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Over the past 20 years, the basic communication course has become a staple of many of general education programs (Cutspec, McPherson, & Spiro, 1999; Hunt, Novak, Semlack, & Meyer, 2005). The ability to communicate effectively is viewed as a prerequisite to interpersonal relationships, success in the workplace, and meaningful participation as a citizen in our democracy (Westphal-Johnson & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Also, as Dance (2002) notes, the basic course is communication's "bread and butter" offering in that it "introduces new students to the discipline, provides continuing teaching opportunities for both permanent and adjunct faculty and often supports graduate programs through its staffing by graduate assistants" (p. 355). The role of the basic course in general education affords the discipline with substantial political capital on many campuses—administrators often look to the basic course as an ideal location for launching new initiatives given the course's position in general education. To the extent that basic course directors are able to deliver those initiatives effectively, they may earn additional access to university

resources. We certainly agree with Dance (2002) that this is an important course.

In the last several years, communication education scholars have debated the merits of various formats and structures for the basic course (see, for example, Hunt, Ekachai, Garard, & Rust, 2001). Should the basic course focus on the development of students' public speaking skills? Or, should the basic course present students with a combination of public speaking, group, and interpersonal skills? It is not our intent to resolve this debate. Instead, our objective is to bring to light particular trends in academia today that can and, we feel, should be reflected in basic communication course pedagogy. Indeed, our goal is to explore the core content of basic courses in communication and examine how those in the discipline might begin to advance our pedagogical content knowledge and assume a leadership role in significant national trends now sweeping across our campuses.

Our central contention is that the discipline's pedagogical content knowledge (i.e., the collective knowledge the discipline has developed regarding the best ways to teach communication, see Friedrich, 2002) should be expanded to include educational strategies for advancing students' critical thinking, information literacy, and political engagement skills. While many programs and teachers may already teach and nurture these abilities, we feel that the discipline should explicitly position itself as uniquely qualified to address these skills. Although these three skill areas may initially seem unrelated, we hope to show that they are, in fact, inextricably linked. And, throughout this essay we will detail the reasons why our discipline is distinctively competent to meet these challenges. Perhaps most importantly, these

skills are some of the most essential for students to acquire if they are to succeed in their relationships and occupations, and as citizens in the 21st century.

THE CASE FOR CRITICAL THINKING INSTRUCTION

Across the country, many institutions of higher education have recognized the need to integrate critical thinking instruction into general education programs (Halpern, 2001). Educators have come to the realization that, although most first-year students enter college with some previous critical thinking instruction, there is substantial room for improvement and further development (Jacobson & Mark, 2000).

Although there is some debate regarding the precise definition of critical thinking, virtually all definitions emphasize students' ability to develop and analyze arguments based on available resources and knowledge (Angelo, 1995; Williams, Oliver, & Stockdale, 2004; Williams & Worth, 2001). Most scholars consider analysis, evaluation, and reflection as central to the process critical thinking (Williams, Oliver, & Stockdale, 2004). In addition, these abilities are included in the learning objectives of most basic courses in communication. In fact, virtually all textbooks for the basic course devote at least some attention to the topic of critical thinking and many operationalize critical thinking in terms of argumentation. The question we want readers to consider is whether we, as a discipline, are really doing enough with the basic course to foster the development of students' critical thinking.

We believe that the basic communication course provides an ideal context for teaching critical thinking skills because they are intimately tied to communication skills (O'Keefe, 1986, 1995). While many basic courses require students to deliver oral presentations, a growing number have begun to value active learning strategies like instructional discussion to provide students opportunities to articulate and defend their ideas. When these classroom experiences are provided, deeper processing and meaningful engagement with the material is likely to occur (Cooper & Simonds, 2007; Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff, 2008; Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2005; Simonds, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004). Speaking and listening, whether through class discussion or more formal situations, allows students to question information, examine new evidence, and create linkages between the evidence and their lived experiences. As O'Keefe (1986) persuasively argues, "Oral communication improves not only students' facility with language but their facility in maneuvering ideas as well. Speech allows ideas to be picked up and examined, set on shelves in categories, and eventually added to other categories, ideas, or words" (p. 6). Several scholars have documented the positive effects of communication skills training on students' critical thinking development (Allen, Berkowitz, & Louden, 1995; Colbert, 1995; Hill, 1993). Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Louden (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of research concerning the effects of public speaking experiences on critical thinking and concluded that "critical thinking improved as a result of training in communication skills" (p. 27).

