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## The Basic Communication Course at U.S. Colleges and Universities: VI

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## **The Basic Communication Course At U.S. Colleges and Universities: VI**

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“Speech communication instruction is founded on the important and fundamental assumption — that instruction actually makes a difference. Instructors assume that through education and experience, communication skills can be improved and knowledge can be enhanced” (Rubin & Graham, 1988). With this assumption in mind, speech communication professionals have attempted to include in the collegiate curriculum a basic communication course. That course allows students the opportunity to gain, to some degree, the communication knowledge and skills perceived essential for obtaining employment, career success, and effective participation in a democratic society (Kramer & Hinton, 1996).

“Over the last three decades, the basic course has generally followed one of two main formats, either a public speaking course which emphasizes the creation and development of public presentations, or a hybrid course which combines intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public communication” (Kramer and Hinton, 1996). Both the public speaking and the hybrid appear to accomplish the goal of improving various dimensions of students’ communication competence. “Recent studies have shown that students’ perceptions of their commu-

nication competencies generally improve after taking a basic hybrid course" (Ford and Wolvin, 1992). Other results indicate that students' perceptions of their competencies changed significantly in class, work, and social contexts, after completing a basic public speaking course (Ford and Wolvin, 1993). In two other studies, a significant reduction in students' communication apprehension and an increase in self-esteem resulted from a public speaking course (Morreale, Hackman, & Neer, 1995); and an increase in willingness to communicate and in self-esteem resulted from an interpersonal communication class (Morreale, Hackman, & Neer, 1998).

In light of such reports of success, a need exists to answer questions about the basic course, its objectives, course content, instructional and testing methods, enrollment, staffing and institutional support. To discover answers to such questions a longitudinal study of the basic communication course was undertaken in 1968. This is the sixth report in the descriptive series.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

This formal investigation of the basic course began in 1968 with a study conducted by members of the Undergraduate Speech Instruction Interest Group of the Speech Association of American. At the time of the initial study, it was determined that subsequent studies should be conducted approximately every five years. The purpose was to keep the information current, as such data are valuable to basic course directors, department faculty, and administrators at the departmental and college levels. Moreover, as the field changes, so too, might the basic course. The study was replicated in 1974, 1980, 1985, and 1990 (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston,

1990; Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1985; Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974; Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petri, 1970). Each of these studies gathered information using a national survey and reported demographic findings and pedagogical practices in the basic communication course (Newburger, 1994).

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of the present study, conducted in 1996, was to examine again the nature of the basic communication course as taught at two- and four-year colleges and universities, and to compare the findings to those of the past studies. Additionally, the current researchers were interested in examining pedagogical issues that have emerged since the study was last conducted in 1988. As in past studies, information was sought on factors such as course objectives, course content, instructional and testing methods, enrollment, staffing, and institutional support. The present study also examined contemporary issues such as assessment practices, the role of communication across the curriculum, and the use of technology in the basic course.

## **DEFINITION OF THE BASIC COURSE**

In the present study, the basic course was defined as "that communication course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates; that course which the department has, or would recommend as a requirement for all or most undergraduates." Given this definition, the course may focus on one subject, or some combination of communication contexts or levels, such as the hybrid course. The hybrid model

might address two or more topical areas such as interpersonal communication, public speaking, or small group communication. The basic course may take primarily a theoretical or primarily a performance approach, or a combination thereof. It is a course that is intended to introduce students to the discipline's content or the fundamentals of communication.

### ***Method***

The present study made every effort to replicate the method used in the past studies in the series. Survey development, sampling frame, and data gathering and analyses were kept as similar as possible in order to argue for the longitudinal value of the present data.

### ***Instrumentation***

As with past studies, the present work based its survey instrument on the tool used in the last study in 1988. First, some items deemed no longer of interest were eliminated, while others were revised or reworded. Then new items were added to address questions of timely interest such as technology, communication laboratories, and communication across-the-curriculum programs. The resultant survey was submitted to the chairs of the basic course units of the National Communication Association (NCA), regional associations, and NCA's Research Board. Recommendations from those groups for improving the survey were implemented, and then the instrument was pilot-tested on four campuses. The results of the pilot tests suggested the survey was too long, so some redundant items were eliminated. The final form of the questionnaire consisted of 97 items, 93 of which could be answered using categorical responses.

## **SAMPLING PROCESS**

The surveys were mailed in 1996 to the entire NCA mailing list of 1500 schools and colleges that have a communication program/department. That mailing list includes junior and community colleges, as well as four-year colleges and universities in the United States. The same sampling process was used in past studies. In 1990, surveys were mailed to 1532 schools on the SCA (now NCA) list. In replication of the past studies, no effort was made to recontact those schools that did not answer the initial mailing. A total of 292 schools responded to the survey, a response rate of 19.6%. The response rate in 1985 and 1990 was 28%.

