

Risk Communication Course Proposal

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April 2000

Proposal: The Humanities and Social Sciences Department proposes that a course entitled "Risk Communication" be added to the HSS curriculum. The scientists and engineers trained here have an increasing potential to affect more and more people. As such, the need for them to effectively communicate risk--in areas such as the environment, personal safety, health, and money--to those people also increases.

Elaboration: Risk communication is a type of double-edged sword. As technology becomes more ubiquitous and society depends more upon it, risk and the need for its communication increase. However, effective risk communication is also difficult to achieve, due to both differences in expertise and high levels of emotion.

The importance of risk communication comes from several areas, including legal obligations and ethical responsibilities. Several laws require the disclosure of risks, making it necessary for managers, scientists and engineers to not only be aware of the requirements, but to have the skills for informing the public effectively. Furthermore, some scientists and engineers will serve as consultants and/or lobbyists to lawmakers. Therefore these individuals must be able to convey an appropriate level of risk, and do it in an unbiased way. Scientists and engineers are considered professionals. As such, they have certain professional ethical responsibilities (as discussed in VA303 Business and Engineering Ethics). For instance, the NSPE Code of Ethics states, if engineers' "professional judgment is overruled under circumstances where the safety, health, property or welfare of the public are endangered, they shall notify their employer or client and such other authority as may be appropriate" (II.1.a). Many ethical theories require that individuals be treated as rational beings, or that they give informed consent. From an ethical perspective it is clear that risk communication is not only necessary, but the Institute should provide students the opportunity to learn skills to make their risk communication more effective.

Risk communication is inherently difficult, with high chances for failure. There are

many barriers to effective risk communication, which, if not overcome, can threaten society's safety. Therefore, students need to be prepared for the things that can make it more difficult than it should be, and they should be informed about the things that can cause it to fail. As implied by the portion of the Code of Ethics already cited, sometimes professional judgment is contradicted. It is often the case that roadblocks may be put up by the professional's own organization. Students should be prepared for this and learn how to deal with it. Most often, risk communication occurs between experts (professionals) and laypersons, people with different perspectives and expertise. It also takes place in situations that are emotionally charged. These two facts, separately and especially together, make the communication of risk more prone to failure because the audience may not understand, or may be irrational and/or threatening. Other barriers to effective risk communication include credibility of the source, the media, and cultural characteristics (FAO 1998). All of these factors make an explicit course in risk communication extremely beneficial for all science and engineering students, if not necessary for those pursuing certain career goals.

As alluded to in all the previous discussion, risk communication involves aspects from many different disciplines. So law and political science, as well as ethics and philosophy have been addressed; more are necessary. To prevent and defuse emotional situations or bridge expertise gaps, certain rhetoric and linguistic skills are necessary. To understand the audience effectively, appropriate social psychology and social science methods must be employed. To understand how to *reach* the audience effectively, aspects of mass communication, advertising, marketing, and consumerism should be studied. Finally, to make sure the communicator, and perhaps the audience, understands the "big picture" and/or motivating factors, economics should be tied into the course.

A student would likely find great difficulty crowding all of these subjects into his or her four year undergraduate tenure at Rose-Hulman, while still having the opportunity to explore other topics the Humanities and Social Sciences Department has to offer. Therefore offering this course would be extremely beneficial either for those who want to develop themselves in a way that includes this increasingly important topic as part of a larger program of study, or those who wish to have a solid ground on which to expand their pursuit of knowledge in the discipline. It would also allow the students to focus on the point--communicating risk--while supplying the necessary background and supplemental information in a form that is relevant to the topic at

hand.

Course Topics: The following describes a way that the course could be conducted, given all the aforementioned facts, including the disciplines mostly involved in the course segments.

- *Importance/Need for Risk Communication*
First convey the necessity for communication of risk, and the importance of professionals who are skilled at it. Case studies/examples of situations where risk exists should be presented, allowing students to identify opportunities and needs for communicating the risk.
- *Legal Responsibilities* [Law, Political Science]
Educate students about the types of legal expectations there are, as well as specific examples of them. Additionally, cover aspects of approaching lawmakers about risks inherent in their professional work.
- *Ethical Considerations* [Ethics, Philosophy]
Examine obligations resulting from various ethical theories (e.g. Respect for Persons) and specific Codes of Ethics (e.g. NSPE, ASCE, and IEEE)
- *Legalism and Ethics*
Other courses discuss legal and ethical issues separately (i.e. SL290 Business Law, VA303 Business and Engineering Ethics) but none address them together. It is necessary for professionals (especially in risk communication) to work within the law, while simultaneously taking ethical considerations into account. A case study and/or project should be introduced addressing minimal legal obligations that might be pitted against higher ethical responsibilities.
- *Barriers and Constraints* [Social Science, Sociology, Economics, Anthropology]
There is always difficulty in achieving risk communication, so here students should be prepared for the barriers that may occur and informed of the constraints on effective risk communication.
- *Risk Communication Planning* [Psychology, Social Psychology, Marketing, Anthropology]
This segment should cover establishing purpose and objectives, audience analyzing, and method selection, all culminating with a plan for delivering the communication of risk. A project allowing students to practice all of these aspects by creating (and justifying) a complete plan for communicating a risk from a case study, hypothetical or otherwise.

- *Communicating Risk* [Rhetoric, Linguistics, Advertising/Marketing, Mass Communications]
Here students will study how to put the plan into action. Topics might include preparing informational materials, communicating face-to-face, handling the media, and involving stakeholders (Lundgren and McMakin 1998).

Curriculum Placement: The proposed course fits well into the HSS curriculum. It helps to exemplify the Department's goals, specifically *Values, Critical Reasoning, Communication Skills, and Systemic Thinking*. This course could fit into several of the Department's academic disciplines: *Languages and Literature, Psychology, Anthropology*, or even *Special Topics*. Perhaps the most appropriate of these would be *Special Topics*, given the multi-disciplinary nature of the field and course. Finally, a thematic category must be established for the course. While the course could be suited to *Values and Contemporary Issues (VA)*, the *Rhetoric and Expression (RH)* theme is probably more conducive to the course material, since the theme's focus is on "human communication in all its forms" (Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology 1999). This course requires advanced critical thinking, as well as a maturity in thinking. As such, this course should have Junior class standing or consent of instructor as a prerequisite. Given all of this, the course established should be "RH390 Risk Communication."

This course also has a place as a part of other programs. The Science, Technology, and Society minor is very relevant for engineers and scientists entering the world as professionals whose work might have great effects on society. Risk communication is an important aspect of this interaction. Therefore, the course could be made one of the non-core options for fulfilling this minor.

The institute also offers a Consulting Engineering Certificate, of which Technical Communication is already an integral part. However, Risk Communication is something that should be encouraged, minimally, if not required for the program. Most engineering societies' codes of ethics (NSPE, AICE, IEEE, ASCE, ASME, and ABET) refer specifically to the paramount duty of upholding the safety, health, and welfare of the public. Not only is engineering competence required to do this, but the ability to communicate risk to clients as a consultant is a fundamental skill.

Conclusion: Risk communication is a critical contemporary skill for scientists and engineers

that is difficult and demands knowledge from several disciplines. The students of Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology stand to benefit from a course that provides them insight into the topic by providing them with the appropriate tools from appropriate disciplines in a direct format.

References

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