On many campuses educators have developed courses targeted specifically at first-year students. Of-

ten, such courses are designed to both ease the transition from high school to college and equip students with the kinds of critical thinking skills required for success in higher education and beyond. In fact, such a course (titled Foundations of Inquiry) was offered at our institution; however, FOI never really amounted to much of a success with students and assessment data revealed little transferability of the general critical thinking skills acquired in the course to new contexts (such as middle and outer core courses in the general education program and courses in students' major). For these and other reasons, higher administration made a decision to remove FOI altogether and focus institutional efforts to improve first-year students' critical thinking skills in our introductory communication and English courses.

One reason we feel our administrators made a sound decision is that research has shown critical thinking instruction is most effective when housed within a content course, such as the basic communication course, and applied to specific assignments (Royalty, 1995; Williams, Oliver, & Stockdale, 2004). Many of our students noted that the more generic, multi-disciplinary course (FOI) was problematic specifically because it was not linked to a particular discipline. As a result, these same students frequently voiced how difficult it was for them to envision the relevance of tasks like argument diagramming to other courses or to their future occupation.

Our students' concerns were presaged by communication educators like O'Keefe (1986) who has noted that the more generic, multi-disciplinary approaches tend to "treat critical thinking as a separate entity…It makes much more sense to instead change the way we teach our present content courses" (p. 2). Students that are

afforded the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills tied to specific disciplinary course work, such as the creation of a persuasive speech in the basic communication course, learn the relevancy of those skills to specific tasks. Students enrolled in the basic communication are presented with a several meaningful opportunities to learn how to produce and consume arguments effectively.

Although we wholeheartedly endorse the basic course as a rightful home of critical thinking instruction, it is important to note that we cannot assume that students will experience significant gains in this area merely by composing, delivering, and critiquing speeches—especially if our emphasis in teaching communication is on the delivery of information. Research has shown that critical thinking skills improve as a result of specific and intentional instruction (Halpern, 1987a, 1987b). According to Dance (2002), the present model "for most basic courses focuses on public speaking skills. The course's measure of success is the degree to which the student improves in platform abilities" (p. 355). Dance (2002) recommends that we revive one of our discipline's oldest paradigms, the speech and thought paradigm, by adopting a braided pedagogical approach that helps students to become better thinkers by improving their public speaking skills. In other words, basic course instructors should devote as much time and effort to improving students' thinking abilities as they devote to improving students' public speaking abilities.

We agree with Dance (2002) that such techniques are deeply embedded in our disciplinary pedagogical content knowledge. When we were asked to incorporate

the critical thinking skills of the FOI course into our basic course (COM 110), our first reaction was that we were already teaching critical thinking skills—so, we reasoned, such "reform" would be relatively easy. A cursory glance of any COM 110 syllabus would lead the casual reader to the same conclusion. After all, we had chapters assigned to students on critical listening and thinking that included discussions of how to construct and evaluate arguments, as well as recognizing fallacies in reasoning. In addition, students in the course were required to compose, deliver, and critique multiple speeches. However, a closer inspection of our lesson plans revealed that our efforts were not as "intentional" as we initially thought. We found that, although many instructors were requiring students to read the aforementioned chapters, very few of them were actually incorporating argument development, analysis, and evaluation into class discussion. As we looked over the evaluation criteria in our peer evaluation forms we noiced they focused almost exclusively on delivery skills—few instructors were asking students to evaluate the quality of supporting materials and overall argument development of their peers. In short, we were not doing a very good job of operationalizing and intentionally teaching critical thinking skills in COM 110.

As we "redesigned" our course, we embraced Dance's (2002) speech and thought paradigm by bolstering the articulation and evaluation of arguments in the COM 110 curriculum in a number of ways. For example, we revamped our instructions and evaluation criteria for written and oral assignments, making sure to emphasize the development and support of claims. We worked with our instructors to develop fresh lesson plans de-

signed to teach students how to identify and avoid fallacies of reasoning and to construct quality arguments using Toulmin's (1958) argument model (in our experience this model is an excellent way to operationalize critical thinking in the context of the basic course). In addition, we substantially overhauled our approach to teaching information literacy skills by developing a number of activities that help students learn how create research strategies and evaluate sources using three tests of evidence: bias, timeliness, and credibility (a point we will return to in greater detail in the next section). A detailed overview of all of the changes we made to COM 110 is beyond the scope of this paper (for more information please contact the first author); however, we feel comfortable in stating that we have gone a long way in the last few years towards institutionalizing a commitment to meaningful critical thinking instruction and, as a result, have moved closer to the speech and thought approach advocated by Dance (2002).