Although a higher return rate would have been desirable, the number of responses is sufficient to argue that the findings of this study are representative of the status of the basic course in US colleges and universities. Reinard (1994, p. 218) states that for proportional data from a population of known size and no estimate of population variability, with an N of 1000, a sample size of 278 is sufficiently representative. With an N of 5000, a sample size of 357 would be representative. Calculations suggest an N of 1500 (the number of questionnaires mailed out) would require responses and a sample size of 288 in order to have confidence in the data at the 95 percent level. Thus the 292 returned questionnaires constitute a reasonable sampling frame.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Respondents' Demographic Data***

Respondents were asked to describe their institution size, affiliation and kind. Data in the current study sug-

gest responses from a diversity of school sizes and kinds. Table 1 displays the various sizes of responding institutions' student populations.

**Table 1**  
Size of Student Body of Responding Schools

<i>Size</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent of respondents</i>
Below 1000	27	9.4
1000-4999	98	34.3
5000-9999	49	17.1
10,000-19,999	61	21.3
20,000 and above	51	17.8

Table 2 displays the types of schools by sources of support and affiliation. Table 3 shows the type of institution by kind.

**Table 2**  
Type of Institution by Support and/or Affiliation

<i>Type</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent of respondents</i>
Church supported/affiliated	66	22.8
Private secular	30	10.4
State supported	185	64.0
Other	8	2.8

**Table 3**  
**Type of Institution by Kind**

<i>Type</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent of Respondents</i>
Community or junior college	67	23.0
Four-year college	73	25.1
University	145	49.8
Other	8	2.8

Responding institutions overwhelmingly use the semester system. Indeed, 85.7% of respondent schools are on a semester system. Only 13.2% of respondent institutions are on a quarter system, and only one percent are on a trimester system.

**Table 4**  
**Schools, Departments, Divisions and Colleges**  
**Offering a Basic Communication Course**  
**(Ordered by frequency of mention from least to most)**

<i>Area</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Agriculture	5
Home Economics	6
Nursing	11
Journalism	12
Education	13
Business	19
Arts and Science	39
Other	67



In past studies, some departments reported competition from other academic units in the college or university to teach the basic course. That competition created enrollment problems for the communication department's course. The present study inquired whether such a problem still exists, and if so, to what extent. Table 4 shows respondents answers about which schools, departments, divisions, or colleges, other than the communication department, offer a basic communication course.

Only 2.5% of respondents reported they have a "Communication Across the Curriculum" program that may be substituted for their department's basic course; 97.5% of respondents don't have such a program.

### ***Respondents' Categorical Data***

The survey results that follow are organized around four descriptive categories suggested by the questionnaire items: (1) General Approach and Orientation to the Basic Course (2) Pedagogy (which subsumes seven sub-categories), (3) Enrollment Description and Dynamics, and (4) Administrative Concerns. Administrative concerns include issues such as who teaches the course, how they are trained, consistency across sections of the course, and quality among sections.

### ***General Approach and Orientation To the Basic Course***

As in earlier studies, the researchers were interested in describing the current status of the basic course, but also tracing trends in the direction the basic course might be taking. Is there, for example, a pendulum

swing between a primary emphasis on public speaking and a more "hybrid" course that presents interpersonal, small group, and perhaps some other context, as well as public speaking?

Current data show that public speaking remains the dominant approach to the basic course. Fifty-five percent (55%) of respondents reported that their course is a public speaking course; 30.1% equally emphasize interpersonal, small group, and public speaking contexts; and, 4.2% take a theoretical approach with no special emphasis given to a specific context or set of variables. Only 1% reported a course exclusively about the interpersonal context, and only 0.7% reported a basic course exclusively about small group communication.

When respondents to the present study were asked what the approach/philosophy of the basic course at their institutions was five years ago, 63% named a public speaking context, 30.7% equally emphasized interpersonal, small group, and public speaking contexts, 4.4% theoretical approach, and 1.5% interpersonal context. If respondents' recollections are correct, there exists a subtle trend away from public speaking, but the data do not suggest any magnitude to this trend. Table 5 shows the comparison of this and earlier surveys regarding approach and orientation. Since 1980, the public speaking course has held its own as the most popular basic course. The hybrid course places second but shows more variability in terms of what one might call market share. The other orientations pale by comparison to public speaking and the hybrid approach.

