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# Exploring Introductory Communication Course Administrators' Relationship Management During COVID-19

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed the context of higher education during the Spring 2020 semester. As the virus began to spread across the United States, colleges and universities canceled in-person classes and activities, closed campus, and moved all operations online. Within the communication discipline, introductory communication course (ICC) administrators and instructors were not only dealing with these challenges, but they were also navigating the transition of large multi-section, often standardized, courses online at large institutions. This research project used semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 ICC administrators from institutions located in 14 states across the Midwest, mid-Atlantic, Southeastern, and West Coast regions of the U.S. to explore how they engaged in relationship management with their instructors and how their approach to relationship management informed their transition to remote learning due to COVID-19. The analysis results in four emerging themes: (1) rhetorical approaches to relationship management, (2) relational approaches to relationship management, (3) relationship management → positive outcomes, and (4) relationship management as central to navigating COVID-19. Based on these findings we suggest a rhetorical/relational goals approach to course administration and offer practical implications ICC administrators can implement to engage in successful relationship management during times of crisis.*

*Keywords: instructional communication, relationship management, rhetorical/relational goals theory, COVID-19, course administrators.*

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed the context of higher education during the Spring 2020 semester. As the virus began to spread across the United States (U.S.) colleges and universities canceled in-person classes and activities, closed campus, and moved operations online. By the middle of March 2020, more than 1,100 institutions of higher education in all 50 U.S. states had transitioned all courses online (Smalley, 2020).

As institutions first announced they would be transitioning online, many instructors thought they would simply adapt their courses into traditional online courses; however, they quickly realized that COVID-19 had created a learning environment that was nowhere near normal. Instructors were forced to figure out how they could support their students to get through the semester successfully (Lederman, 2020). As administrators and instructors considered the needs of their students, they also faced several challenges themselves. Not only were they responsible for teaching their courses, but some were taking a crash course in instructional design, while others were given little to no institutional support (Zahneis, 2020). To further complicate the administration of communication courses, many instructors were tasked with taking care of their children and figuring out how to work from home while sharing space with family members (Flaherty, 2020; Supiano, 2020). Within the communication discipline, introductory communication course (ICC)<sup>1</sup> administrators and instructors were not only dealing with these challenges, but they were also navigating the transition of large multi-section, often standardized, courses online.

At institutions across the U.S., ICC administrators are responsible for leading ICC programs that are often a central component of their institution's general education curriculum (Morreale et al., 2016). As a component of the general education curriculum, the ICC is often standardized and run by ICC administrators responsible for curriculum development, course evaluation, and the instructors teaching the course (Simonds, 2014). As they direct their course, ICC administrators must manage relationships with several stakeholders (e.g., instructors, administrators, general education committees). As ICC administrators transitioned their courses online during the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to rely on their relationships with their instructors to successfully navigate the crisis. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how ICC administrators engaged in relationship management

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<sup>1</sup> In line with several scholars, we use the term *introductory* rather than *basic* because introductory situates these courses as the first exposure students have to oral communication skills without placing the value judgment insinuated by the term basic (Fassett, 2016; Huber, 2020; Morreale, 2020).

with their instructors and how their relationship management informed their transition to remote learning due to COVID-19.

### **Literature Review**

The ICC is often described as the *front porch* of the communication discipline (Beebe, 2013) because it is students' first exposure to the discipline and it facilitates the development of academic, career, and social skills that are transferable and will be used by students throughout their lives (Ruiz-Mesa & Broeckelman-Post, 2018). A communication course is required as part of the general education curriculum at 80% of colleges and universities in the U.S. (Morreale et al., 2016). The ICC often meets these general education requirements for oral communication. For example, 61% of institutions that responded to Morreale et al.'s (2016) survey indicated a public speaking course was central to their general education requirements. At many institutions, the ICC is led by an administrator who coordinates the course. As a program representative, the role is often complex as ICC administrators must engage and build relationships with a variety of stakeholders and navigate a variety of roles and responsibilities to achieve their goals (Anderson et al., 2020; Fassett & Warren, 2011).