Our own assessment data lend credence to the importance of intentional and specific pedagogy for critical thinking instruction. In the spring 2005 semester, we pilot tested eight sections of COM 110 containing enhanced instruction in critical thinking. These experimental sections were compared to a group of eight control sections—sections that featured no changes to our traditional way of teaching the course. Using a pretest/posttest design, we administered two critical thinking measures—an actual "test" of students' critical thinking skills and a self-report of their critical thinking skills. Data analyses revealed that both groups demonstrated a significant improvement over time on the self-report measure. Most importantly, the control group did not

improve their performance on the critical thinking test while the experimental group experienced a statistically significant increase on this measure (see Mazer et al., 2008). So, while both groups *thought* they improved their critical thinking skills by the end of the semester, only the experimental group produced a statistically significant increase on the critical thinking test. We are happy to report that all sections of COM 110 now contain "enhanced" instruction for critical thinking. The descriptive statistics for this study are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Critical Thinking Measures

	Control				Experimental			
	Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
CTSA	64.12_a	6.92	67.40_a	5.78	62.86_b	6.86	66.21_b	7.15
CT	5.50	1.68	5.76	1.43	5.26_c	1.48	6.29_c	1.61

Note: Scores on the Critical Thinking Self Assessment (CTSA) range from 17 to 85 and scores on the critical thinking (CT) test range from 0 to 10. Means with the same subscript are significantly different.

In the next section we discuss the relationships between critical thinking and information literacy instruction and develop the case for the inclusion of both within the basic communication course.

THE CASE FOR INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

As with critical thinking instruction, library instruction is a key component of many general education programs (Jacobson & Mark, 2000). In large part, this component of general education is based on the premise that information literacy is important, and that instruction in this area should begin in the first semester of a student's college experience (Jacobson & Mark, 2000; Samson & Granath, 2001). Breivik (1998) agrees that "the best place to start information literacy planning is with general education or core curriculum, where concerns for competencies that all students should acquire provide a natural home for the discussion of information literacy abilities" (p. 44). Information literacy involves finding sources, analyzing the material, evaluating the credibility of the sources, and using and citing sources ethically and legally (Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer, 2004; Mackey & Jacobson, 2004).

We have engaged in many conversations with other basic course instructors regarding students' needs in this area. It is unlikely that anyone affiliated with the basic course, especially those whose focus is public speaking, would disagree with the statement that many students enter the course with significant room for improvement in the area of information literacy. Most first-year students are not information literate, due to poor proficiency in database searches and critical thinking skills (Jacobson & Mark, 2000). Many students, as Jacobson and Mark (2000) note, know how to use the Internet to access needed information; however, most do not know how to build and expand effectively

upon this knowledge. Additionally, few students enter college with a firm grasp on how to develop an effective research strategy for a given assignment. The massive proliferation of information resources that we have experienced in the last several years further complicates matters for students (American Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000; Swanson, 2004). As a result, it is likely that many students will enter the basic course with a "need to know how to focus their topics, where (in addition to the Internet) to search, and how to evaluate and use the information they retrieve" (Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 1996, p. 15).

We believe that the basic communication course provides an ideal environment to teach information literacy, since students apply what they learn about library information through the construction of speeches and presentations. In this way, the basic course provides students the opportunity to practice information literacy skills in an applied manner. In addition, an emphasis on information literacy instruction compliments efforts to develop students' critical thinking skills (Samson & Granath, 2001).

In basic courses that feature several tasks requiring research (e.g. speeches and written assignments), there are multiple opportunities for interaction with library staff and/or information literacy instruction. The problem is that most universities attempt to teach information literacy skills at the surface level by taking students to the library for a one-time tour and possibly a follow-up assignment (Phillips & Kearley, 2003). Phillips and Kearley (2003) claim that students leave these one-shot approaches to information literacy instruction

without the ability differentiate between a library catalog and an index, scholarly journal and a magazine, or web sources and library databases. It seems clear that more can and should be done to develop students' information literacy skills.

