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# The Communication Center at U.S. Colleges and Universities: A Descriptive Overview

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# The Communication Center at U.S. Colleges and Universities: A Descriptive Overview

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Communication centers continue to develop and evolve at higher education institutions. Originally, communication centers (e.g., speech labs or speech centers) were designed "to assist students enrolled in basic public speaking and communication courses" (Jones, Hunt, Simonds, Comadena, & Baldwin, 2004, p. 105-106). Essentially, centers were an outgrowth of the basic communication course, created to augment instruction by providing students an additional resource to obtain assistance for developing competent public speaking skills (e.g., Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Nelson, Whitfield, & Moreau, 2012; Sellnow & Martin, 2010). Today, the National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) currently lists over 70 higher education institutions with communication centers (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). The steady growth of centers (Helsel & Hogg, 2006; Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012) has propelled the necessity to disseminate practices, research, and a sense of community among communication center, basic course, and communication professionals. The number of centers is expected to increase, especially as the results of effectiveness continue to become better known.

Many previous communication center pioneers failed to institutionalize their centers with the Communica-

tion department and basic communication course (Sellnow & Martin, 2010). Centers are part of the basic communication course and yet separate from the course making it difficult to fully capture what each and every center provides to an academic institution (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Ambiguity exists around communication centers' conceptualization and practical functionality.

Thus, the disciplinary associates in the Basic Course and Communication Center areas have begun to explore and expand communication center awareness. For instance, the National Communication Association's webpage for the Communication Center Section (2012) defines centers as serving students, faculty, staff, and members of the local community. This unspecified definition highlights communication centers as complicated multifaceted structures and organizations varying from institution to institution. Operating under different administrative and educational missions, it is exceptionally difficult to identify commonalities among communication centers (Emery, 2006). Yet, many communication centers' primary function is to supplement the basic communication course. With the ambiguous description and variability of centers, it is imperative to understand the function of centers as an effective and efficient educational resource. Communication center professionals and related basic communication course practitioners have been calling for more research to inform center instruction, pedagogy, and organization (Nelson et al., 2012).

It is therefore appropriate to begin to systematically gather data to enrich collective knowledge as to how these centers are created, organized, and maintained.

To assist in the forward movement of the communication center conversation, it is important that we assess who and what we are to aid the larger conversation of where we are headed as members of this communication subfield. The growing visibility and responsibility acknowledges the need to communicate to others within our discipline the offerings communication centers have for the departments and institutions. This study consolidates descriptive data across current communication centers. It reports and discusses communication center information: institutional context, structure and configuration, services, resources, institution and community impact, and curriculum.

## THE COMMUNICATION CENTERS MOVEMENT

The communication centers movement has gained momentum as a grassroots movement—growing from necessity by the late 1980s. Centers emerged to facilitate students with support outside the classroom for the basic communication course (Preston, 2006). As the necessity grew into a movement in the early 2000s, center directors came together and formed several organizational memberships—the NACC and the Communication Centers Section of the National Communication Association (NCA). The trend for communication centers continues to develop a national presence.

Approximately 1.3 million students take a basic communication course at a U.S. college or university each year (Beebe, 2013). Essentially, the basic communication course is where students are introduced to communication skills and theories (Morreale, Hugenberg, &

Worley, 2006). The basic communication course is foundational to the discipline of communication and communication centers. Universities and colleges choose to create communication centers to provide places for students to practice their public speaking skills (e.g., Nelson et al., 2012). Centers historically were established to improve public speaking skills in conjunction with basic communication courses (McCracken, 2006). Most centers began operations as an outgrowth of the basic course (Nelson et al., 2012). There is an inherent relationship between both basic communication course and communication center personnel. Because many basic communication course directors work closely with communication center directors, faculty, and students it is important to identify commonalities among centers. It is hard to imagine communication centers would exist without the basic course.