**Table 5**  
**Percent of Schools Reporting Approach/Orientation**  
**to the Basic Course**  
**Type of Course/Orientation**

	1968	1974	1980	1984	1988	1996
Public Speak	54.5	21.3	51.3	54.0	56.0	55.0
Fundamentals	21.3	12.8				
Hybrid Combine	13.2	39.4	40.3	34.0	25.0	30.1
Theory			2.5	4.0	4.0	4.2
Interpersonal			4.7	6.0	4.0	1.0
Other	2.2	1.3	.5	2.0	9.0	.7
						(Group)

### ***Pedagogy***

The general approach and orientation taken toward the basic course leads, naturally, to questions about the pedagogy employed. How do instructors balance theory and performance aspects of the course? How do they deliver the course content? What materials do they use, and how, if at all, do they supplement these materials? What do they ask students to do—the number and kinds of performances, for example—and how do they measure the students' successes in doing these things? The present study pursued all of these questions. Responses regarding pedagogy are arranged in eight categories: (1) Balance of Theory and Performance, (2) Delivery Systems, (3) Number and Evaluation of Performance Assignments, (4) Student Exemption from the Course, (5) Topics Presented in the Basic Course, (6) Textbooks Used, (7) Interactive Multimedia (8) and Innovations.

**Balance of Theory and Performance.** One obvious question about how the course is taught concerns the balance in time and energy between theory and performance, that is cognitive learning and skills training. The respondents indicated a balanced ratio between “theory” and “performance” (see Table 6).

Table 6  
Ratio of Theory to Performance in Basic Course

Theory/Performance	Percent
20%-80%	9.2
30%-70%	24.4
40%-60%	23.7
50%-50%	23.3
60%-40% or greater	19.4

**Delivery Systems.** It appears the basic course is presented in a traditional lecture format at most of the reporting colleges and universities. The once common “lecture-laboratory” delivery system, in which a professor of record delivers a mass lecture, and students break into small laboratory sections to practice performance skills, appears largely to have disappeared from communication departments. Indeed, only 13.2% of all respondents reported using the mass lecture/small performance laboratory system. Now, instead, a single teacher of record takes full responsibility for what goes on in the classroom.

Few responding schools rely upon videotaped or televised lectures as a means of reaching large numbers of students. Indeed, 90.5% of respondents do not present any lectures on videotape. Of those who do use televi-

sion as a delivery system, television doesn't figure heavily in the course. Fewer than one percent of respondents present more than 25% of course lectures via videotape. Similarly, over 97% of respondents report they do not broadcast course materials over the airways or through an on-campus cable system. Of those respondents who report broadcasting course lectures, most do not broadcast as much as 25% of the course lectures.

Technology and other forms of teaching tools are used in the basic course to supplement course instruction. When asked whether students perform assignments which are videotaped and played back to them, 42% answered no, 47% reported one to three of such assignments, 10.3% four to six, and 0.7% seven to nine assignments. Table 7 displays usage patterns for technology and other resources that supplement teaching in the basic course.

**Table 7**  
**Technology and Other Resources Used to Supplement Instruction in the Basic Course**

<i>Form of Technology / Resource</i>	<i>Frequency of Mention</i>
Teacher-Made Handouts	273
Videotape	269
Slides and Transparencies	191
Film	130
Audiotape	85
Computer-based Materials	
Stored in Electronic Media	78
Models	74
On-line Computer Applications (email, www, etc.)	69
Other	23

**Number and Evaluation of Performance Assignments.** The basic course remains a skills-based course to a great extent. Nearly three quarters of all respondents (71.5%) require their students to present four to six oral performance assignments. Only 4.2% of respondents do not require any performance assignments. Fifteen percent require one to three performance assignments, 8.5% require from seven to ten performances, and 0.7% ask for more than ten.

Most students perform before the same audience group (93.2%) each time they present. Almost 93% of responding institutions have only one instructor involved in evaluating student speeches. In regard to the process of providing feedback to students about their performances, 58.4% rely on teacher feedback alone; 41.2% report they use a combination of teacher and peer evaluation to provide feedback to their students, and 0.4% report they rely entirely on peer evaluation. Approximately eighteen percent (18.4%) of respondents report they do not provide oral evaluations of student performance. Oral evaluations are given after each performance in 42.2% of responding institutions. About sixteen percent (16.2%) of respondents said they wait to give oral evaluations until after several performances are presented, and 11.9% of respondents reported they wait until after all performances in one assignment are completed, before they provide oral evaluation.

Investigators wanted to know the weight assigned to oral performance activities as compared to written activities. Table 8 displays the responses to the question about those comparative weights. Respondents also were asked if students are provided written criticism of their performance work. About ninety percent (90.6%) responded that they always give written criticism, 7.2% give written criticism sometimes, and 2.2% never give it.

**Table 8**  
**Weights Given to Oral vs. Written Activities**

Ratio	Percent
100/0	2.5
80/20	22.3
60/40	42.8
50/50	20.5
40/60 or less	11.9

**Student Exemption from the Course.** Because of life experience or unusual talent, some students might think they do not need to complete a basic communication course. In cases where a course is required, such students may wish to apply for exemption from the requirement. Respondents were asked if this were possible, and if so, how was the exemption process carried out.