### **The Role of the Introductory Communication Course Administrator**

ICC administrators are responsible for a variety of duties as they coordinate and supervise the development and delivery of the curriculum of a multi-section course (Fassett & Warren, 2011). These responsibilities include developing curriculum, training instructors, assessing the course, managing instructors, and offering leadership as well as mentorship. Ultimately, ICC administrators play a central role in teaching communication instructors how to teach (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018; Broeckelman-Post & Simonds, 2020; Simonds, 2014). ICC administrators are responsible for developing course curriculum that accomplishes discipline-specific and general education learning outcomes (Simonds, 2014). They then have to train instructors to prepare them to help students achieve course learning outcomes. Training involves general teacher training, how to teach communication courses, in- and out-of-classroom management, and how to effectively evaluate student learning (Simonds, 2014; Frey et al., 2015). ICC administrators also play a role in justifying their course's place in institutional general education curricula by conducting an assessment to demonstrate the effectiveness of the course. Finally, they are often responsible for hiring and firing instructors, managing student and instructor

conflict, and observing their instructors to provide feedback and help them develop as educators (Simonds, 2014).

As administrators practice these responsibilities, ICC programs are often structured in one of two ways. In the first structure, often at large institutions with doctoral programs, the majority of ICC sections are taught by graduate teaching assistants. In this situation, ICC administrators often work almost solely with graduate students and may teach them a course on pedagogy as part of their administrative role. In the second structure, often seen at smaller institutions, ICC administrators are more likely to supervise part-time or adjunct faculty (Fassett & Warren, 2011). These different course structures show how the ICC program context can be different across institutions. However, regardless of the program structure, ICC administrators are functioning in a system they must manage and navigate (Keith, 2016).

ICC administrators operate within a system that includes ICC students, instructors, and other institutional stakeholders (Keith, 2016). Working within this organizational system makes course administration extremely complex (Anderson et al., 2020; Fassett & Warren, 2011). Although we outlined very specific and clean-cut ICC administrator responsibilities above, in practice the role comes with competing expectations and shifting roles. Administrators may have to navigate supporting their instructor in front of a student in order not to undermine the instructor's credibility, but at the same time ensure they are treating the student fairly if said instructor did make a mistake. These situations make ICC administration challenging because administrators must be ready to respond to problems and emergencies even when they intend to use their time to work on another task (Anderson et al., 2020). To navigate their role as organizational representatives, ICC administrators must engage in relationship management, especially with instructors who are one of their key stakeholders.

### **Relationship Management Theory**

Originally theorized by public relations scholars, relationship management theory explains that organizations balance their interests and those of their stakeholders through the management of organization-stakeholder relationships (Ledingham, 2003; Smith, 2012). Within the ICC context, we suggest that ICC administrators serve as representatives of their ICC program (the organization) who build and manage relationships with several stakeholders (e.g., course instructors, institutional

administrators, general education committee members). Although originally discussed at the organizational level, public relations scholars have noted how central interpersonal communication is to maintain successful relationships and meeting the needs of all parties (Broom et al., 2000; Toth, 2000). Therefore, as ICC administrators communicate with their stakeholders they are engaging in a form of relationship management.

Central to the organization-stakeholder relationship is that both parties are interdependent. Due to this interdependence each party's actions can lead to consequences for the other that need to be managed (Hung, 2005). For example, ICC administrators and their instructors often have interdependent relationships. Instructors depend on the ICC administrator to provide the resources they need to teach the ICC and the ICC administrator depends on the instructor to implement the curriculum as designed to meet agreed-upon general education learning outcomes. Thus, in the ICC administrator-instructor relationship the actions of both parties have consequences for the other. Scholars have outlined five dimensions of an organization-stakeholder relationship: trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment in the relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Levenshus, 2010). Trust is the idea that those involved in the relationship can rely on one another. Openness involves the presence of "frank" communication within the relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 61). Involvement signifies that both parties are engaged in furthering the other's interests. Commitment indicates that everyone involved chooses to maintain the relationship. Investment includes the spending of "time, energy, and resources to build [and maintain] the relationship" (Levenshus, 2010, p. 315). Ultimately, relationship management involves a two-step process where the focus is first on building relationships with stakeholders and second on communicating involvement in stakeholder activities (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

When teaching in a standardized course, like many ICCs, instructors not only have to manage relationships with their students, but they also have an interdependent relationship with the ICC administrator who is providing course materials, setting course expectations, and is responsible for the overall implementation of the course. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how ICC administrators engage in relationship management with their instructors and how their relationships with their instructors informed their response to COVID-19. This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do ICC administrators engage in relationship management with course instructors?