These on-site facilities assist basic communication course instructors with additional instruction for students, speaking practice, and tutoring services (Sellnow & Martin, 2010). Centers have been successful in assisting students' improvement in oral communication competencies and associated with reducing public speaking anxiety and building confidence (e.g., Dwyer, Carlson, & Kahre, 2002; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Hunt & Simonds, 2002). Furthermore, communication centers allow students to receive peer feedback from other students (i.e., peer tutors), access to video recording equipment for self-reflection, and assistance with basic communication course assignments.

Presently practitioners have dedicated minimal time to study their communication centers movement that would enable scholarship to support and challenge prac-

tices (Preston, 2006). Two prior studies (e.g., Helsel & Hogg, 2006; Preston, 2006) conducted summative reviews about the communication centers movement in order to ascertain generalizable information on centers' practices. These studies had limited samples constrained by low response rates. Thereby, in order to continue exploring common practices and gain credibility surrounding communication centers within the broader discipline, it is important to gather information from more centers and disseminate communication research more widely. Our study's purpose is to continue communication centers exploration providing more depth and breadth that previous scholarship lacked about trends and tendencies of centers. Additionally, this descriptive overview updates communication centers information and extends communication center knowledge and its movement.

Although many centers' missions are largely organized around a similar aim—to provide an opportunity for learners to develop competent communicative behaviors (Jones et al., 2004) and support basic communication course or communication across the curriculum programs (Von Till, 2012)—there is still variation among practices. The increasing visibility of communication centers as an auxiliary student resource outside the classroom suggests that this is an ideal time to investigate communication centers common and diverse purposes. Clearly communication centers are designed to primarily augment basic communication course instruction. Professionals have been calling for further investigation of center services to better understand what additional functions centers provide (e.g., Morreale et al., 2006; Preston, 2006).

Beyond common missions, the functionality of communication centers has only received limited investigation. In one early study the National Communication Association surveyed ten communication center supervisors about their perceptions of the centers on their campuses (Morreale, 2001). The information gathered from this informal survey described the advantages and disadvantages of having a center. Thus demands require more research on communication centers for supervisors as well as for increasing students' access. As Dwyer and Davidson (2012) reported many students do not take full advantage of all center's resources; therefore, more research must examine current practices. Currently, scholarship about centers is in short supply but continues to grow. In response, recently an edited book (e.g., Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012) completely dedicated to communication centers was published. However, in order to better direct basic course and center practitioners and offer insight into center's contributions to the communication discipline and higher education at large, additional resources and information are needed.

### Exploration of Centers

Examination of these centers will be useful to: understand the place of these centers, explain their function from a generalizable perspective, and ascertain the trends and tendencies of these centers overall. As a valuable asset to the basic communication course and communication across-the-curriculum programs at higher education institutions, additional communication center exploration has potential for assisting in the develop-

ment of common practices and general approaches for current and future centers. This study presumes the explicit and implicit value centers have to the aims of the basic communication course and undergraduate learning; it is expressly designed to provide descriptions as a means of identifying current practices. The data included in this article outlines trends across communication centers and serves as a potential next step towards growing respect for communication center services and professionals.

## METHOD

This study of communication centers surveyed directors or individuals who oversee the centers at two- and four-year institutions of higher education. The survey design replicates rationale from the basic communication course survey (e.g., Morreale et al., 2010) in an effort to generalize and characterize the current state of communication centers in the United States.

### *Instrumentation*

The survey sought responses regarding (a) institutional context of the center (e.g., enrollment or type of institution); (b) center structure and configuration (e.g., managerial duties); (c) center services (e.g., popular services or catalogue student consultations); (d) center resources (e.g., technology access); (e) center at the institution and in the community (e.g., accessibility to department); and (f) center and curriculum (e.g., standardized curriculum). The survey included 80 items con-

sisting of 57 closed and 23 open questions. The survey was posted online and administered through Qualtrics to facilitate accessibility and responsiveness. This study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Participation was completely voluntary and those who participated could opt to retain their anonymity. Total time required to complete the survey was approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