At the same time we completed the critical thinking revisions to our basic course, we also worked with library staff to redesign our information literacy instruction. We began by replacing the one-shot approach we were using (this one contact point occurred early in the semester and included a 50 minute lecture on the databases available in the library). Our course requires students to complete three different speeches (informative, group, and persuasive) and each assignment contains unique research requirements. As a result, the first change we made was to establish three contact points with the library—one for each major speech. The nature of these contacts also changed substantially. Rather than the passive model we had been using, we worked with our librarians to create student-centered approaches that actively engaged students as they developed research strategies for the speeches. During each contact point with the library, students now complete worksheets that guide them through every step of the research process including how to create research questions, generate a list of search terms, search various information sources, and evaluate their search results. In addition, we developed and provided in-class assignments for all sections of the basic course on evaluating information in terms of timeliness, credibility and bias. These core information literacy instructional strategies overlap with and reinforce our efforts to embed critical thinking instruction throughout the course.

We pilot tested these information literacy enhancements alongside our critical thinking enhancements in eight sections of our basic course. These experimental sections were compared to eight control sections that used the passive approach to information literacy instruction described above. As was the case with the critical thinking test, our data revealed that only the experimental sections (pretest M = 6.27, SD = 1.67; posttest M = 6.76, SD = 1.73, the range of this instrument is 0 to 10) experienced statistically significant gains on the information literacy test over time (Meyer et al., 2008). The mean for the control group on the posttest (M = 6.24, SD = 1.49) was not significantly different than the pretest mean (M = 6.14, SD = 1.67). We also observed a statistically significant positive correlation between students' critical thinking and information literacy scores (r = .27, p < .04) which provides additional evidence for the claim that these two sets of skills are integrally related (Meyer et al., 2008). The fact that the control group did not improve significantly over the course of the semester speaks volumes about the importance of intentional instruction. Put simply, we cannot assume that students will improve in these areas simply as a function of conducting research for speeches—our efforts need to be well-designed, substantive, and intentional.

In the final section of this essay we discuss the ways that critical thinking and information literacy instruction form the foundation for the pedagogy of political engagement.

THE CASE FOR PEDAGOGY FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

While it is may be clear to most students that communication skills may enhance their interpersonal relationships or their career aspirations, it may not be immediately clear to them what their responsibilities are as citizens in a democracy. For some instructors, educating for citizenship may be a quaint or archaic idea. However, implicit in the philosophy of general education is shared experience and hence mutual responsibility. Beyer and Liston (1996) point out that *common, community, and communication* all share the same linguistic root and that without these it would be impossible to "establish a widely held social good" (p. 88). Therefore, it is important that basic communication courses, especially those that are part of a general education curriculum or those housed at public institutions, should teach and engender political engagement among their students.

Several scholars have persuasively argued that political disengagement among the youth of this country is an issue that should concern all of those in higher education (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Hillygus, 2005; Spiezio, Baker, & Boland, 2005). This is a problem worth addressing because, as Galston (2003) argues, the withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from our political system places democracy at risk. Unfortunately, the reality today is that few colleges and universities offer programs that are designed to intentionally develop students' political engagement (Beaumont et al., 2006). We agree with Beaumont et al. (2006) that this

lack of interest represents a missed opportunity to the extent that such institutions are "well positioned to promote democratic competencies and participation" (p. 250).

In an attempt to strengthen undergraduate education for engaged citizenship, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) partnered with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and *The New York Times* to create the Political Engagement Project (PEP) (see the following website for additional information: http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/initiatives/engagement.htm). Currently, twelve institutions are active participants in this national initiative; however, the creators of PEP are looking to dramatically expand the institutions participating in the project. Given the essential role of communication in political engagement, those affiliated with the basic course are perfectly situated to take full advantage of this opportunity.

