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**A SURVEY OF GALLAUDET COMMUNICATION
ARTS GRADUATES**

**Rosemary D. Weller, Robert D. Harrison
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Abstract

Recent Gallaudet alumni with undergraduate degrees in Communication Arts were asked about their perceptions of the major program and how it related to employment after graduation. Forty-four graduates (76 percent) responded. Ninety percent of the respondents were in the work force—in educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, private companies, and in government positions. Sixty-seven percent were satisfied with their salaries. The vast majority indicated that they were equipped to handle certain basic tasks on the job. Eighty-three percent said that their major courses had been very helpful. Over 60 percent indicated that they would choose the same major again. Implications for further research are included.

Introduction

One of the most crucial tasks facing freshmen and sophomores in a liberal arts college is that of selecting a major. The process may be even more complex for a deaf or hard of hearing student due to a long tradition of limited career options for people with hearing loss in the United States. However, with the advent of technology and the increasing awareness of the abilities of deaf or hard of hearing people, barriers are falling rapidly in all career areas.

Since 1990, an average of 15 students have graduated from Gallaudet University each year with a bachelor's degree in Communication Arts. A question often asked by potential majors, faculty, and administrators is, "How does a Communication Arts degree benefit Gallaudet graduates?"

A popular Harper Collins poster which asks, "What can you do with a communication degree?" suggests that there are a multitude of career paths available to graduates. Does this claim have a basis in reality graduates who are deaf or hard of hearing? Further, does the course work offered to communication majors relate to satisfying workplace experiences after graduation?

There is little in the extant communication literature that addresses these questions for hearing students. Several alumni studies (Johnson & Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Lohr, 1974; Sorenson & Pearson, 1981) asked respondents selected at random from past communication class rosters to indicate the importance of selected communication skills and courses to their professional and personal lives. A clear limitation of these studies is that most of the respondents were not communication majors.

Of the few communication department studies of their graduates, one investigation by Jamieson and Wolvin (1976) looked exclusively at alumni

graduating with a master's degree. This study's results emphasized the need to integrate career education into course work, highlight the value of internships and participation in co-curricular activities, and bought out the importance of carefully selecting supporting courses in conjunction with the major program.

Four surveys of alumni in both undergraduate and graduate communication programs Saks-Levin, 1986; Weitzel, 1989;(Weitzel & Kirk, 1977; Wolvin, 1991). Showed, among other things, that alumni recognize the value of communication course work in the performance of their jobs and in helping them to attain their positions. Moreover, these studies revealed the diversity of employment opportunities available to those who major in communication.

These studies identified important areas of concern in helping communication departments assess undergraduate training. This literature revealed that there is a small corpus of material that exists in the communication literature regarding hearing students, but there is nothing in the extant communication literature that indicates what graduates who are deaf or hard of hearing have done with a degree in communication or which identifies specific courses that have helped them in their work.

Method

The focus of this study of recent graduates in Communication Arts was to determine what graduates have done with degrees in communication and to determine if specific courses have been helpful to them in the workplace.

The Department of Communication Arts at Gallaudet University was established in 1980 to enable undergraduate students to formalize their knowledge of communication studies (and the implications of hearing loss on an individual's communication). Later, in response to the challenges of the 1990s, the Department embarked on a period of curriculum assessment and revision. In the survey, alumni who graduated with degrees in Communication Arts between 1991 and 1994 were asked about their perceptions of the major program and how it related to employment after graduation.

A four-page survey form covered employment status, advanced training, salaries, job satisfaction, job skills, and perceived value of specific course offerings. In October of 1994, the questionnaire was mailed to 58 graduates; 49 females and nine males. A follow-up mailing was done six weeks later. Seventy-six percent responded, including 37 females and five males. Not all respondents answered every question.

Findings

Ninety percent of the respondents were in the work force. Sixty-nine percent were working full time. Twenty-one percent had part time jobs. One was a full time homemaker, and three did not respond to this question.

Almost half the 39 respondents had continued education beyond the bachelor's degree. Forty-one percent were enrolled in master's degree-level programs. Eight percent of the respondents had already earned master's degrees. Twenty of the 39 respondents (51 percent) to this question had not elected to enroll in advanced training programs.

Where did these graduates find employment? Forty-four percent were working for educational institutions. Thirty-five percent were employed in nonprofit organizations. Thirteen percent worked for private companies, and eight percent worked for the government.

Salaries ranged from \$15,000 to \$30,000 for 68 percent of the respondents. Five percent earned more than \$30,000. Seventeen percent, of which 10 percent were part-time employees, earned less than \$15,000. Ten percent were volunteers and reported no salary.