## *Sampling*

Recruitment of the sample, communication center directors or individuals overseeing the center, was via an online survey link and was made available at the following locations: Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET), Communication Centers Listserv (commcenters@listserve.eku.edu), and Basic Communication Course Listserv (basiccc@lists.udayton. edu). Additionally, in order to reach other directors, solicitation to participate in the survey was also included in the *Communication Centers Newsletter* (LeFebvre, 2011) and a public announcement was made during Communication Centers Section Meeting at the 2011 National Communication Association conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The number of responses ($N = 40$) represents 57.79% response rate among the total recorded number of communication centers (NACC, 2012). According to Baxter and Babbie (2004), they suggest a 50% response rate is adequate and 60% satisfies opportunity for analysis and reporting of a population. Future investigations would hope to collect data from a greater number of respondents representing additional centers, since communica-

tion centers are a burgeoning area within the communi-
cation field.

## Analysis

The descriptive results were comprised of quantita-
tive and qualitative findings. The quantitative results
used frequencies to calculate the summative experi-
ences. The qualitative results emerge from open-ended
questions using grounded theory. We employed a con-
stant comparative method to make sense of the data by
identifying themes across the answers (Glaser &
Strauss, 1967). We used open and axial coding to iden-
tify categories and gain insight into the themes under-
lying the responses. To begin we read the answers sev-
eral times to become familiar with the content. The first
author was more familiar with communication centers,
whereas the second author was less familiar operating
as a naïve coder. Then the authors engaged in open
coding by allowing the responses to speak about the ex-
periences directors have with their communication cen-
ters. Open coding was first performed to specifically
identify the central concepts to three open-ended ques-
tions (e.g., tutor training, marketing, and administra-
tive/faculty challenges) and then compared the re-
sponses. Next, we utilized axial coding to map the rela-
tionship between and within the responses. The analy-
sis was suspended when saturation was reached among
the responses yielding no additional findings. Three
overarching procedural phases (i.e., employment pre-
requisites, pre-employment training, and employment
training) for tutor training and four marketing strate-
gies (i.e., direct, indirect, professional relationship, and

digital) emerged. Three administrative (director, staff, and center) and two faculty challenges (naïveté or misuse) were also indicated.

## RESULTS

The following results were compiled from 40 respondents, 34 at four-year and six at two-year colleges and universities. The total response rate varies in the results; this is based on the respondent's (i.e., directors) discretion and ability to answer questions related to the specific communication centers. We report frequencies because some directors did not answer some questions, which causes the numbers per question to vary. We chose to keep all responses because we were attempting to show any and all practices within centers. Frequencies indicate the number of directors to answer a particular question and are reflected as percentages. The findings are followed by a summative discussion of some of the more significant quantitative and qualitative findings and denoted interpretations by the authors of the meaningful current trends of communication centers.

### *Institutional Context of the Center*

**Size and type of institution**. Respondents ($N$ = 36) provided a description of the size of their institutions using student enrollment data. The enrollment across institutions ranged from 1,600 to 70,000 ($M$ = 16,080.72). Regarding the type of institution responding ($N$ = 40) 34 were four-year (85%) institutions and six

were two-year (15%). The types of institutions (Carnegie classification) represented in this survey ($N$ = 38) were: 11 indicated Research I (28.9%), four indicated Research II (10.5%), five indicated a Master's of Arts Level I (13.2%), two indicated a Master's of Arts Level II (5.3%), eight indicated a Bachelor's of Arts/Liberal Arts (20.1%), two indicated a Bachelor's of Arts/General degree (5.3%), and six indicated an Associate's degree (15.8%).