In our own efforts to include pedagogy for political engagement in COM 110, we have learned that such strategies compliment our existing communication pedagogy. For example, we know that critical thinking skills are essential if students are to become critical consumers and producers of information in a democratic society (Browne & Stuart, 2004; O'Keefe, 1995; Tsui, 2000). In other words, it is very difficult for members of our democracy to participate effectively if they cannot think critically. Similarly, students' must be information literate in order to be political engaged. As DeMars, Cameron, and Erwin (2003) argue, information literacy is "central to the practice of democracy" (p. 253). As a result, our lessons addressing critical thinking and in-

formation literacy are also geared to enhance students' political competence. For example, our discussions of argumentation and fallacies include an in-class analysis of recent political advertisements (believe it or not, such advertisements contain several examples of fallacious reasoning). Ultimately, we believe that our emphasis on political engagement is not mutually exclusive with traditional communication pedagogy. Instead, teaching students how to communicate, think critically, evaluate information, and become politically engaged are mutually reinforcing and certainly consistent with the long-standing goal of liberal education to produce well-rounded and engaged citizens.

It is quite clear that if students are to become engaged citizens they must possess the ability to work with others (Ehrlich, 2000). In order to enhance students' group communication and political engagement skills, we modified our group presentation assignment to include the development of a grassroots-style campaign. Students are asked to research multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives on a current and controversial topic. Students then work together to develop a communication campaign that both raises public awareness and presents policies designed to address the root causes of the problems they isolate.

As a follow-up to the spring 2005 assessment of COM 110 mentioned earlier, we collected data in the fall 2005 semester to further explore the impact of our pedagogy on students' critical thinking development. In this study, however, we were also concerned with the relationships between critical thinking and important communication variables such as argumentativeness (a positive communicative behavior rooted in a disposition

to argue about controversial topics constructively) and verbal aggressiveness (a negative communicative behavior relying on such antisocial tactics as name calling, personal attacks, and maledictions). Data analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between the critical thinking and argumentativeness measures (r = .19, $p < .05$) and a significant negative correlation between the critical thinking and verbal aggressiveness measures (r = -.31, $p < .01$) (Hunt et al., 2006). In other words, as students' critical thinking skills improved, they became more likely to report the use of prosocial communication strategies and less likely to report the use of antisocial tactics like name calling and personal attacks. Again, we view such skills as fundamental to meaningful political participation.

As students progress through our basic course, we regularly ask them to consider how they might utilize their communication skills to participate in our democratic system. We also present them with the skills for political engagement provided in Figure 1. As they look over this list, they quickly come to the realization that all of these political engagement skills rest on the foundation of the communication, critical thinking, and information literacy skills covered in the course. In short, as students become more competent communicators, they become better prepared to participate in our democracy. We agree with Hillygus (2005) that politics is a game of communication. In order to engage in political persuasion, an individual must have the verbal and argumentation skills to communicate a position. In her study of the effects of higher education on students' political engagement, Hillygus (2005) found that the best predictor was training in communication skills. She

- Work together with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live.
- Contact or visit a public official—at any level of government—to ask for assistance or to express your opinion
- Contact a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion on an issue or issue a press release detailing your issue
- Call in to a radio or television talk show to express our opinion on an issue.
- Attend a speech, informal seminar, or teach in about politics
- Take part in a protest, march, or demonstration.
- Sign a written or e-mail petition about a political or social issue.
- Work with a political group or for a campaign or political official.
- Boycott something because of conditions under which the product is made, or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it.
- Buy a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces it.
- Work as canvasser going door to door for a political candidate or cause.

Figure 1: Skills for Political Engagement

goes on to state that the findings "suggest that an educational system geared towards developing verbal and civic skills can encourage future participation in American democracy" (p. 41).

We pilot tested this new PEP pedagogy in four sections of the course in the spring of 2007. Two of these PEP enhanced sections contained a video requirement for the group speech, the other two sections developed a more traditional grassroots campaign for the group assignment.[1] These experimental sections of the course were compared to two control sections that lacked any political engagement instruction. We then administered measures of political skills, political efficacy and motivation, and affective learning.

The political skills measure included items assessing students' general interpersonal communication skills as well as specific political skills. As shown in Table 2, data analyses revealed significant pre- to posttest gains on the general interpersonal communication skills measure for all three groups; however, the gains were larger in the experimental PEP sections. This finding is particularly salient in that it provides support for the claim that the pedagogy of political engagement does not crowd out or compete with traditional basic course pedagogy. In fact, the largest gains in communication skills occurred in the PEP sections of COM 110. In addition, our analyses revealed significant pre- to posttest gains on the skills of political influence and action measure for the experimental groups only.