RQ2: How did ICC administrator-instructor relationships inform administrators' response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Method

To address our research questions we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 ICC administrators. This approach allowed us to gain insights into the nuanced ways that ICC administrators engaged in relationship management and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in their unique institutional contexts. We used interpretive thematic analysis to draw meaning across our participants' responses which led to the emergence of four themes.

## Participants

Participants in this IRB approved study were 18 ICC administrators from institutions located in 14 states<sup>2</sup> across the Midwest, mid-Atlantic, Southeastern, and West Coast regions of the U.S. Participants represented a broad array of public institutions including small and mid-sized regional teaching institutions, a Hispanic serving institution, and large research-intensive universities. The majority of participants were tenured/tenure track professors (two assistant professors, eight associate professors), five were lectures/instructors, one was a teaching professor, and two were Ph.D. candidates. Participants had between one and 12 years of experience serving as an ICC administrator ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ). Participants self-identified their racial/ethnic identity and gender identity during the study. One participant identified as Biracial, one as Latina, one as multi-ethnic white, and 14 as white/Caucasian. One participant identified as male and 16 identified as female. One participant did not report their racial/ethnic or gender identities. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant demographics.

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<sup>2</sup> Participants' institutions were located in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Indiana, Arkansas, California, Texas, South Dakota, West Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Illinois.

**Table 1.**  
***Participant Demographics.***

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Tenure/ Tenure Track</b>	<b>Years as Course Administrator</b>
Jessica	Female	Teaching Professor	No	10
Evelyn	Female	Assistant Professor	Yes	5
Sonia	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	12
Monica	Female	Doctoral Candidate	No	2
Nadia	Female	Lecturer	No	5
Alex	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	7
Zoe	Female	Lecturer	No	1
William	Male	Associate Professor	Yes	10
Shannon	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	5
Mikayla	Female	Lecturer	No	3
Jorja	Female	Lecturer	No	2
Kiera	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	4
Amelia	Female	Instructor	No	10
Rachel	Female	Doctoral Candidate	No	2
Naomi	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	11
Nicole	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	4
Huda	Female	Associate Professor	Yes	6
Aziza	Female	Assistant Professor	Yes	2

### **Procedures**

We used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data for this study as this method provided the opportunity to gain rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences (Tracy, 2020). This approach to data collection also allowed us to gain a nuanced understanding of our participants' experiences in their individual institutional contexts. This was extremely important as each state, and thus institution, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic differently. By conducting semi-



structured interviews, we were able to account for these differences by asking open-ended questions and follow-up questions which increased the depth of participants' responses and allowed for the clarification of points of confusion.

We recruited participants in several different ways. First, we directly emailed the call for participants to ICC administrators in our professional networks who were eligible to participate. Second, we shared our call for participants on disciplinary listservs (e.g., COMMNotes, Basic Course Directors Listserv) to recruit participants from outside our professional networks. Finally, some participants were forwarded the call by a third party who indicated the participant was eligible and may be interested in participating. After participants responded to the call, we scheduled an interview and emailed them a consent form (all interviews were conducted via Zoom during Summer 2020). Interviews lasted between 27 and 69 minutes with an average length of approximately 51.6 minutes (SD = 11.6). We collected a total of 928 minutes of audio data.

At the beginning of each interview, we provided participants with an overview of the study, confirmed they had reviewed the study's consent form and provided them the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were also reminded that their participation was voluntary, they could decline to answer any question, and could end participation at any time. We obtained informed consent to participate and be recorded from each participant before asking any questions. Interview questions included:

What are your responsibilities in your current position?

How do you approach building relationships with instructors who teach in your basic course program?

How did the relationships you have with instructors influence the transition to online courses during COVID-19?