**Affiliation, size, and type of department**. Respondents ($N$ = 39) were asked if their center had department affiliation. The majority of respondents ($N$ = 29) indicated that their communication center was affiliated with a department (74.4%). The remaining respondents ($N$ = 10), who indicated they do not have departmental affiliation, were asked if their center had institutional affiliation. Six of those respondents indicated they did have institutional affiliation. Communication centers reported affiliation with departments as follows: communication (82.8%), learning center (6.9%), business (3.4%), undergraduate studies (3.4%), and accounting (3.4%). Respondents ($N$ = 34) indicated the membership of their department of affiliation ranged from zero to 43 ($M$ = 9.50, $SD$ = 8.57) tenure track faculty. Respondents ($N$ = 38) indicated the membership of their department of affiliation ranged from zero to 50 ($M$ = 7.87, $SD$ = 9.08) non-tenure track faculty. Respondents ($N$ = 26) indicated the membership of their department of affiliation ranged from zero to 41 ($M$ = 9.38, $SD$ = 10.79) graduate teaching assistants.

**Budget.** Respondent-reported data ($N$ = 37) related to budget indicated that 56.8% of centers had financial support while 43.2% did not. Respondents whose centers received funding allocation ($N$ = 16) indicated their cen-

ters received an annual budget that ranged from $1,000 to $135,000 ($M$ = 44,359.38, $Md$ = 30,000, $SD$ = 42,079.29).

**Logistics and operations**. Respondents ($N$ = 37) provided a description of the logistics of their communication centers, specifically space allocation – 86.5% of respondents indicated their centers had distinct space, while 13.5% indicated they do not have space for their centers. According to respondents ($N$ = 25), communication centers varied in space allocation with a range from 75 to 4000 square feet ($M$ = 895.20, $Md$ = 500). Respondents ($N$ = 33) provided data on the weekly and daily hours of operation. The range of weekly hours of operation was 10 to 90 hours ($M$ = 30.7, $SD$ = 15.46). The range of daily hours of operation was two to 10 hours ($M$ = 5.79, $SD$ = 2.33).

### Center Structure and Configuration

**Center title and existence.** Respondents ($N$ = 38) indicated that the title of their communication centers varied from Speaking/Speech Center (35%), Communication Center (30%), Communication Lab (20%), to some other title (15%) (e.g., Presentation Practice Center, Public Speaking Resource Center, Leadership and Professional Development Center). The respondents ($N$ = 38) also reported the length of their center's existence from establishment to the present date of the survey ranged from 0 to 37 years ($M$ = 8.26, $Md$ = 5.50).

**Center management.** Respondents ($N$ = 35) reported that their centers had a designated individual who oversaw the center's operations. Titles of these individuals included director (80.6%), coordinator (9.7%),

and other (9.7%) (e.g., faculty advisor, supervisor, administrative support staff). Respondents ($N = 31$) were asked to list their years of experience managing a communication center. The range of communication center management experience reported ranged from zero to 16 years ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 4.27$). Center directors ($N = 35$) were comprised of 30 females (85.7%) and five males (14.3%). Ethnicity ($N = 35$) was 31 white, non-Hispanic (89.3%), two multiracial (5.7%), one Asian pacific (2.5%), and one preferred not to answer (2.5%). Respondents' ages ($N = 34$) ranged from 27 to 61 ($M = 42.82$, $SD = 10.24$). The majority of these individuals ($N = 35$) indicated earning a doctoral degree (62.9%) or a master's degree (37.1%). The vast majority of center directors ($N = 40$) earned their degree in Communication (82.9%) while the remaining directors earned a degree in English (5.7%), Theatre (5.7%), Education (2.9%), or Cultural Studies (2.9%).

**Center accountability.** The respondents ($N = 35$) identified to whom in the administrative hierarchy the center director was accountable for the center's operations. Respondents indicated the dean (20%), departmental chair (20%), course director/program supervisor (17.1%), vice chancellor/vice president/provost (14.3%), chair and dean (11.5%), other (11.5%) (e.g., faculty, academic services), and uncertain (5.7%).

**Staff and tutors**. Respondents were asked to report the number of staff and tutors who compromised their communication center. From the respondents ($N = 38$) the total number of individuals employed as the center's staff ranged from 3 to 179 ($M = 30.97$, $Md = 18$). A breakdown of staff and tutors that comprise communication centers' staff as reported by respondents was: 114

underclass tutors, 136 upper-class tutors, 59 graduate students, six part-time faculty, and 14 full-time faculty.