More than half of the respondents (58.8%) reported students cannot be exempted from the course. Less than one percent of respondents (0.7%) said that students can be exempted by written exam. About 5.3% allow exemption from the course by successful oral performance. Nearly a quarter (23.6%) of respondents require both written exam and oral performance of a student who seeks exemption. Only 3.2% of respondents allow exemption on the basis of life experience, and 8.5% by some other means.

In 43.3% of cases, students who "test" out of the course get credit for the course, but in 56.7% they do not. In 11.5% of the cases, students who "test out" of the course must take another speech communication course

in its place, but in 88.5% of responding institutions, once a student has been excused from the basic course, liability for basic communication coursework ends.

**Topics Presented in the Basic Course.** The question of what topics receive most attention in the basic course was probed in the current survey, as it was in the past studies. Respondents were asked to mark the ten topics that receive the greatest amount of time in the course, from a list of 30. Table 9 displays the top 13 responses in rank order by frequency of mention.

A comparison of the rankings of topics now covered in the course, to the rankings from the 1990 study,

**Table 9**  
**Topics that Receive the Greatest Amount of Time**  
**in the Basic Course in 1996**

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1. informative speaking	248	84.9
2. persuasive speaking	240	82.2
3. audience analysis	206	70.5
4. delivery	200	68.5
5. outlining	173	59.2
6. listening	171	58.6
6. supporting material	171	58.6
7. speech anxiety	141	48.3
8. reasoning	127	43.5
9. nonverbal communication	117	40.0
10. interpersonal communication	112	38.4
11. communication theory	109	37.3
12. critical thinking	108	37.0
13. language	100	34.2



shows how the top-ranked 13 topics compare (see Table 10). With the exception of the two top-ranked topics, informative and persuasive speaking, there is considerable change in the amount of time devoted to various topics. Audience analysis, supporting material, and speech anxiety, for example, demonstrate considerable increase in the amount of attention they receive in the course.

**Table 10**  
**1990-1996 Comparison of Topics Covered in the Basic Course (Percentage of schools indicating the topic is covered in their basic course)**

<i>Topic</i>	<i>1990 Percent</i>	<i>1996 Percent</i>
1. informative speaking	81	84.9
2. persuasive speaking	78	82.2
3. audience analysis	30	70.5
4. delivery	59	68.5
5. outlining	30	59.2
6. listening	not mentioned	58.6
6. supporting material	26	58.6
7. speech anxiety	18	48.3
8. reasoning	32	43.5
9. nonverbal communication	not mentioned	40.0
10. interpersonal communication	39	38.4
11. communication theory	44	37.3
12. critical thinking	not mentioned	37.0
13. language	15	34.2

**Textbooks Used.** Textbooks and other ancillary materials required of students also provide insight into what instructors are addressing in their courses. Every iteration of the basic course survey has asked respondents to name the textbooks they require, and to list other ancillary materials they use to deliver their courses. Respondents in the present study named over 100 textbook titles. Table 11 lists the most frequently mentioned textbooks, ordered by the number of times the book was mentioned. The books listed represent various approaches to the basic course (public speaking, interpersonal, hybrid, etc.), since survey respondents were reporting about the book used in their particular course.

Table 11  
Most Frequently Used Textbooks in the Basic Course  
by Frequency of Mention

Lucas, S.E. (1992) <i>The Art of Public Speaking</i> (5 <sup>th</sup> ed.). NY: Random House. (52 Mentions)
Osborn, M. and Osborn, S. (1994). <i>Public Speaking</i> . NY: Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (20 Mentions)
Gronbeck, B., et. al. (1994). <i>Principles of Speech Communication</i> . NY: Longman. (11 Mentions)
Gamble and Gamble, (1993). <i>Communication Works</i> . NY: McGraw-Hill. (10 Mentions)
Pearson, J. and Nelson, P. (1997). <i>Understanding and Sharing</i> . Dubuque, IA: Wm.C. Brown. (10 Mentions)
Adler, R. and Rodman, G. (1991). <i>Understanding Human Communication</i> . NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. (9 Mentions)
Zarefsky, D. (1996). <i>Public Speaking: Strategies for Suc-</i>

cess. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. (9 Mentions)

Beebe, S. and Beebe, S. (1997). *Public Speaking, An Audience-Centered Approach*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Brown. (8 Mentions)

Devito, J. (1993). *Essentials of Human Communication*. NY: HarperCollins.(8 Mentions)

Gregory, H. (1993). *Public Speaking for College and Career*. NY: McGraw-Hill. (8 Mentions)

Grice, G. and Skinner, J. (1995). *Mastering Public Speaking*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. (8 Mentions)

Devito, J. (1994). *Human Communication: The Basic Course*. NY: HarperCollins. (7 Mentions)