Each participant's audio recording was transcribed using a transcription service. Transcription of the audio recordings led to 270 single-spaced pages of data. We verified the transcriptions generated by the transcription service before data analysis by listening to the audio recording while reading the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of each transcription. Any errors were corrected before data analysis and interpretation.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

We conducted an interpretive thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Owen, 1984) to interpret our participants' interview data. We began by refamiliarizing ourselves with the data by reading each transcript. Next, we independently coded each transcript employing the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2020) to identify concepts, experiences, and perspectives that were recurrent, forceful, and repetitive across the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miles et al., 2014). After initial inductive coding was completed, we engaged in a collaborative sensemaking process where we met to discuss our initial codes and interpretations of the data, problematize any differences in our initial findings, and come to agreement on the patterns we were drawing from the data to organize our codes into overarching themes. As we engaged in this collaborative sensemaking process we identified that aspects of rhetorical/relational goals theory (RRGT; Mottet et al., 2006) helped us organize our codes in meaningful ways. Considering rhetorical/relational goals theory as a form of student-instructors relationship management we added it to our theoretical framework to guide our development of themes. For example, the codes “personal stories,” “trust,” “check-in,” and “interpersonal interactions” came together to contribute to the theme: *relational approaches to relationship management*. As we concluded our analysis and interpretation process we developed the themes *rhetorical approaches to relationship management*, *relational approaches to relationship management*, and *relationship management → positive outcomes* to answer our first research questions, and *relationship management central to navigating COVID-19* to answer our second research question. As we finalized our themes we returned to the data to ensure they represented the data and identify exemplar quotes for each theme.

We conducted member reflections (Tracy, 2010, 2020) with 14 participants who gave consent to be contacted after their interview to help confirm and refine our findings based on our participants' perspectives. These participants were sent a PDF document that included a draft of our preliminary findings. We asked participants to review our findings and let us know if they believed their experiences fit within the themes and to share any thoughts or criticisms of the findings they had. Five participants responded to our request to engage in member reflections. Each of these participants indicated that our findings were insightful and reflected their experiences. During member reflections, one participant emphasized how central building trust in the ICC administrator-instructor relationship is and its value to

relationship management. As we finalized our themes we ensured that trust was emphasized in how we discussed the theme *relational approaches to relationship management*.

### Findings

Based on our analysis and interpretations we argue that ICC administrators balanced two different approaches to relationship management to achieve their objectives. As the pandemic hit, administrators had to rely on the relationships they had with instructors to successfully transition their course online and support instructors as the semester concluded. Through our analysis we developed four themes: (1) rhetorical approaches to relationship management, (2) relational approaches to relationship management, (3) relationship management à positive outcomes, and (4) relationship management central to navigating COVID-19.

### Rhetorical Approaches to Relationship Management

In their role as ICC administrators, the large majority of our participants were responsible for ensuring their instructors had the information and resources they needed to be successful in the course. To achieve this goal, ICC administrators took a rhetorical approach to managing their relationships with instructors. ICC administrators used avenues like pre-semester training, regular formal meetings, and email communication to ensure instructors were aware of how the course curriculum should be delivered, understood institutional and departmental policies and procedures, and were aware of their responsibilities as instructors. We further explain this theme through two subthemes: (1) rhetorical relationship management goals, and (2) rhetorical relationship management strategies.

**Rhetorical Relationship Management Goals.** ICC administrators explained that ensuring their instructors knew what was expected of them was an important foundation to their ICC administrator-instructor relationship. Nearly every ICC administrator led a standardized course; therefore, it was important for them to effectively communicate the need to teach a “consistent curriculum.” This led to the need for ICC administrators to communicate about policies and expectations with clarity. As Sonia noted,

If I expect certain things out of my instructors I have to be really clear about that...If I expect that things are graded and returned within a week, I need to say that. If I expect people to use their

[institutional] email and follow FERPA policies [I need] to say that really clearly. It's not fair for me to hold people to a set of expectations that I haven't clearly articulated.

William concurred explaining that it was important for him to model behavior he expected of his instructors saying, “if those are the expectations for our TAs when they're out in the classroom then those also need to be the expectations that I live by in my role as a course director.” Foundational to building a positive relationship with instructors was not only ensuring they knew what was expected of them, but also that they were aware of why certain decisions about curriculum and policies had been made. For example, Sonia explained it is important to make “sure that people know why we do things and know what the underlying rationale is.” Drawing from our participants' experiences, clarity and transparency are central rhetorical goals that help set the foundation for the development of positive ICC administrator-instructor relationships.