**Tutor training**. Respondents ($N$ = 37) indicated that communication center tutor training ranged from zero to 75 hours ($M$ = 16.17). Open-ended responses indicated three overarching procedural phases – employment prerequisites, pre-employment training, and employment training. Respondents reported a variety of *employment prerequisites* that included completion and achievement in public speaking, professional communication or pedagogy training coursework, practicum or shadowing hours, employment skills examination and/or speech. Also, respondents indicated that a successful interview process and professor recommendations were utilized to screen in the training process. Various *pre-employment training procedures* were identified comprising brief to extensive trainings experienced in one-on-one and group settings that included tutorials, mock consultations, role-playing scenarios, and common practices. Lastly, respondents reported *employment training* procedures that involved more intense skill and knowledge development through peer mentoring and collaborative training initiated in the pre-employment phase. The most frequent responses noted face-to-face weekly or monthly training sessions. Other procedures involved online training, observation, seminars, guest speakers, and assigned readings in some combination with continual assessment from student feedback, peer evaluations, director's evaluation, and staff meetings.

Additionally, respondents were asked to describe what ongoing training took place throughout the semester. Respondents ($N$ = 29) indicated that ongoing training ranged from zero to 48 hours ($M$ = 10.14). Open-

ended responses reported ongoing training time allocation and training activities. Respondents time allocation to ongoing training included: weekly individual discussions, experiential training courses, staff meetings; bimonthly and monthly meetings; online training sessions; professional development seminars; periodic meetings; and minimal to no current ongoing training. Respondents identified comparable activities utilized in employment training. Additional activities included debriefing about the week's consultations, speech evaluation, and feedback.

Also, respondents ($N$ = 33) indicated whether a training manual was utilized at their communication center. Currently, there is no standardized training manual for communication centers. Therefore, directors are responsible for creating their own training manual. The majority of communication center directors (57.6%) did not use a tutorial training manual at their center.

**Center certification**. The National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) offers a tutor training and certification program for communication centers. The process for certification consists of a review by the NACC's immediate past chair, chair, vice-chair, and vice-chair elect. Respondents ($N$ = 35) were asked to indicate if they had received NACC tutor training and certification for their communication centers. The vast majority of respondents (91.4%) indicated their program was not certified by the NACC. A follow-up question asked respondents ($N$ = 32) to indicate if they had intentions of pursuing NACC certification: 46.9% indicated they are interested in having their center's tutor training program certified, while 51.5% indicated they were not interested in pursuing certification.

## CENTER SERVICES

**Consultations and tracking usage.** Respondents ($N = 34$) unanimously indicated that the most popular service of their communication center was public speaking (100%). The respondents ($N = 30$) reported that an average of 32 course sections utilized the center in a given semester. Respondents ($N = 33$) indicated that both individual and group consultations were provided (100%). Total consultations in a given semester, according to respondents ($N = 26$), ranged from 25 to 3000 ($M = 480.81$, $SD = 614.28$). However, it should be noted that the individual who reported 3000 indicated this was an approximate estimation and that consultations were not calculated at their center. Respondents ($N = 14$) indicated that the average number of hours per semester spent consulting with students ranged from 20 to 18,000 hours ($M = 1843.82$, $SD = 4823.06$). Respondents ($N = 33$) were asked if e-tutoring was available at their centers, 81.8% indicated it was not available.

**Consultation focus.** Respondents were asked to identify the top three issues students seek assistance for at their communication center. These open-ended responses were compiled as a complete list of issues to identify the frequency of type and consultation focus that occurred at centers. The foremost client issue according to the respondents were: delivery (29.1%), followed by organization of speech (15.1%), outlining (15.1%), topic selection (12.8%), presentational technology (5.8%), speaking apprehension (5.8%), video feedback (4.7%), gathering support material (3.5%), specific course related assignments (3.5%), group presentations

(2.3%), interviewing (2.3%), and introducing the speech (1.2%).

