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Nontraditional Students, Multilingual Learners, and University Type: The Vital Missing Comparisons in our Basic Course Research

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After the G.I. Bill was passed in 1944, the United States saw a massive expansion of higher education. The subsequent economic growth, expanding middle class, and support of public education meant that more Americans had access to college education than ever before (Bok, 2006). In the decades that followed, a typical or “traditional” college student was a person who entered a four-year university at the age of eighteen immediately after completing high school, attended full-time, considered their education a full-time responsibility, had no dependents, was employed part-time or not at all, and graduated in four years (Center for Institutional Effectiveness, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Most descriptions also assume that traditional students are born in the US, speak English as their first language, and live in student housing on or near campus.

However, the majority of students in college and university classrooms today do not reflect these “traditional” characteristics. Today, only 25% of all students in the U.S. attend school full-time at residential colleges; the remaining 75% are considered non-traditional students, and roughly 40% of these are part-time stu-

dents (Complete College America, 2011). Thirty-one percent of students are enrolled in 2-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In 2014-2015, 886,052 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Institute for International Education, 2014), and many universities facing budget cuts are trying to increase international student recruiting. Approximately 12% of undergraduates are immigrants (Erisman & Looney, 2007), 20% of people living in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and a rapidly growing proportion of college students are part of Generation 1.5, which includes students who attended U.S. schools but also learned English as a second language. Furthermore, classroom interactions and campus and local cultures can vary widely between regions. Since the basic communication course is frequently required for most or all students at many colleges and universities as part of a general education requirement, and because the basic course is typically intended to help incoming undergraduate students build communication skills that they will use in other courses, their future careers, and in their communities, this diversity of student preparation and experience has important implications for how we approach the basic course.

Unfortunately, one of the weaknesses in basic course, communication education, and instructional communication research is that most of this research does not represent the learning experiences of many of today's college students, nor does it help to discern the potentially differing needs of these groups of students. We examined the articles published in the *Basic Communication Course Annual (BCCA)* since its inception

27 years ago and the last decade of research published in *Communication Education (CE)* to assess the extent to which the diverse experiences of students are represented and analyzed, and the findings were limited at best.

In 27 years of research during which 235 articles were published in the *BCCA*, there were five articles about issues related to ESL and international students (Hao, 2010; Murphy, 1993; Quigley, Hendrix, & Freisem, 1998; Yook, 1997; Yook & Seiler, 1990), four about race or whiteness (Fotsch, 2008; Prividera, 2006; Treinen, 2004; Treinen & Warren, 2001), one about veterans (Roost, 2015), and one about deafness (Johnson, Pliner, & Burkhart, 2002). Additionally, there was a collection of five manuscripts written twenty years ago about cultural diversity in the basic course, but all of those were case studies or reflection pieces that provided recommendations based on author experience (Goulden, N.R., 1996; Kelly, C., 1996; Oludaja, B. & Honken, C., 1996; Powell, K.A., 1996; Sellnow, D.D., & Littlefield, R.S., 1996). While there is value in this type of work, these articles did not provide empirical data that could be used to assess the effectiveness of the basic course for different types of students and universities, nor did they provide models of the kind of assessment data differentiating effectiveness by student classification that is so often required by institutional assessment offices and accreditation organizations. Only one study compared the effectiveness of an instructional technique at two universities in different regions and found significant differences, but those differences were attributed to possible training effects with no exploration of the potential impact of regional cultural

influences (Broeckelman-Post, Titsworth, & Brazeal, 2011).

Similarly, only ten of the 155 research articles published in *CE* in the last decade included data collected on multiple campuses, and none tested for differences by campus or region. Only eight studies included participants enrolled in non-US universities, and only five of those studies made cross-cultural comparisons. All but five studies that involved undergraduate students had a mean age between 18 and 23, only 12 of the studies that reported ethnicity did not involve predominantly Caucasian samples, and only two studies involved a significant population of students who primarily spoke a language other than English. Put another way, most of our research is conducted on “traditional” students at large, residential campuses. Because there has been a tendency to use single-campus designs and then generalize to all college students, there is an implicit assumption embedded in our research that all college students are similar. This implies that instructional communication and communication education processes work the same way everywhere, including in the basic course, but there is little evidence to support or reject this assumption.

This lack of diversity in our student samples and absence of direct, empirical comparisons among groups of students and geographic regions of the United States is a significant weakness. Without such data, it is difficult to ensure that our courses are being adequately tailored to meet the needs of all of our students and impossible to know whether best practices can be transferred effectively from one institution to another, particularly across geographic regions and university types.

If we want our research to have useful implications for teaching and learning in classrooms across college contexts, we need to conduct research using student samples that more accurately reflect these changing demographics and that are sensitive to differences across geographic regions and types of institutions. Specifically, we suggest that future basic course research include a more careful consideration of the following:

1. Include demographic items that indicate whether a student is traditional or nontraditional, such as age, employment, parenthood, transfer/non-transfer, military service, and residential/commuter status. Instead of simply reporting demographics as descriptive statistics, we also need to include these variables in our analyses to identify whether there are group differences and perhaps do away with the “traditional” and “non-traditional” labels for students entirely since those distinctions represent too many types of student situations to be useful. For example, one potential question might be, “Is there a difference in the degree to which taking a basic course increases communication competence between students who have full time jobs and those who are not employed?”
2. Seek to discover the most effective pedagogies for multilingual students with a range of English language proficiencies. As universities seek to expand international student enrollments and as Generation 1.5 students become an even larger proportion of our college student population, it is critical that we understand how to best teach

communication skills in diverse linguistic environments. There is already a glaring need at many universities with large immigrant and Generation 1.5 populations, and this will soon be an urgent pedagogical concern on all campuses since such students are expected to comprise one-third of all K-12 students by 2040 (Erisman & Looney, 2007). For example, we should ask, “Does the current basic communication course address the needs of L1, Gen 1.5, and L2 students equally well?”

3. Collect data at multiple types of universities and/or in multiple geographic regions and draw comparisons between the university types or regions in the analysis. Currently, we have very little research that examines whether differences exist by university type and region. Such studies could provide insight into how to best adapt instructional practices to the university setting and local culture and might challenge long-held assumptions based on data collected on a single campus. Broeckelman-Post et al. (2015) began this conversation when they found that regional differences exist in the way that teacher misbehaviors impact student interest and engagement, and future research questions could investigate whether there are university and regional differences in student communication needs, responses to teacher variables such as immediacy, and the ways that various classroom techniques impact communication apprehension and information literacy, to name just a few examples.

4. Include other dimensions of cultural and intellectual diversity as variables in our studies, such as national cultural dimensions (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and others), political affiliation, faith tradition, cognitive complexity, physical and cognitive (dis)ability, and more. For example, we might want to examine whether students from high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures experience similar levels of communication apprehension when giving speeches, or whether there is a difference in the types of arguments used by politically conservative and liberal students in their speeches.

We have a changing student body in our colleges and universities, and research that reflects and seeks to understand the rich diversity of learners and experiences in all of our classrooms is critical. This is not simply an opportunity, but also a responsibility that we must fulfill in order to help ensure the success of our future students and the future viability of our basic course programs.

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