

Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 30

Article 12


2018

Eliminating the Oral Communication Requirement: A Response

Joseph M. Valenzano III

University of Dayton, jvalenzanoiii1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Valenzano, Joseph M. III (2018) "Eliminating the Oral Communication Requirement: A Response," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 30 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol30/iss1/12>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Basic Course Forum: Advocacy

Eliminating the Oral Communication Requirement: A Response

Joseph M. Valenzano III, University of Dayton

Abstract

Authors were asked to prepare an essay as if they were writing a letter to their dean (whose academic training was in another discipline) who (1) asked that enrollment in each basic course section be increased to a level that compromises the pedagogy of the basic course or (2) proposed that the required basic communication course be eliminated from the university's general education program.

Dear Dean Wermzer,

Thank you for inviting me to respond to your draft proposal for a revised general education curriculum. I would like to reiterate my grave concerns with the proposed elimination of the oral communication requirement in this proposal. In your proposal, you provide four reasons you believe this is the most viable path forward. I would like to provide some information that I believe may change your perspective on this path.

1. There is content overlap with required English courses.

In theory, English courses and our required courses in communication share some content, like outlining and constructing a bibliography; however, not only are those parallels tenuous, they also are where any commonalities in instructional content cease. The argument is tenuous because one could make the case outlining

and citation skills overlap with a great many courses in a student's curriculum, not just communication. Additionally, the courses are more different than similar, in that English courses do not train students to orally present material in a variety of formats and also do not have the focus on adapting to audiences that communication courses do. Rather, English requirements in general education typically are in areas of literature and written composition, not oral communication. For example, according to the Humanities Indicators project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, first-year composition is the most commonly taken humanities course by students seeking a BA, where writing and grammar are the core of course content. Oral Communication is listed separately, coming in at ninth on the list, just two slots ahead of another English course, Literature, which focuses on the reading and analysis of famous literary works ("American Academy").

The split in focus and course content can actually be traced back to when Communication broke off from English in the early 20th century. At that time, Herbert Wichelns (1925) declared one of the major differences between the two disciplines was the fact Communication concerned itself with "situated oratory" and adapting ideas to particular audiences in specific situations, whereas English was more focused on beauty and aesthetics. This is not to say such a disciplinary bent is unimportant for our students, but rather to underscore the significant difference between the two disciplines and highlight the training in adaptability our students would lose should we eliminate the communication requirement.

2. Delivering speeches is no longer a common workforce experience.

I know that several of my colleagues in other departments feel this is what we teach in our required communication class, but it is not only a good skill for many students to learn, it also does not need to be the focus of the course. The fact is, in any number of careers employees deliver presentations, whether they are in sales, health, education, or engineering. It is important to note that employers repeatedly call for graduates to have communication training as part of their degree programs (i.e., Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Kern, 2016; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014). Even so, I grant that perhaps a required course focusing entirely on presentational speaking may not provide maximum benefit for our students.

Recent research (Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Morreale, Valenzano, Bauer, 2017) also supports the notion that content can, and probably *should*, move beyond presentational speaking to accommodate these needs. I, and the faculty in my

department, are open to engaging my colleagues, the administration, alumni, and employers to determine the most important oral communication knowledge and skills to incorporate in our required course. We would follow the model outlined by Wallace (2015) after he and his colleagues did the same thing at their institution, resulting in an award-winning course.

These skills and knowledge areas might include presentational speaking, but also might include things like dialogue, civility, explaining complex ideas to non-experts, or a host of other areas best taught by those trained in communication—in fact, a small subset of employers indicated as much at a Basic Course Director’s conference in 2014 (Hooker & Simonds, 2015). Such an approach, when linked to our university’s mission, would help us create a distinctive element of our required curriculum that benefits our students.

3. Faculty in other disciplines can incorporate communication skills training into their classes.

It is fair to say that faculty in other disciplines sometimes require oral presentations of students in their classes, but this is not the same as being trained in communication or training students how to communicate. In fact, faculty also often lament that students do not participate or otherwise engage in discussions in their classes, and that when they do they often come across as uncivil and inappropriate. These are challenges best addressed by communication professionals, and cannot be effectively handled if we simply incorporate a presentation in classes throughout the curriculum.

Instead, as I referenced before, I propose a rigorous and thoughtful overhaul of the curriculum in our introductory communication course. This course would incorporate training on presentations, dialogue, civility, and interpersonal skills that will help students acclimate to the expectations of faculty with regard to engagement in later courses. Again, Wallace (2015) clearly articulates the model I propose using, as he successfully participated in a similar endeavor at another institution. I truly believe this path will lead to developing a course with wide support across multiple constituencies.

4. We need to reserve credit hour requirements for vocationally oriented

courses.

I could not agree more, and as I believe I have already illustrated, what course better prepares students for their future vocation than this revised introductory communication course? After all, communication is arguably the most desired skill sought by employers. The advantage of a required communication course is its adaptability and enduring need. Skills such as dialogue and explanation are becoming ever more important for our students and society. We need to pivot our course toward these aims, not eliminate it.

I ask that you bring my colleagues together to be creative in developing a new general education program, and not adopt intellectual austerity measures with regard to the curriculum. Collectively we can devise a curriculum that augments quality, addresses program accreditation concerns, and prepares our students for becoming strong citizens in their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to these arguments.

Sincerely,

Joseph M. Valenzano III

References

- American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (n.d.). Humanities indicators. Retrieved from <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=39>
- Hooker, J. F., & Simonds, C. J., (2015). From the outside looking in: Employer's views of the basic course. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 27, 102-116. Retrieved from <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/12/>
- Kern Entrepreneurial Engineering Network [KEEN]. (2016). KEEN Frameworks Poster. Retrieved from <http://engineeringunleashed.com/keen/wpcontent/uploads/2016/02/KEEN-Frameworks-2016.pdf>

- Morreale, S.P., Valenzano, III, J.M., & Bauer, J. A. (2017). Why communication education is important: A third study on the centrality of the discipline's content and pedagogy. *Communication Education*, 66, 402-422.
doi:10.1080/03634523.2016.1265136
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2015). Job outlook 2015.
Retrieved from <https://umuc.edu/upload/NACE-Job-Outlook-2015.pdf>
- Wallace, S. P. (2015). A model for the development of a sustainable basic course in communication. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 27, 78-101. Retrieved from <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/11/>
- Wichelns, H. A. (2001). The literary criticism of oratory. In C. R. Burghardt (Ed.), *Readings in rhetorical criticism* (pp. 3-28). State College, PA: Strata Publishing.
(Original work published 1925)