## Center Resources

**Equipment and technology**. Respondents ($N = 13$) estimated the cost of equipment for the communication center averaged \$17,770. They were asked to identify what type of equipment was available at their centers. Responses indicated their communication centers included: tables (77.5%), chairs (77.5%), computers (77.5%), video recording equipment (77.5%), desks (72.5%), dry erase boards (65%), lecterns (62.5%), bookcase (57.5%), LCD projector (47.5%), printers (45%), practice rooms (42.7%), overhead projector (27.5%), and file cabinets (15%).

## Center at the Institution and in the Community

**Marketing.** In open-ended responses ($N = 35$), respondents identified multi-level marketing strategies utilized to promote and strengthen awareness, increase service knowledge, and encourage use. Respondents indicated four key marketing strategies to target students—direct, indirect, professional relationship, and digital. First, respondents overwhelmingly indicated use of direct marketing, which encompassed face-to-face communication from current and previous students, tutors, interns, staff, and faculty members, and directors. These self-promotion strategies emphasized past testimonials, positive experiences, and/or direct engagement of students with tours, tutors, services, and the center. The second strategy utilized indirect techniques in-

cluding: distribution of promotion materials (e.g., newsletters, flyers, or highlighters) or sponsorships (e.g., brown bag lunches, special speaking events, or annual fora). Third, respondents reported professional relationship marketing that highlighted an instructional relationship with faculty curriculum including listing center information in their syllabi, offering time for classroom workshops, and promoting attendance as a classroom requirement or extra credit. Relationship marketing also included partnerships with classes or student organizations. Finally, respondents mentioned digital marketing as a widely utilized strategy. This involved publicizing the communication center on departmental and university websites as well as more mainstream universal outlets such as social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Also, respondents noted promotion involved more traditional media for informational distribution: campus marquees, electronic bulletin boards, blogs, and email announcements.

**Workshops**. Respondents ($N = 32$) indicated their communication centers provided workshops for academic departments 46.9% of the time (time refers to how often this task occurs) during an academic year. The same respondents indicated their communication centers provided workshops for the academic institution 59.4% of the time during an academic year. Finally, respondents indicated their communication centers provided workshops for the community 12.5% of the time during an academic year.

Table 1
*Directors' Perceptions of Communication Center Support*

| | Very Supportive | Supportive | Neither Supportive or Unsupportive | Unsupportive | Very Unsupportive | Not Applicable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full-time Faculty Within Department (N = 33) | 42.4% | 42.4% | 12.1% | 3% | -- | -- |
| Part-time Faculty Within Department (N = 32) | 28.1% | 53.1% | 12.5% | -- | -- | 6.3% |
| Graduate Teaching Assistant (N = 33) | 27.3% | 9.1% | 9.1% | -- | -- | 54.5% |
| Faculty Outside Department N = 33 | 9.3% | 39.4% | 27.3% | -- | 3% | 21.2% |
| Administration (N = 33) | 39.4% | 48.5% | 6.1% | 3% | -- | 3% |

## CENTER AND CURRICULUM

**Syllabi and support.** Respondents ($N$ = 32) indicated that the communication center was not mentioned in course syllabi (68.8%). See Table 1 for the perceived support of full- and part-time faculty, graduate teaching assistants, faculty outside the department, and administration of their respective center. Overall the majority of full-time faculty within the department were perceived by directors as being very supportive and supportive (84.8%) of the communication center. Part-time faculty were perceived as being supportive and very supportive (81.2%). Most directors (54.5%) do not have graduate teaching assistants; however, those that do have communication centers with graduate teaching assistants reported that the majority is very supportive of the center. When comparing faculty within the department to those faculty outside the department directors perceive that they appear supportive to neither supportive or unsupportive. By and large directors see administration as supportive and very supportive (87.9%) of the communication center.