**Rhetorical Relationship Management Strategies.** Not only did our participants discuss the rhetorical goals they believed were central to relationship management, but participants also outlined specific strategies to achieve these goals. Participants outlined a few different settings they engage in rhetorical relationship management. First, they explained that instructor training/retreats before the semester were used as a space to communicate the expectations discussed above. As Jessica explained, “the first couple of days [of training] I'm very much like these are the policies, this is how things work, and this is how it's gonna go.” As Monica said,

So we have a week-long training before the semester begins where we go over things like how to interact on the first day of class or how to develop a lesson plan, how to grade assignment[s], what the different assignments for the course are.

Pre-semester training were important, especially for new instructors, because they offered an opportunity for ICC administrators to ensure new instructors were prepared to teach their institution's ICC and that returning instructors were aware of any changes to curriculum, policies, and procedures.

In addition to training, ICC administrators sent update emails throughout the semester. For example, Monica “send[s] out weekly emails to people with heads up about stuff and reminders.” Many ICC administrators also hold weekly or monthly

meetings with their instructors to discuss upcoming course content or touch base on teaching the course. As Kiera explained, “In a typical semester, we have a once-a-month meeting. So that’s a way we all get together and talk about the experience of teaching our [introductory course].” Monica added, “we have weekly trainings through[out] a new instructor’s first semester with our program.” Participants noted that rhetorical goals alone cannot achieve the development of strong ICC administrator-instructor relationships. They also need to engage in relational strategies. As Jessica explained:

[Instructors] need to respect the policies, they need to understand that there are consequences if you don’t go to class for weeks at a time or never grade your students’ papers...but then I know that in order for them to be successful they have to trust, they have to see me as somebody they can talk to.

Thus, taking a relational approach is also important for relationship management.

### **Relational Approaches to Relationship Management**

ICC administrators took a relational approach to relationship management in order to build trust with their instructors, offer them support, and position themselves as someone who instructors could reach out to in order to collaboratively solve problems. ICC administrators achieved this goal in several ways. Some had open door policies where instructors could stop by when they had questions. Others would engage in informal, interpersonal conversations to get to know their instructors outside of their formal role. Many would share personal stories of their experience teaching the introductory course to foster a connection. We further explain this theme through two subthemes: (1) relational relationship management goals, and (2) relational relationship management strategies.

**Relational Relationship Management Goals.** ICC administrators emphasized the need to build “mutual trust” between themselves and their instructors. By this, they meant that they needed to trust their instructors were going to effectively teach the course and that their instructors needed to trust that they could go to the ICC administrator in confidence to solve a problem or share a concern. As Shannon explained:

Trust is foundational to the relationship because one, I have to trust [instructors] in the classroom as a representative of me, and two, they have to trust me and value that relationship with me to do what they're supposed to do and to come to me when they have issues...I'll use [sports metaphors] of nobody gets kicked off the team when they make a mistake in the game, right. You go to the coach, you figure out what you did wrong, and you try to make it better mistakes next time.

Nadia added:

I think that the people who were under either my support or [supervision], would be able to trust me with information or be able to trust me to point them in the right direction without sharing the information with other people.

These participant quotations emphasize that ICC administrators identified trust as a central strategy to building their relationships with instructors and that much of the trust they built with their instructors comes from a relational approach to relationship management.

**Relational Relationship Management Strategies.** Participants outlined several different relational strategies they employed to build trusting, interpersonal relationships with the instructors teaching in their programs. ICC administrators explained that being available to their instructors, checking in with them, sharing personal stories, opportunities for social interaction, and positioning themselves as a support figure were important to building relationships with their instructors. Many participants expressed that having an open-door policy was a key way they developed relationships with their instructors. These policies allowed them to show instructors they were available to talk about the course and any issues they were having. Jessica said, "I have an open-door policy for them...even when it's not my specified office hours, when we're on campus, they know if I'm in my office they can stop by and talk." Aziza supported this perspective saying she tried to have an "open-door" policy where instructors knew they "[could] talk to [her]." Being available to instructors was valuable because it provided them the opportunity to ask questions and engage in problem solving about the course, but also provided opportunities for non-course related conversation. As William noted, "like any other relationship you

would talk about things not related to the course.” Thus, providing opportunities for relationship building.

