and successful Hope Institute now at Luther College—will assist faculty adapt to the changes in pedagogy that our expanding scholarship, new areas of knowledge, changing demographics among our students, and emerging technologies demand. The publishing partnerships with Routledge Journals and EBSCO, Inc. that were approved by the Legislative Council during this convention will create greater accessibility to the scholarly work of our members by communities of scholars that we may not have been reaching at all. Certainly, moving our journals on-line will offer more access to our members and students and these partnerships will allow NCA to navigate the murky waters of academic publishing with greater resources and expertise than would have ever been realistic had we continued as we have for the past eighty-five years.

I could go on about the many activities and initiatives that NCA and its mem-

bers are engaged in and about why NCA seems so well positioned to move forward; but I will save that for some of Judy's Presidential Columns in *SPECTRA*. Suffice it to say that I believe NCA does far more for its members and for the discipline than host the annual convention and publish our journals, although I don't want to minimize the importance of either. NCA is the largest professional association in our discipline, it is the most visible and active in advancing our work, and it provides the broadest range of professional services for its members. And I believe firmly that we can build upon the strong foundation to provide even more value in the future.

However, if we are to realize those possibilities—and I do believe that each of us, as an individual teacher/scholar and as a member of our profession can be well served if we do—we also must confront some potential obstacles. I want to focus upon two of those in my remaining time.

First, for any voluntary association to succeed, it must rely upon the good will and the participation of its members. Their dues are also important, as we all know, for without membership dues and convention attendance fees NCA could not survive. But we also know that the key to having membership dues is to have members; and the key ingredient to having members is for individuals to believe that they are receiving professional benefits from belonging and that they believe they have the opportunity to participate in the Association's decisions and activities. I do believe that NCA offers enormous benefits to each of us as a professional teacher/scholar, but I also believe that NCA must become more effective in demonstrating those benefits to our members.

Perhaps more importantly, however, is the question of whether members believe that they can have influence in shaping the directions and initiatives of this Association. My own experience—and it is admittedly an experience that has been shaped over more than twenty-five years as a member of the Associa-

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tion and, more recently, as a member of the Finance Board, the Administrative Committee and as an officer—leads me to the conclusion that we do take seriously the commitments made in our Affirmative Action statement. We do seek diverse points of view as committees are appointed and as nominees are sought for elected positions. We seek to include those diverse voices, I think, across the range of intellectual interests represented by our Commissions and Divisions; across the range of professional interests represented by our Sections; and across the range of interests that must be considered in our scholarship and professional lives that are represented by the Caucuses. And we seek, I think, to include the diversity of perspective that is represented across academic ranks.

And yet, my impression is that many of our members do not perceive that such openness exists and instead assume that there is in operation a "closed" system that depends upon networks of association and friendships that perpetuate a kind of "old boys network" (or women's network given recent elections to 2nd Vice President) that inculcates the same perspectives that have always been seen to dominate. In the course of the Task Force on Constitutional Review's work, we discovered actions that certainly contributed to such perceptions. We heard that the seating arrangement at a recent Legislative Council reinforced the view of an "inner circle" when officers and Board chairs sat together; we heard that calls from the Committee on Committees encouraged younger members to apply for a wide variety of positions from which they were then excluded because they lacked the necessary experience and knowledge, and that these actions sent a message that new voices weren't really appreciated or appointed; and we heard that emerging areas of scholarship and voices representing other interests believed that they were excluded from participating in the most basic of Association decisions through the Legislative Council; and that they felt marginalized,

disaffected, and wondered if there really were a "place" for them within NCA. Composition of the Committee on Committees was also seen as problematic given that existing officers have a voting majority over those members elected by the Legislative Council; and the composition and size of the Association's Boards were also seen to exclude diverse perspectives as well as limiting opportunities for developing NCA's leadership for those "outside the inner circle."

The recent Constitutional Amendments were an attempt to address these perceptions and to make structural changes that would expand opportunities for diverse points of view. It is my hope that despite that defeat, the issues and processes addressed by that initiative will continue in the near future. I also believe that we must be more realistic in our invitations from the Committee on Committees for nominees to Boards and standing committees. We need to indicate the types of experiences and qualifications that are expected to serve on particular Boards and committees and to be even more vigorous in our pursuit of diverse voices. We must, I believe, work to change the perception that NCA is a "closed" organization into one that more closely parallels what my experience has indicated to be actual case.

Second, we also must address what is, in some ways, an even more critical matter...and that is the perception among some members and units that NCA does not "care about" their work, does not "value" their work, does not serve their interests or members, and actually impedes their ability to do scholarly work within the framework of this Association. I have heard some express concern and regret about the proliferation of NCA units and argue that everyone's interests can be served through larger units that encompass many "subsets" of intellectual work. I have heard others contend that the larger units are unresponsive to areas of scholarly endeavor that have emerged as the boundaries of what constitutes communication theory and practice have ex-

