

**The Brigance Colloquy on Public Speaking as a Liberal Art**  
**February 26-28, 2009**  
**Call for Participation**

“What kind of speech training is needed in a democracy? The answer is obvious. The kind needed to promote the welfare of a free society.” W. Norwood Brigance

The Liberal Arts tradition, democracy, and the teaching of public speaking originated in ancient Greece simultaneously, and for good reason. Rhetoric, one of the original Liberal Arts, played a crucial role in public deliberation. Democracy heavily depended upon citizens’ abilities to create, evaluate, and effectively present arguments, viewpoints, and positions. Societal leaders, in particular, required adept speechmaking skills to advocate and debate public policies and shared concerns.

Yet, today many elected officials struggle to engage in productive political deliberation about the great difficulties we face as a nation and as a global citizenry. Meanwhile, citizens angrily observe their leaders’ failures but are unequipped to join or influence national conversations. And sadly, too often, public speaking courses do not provide the essential skills citizens require. Instead, they are taught purely as basic skills courses that stress the fundamental expertise required to construct an effective speech without regard for its role in democracy, its relationship to leadership, or its standing as part of the discipline of rhetoric. This state of affairs is less surprising when one considers the way public speaking is taught in many of our textbooks. Little, if any, attention is typically given to the rhetorical tradition of public speaking or to the relationship of public speaking with democracy and citizenship, making it a rather superficial introduction to communication.

In response to these concerns, the 2009 Brigance Colloquy on Public Speaking as a Liberal Art will bring a select group of scholars together to examine what it means to teach public speaking and public communication as a Liberal Art. W. Norwood Brigance—a former Speech Association of America President, NCA Distinguished Scholar, and Wabash College Professor—fiercely advocated for the importance of speech in a free society. For Brigance, speech making was more than how to influence an audience; it was, as he put it, “inherent in a free society.” As long as fifty years ago, he worried about the state of speech instruction, writing, “American schools, in short, have failed to qualify citizens in this essential of democracy, and we are paying the price for that failure. A democracy, then, lives in constant danger unless its leaders are trained in speechmaking.”<sup>1</sup>

Motivated by Brigance's enduring concerns, colloquy scholars will discuss pedagogical goals and strategies for use in the public speaking course to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic society. What is the relationship between public speaking and democracy, and how would a more intense focus on that relationship impact the public speaking course? What does it mean or what would it mean to approach public speaking, and related courses and activities, in a manner that reflects rhetoric’s origins as a liberal art? What does it mean to think of public speaking as an art that enables students to think freely, reflectively, and thoughtfully? How can the public speaking course help students develop their voices as well as their willingness and

ability to listen and learn from each other? How can public speaking best prepare students to use their voice and join the public dialogue to better society?

Approximately twelve colloquy scholars will collectively address these questions during a two-day meeting from February 26-28, 2009. The colloquy will take place on the campus of Wabash College at the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts and other campus venues. The mission of the Center of Inquiry is to explore, test, and promote liberal arts education (<http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/>). To help spark group discussions, each colloquy participant will write an approximately five-page position paper, due two weeks prior to the colloquy, in response to one or more of the questions listed above.

All travel expenses, lodging, and food will be covered by the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts.

\*\*\*\*\*Scholars interested in participating in the colloquy are encouraged to write a two-page statement of interest.\*\*\*\*\* The statement may include such items as relevant teaching experiences, research, attendance at previous conferences, and/or goals for your departmental curriculum, college, or university. Statements are due by October 1, 2008. Selected scholars will be notified by October 15, 2008. Please send statements to: Todd McDorman, Chair, Rhetoric Department, Wabash College, P.O. Box 352, Crawfordsville, IN 47933. Direct questions to Todd McDorman at 765-361-6183 or by email at [mcdormat@wabash.edu](mailto:mcdormat@wabash.edu).

<sup>1</sup> W. Norwood Brigance, "Demagogues, 'Good' People, and Teachers of Speech," *The Speech Teacher* 1 (1952): 160-61.