**Administrative challenges.** In the open-ended responses, respondents ($N$ = 28) identified key challenges they face with their administration. Respondents also reported that they primarily experience tangible difficulties acknowledging a variety of factors related to directors, staff, and/or the center. Directors were confronted with challenges including release time, financial compensation, faculty track position, and overall support. Respondents also identified staff related obstacles in regards to their administration including lack of financial compensation, summer and travel funding op-

portunities. Finally, respondents indicated center-focused challenges that included: budget problems, space allocation issues, equipment needs, limited public relations resources, lack of support, technological assistance, knowledge of the communication center, services, and resources.

**Faculty challenges.** Additional qualitative responses ($N = 25$) identified key problems respondents face from faculty. Two particular faculty challenges they experienced were naïveté or misuse. Faculty challenges from naïveté included: lack of knowledge about the center (e.g., hours, time constraints, purpose), limited faculty diffusion of information about the center, limited capacity to extend services beyond resources or other interdisciplinary subjects, unclear roles and responsibilities, lack of support from faculty network, and difficulty in generating marketing and public relations efforts. Additionally, challenges emerged from misuse included inappropriately substituting class time with center services and sending students to the center without a purpose or set goal.

## DISCUSSION

These findings support the fact that there are many varied complexities associated with operating and organizing an efficient center. To date little research has been gathered and identified about communication center data. This data highlights that establishing a center is one challenge while maintaining a viable center is another thing altogether. With the evolution of pre-existing centers and emergence of new centers, it is im-

portant to identify tasks associated with establishing and maintaining a center. In order to expand beyond the descriptive results, we highlight five interpretative discussion points that arise from the findings.

First, logically situating a communication center's affiliation within a Communication department establishes center credibility and an identity at its early stages of development because of its relationship to the basic communication course. As noted in the most recent survey of the basic communication course (Morreale et al., 2010), over 50% of students enroll in the basic communication course focused exclusively on public speaking, and another 36% enroll in a hybrid basic communication course that includes public speaking as part of the curriculum. Therefore, 86% of students are exposed to public speaking through the basic course, which communication centers support to maintain the integrity of the communication skills taught in the basic course. As communication centers directors unanimously reported, public speaking in this survey is the most popular service provided by communication centers. Directors articulated that communication centers primarily consult on public speaking, which explicitly stems from the relationship to both the basic communication course and Communication departments. Thus, it makes sense that respondents reported in this study that 82.8% of communication centers are affiliated with Communication departments. It appears that connecting to a Communication department allows a center to have roots within the college or university that may enable more stability. Faculty considering or working to establish a center at their institution would be wise to procure endorsement from their basic course and Com-

munication department to give the center a firm scholarly foundation.

Next, more than half of the responses indicated that the center is supported financially by their institution/department. Funding is essential to hire staff, obtain space, and secure technology needed to offer services. To maintain funding support, the value of the services provided must be clearly communicated to administration, especially in today's financial climate of accountability and assessment. It seems prudent, at a minimum, to track the number of consultations that occur, note when these consultations take place (day of week and time of day), and keep records of the consultation focus. Additionally, centers should incorporate a feedback mechanism to gather information about usefulness from the students assisted (e.g., Nelson et al., 2012). Many times the quantitative data and qualitative comments received from these individuals can be quite powerful to maintain support for sustainability.

Third, visibility begins by acknowledging and informing students and faculty within the Communication discipline and in other disciplines of the center's availability and usefulness. To maintain the presence of a center, directors and departments must show evidence of its utilization and constructive impact on student achievement. Communication center leadership often has the responsibility of marketing the resource center to faculty, staff, and students. A number of effective strategies provided by respondents include: class visitations, course section tours of the center, campus advertisements on television monitors, and classroom workshops. Department faculty members with whom the center is affiliated are essential to connecting students to

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the communication center. Marketing the communication center to students is essential; otherwise, valuable and limited resources may be squandered in varying budgetary conditions ($1,000 to $135,000). Additionally, nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that the center was not mentioned in course syllabi provided to students from department faculty. Departments can demonstrate support for centers in no better way than to assert departmental standards reflecting the value of these resources by either strongly suggesting or mandating information about the center be included in faculty syllabi guidelines.