Jaffe, C. (1998). *Public Speaking: Concepts and Skills for a Diverse Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (7 Mentions)

Verderber, R. (1996). *Communicate!* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (7 Mentions)

Zeuschner, R. (1997). *Communicating Today*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. (7 mentions)

Nelson P. and Pearson, J. (1996). *Confidence in Public Speaking*. Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark. (5 mentions)

Sprague, J. and Stewart, D. (1996). *The Speaker's Handbook*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College. (5 mentions)

**Interactive Multimedia.** Respondents answered three open-ended questions that investigated the role of interactive multimedia (IMM) as supplemental support

for the basic course. The goal of these questions was to gain some qualitative insight into this aspect of the basic course, in addition to the quantitative focus of the majority of the questions on the survey.

There were only 11 responses to the first question, which asked if departments develop or produce their own interactive multimedia of their own for use in their basic courses. The number of non-respondents to this question is significant. Apparently out of a total of 292 responding schools, only 11 had an interest in discussing the topic of developing and producing IMM materials. Those 11 respondents indicated that the course processes or subject matter, of interest for IMM applications, included: basic course information, scheduling and testing, public speaking, listening, group and intercultural communication, language, and listening.

The second question about interactive multimedia asked respondents to name the course subject matter for which they use outsourced IMM, if any. Ten respondents answered this question, indicating that they use IMM to assist in the following subject areas: speeches (on videotape), speech preparation (videodisk and player), public speaking skills (self-instruction modules), speech outlining and delivery, intercultural/cultural/interpersonal (negotiating and bargaining), and research skills.

Respondents also were asked to recommend one or more titles of available interactive multimedia for use by others. Again, ten respondents answered the question. Only six specific recommendations were offered, and not one of the six was offered by more than one respondent.

**Innovations.** Respondents were asked to describe any innovations they have incorporated in their courses. One hundred twenty-seven (127) respondents answered

this question. Most respondents listed more than one innovation being used in their course. Examination of the responses suggests that the innovations distribute into five categories: (1) Uses of Technology, (2) Uses of Student Assignments and Activities, (3) Conceptual Innovations, (4) Uses of Human Teaching Resources and (5) Other. The technology category subdivides into the use of video or computer technology. Video use primarily involved public speaking instruction, for example, videotaping student speeches and using tapes of speeches for pedagogical purposes. Computer technology involved a broader spectrum of uses such as, but not limited to: interactive (smart) classrooms, computer-equipped practice labs, computer-based tutorial packages, CD-ROMs and the Internet for research activities, e-mail listservs, and home pages for the course.

### ***Enrollment Description and Dynamics***

The basic communication course appears to be a stable component in the undergraduate curriculum. Survey data suggest the course is popular among students, with enrollments holding steady or increasing, relative to other departmental and college offerings.

In terms of enrollment dynamics, 55.1% of respondents said their enrollments are holding steady, 39% said enrollments are increasing, and six percent reported enrollments are decreasing. Further, 48% of respondents characterized overall enrollments in other areas of their departments as holding steady, 42.3% increasing, and 9.6% decreasing. In terms of the growth rate of the basic course, 65.3% indicated that it is about the same as that of their institution; 28.5% said that it is greater, and 6.2% said that it is less than that of their

institution. Tables 11 and 12 display changes in enrollments among responding institutions.

**Table 11**  
**Dynamics of Increasing Enrollment**  
**Where Enrollment is Increasing**

How much	Frequency	Percent
Less than 5%	71	33.2
5-10%	62	29.0
10-15%	33	15.4
15-20%	19	8.9
over 20%	29	13.6

**Table 12**  
**Dynamics of Decreasing Enrollment**  
**Where Enrollment is Decreasing**

How much	Frequency	Percent
Less than 5%	39	53.4
5-10%	22	30.1
10-15%	6	8.2
15-20%	1	1.4
over 20%	5	6.8

Enrollment dynamics also includes issues of class size and numbers of students enrolled per section. Most departments strive to keep class sizes small. Only 7.3% enroll over 30 students per section; nearly six percent limit enrollments to 13 to 17 students; and 0.3% report enrollments per section below 12 students. Most respondents (46.5%) reported enrollments of 23 to 30 stu-

dents per section. Nearly as many (39.9%) enroll from 18 to 22 students in a section. Some 30% of responding institutions offer over 20 sections of the course each academic term. Twenty-five percent offer five or fewer sections. Twenty-four percent offer from six to ten sections, and 20.8% offer 11-15 sections.

The majority of responding institutions give three credit hours for the course (84.3%). Far fewer (6.8%) give four hours. A smattering (3.9%) of institutions offer five hours of credit. About four percent offer two hours, and less than one percent of respondents offer just one hour of credit. Three percent of the respondents give credit in a different way from academic hours.