Checking in and sharing personal stories also offered additional opportunities for ICC administrators to engage in relationship building. William explained how he would “go up to [the instructors] office and grab a seat and sit down and have a conversation with them. How’s it going? What are the struggles?” He explained that “when you can have authentic communication that’s open and deep and meaningful I think that’s a good sign of a professional and healthy relationship.” Naomi supported this perspective emphasizing the importance of “having individual check-ins.” Another way to show this support is to share personal experiences teaching. As Jessica explained, “I’m open to talking about my own failures in the classroom. You know, things I’ve learned over time. They need to see me as somebody who has been where they are in order to build that relationship.” Monica supported this notion when she explained that she uses “personal experience[s] that [she’s] had, or [she’s] heard” as a means to help and support them. Checking in with instructors and sharing personal stories are both relationship building strategies that allowed ICC administrators to reduce the power distance between themselves and their instructors and facilitate interpersonal relationship that communicated the ICC administrator as a support person. As Shannon noted, positioning the ICC administrator as someone who was supportive is extremely important. She explained:

I always tried to build a relationship where they felt like we were on the same team. So we’re all on the same side, and kind of this promise that, as teammates, we would support each other. I just continuously try to show, semester after semester, the different ways that I was willing to support people, help people, be a resource for people when there was a problem, not [someone] to cover it up from.

Finally, the last relational strategy to relationship management our participants highlighted was their role in facilitating instructor-instructor relationships. Many of our participants explained that the relationship between instructors was vital. William explained how these relationships allowed instructors to “lean on one another and support one another.” Shannon also highlighted the value of instructor-instructor relationships sharing a story of how one of her graduate assistants “mentored some of the younger graduate assistants” and helped them “put [theory] into practice.” ICC administrators used several strategies to facilitate this form of relationship

building from hosting social events after training sessions to set up formal mentoring program where more seasoned instructors were paired up with new instructors. Participants believed that ICC administrator-instructor relationship to be essential, but also noted that instructor-instructor relationships were valuable to create a community of practice working toward the successful implementation of the ICC.

### **Relationship Management → Positive Outcomes**

Not only did participants explain that they engage in relationship management, but they also emphasized that building strong, positive relationships with their instructors was central to successfully administering the ICC. From their perspective, ICC administrators believed that building strong relationships with their instructors lead to their instructors being more engaged in the course and leads to positive outcomes for students in the classroom. The perceived benefits of relationship management were especially important to ICC administrators who run standardized ICCs. We further explore this finding through two subthemes: (1) relationship management leads to instructor buy-in, and (2) relationship management leads to student learning and development.

**Relationship Management Leads to Instructor Buy-In.** Across our participants' experiences, it was evidence that the stronger the relationship ICC administrators had with their instructors the more instructors bought-in to the course. Participants defined "buy-in" as when instructors were engaged and committed to the course. When instructors bought-in to the course, ICC administrators explained that they were more likely to bring issues to the administrator and to be willing to implement a standardized course. As Evelyn noted:

The relationship allows me to get buy-in to the changes we want to make to the [introductory] course to make it more efficient, to really be able to assess it in meaningful ways. The better the relationships that I have, the more I can understand faculty members concerns in relationship to the [introductory] course that I can then take to the general education counsel, so that I can advocate for our course...The stronger relationships that I have the more disclosure there will be, the more information that I can get to go and advocate which I think is critically important.



Shannon said that when her instructors bought in they understood “the need to keep consistency and effectively execute the standardized course.” She further explained that:

[Instructors] don’t necessarily want to do that by default, but they will, if they have a good positive relationship with you, and you make it very clear why it has to be this way and where it can be flexible and all of that is built on trust and relationship.

When instructors have bought into the course, ICC administrators were not only able to successfully implement a standardized course. Strong relationships also translated to positive outcomes for students in the classroom.

