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“Communication and Knowledge in the 21st Century—Lessons for Higher Education”

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For several decades scholars in a variety of disciplines have argued about the relationship between knowledge and rhetoric, investigating the inherent connections between how we know what we know and how we communicate what we know. These debates have been primarily theoretical, provoking some to wonder about the practical consequences of the discussion. What better place to explore such

consequences than in world of higher education—the very place where researchers discover knowledge, transmit knowledge to others and utilize knowledge to change the world.

Universities are in the knowledge business. Just as companies create, develop and market products, universities discover, apply, organize and deliver knowledge. In the 21st century, we are traveling an unpredictable path from an industrial economy to an information age. Not surprisingly, additional pressures are being placed on higher education impacting both graduate and undergraduate education.

Among the formidable challenges is finding ways to integrate different kinds of knowledge and ways of thinking amid a proliferation of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines. As in medicine, the allure of more arcane specialties has produced a shortage of primary-care thinkers--those who can integrate disparate knowledge and create the wisdom that seems so scarce in today's public sphere.

It might seem expedient for academics to be intellectual purists- -to draw sharp lines between the discovery of knowledge and its application, organization and delivery. A troubling consequence of this practice is the tendency to pit teaching against research and to segregate the academic from the non-academic. The fear is that blurring these lines might diminish the importance of research, constituting a "sellout" of a university's primary mission.

But there is alternative. It begins with a simple proposition: All aspects of the knowledge enterprise are inherently intertwined, each relying on the ability to adapt to an audience. This alternative has roots that are deeply embedded in one of the oldest academic disciplines, namely, rhetoric.

Though one popular connotation depicts it as empty or vacuous speech, classical rhetoric concerns itself with the noble task of "adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas." Hence, rhetoric is a discipline occupied with the process of transforming information into knowledge and wisdom--understanding that different persons and audiences have separate experiences, distinct knowledge and unique styles of communicating. In a sense, rhetoric teaches us that the lines between knowledge discovery and transmission (between the form of a message and its content) are fuzzy at best, and that communication is thus a method of discovering as well as a vehicle for conveying knowledge.

At the University of Texas, many believe that the intellectual tradition of rhetoric can teach students, faculty and administrators how to meet the challenges of a post-industrial world. For example, in 1997 the Graduate School created a cutting edge Professional Development Program [later renamed "Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE)"] that included 16 courses, ranging from traditional classes in preparing future faculty, academic and professional communication and teaching methods to instruction in more cutting-edge topics such as consulting, professional uses of technology and entrepreneurship.

Almost 4,000 UT graduate students from 80 different graduate programs enrolled in these courses. Their popularity and overwhelming positive student feedback attest to a hunger for acquiring cross-disciplinary skills to enhance credentials earned in academic disciplines.

Arguably, the common denominator among these professional development courses is rhetoric, in the most venerable academic sense: to teach students how to adapt to a variety of audiences--so they can write scholarly articles and books, develop grant proposals, utilize knowledge to generate informed and responsible public policies, facilitate innovation in commerce and business, and improve the human condition. UT's professional development courses taught students principles of effective communication, enabling them to present their work clearly and convincingly to peers at scholarly conferences, as well as to non-academic audiences. Professional development classes also provided students with the pedagogical resources to lead classrooms, corporate boardrooms and workshops with energy, passion and rationality. And all of these skills complement and strengthen what students learn in their academic disciplines.

It should be noted that in 2003 IE launched an initiative for undergraduate students grounded in the same premise about rhetoric and knowledge: The IE Pre Grad Internship. Over 3,000 students from nearly every academic discipline have enrolled in this course, using basic principles of communication to discover what they are passionate about and devising a plan for their future education and careers.

The Professional Development program [IE] and the IE Pre Grad Internship represent one way higher education in the 21st century can prudently balance professional and academic realms. In the spirit of classical rhetoric, we might well be advised to design education so that each student is trained to become both an intellectually rigorous scholar and a professionally astute citizen. Those of us in the business of higher education take that responsibility very seriously.

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