panded. I have heard some members characterize the work of others as not being intellectually rigorous, as being "faddish" and not "doing real scholarship." At the same time, I have heard some members describe what might be called "traditional" areas of work as irrelevant and even occasionally debunked as the domain of "dead white males" that merely seek to preserve the existing hegemony. And I have heard some in emerging areas lament what they see as the "appropriation" of their discourse by scholars who aren't really doing what this area of scholarship is about, creating the very disciplinary boundaries and practice of "disciplining" against which they have struggled themselves. I have heard scholars argue that NCA's publication policy works to impede the development of new publishing outlets that are necessary for their intellectual advancement and complain that our more established journals just "won't accept our work because it doesn't fit the ideological litmus test." At the same time, I have heard others bemoan what they see as the "balkanization" of our scholarship and believe that journals can be organized around intellectual core epistemologies. Others contend that the increasing specialization of intellectual interests works against a broad understanding of our discipline and point to other Association's who have fewer journals that incorporate more diverse scholarship. Many of these arguments swirled around the creation of our new journal in Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies and raise issues about the desirability of even more new journals, which are now more feasible with our approved partnership with Taylor and Francis. Personally, I disagree with those who believe that the most desirable option is to have fewer journals that include more diverse segments of our scholarship. My own view is that the culture of our field and the practices of academic life require that we pursue an alternative model, one that encourages more publishing outlets when those outlets are intellectually justified and economically

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feasible.

Some of these concerns can be addressed by a more responsive publication policy as we adapt to the necessary changes that will result from our new publishing partnerships, and I will encourage a thorough review of those existing policies. Other concerns that I have mentioned will require more effort and must ultimately be addressed from two perspectives. The governance of NCA—and I include the Legislative Council and individual units as well as the officers, Boards and committees—must continually recognize shifts in our environment and in our intellectual work, and we must be more proactive and collaborative in our efforts.

I think, too, that the members of our Association and of our discipline must also recognize the function and role of a professional association. We must accept the fact, and rejoice as well, that there are varied areas of scholarship and that as we support the existence of all while advancing our own agendas, we contribute to a strengthening of each of our own individual interests.

If we fail to do so, I believe we will see more of our members identifying with other associations and allowing their memberships in NCA to lapse. I certainly recognize and support the value of multiple professional connections, and my own work is enriched by those associations. But smaller associations lack the resource base and other associations have interests beyond advancing the discipline of communication. I am convinced that failure to support NCA as the broadly based organization that can advocate effectively in diverse fora and that can promote the professional development of our members and field will surely erode our position within our institutions and within higher education more broadly constructed.

There are, to be sure, many other areas where NCA can and must be more active and engaged. I believe, for instance, that we risk losing our voice in critical elements of our institution's core function of undergraduate education

when we diminish our commitment and involvement with oral communication requirements. I see that danger particularly compelling as more campuses explore what is sometimes called "Communication Across the Curriculum." For many of us, that isn't "what we do." But our failure to be engaged in those efforts often results in programs being directed and staffed by faculty and instructors that lack the theoretical foundation to teach and evaluate student oral performance. The "oral" part is subordinated to, not given equal status with, emphases on written communication. If we abdicate this responsibility, we do our selves, our profession and discipline, and our students an injustice.

I believe that every member of the professorate in higher education, and every teacher of communication in K-12 should belong to NCA because I can think of no other organization with the ability to represent the wide range of activities and work that are so critical to all of our success. It is, I believe, part of what it means to be a "professional," and to identify with a group of teacher/scholars who share a fundamental interest in advancing the broader aspects of communication.

There is, of course, a reciprocity that is essential to every relationship, and NCA owes to its members, to *all* of its members, a commitment to advance individual as well as collective interests. I believe that the planning process in which we are all engaged will help us do that but I also believe our governance must be even more responsive to the needs and desires which can help promote our scholarship and the visibility of us all.

We are making significant progress, I think, but we must address the concerns and frustrations that are part of any organizational culture. Now, I recognize clearly that differences of perspective, method, and areas of scholarship will inevitably exist. Those differences are legitimate points of contestation and enliven what we do. I would argue, however, that an emphasis on our differences may at times obscure areas for coalition building to advance what I believe are ultimately shared core values.

And NCA becomes the framework through which and by which such coalitions can be effective.

In the time that I have remaining as an officer and serving on the Administrative Committee, I will continue to work on these concerns; but they cannot be addressed effectively without the participation of us all and without what I would call candor as an operating principle. By candor, I do not mean an honesty that relies solely on self expression regardless of the consequences; but rather a more classical orientation that not only means expressing oneself honestly but also recognizes that others in the conversation are speaking with reason and conviction as well. It means, I think, giving the benefit of the doubt—at least until there is proof to think otherwise—and working to solve problems in ways that serve our multiple interests.

And, I know that when I leave the position of Immediate Past President and become "only" another member of NCA, that I will work with my colleagues and friends, even those with whom I have differences of opinion and direction, to advance all of our interests.

I thank you for your attention this afternoon, and particularly thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve in the governance of this Association. It is important, I believe, that we continue to seek ways to involve more of us in that challenging role.

On reflection, I guess I want to amend the theme that has surfaced throughout these remarks. I do not believe that these really are the worst of times, nor do I believe that they are the best of times. They are, however, challenging times filled with both pitfalls and wonderful opportunities; and I know based upon the incredible talents of those who are members of NCA that we have the resources to meet these challenges and to prosper. I look forward to seeing us do so.

Finally, I would leave you with the words of two most awesome philosophers, Bill and Ted: Be most excellent to one another, and party on.

Thank you.