#### **Relationship Management Leads to Student Learning and Development.**

One of an ICC administrator’s key goals is to develop a curriculum that when implemented effectively leads to student learning and development. In line with other participants, Shannon explained that she “foundationally believe[s] that the positive relationships [with instructors] are fundamental to achieving the student learning outcomes in each section.” When instructors have strong relationships with the ICC administrator and have bought into the course and its goals instructors are more effectively able to help students. In Shannon’s words, “see the value of [the] course, to see the important role it plays in general education and ultimately being able to take these skills and apply them in a variety of different contexts.” As the ICC is often a general education course, instructors need to clearly articulate the value of the course. By having a relationship with their instructors, Jessica explained that ICC administrators can “empower the [instructors] to be better teachers,” facilitate the course curriculum effectively, and create meaningful learning experiences for students. Ultimately, strong ICC administrator-instructor relationships allow for a collaborative effort to create positive learning experiences for students. As Kiera said, “we all have to make the class work. We need to make sure that all 1,000 of our students every semester are getting a really positive, really consistent experience.”

#### **Relationship Management Central to Navigating COVID-19**

As ICC administrators had to make quick decision about how to adjust their courses due to the quick transition to remote learning, strong relationships, with a

specific emphasis on trust, were central to administrators' abilities to successfully adjust their course so instructors and students could successfully complete their semester. As courses transitioned online, ICC administrators had to continue to maintain relationships with their instructors by being intentional about how they communicated with their instructors to keep lines of communication open and ensure they were supported. Ultimately, strong relationship management allowed for ICC administrators to successfully navigate the challenges they faced transitioning the ICC online and offered those who described their relationships with instructors as less strong the opportunity to continue to build relationships that led to a successful completion of the semester. We explicate this theme through two subthemes: (1) relying on pre-existing relationships, and (2) intentional relationship maintenance during the pandemic.

### **Relying on Pre-Existing Relationships**

Having engaged in relationship management and built strong ICC administrator-instructor relationships prior to the pandemic, several of our participants explained that they were able to rely on the trust that had been built with their instructor as they led the transition of their course online. During the transition, ICC administrators had to rely on rhetorical approaches to relationship management explaining how the course would be changing and what instructors need to do successfully transition their sections online. Our participants explained that because they had built trusting relationships with their instructors prior to the pandemic at the beginning of the crisis they did not receive push back from their instructors when they used rhetorical approaches to relationship management to make sure instructors knew exactly what they needed to do, how policies had changes, and what the ICC administrator's expectations were. Jessica explained, "I think that because [the instructors] trust me to make decisions for them...I did feel like I had buy-in from the [instructors] with the decision I was making." Mikayla noted:

[We were] able to have buy-in. So we did not necessarily have a lot of pushback from instructors. I think that we built that trust that we were making decisions and that we would make decisions that were best for the students and the instructors. And so, I think that building trust, having that trust was a really important part of the change that

we didn't get much pushback about what we were doing or questions about what we were doing.

As important as relationships developed prior to the pandemic were, ICC administrators also noted the need to continue to intentionally communicate with instructors to maintain relationship with their instructors in order to complete the semester.

**Intentional Relationship Maintenance During the Pandemic.** As the Spring 2020 semester progressed and the COVID-19 pandemic continued, ICC administrators explained that they had to be extremely intentional about communicating with instructors in the mediated environment the crisis necessitated. William explained how he “made an effort to call everyone just to check in to see how they were doing.” Further, “if [he] had heard from [an instructors] that was struggling once [they] had made the transition [he] would reach out to them on the phone [and] would periodically drop emails.” Mikayla explained that these intentional approaches to communicating with instructors and maintaining relationships were important because they did not “have the ability for those informal interactions in the office.” To successfully navigate the pandemic, ICC administrators first relied on the trusting relationships they had with instructors to successfully move the course for the in-person to online context. Once online, it was extremely important to intentionally create opportunities for communication with instructors to provide them the support they needed to complete the semester.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how ICC administrators engaged in relationship management and how ICC administrator-instructor relationships informed how administrators navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that ICC administrators take rhetorical and relational approaches to engaging in relationship management. They take a rhetorical approach to achieve goals related to ensuring instructors know course policies and procedures and have the content knowledge to effectively teach the ICC. In tandem, they also use relational strategies (e.g., interpersonal interactions, checking in) to build trust with instructors so they know they can go to the ICC administrator when challenges arise. ICC administrators foster these relationships because they help ensure that the curriculum, which was standardized at many of our participant's institutions, is successfully implemented and can lead to positive student outcomes. We also suggest

that during COVID-19, ICC administrators relied on the relationships they had with their instructors to successfully navigate the transition of multi-section ICCs to remote learning. Pre-existing trusting relationships allowed ICC administrators to rely on rhetorical strategies to successfully ensure the course and their instructors were prepared for remote learning. Our findings lead us to theorize a rhetorical/relational goals approach to course administration.

