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Basic Course Forum: Advocacy

Class Size for the Basic Communication Course: A Recommendation for the Dean

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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.

Dear Dean,

At your request, I have researched the best practices for instruction in the basic communication course with regard to class size. Currently, the maximum enrollment for each section is 25 students, and your request to increase enrollment was given careful consideration. However, my findings do not support an increase, and I firmly recommend that the ideal enrollment for this class be 20 students with a maximum enrollment capped at 25 students per section for both self-contained and lecture/laboratory sections. My rationale for maintaining class size at these limits is presented fully in the remainder of this letter.

First, the basic communication course is best taught from an incremental, experienced-based approach (see Lucas, 1999), which demands current class size remain at 15-22 students. The most effective instructional methods for students to learn oral communication skills is through incremental improvement, where students are able to “internalize knowledge and solidify skills” (Lucas, 1999, p. 78). Class sections of 15-22 students provide an ideal platform for learning to take place in the basic course, as they allow for practice, self and peer evaluation, and detailed instructor feedback. Through the use of multiple oral presentations students are provided learning opportunities for practice and repetition that enhance speechmaking skill acquisition. An increase in class size would dramatically inhibit instructional time for students to prepare quality presentations and improve skills (Meyer, 2007).

In larger class sections, student feedback diminishes (and learning weakens). According to Allais (2014), providing meaningful feedback to students about assignments requires low student-faculty ratios. Therefore, student enrollment increases for course sections leads to a lack of individualized student attention (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014). When students are learning oral communication skills, it is imperative they have detailed feedback on assignments as well as presentations and the time to implement that feedback into the practice of their craft.

Additionally, current course section size helps to build rapport and relationships that ultimately lead to student retention. Research has found that student retention is directly tied to frequent and quality contact with instructors and peers in and outside of class (Tinto, 2012). In basic course laboratory sections, students are known by name, know the names of their other classmates, and meet with instructors before and after class as well as during office hours – a community of learners is established. Increases in class size would inhibit the instructor-student and student-student interaction and destabilize the citizenry of the basic communication course. Current class sizes of 15-22 students allows multiple opportunities for interaction with each other and their instructor about the course, which provides opportunities for meaningful learning to occur.

As the size of course sections increase, the pedagogy will decrease. The recommended class size for a basic communication course section is 15-22 students (Meyer, 2007; Moshiri, Lentz, & Nelson, 2015). We are already operating above the recommended student enrollment capacity limits. If budgets are stressed, the National Communication Association (NCA) supports a student to faculty ratio up to 25:1. This limitation in class size “assures appropriate student learning” is

achieved (NCA, 2011, p. 4). Moreover, the NCA (2011) recommends that communication courses “display appropriate, balanced attention to theory, research and application of communication knowledge” (p. 4). In order to maintain the balance of our basic course it is imperative that class sizes remain at current levels – 15-22 students per course section. Moshiri and Cardon (2014) point out that large enrollment courses face a number of serious limitations, including a “lack of individual attention, difficulty of evaluation, and lessened learning effectiveness” (p. 315). In contrast, there are several benefits to maintaining current class sizes. A study by Benton, Li, and Pallet (2013) found that students participating in smaller classes reported greater progress toward completing relevant class objectives, demonstrated more desire to attend the course, and showed more effort toward learning course content. We think it is important to point out that students enrolled in smaller classes feel more individual attention from the instructor and, therefore, put forth more effort to achieve the learning outcomes for the course (Mayhew et al., 2016). A number of students, across multiple different course sections, each semester write something similar to this student comment on evaluations: “I was unsure of the course going in, but I enjoyed it. The instructor had such great positive energy and was so helpful which made such a difference and is why I learned so much. We build a camaraderie with our class, so it’s less presenting to strangers and more talking to friends. Of course, there’s always going to be pressure in a class environment, so it doesn’t completely avoid it, but it works.”

I fully recognize the financial constraints of smaller class sizes in higher education; however, I also recognize that the basic course in communication is most successful for students when taught at its current class size (i.e., 20 students) due to the positive outcomes related to student learning. Moreover, I know you value the integrity that the basic course learning provides to vast numbers of students who enroll each academic semester from across our institutional landscape. For that reason, I know you will support my efforts to continue to offer a quality education to our institution’s students by maintaining class sizes for course sections between 15-22 students. Thank you in advance for allowing me to clarify why class size is structured in its current form within the basic course.

Sincerely,
Basic Course Director

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