### ***Administrative Concerns***

Administration of the basic communication course may involve coordinating the efforts of a multiplicity of faculty members who teach multiple sections of the course. Who teaches the basic course and how are they trained? Is the basic course in communication offered in competition with similar courses taught in other disciplines? And how is this activity paid for? Much of a course administrator's time and energy is devoted to assuring that every student has a classroom with a teacher and that those teachers are scheduled appropriately. The administrator may be concerned with questions of quality control, similarity and consistency among sections, and course evaluation. These and other administrative concerns received attention in the present study.

**Who Teaches the Course?** Respondents were asked to indicate the staffing patterns of their basic course. Specifically, they were asked to indicate who

does the majority of teaching in the basic course, by estimating percentages of the teaching load carried by graduate assistants, instructors, assistant professors, associate professors, professors, and others (e.g., adjuncts). Table 13 provides an overview of staffing patterns, displaying the data by frequency of mention, not by relative percentages. Teaching in the basic course is broadly distributed among the ranks of teaching faculty. Instructors, assistant professors, and associate professors do most of the teaching, but it also appears that full professors carry a share of the teaching load.

**Table 13**  
**Staffing Patterns in the Basic Course by Frequency of**  
**Mention (least to most in order of teaching load)**

Adjunct Faculty	57
Teaching Assistants	78
Full Professors	125
Associate Professors	133
Assistant Professors	154
Instructors	168

**Quality Control.** Issues of quality control in the basic course may relate to who the teacher is but also to the quantity and quality of training provided for the position. In a large, multi-section course, quality control also may involve standardization across sections, program evaluation procedures, and assessment of outcomes.

**Training of Faculty.** The quality of training provided to faculty and instructors impacts the quality of the basic course. Some faculty are more experienced, while others are relatively new to the job. In connection



with an interest in quality control in the basic course, respondents were asked how their graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty are trained and prepared to teach.

Train them through regularly scheduled discussion sessions with a course director; 26.7% provide both regularly scheduled discussion sessions and formal course work for credit; 10.5% provide training through formal course work only. Seven percent provide no instruction or training at all. When institutions give credit hours for graduate assistant training, 40.5% give three hours, 16.7% offer one, 9.5% give two, and 7.1% give four. More than a quarter of respondents (26.2%) marked the category other.

If institutions use adjunct teachers, 37.9% do not train them at all; 35% train them through regularly scheduled discussion sessions with a course director; 1.5% through formal course work for credit; 1% through a combination of scheduled discussions and formal course work; and 24.8% train in other ways.

**Standardization.** Given the premise that more than one section of a course is available, students must be confident that, no matter the section or instructor, they will get essentially the same course of instruction. Respondents were asked to describe how much standardization exists in their basic course. They were asked to choose from among six possible descriptions ranging from "Everyone teaches from the same syllabus using the same textbook," through "Our teachers have great autonomy in selecting materials and designing instruction."

In response to this question, about standardization in the basic course, 24.1% said everyone teaches from the same syllabus using the same textbook; 17.7% said everyone attempts to meet the same learning objectives,

using the same textbook and the same performance assignments; 33.7% said that everyone attempts to meet the same learning objectives, using the same textbook, but may develop whatever teaching strategies they wish to meet them; 12.8% said everyone attempts to meet the same learning objectives but may choose from more than one selected textbook and may develop whatever teaching strategies they wish; and, 9.2% said that their teachers have great autonomy in selecting materials and designing instruction. Only 2.5% reported other or anything else. Given these responses, it appears that most departments are attempting some kind of standardization across multiple sections of the basic course.

**Program Evaluation Procedures.** Respondents were asked to describe how they measure the quality of instruction. Most respondents rely on student feedback gathered in survey form. Many collect student feedback about the course from evaluation forms that are administered campuswide and are also used in other departments. Table 14 displays the ways that quality of instruction is evaluated.

A related question concerned the frequency with which evaluations occur. How often, and when, do departments evaluate the quality of instruction in the basic course? If an institution collects feedback from students in survey form, 74.4% do so every term in every section, 12% once every year in every section, and 13.7% do so in some other fashion. Seventeen percent (17.3%) of institutions evaluate different faculty ranks in different ways, but 82.7% apply the same standards and methods regardless of faculty rank.

**Table 14**  
**How Respondents Measure Quality**  
**by Frequency of Mention**

Measure	Frequency	Percent
Feedback from students in survey form	218	74.5
College-wide form used in other departments as well	150	51.4
In-class observations by chairperson or peers	138	47.3
Departmental form used in other classes as well	65	22.3
University-wide form used in other colleges as well	57	19.5
Other	22	7.5
The matter of assessing the quality of instruction is left up to the teachers	13	4.5
Evaluation of only non-tenured teachers	11	3.8
No measure of the quality of instruction	3	1.0

**Assessment of Outcomes in the Course.** Another important part of quality control relates to assessing the outcomes of instruction. Respondents were asked how this task is accomplished. Respondents indicated that they use both teacher-constructed and oral performance competency assessment tests. Table 15 displays rank-ordered responses to this question.