[1] We designed the two experimental sections to test for any unique effects associated with the different group assignments. Our data analyses revealed no significant differences on any of the dependent variables between the experimental groups.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Political Skills Measures

	Video				Grassroots				Control			
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		Pre		Post	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
IPC	27.72_{a}	5.64	32.18_{a}	2.23	27.10_{b}	5.44	31.89_{b}	5.24	29.21_{c}	5.13	30.61_{c}	4.51
Political Skills	21.32_{d}	6.35	27.74_{d}	7.78	19.93_{e}	6.63	27.83_{e}	7.62	23.41	7.04	25.97	5.53

Note: Means with the same subscript are significantly different.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Efficacy and Motivation Measures

	Video				Grassroots				Control			
	Pre		Post		Pre		Post		Pre		Post	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Efficacy	22.65_{a}	6.19	28.32_{a}	6.71	21.16_{b}	6.46	28.04_{b}	6.96	23.81	6.59	24.57	6.85
Motivation			68.23_{c}	16.50			68.64_{d}	13.37			56.03_{cd}	11.23

Note: Means with the same subscript are significantly different.

As Table 3 demonstrates, data analyses revealed significant pre- to posttest gains on the political efficacy measure (e.g., perceptions that respondents could actually influence the political process) for the experimental groups only. In addition to political efficacy, we administered a measure of general course motivation at the end of the semester to all three groups. Our analyses indicated that the two PEP sections reported significantly more motivation for the course (operationalized by items such as "want to study," "inspired," "challenged," and "enthused") compared to the control sections.

We also administered a measure of affective learning (e.g., students' perceptions of the instructor and course content) at the end of the semester to all three groups. As noted in Table 4, students in the two PEP sections

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Affective Learning Measure

	Video		Grassroots		Control	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Content of Course	24.85_{a}	4.94	25.27_{b}	3.87	21.84_{ab}	4.15
Behaviors Recommended	25.65_{d}	4.37	25.76_{e}	3.47	23.28_{de}	3.83
Instructor	25.98_{f}	5.16	26.44_{g}	3.25	22.72_{fg}	5.18
Engage in Behaviors	24.65	5.17	25.30	3.98	23.48	4.70
Enroll in Similar Course	20.89_{h}	8.14	21.67_{i}	6.67	15.98_{hi}	6.51
Overall Affect	122.02_{j}	24.18	129.44_{k}	17.48	107.30_{jk}	19.16

Note: Means with the same subscript are significantly different.

reported significantly more affect for the course compared to students in the control sections. A closer inspection of the subscales indicated that students in the PEP sections reported significantly higher affect for the content of the course, the instructor, the behaviors recommended in the course, and likelihood in enrolling in a similar course in the future compared to students in the traditional sections of COM 110. In short, students in this sample liked the PEP version of COM 110 better than the traditional version of COM 110.

Taken together, these results are consistent with previous research indicating that instructors can successfully promote students' political engagement. For example, Beaumont et al. (2006) found that even students who enter higher education with little interest in politics benefit substantially from strategies designed to encourage political engagement. Also, Spiezio et al.'s (2005) research illustrates that general education courses can feasibly serve as the platform for institutional commitments to the promotion of political engagement. Perhaps most importantly, our analyses revealed no significant pre- to posttest differences for any of the groups on a measure of political ideology (e.g., a general measure of conservatism and liberalism). This finding supports previous research reporting that instructors can successfully implement the pedagogy of political engagement without altering students' political ideology (Colby et al., 2007). In short, explicit, visible, and intentional efforts to promote students' political interests, knowledge, skills, and motivation have been shown to be both feasible and efficacious.

In summary, the basic course in communication can play a substantial role in preparing students to be more

critical producers and consumers of information. We are also convinced that such skills are absolutely necessary at the present time. Beyond equipping students for personal success, we have an obligation to prepare them to be engaged citizens. One look around our current political environment should give any reader pause—our democracy is not especially healthy. If our country ever needed a new generation of savvy critical thinkers that know how to access, use and evaluate information, and how to use their communication skills for the common good, we need them now. For all of you associated with the basic course, you are uniquely qualified and distinctively competent to help students develop communication and political competence. It is not a stretch of the imagination to come to the conclusion that what you do in your classes for this generation of students will substantially impact the future of our democracy. In the end, you and the courses you teach can be the vehicle for positively affecting the attitudes and lives of thousands, or perhaps hundreds of thousands of students, and ultimately the political fate of our country.

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