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Making the Case for the Basic Communication Course in General Education


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Basic Course Forum: Advocacy

Making the Case for the Basic Communication Course in General Education

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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. In this essay, the authors discuss the academic, career, and social benefits stemming from strong effective communication skills.

Dear Deans and Provosts:

As the directors of two of the largest introductory communication course programs in the United States, we have the privilege of helping students to grow and hone their communication skills. Our students have been fortunate that our institutional traditions and administrators value communication skills and require a communication course in undergraduate general education. However, 30% of all institutions do not include oral communication skills outcomes in their general education program (Hart Research Associates, 2016), and some universities have recently opted to remove their communication requirement. We argue that a

communication course should be a curricular requirement at all institutions, and in the following paragraphs, provide support for the major benefits of a communication course in the general education curriculum.

Even though the format and outcomes vary across campuses, most institutions rely on one of two types of communication courses: (1) public speaking (60.8%), and (2) a hybrid communication course (27.0%) that includes interpersonal, public speaking, and group communication skills (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). There are competing discourses about the purpose of higher education as a site for job training (Mourashed, Farrell, & Barton, 2014) versus a place to engage in liberal education where students can pursue academic interests for personal and professional growth (AAC&U, 2017). Regardless of the direction the discursive scale tips at a particular institution, including a communication course in the general education curriculum will help students build the skills they need to succeed in their future courses, careers, and communities.

Academic Skills

Because the introductory communication class is typically taken during the first year of college, it is often designed to help students learn college success strategies, build relationships, and create a sense of belongingness, all of which contribute to on-time graduation, retention, and long-term institutional loyalty and philanthropic development (Myers, Davis, Schreuder, & Seibold, 2016). Additionally, students build critical thinking, information literacy, and research skills (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009) as they learn to conduct research, use evidence to support arguments in well-organized speeches, and identify arguments that rely on fallacies.

Career Skills

Employer surveys found that oral and written communication skills are the most desirable employee attributes, followed by communication skills such as effective teamwork, information literacy, and problem-solving with people from different backgrounds and cultures (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016) found that leadership, teamwork, written communication skills, problem-solving skills, and verbal communication skills were the five most desired attributes in new employees. All of these are skills that should be developed in an introductory communication course (Ward et al., 2014). Technologies will change and many of the careers for which we are preparing

our students do not yet exist. Nonetheless, the fundamental way we use communication to make meaning and connect with other human beings remains constant. Communication skills are a career investment that will endure the test of time and will be translatable to new contexts in a rapidly changing world.

Social Skills

Communication is necessary for coming together as a human society, deciding what kind of community we will be, and accomplishing things together. As Isocrates wrote in 390 BCE:

There is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things honorable and base; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another. (2001, p. 69)

At a time when the U.S. is more politically polarized than ever before (Pew, 2014), we have a responsibility to help the next generation communicate in ways that unite and treat all people with respect and dignity.

Additionally, communication skills can contribute to a more equitable society. There are many unwritten rules about how to present oneself at school, during interviews, in the workplace, and in a variety of other contexts (Yee, 2016). Assumptions are made and privileges are granted (or not) based on adherence with those rules (Barratt, 2011). As more first-generation college students, low-income students, and racially and linguistically diverse students enter universities (Hainline, Gaines, Feather, Padilla, & Terry, 2010), a communication course can help demystify those rules and teach skills that will help students begin college and careers on more equal footing. At the same time, we are preparing future leaders for a global economy, and those leaders need to understand and embrace more diverse communication styles (Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm, & Holmes, 2013).

Communication skills are critical to academic and career success as well as creating a more inclusive, engaged, and just society. No university can afford the consequences of neglecting to make a foundational communication course an integral part of students' education.

Sincerely,
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