**Table 15**  
**How Respondents Assess Outcomes of Instruction**  
**by Frequency of Mention**

We use individual, teacher-made tests.	174
We use classroom oral performance competency assessments.	116
We use a departmental oral performance competency assessment.	36
We use course-wide, teaching group-produced tests.	35
Other	34
We don't attempt to assess outcomes of our instruction	33
We secure feedback from other departments who require students to take the course.	29

**Financial Considerations and Administrative Support.** In past studies, the basic course has been described as representing an important contribution to the financial base of the communication department. In the present survey, respondents were asked about this administrative consideration. In response, 44.2% said the financial base of their department does not rest primarily on the basic course; 27.7% said it does rest on the basic course to a moderate degree; and 28.1% indicated that the financial base of the department rests on the basic course, to a large degree. Table 16 illustrates what percentages of the department's total student credit hours are generated by the department's basic course.

Respondents were asked to estimate the degree of administrative support provided to the basic communication course. Just fewer than a quarter of respondents (22%) reported their courses enjoy a very great degree of

**Table 16**  
**Percent of overall Department Student Credit Hours**  
**Generated by the Basic Course**

Percentage	Frequency
1-10%	31
11-25%	48
26-40%	67
41-60%	60
over 60%	54

administrative support; 20.8% said they enjoy a considerable degree of administrative support; 44% called their administrative support adequate; and 20% called it poor. About seven percent (6.7%) thought administrative support for their course was "disgraceful." When asked if the situation were changing, 66% of respondents said that the level of administrative support has remained the same during the past five years. Twenty-two percent (22.7%) reported an increase in administrative support for their courses, and 11.3% said administrative support had decreased.

**Administrative Challenges.** In past studies, basic course directors and other respondents reported a variety of frustrations and problems associated with teaching or supervising teachers of the basic course. In the present study, all but four respondents provided some response, when asked to name the three top problems associated with the basic course, in order of importance. The contemporary responses appear similar to the problems reported in past studies. Similarity of experiences among present respondents suggests the following categories for their frustrations and problems:

(1) maintaining consistency in quality, substance, performance and testing standards, from section to section in multi-section courses; (2) finding, training, and maintaining faculty to teach the multiple sections; (3) fighting faculty burn-out from teaching the same thing repeatedly; and (4) maintaining appropriate class size. The use of part-time and adjunct faculty was repeatedly cited as a factor either related to or that exacerbates all the other problems and frustrations inherent in the basic course.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the basic communication course, as taught at two- and four-year colleges and universities. A total of 292 schools responded to the mailed-out survey. This sample size is sufficient to discuss the survey results as representative of the 1532 schools identified by NCA as having a communication program/department (Reinard, 1994). However, it should be noted that the sample size has become smaller each time this study has been conducted, which is increasingly problematic in terms of discussing the results.

That caveat aside, responses received did indicate that the basic communication course continues to thrive and grow at the same rate or a rate greater than the growth of the parent institution and the communication department. Few departments reported decreases in the size of their basic course. This accelerated rate of growth for the basic course bodes well for the discipline, as long as section size does not become problematic for those teaching and those learning, the students.

The basic communication course follows one of two formats: a public speaking course (55% of those re-

sponding offer this course) or a hybrid course (30.1%) which combines intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public speaking. The public speaking format has experienced a one per cent decrease since the last survey in 1988. The hybrid course has experienced a five per cent increase since 1988. Trends in orientation since the survey began in 1968 are interesting. The public speaking course was the number one orientation five out the six times that the survey has been conducted. Only in 1974, did the hybrid course (39.4%) outpace public speaking (21.3). That one-time variation may have resulted from a tendency for an approach to be "in" or "trendy" for a short period of time.

No matter the type of offering, the basic course appears to incorporate a balance of theory and performance. This result dispels any concerns that the course may be too skills-based at many schools. Only 9.2% of respondents indicated that 80% or more of their course involves performance, with 20% or less involving theory. The courses tend to be taught in a traditional lecture format, with the lecture-laboratory approach dropping in popularity as a delivery method. Challenges associated with presenting large lectures and relating the lectures to laboratory sessions may account for the decline in use of this method.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents indicated that when performances are included, four to six oral presentations are required of students. These presentations tend to be given to the same audience. The number of presentations per student is commendable. Unless a confounding factor such as high communication anxiety is present, more speeches will likely result in more growth in public speaking ability. Presenting to the same audience is customary and almost inherent in the basic course structure. However, teachers of the

course might want to look toward varying the audience to replicate real-life situations.