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents reported being satisfied with their salaries and benefits. Seventy-three percent were satisfied with advancement potential. Eighty-four percent of the respondents reported satisfaction with working conditions. Additionally, 87 percent of the respondents indicated satisfaction with job location, and 90 percent felt their jobs offered challenges. In the area of ease of communication, 92 percent of the respondents were satisfied.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents reported no desire to change jobs at the time they completed the questionnaire. Forty-five percent had thought about changing jobs but were not actively seeking a new job. Twenty-one percent planned to resign their current positions and were actively seeking new jobs.

Did responding graduates feel equipped to handle certain "basic tasks" on the job? The vast majority (95 to 100 percent) gave themselves "strong" positive ratings in communication skills, problem-solving, getting along with others, and organizing and prioritizing their work. Writing skills received a "strong" or "acceptable" rating from 79 percent of the respondents. Twenty-one percent of the respondents rated themselves as "weak" in research skills.

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents reported a direct relationship between the Communication Arts major and their current positions. Thirty-one percent reported an indirect relationship, and 10 percent found no relationship.

What types of communication activities did the respondents find themselves performing on the job? More than 75 percent listed problem solving, working with culturally diverse groups, and listening as daily activities. Decision-making in groups and planning and leading meetings were weekly activities for most. All reported giving formal presentations; 25 percent said it was a daily or weekly task.

Did the courses that respondents had taken as Communication Arts majors relate to the experiences they were having in the world of work? Eighty-one to 91 percent found the required courses -- Group Discussion, Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication and Theories of Human Communication -- to be very helpful. About half the respondents found Mass Communication -- also a required course for majors -- to be helpful. Sixty-nine percent reported that field experience and internships had been important in regard to their present jobs. Twenty-six percent said that their internships were not relevant to current jobs. It is worth noting here that internship experiences often help students determine areas in which they do not wish to work, as well as providing experiences which reinforce career choices.

Majors in Communication Arts at Gallaudet choose 12 hours of electives in the department from more than 13 course offerings. Due to the wide choice of electives and scheduling conflicts, many respondents had never taken some of the electives. Of the electives selected, the overwhelming responses indicated that the classes had been of value on the job. Business and Professional Communication, Persuasion, Intercultural Communication, and Gender and Communication courses were rated highly as useful on the job.

Finally, if they could start over, 60 percent reported that they would choose the same major. Twenty-eight percent were not sure, and 12 percent indicated that they would select a different major.

Implications

The findings of this study provide some answers to the question, "How does a Communication Arts degree benefit graduates who are deaf or hard of hearing?" Recent Gallaudet graduates who majored in Communication Arts have followed a variety of career paths (as suggested by the HarperCollins poster). Ninety percent were in the work force, and job satisfaction was high. Because a large number of them work in educational or nonprofit settings, it may be useful to include issues pertinent to these areas in classroom-related activities and information sharing.

On the whole, the respondents believed they were prepared to perform tasks required on the job. A minority reported a need for research skills; this will support the request for a research component of the

curriculum, which is currently in the proposal stage. Writing skills will continue to be a priority, as requested by the respondents.

The graduates validated the need for, and importance of, core required courses, i.e., Public Speaking, Group Discussion, Interpersonal Communication, Theories of Human Communication, and Introduction to Mass Communication, as well as field work and internships. Responses also encourage the addition of more honors-level courses to the curriculum, the addition of public relations courses, and the continued presence of special topic courses such as Health Communication and Humor.

To incoming students, Gallaudet may state that Communication Arts is a viable major area of study for college students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Faculty members in the Department see this study as an ongoing component of program assessment, and a necessary tool for continuing to fine tune the curriculum to meet the needs of graduates in the world of work. Administrators may include Communication Arts in the positive aspects of its recruitment and enrollment planning.

Though this investigation was clearly limited in scope, it has broader implications. As the 21st century approaches, the answers are important to individual undergraduates as they plan career goals, to faculty who want to offer relevant programs to recruit students, to administrators who manage funding and enrollment in an era of downsizing, and to high schools offering preparatory curriculum for college bound students.

Further research would be helpful in several areas. In the viewpoint of the employer, where do today's workers need background and practice in the communication area? Do non-academic fields require communication expertise which is different from that related to education? How can the major become more marketable? What experiences other than internships are beneficial to communication majors? Is career development keeping up with the job market? Long-term studies of careers in communication would provide valuable information also.

Studies might explore whether the traditional kind of survey approach represents the most effective way of acquiring the information sought. Increasingly sophisticated technology should help to make surveying more efficient and should facilitate feedback to university programs.

Researchers might explore new possibilities for involving alumni in the education of our current students and in helping to assure a smooth transition to life after college. Alumni can play important roles in addressing expectations of new majors and of introducing opportunities for the future. Colleges need to find ways to make the best use of their alumni resource.

Directions for future research in communication arts and in career development in general should continually be examined in the rapidly changing world at the beginning of the 21st century.

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