Furthermore, directors opted out of certification by the NACC. A majority of respondents (91.4%) indicated that their tutor training programs are not certified and of that number fully half indicated little if any interest in seeking certification. We speculated on several factors that may account for this course of action. The procedures and standards for certification have only recently been approved by the national organization (Turner & Sheckels, 2010). Center directors and facilitators may not be uniformly convinced that heightened respect, recognition, or institutional legitimacy will inevitably result from certification. This is an interesting controversy for the leadership and membership of the organization. As the organization continues to grow as a result of more communication centers its membership will need to explore certification support and recommendation processes.

Fifth, most communication centers have only been in existence for approximately eight years. Centers are still a relatively new resource for departments with formats varying from one institution to another. Never-

theless, we are learning what processes and procedures make for a successful and highly utilized communication center. The NACC organization is situated to aid in creating documents to assist departments that are establishing centers at their institutions. The NACC should consider creating and publishing a document that provides start-up tips and practices for founding a communication center. Thus, departments considering adding this valuable resource would benefit from information provided in this article or from the NACC website when initiating a communication center.

Furthermore, the resurgence of centers in the last decade would be greatly aided by an organization that would provide leadership for outlining strategic plans, offering an outlet for communication center research, and disseminating that body of research to established and developing center directors. For instance, Weiss (1998) found half of the centers implemented in the 1980s had been discontinued a decade later due to financial issues, lack of leadership, and not firmly rooting centers in a department to aid in institutional integration. It would seem that what started as a grassroots movement now is at a stage in its development where the NACC organization is able to offer a top-down approach that is coordinated and able to promote communication center development.

Lastly, the NACC would be wise to consider establishing a communication center journal, in the near future, to expand its voice and value. Currently, collaborative research is undertaken in outlets, such as the *Basic Communication Course Annual*. Another research outlet would enhance the collaborative sharing scholarship already existing between basic course and communication

center directors (e.g., Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Nelson et al., 2012) and continue to enhance the services and learning for much needed research related to centers.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current study accumulates communication centers descriptive data within the United States and as with any study has several limitations and provides insight for future directions. One limitation with this research is the sample size ($N = 40$). The sample was appropriate for conducting the study, but limits its generalizability to the full center experience. Although, this study extends description beyond previous studies, we must continually obtain a wider diversity of experiences. For instance, more participation from directors would allow for a greater holistic perspective of communication centers. Additionally, future replications of the study should consider improving the response rate by on-site sampling at the NACC conference or NCA conference. This would allow for improved standards of assessment and consistency for effective centers and sharing of information.

A second limitation of the study was grouping all communication centers into a single examination. It may be pertinent to examine the services provided by two- and four-year communication centers to compare differences or determine if differences exist. Also, future surveys might examine diversity in promotion, hiring practices, staffing, and center services at these differing institutions. To date few studies have examined centers' effectiveness, usefulness to students, and connection to

public speaking competencies (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Examinations across center practices beyond description would also assist in identifying effective and 'best' practices for stimulating student learning in communication centers. Lastly, communication centers sometimes operate in association with other departments and it might be important to expand center applications by extending study to similar departmental centers and disciplines. Understanding the similarities and differences that exist between centers may generate insight into general practices and common approaches.

## CONCLUSION

The immediate purpose of this study was to examine data about communication centers at U.S. colleges and universities. The value of centers to the discipline of communication, basic communication course, and communication across the curriculum programs will continue to have a larger impact as the centers movement continues to emerge as a viable resource at institutions across the country. It appears that these centers will continue to play a larger role in the education of 21st century college students. Institutions allocating resources to support centers are organizing facilities that facilitate learning opportunities for student engagement and institutional integration. As centers continue to evolve and research becomes more generalizable centers have the capacity to be a very rich resource for investigating student retention and learning. Over the long-term this study will be replicated to gather longitudinal data about centers to track their development and pre-

dict the future of communication centers as a resource and service facility assisting learners to pursue excellence in communication education skills. It is imperative that communication education continues to expand center scholarship and this study initializes numerous opportunities for future research and growth.

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