Most schools (58.8%) do not allow students to be exempted from the course, which is a good thing when one looks at what is covered in the course. Topics that receive major attention (over 50% affirmative answers) in the basic course are: informative speaking, persuasive speaking, audience analysis, delivery, outlining, listening, and supporting material. Obviously this topic list relates mostly to the public speaking orientation, since 55% of respondents reported using that orientation. In light of recent criticisms of higher education in the mass media, changes since the 1990 survey in the percentage of schools that cover certain topics is almost surprising. For example, the topic of audience analysis increased from 30% to 70.5%; outlining from 30% to 59.2%; supporting materials from 26% to 58.6%; and speech anxiety from 18% to 48.3%. Such changes suggest that substantive issues related to speech preparation and how the student feels about speaking are increasingly of concern.

A variety of textbooks are used in the course but reports of the use of interactive multimedia are limited. Interestingly, textbook authors and publishers for the basic course are developing ancillary materials using new media such as CD-ROMs to accompany their books, despite the fact that survey respondents indicate they don't use such media to any great extent.

Respondents did identify other innovations they are incorporating in their courses. The use of technology continues to mean videotapes of speeches for evaluative and pedagogical purposes. Additionally, a variety of uses of the Internet were reported. But when asked to report any innovations they are using, respondents mentioned people as much as technology. Student assignments and activities, human teaching resources,



and conceptual innovations were frequently mentioned in various forms.

Most respondents (46.5%) indicated that class size is 23 to 30 students per section, with class sizes of 18 to 22 also common (39.9%). When asked to report challenges and problems, maintaining an appropriate class size was mentioned as a concern. The courses tend to be taught by all levels of faculty, with instructors, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors outnumber teaching assistants and adjunct faculty. Where teaching assistants and graduate assistants are used, the majority of schools provide some form of training to prepare for the instructional position. However, acquiring and training the right faculty was reported as a challenge to those administering the course.

Some degree of standardization and uniformity across sections of the course is attempted at most institutions, as indicated by required textbook selections, common learning objectives, and common course syllabi. Like class size and training issues, consistency across multiple sections was identified as an area of administrative concern.

The major source for course evaluations is the use of feedback from students in survey form (74.5%). The most common type of assessment of course outcomes is the use of individual, teacher-constructed tests, though assessment of classroom oral performance competency is also used to assess outcomes. These approaches might categorically be referred to as more traditional methods of assessment, that is course evaluations, student test scores, and evaluating in-class performance. Considering the increased emphasis by state and regional accreditation agencies on the use of alternative and multiple methods for assessing oral competence, the domi-

nance of traditional methods in the basic course is surprising.

In summary, challenges in administrating the course remain much the same since 1990: maintaining optimal class size, instructional staffing, faculty burn-out, and issues of quality across multiple sections.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Earlier investigations of the basic course were praised and criticized. Praise aside, some of the criticism related to sampling procedures, with recommendations to increase sample size. Other critics called for a survey instrument that probed the nature of the basic course in greater depth and asked more questions. These two points of criticism tended to work against each other. Including more questions lengthened the survey and resulted in fewer surveys being returned and a smaller sample. As a result, the sampling issue was not resolved sufficiently in the present study. Future replications of the study might consider varying the sampling method considerably. Techniques might include phone sampling, on-site sampling at regional and national conventions, and sending a warning letter ahead of the survey mailing.

Another recommendation for future replication relates to course orientation. It may be advisable to gather data separately within the survey, depending on whether the respondent's course is public speaking or the hybrid orientation. These two approaches taken together represent 85.1% of responding programs in the present study. It might be more useful to gather and report data for each orientation separately for some items contained on the survey.

One other recommendation for the present study related to issues of diversity. It was suggested that diversity, as a variable, be included in this study. The developers of the present survey supported that recommendation but realized that addressing diversity would have extended the survey instrument to well over 100 items. Issues related to diversity in the basic course are complex and therefore deserving of appropriate attention. The authors of the present study support the need for another survey that will investigate those issues from a variety of perspectives. Such a survey could examine, but not be limited to, diversity in hiring and teaching staff, course content, classroom strategies, and student demographics.

There are other aspects of the basic course that could be examined in the next iteration of this survey. For example, the role of the basic course in general education is of much interest. Another question to ask might relate to who our students are and why they choose to take our course, if indeed they are given a choice. Some questions already asked in the present survey could be expanded in the next iteration or developed as a separate study. The challenges to administering the course, reported in this study, deserve more examination. That examination could consider how the challenges are being efficaciously addressed on our campuses. Technology in the basic course is a timely topic that has been separately addressed already at basic course conferences and elsewhere.

For now, the present study and its findings are offered to our colleagues with the hope that the information presented is valuable to those teaching in and directing the basic communication course.

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