### **Forwarding a Rhetorical/Relational Goals Approach to Course Administration**

Based on our findings, we suggest that ICC administrators engage in relationship management with their instructors. Although the ICC context is significantly different to that of the public relations scholarship that explores relationship management theory, the ICC administrator-instructor relationship, as discussed by our participants, reflects every dimension (i.e., trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment in the relationship) of an organization-stakeholder relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Administrators explained that to successfully administer the ICC they had to trust their instructors and needed their instructors to trust them. Their desire for their instructors to trust them was so instructors would openly communicate with them when problems arose in their classroom and so they would be involved, committed, and invested in the course and the relationship with the administrator to successfully facilitate the ICC. Therefore, we see interpersonal ICC administrator-instructor communication as important to facilitating the larger organization-stakeholder relationship (Toth, 2000). As the ICC context is significantly different to the corporate settings in which relationship management has been discussed, here we theorize an ICC administrator specific approach to relationship management.

We offer a rhetorical/relational goals approach to course administration that integrates public relation's relationship management theory (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) and communication education's rhetorical/relational goals theory (Mottet et al., 2006). We suggest that ICC administrators and instructors have interdependent relationships (Hung, 2005) where administrators have specific goals that guide their communication with instructors and instructors have specific needs that must be met for them to be successful in the classroom. When ICC administrators' communication, guided by their rhetorical and relational goals, meet the needs of their instructors they will be able to more successfully teach the course

which could lead to more effective teaching and increased student outcomes (e.g., learning).

When engaging in relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), ICC administrators have specific rhetorical and relational goals (Mottet et al., 2006). Their rhetorical goals include effectively communicating course standards and expectations, policies and procedures, and often the standardized nature of assignments and assessment rubrics (Fassett & Warren, 2011; Simonds, 2014). Their relational goals center around getting to know their instructors as individuals and building mutual respect and trust between the ICC administrator and their instructors. These goals guide the ICC administrator's communication behaviors as they administer the ICC and engage in relationship management with their instructors.

On the other side of this relationship, instructors have specific curricular and relational needs when they approach teaching the ICC. This is especially important when instructors are teaching a multi-section ICC that has standardized elements (e.g., consistent assignment guidelines and rubrics). Instructors' curricular needs relate to what they need to know to effectively teach the specific course at their institution. This includes institutional, departmental, and course policies and expectations; expectations about pedagogy (e.g., lecture-based, activity-based) and curriculum design; and campus resources they can refer students to including academic resources and support to ensure their basic needs are met. Instructors' relational needs center around knowing they have someone they can go to that is trustworthy and will support them and back them up. This is central because if instructors have questions about course content, student issues in the classroom, or broader institutional policies they need someone to go to to ask these questions and problem-solve with to be successful in the classroom.

Following the logic of RRG'T (Mottet et al., 2006), when ICC administrators' rhetorical and relational communication behaviors meet the curricular and relational needs of instructors, administrators perceived those instructors would be able to engage in classroom instruction more successfully. If ICC administrators are not meeting the needs of their instructors then they will not be able to engage in effective instruction as easily. This is evident as our participants perceived that strong ICC administrator-instructor relationships led to more effective instruction and positive student outcomes. Based on this theorizing, we offer practical implications ICC administrators can implement to engage in successful relationship management during times of crisis (e.g., COVID-19) and beyond.

## Practical Implications

Based on our discussion above, we offer several practical suggestions ICC administrators can use to enhance relationship management during times of crisis (e.g., COVID-19) and beyond. First, clarity is central to effective rhetorical approaches to relationship management. However, the mediated nature of ICC administrator-instructor communication during COVID-19 could lead to challenges in clearly communicating policies, procedures, and expectations. We suggest effective use of the learning management system (LMS) as a solution to this challenge. By creating a template course shell in the LMS that is used by each instructor as the basis of their course (both online and face-to-face), ICC administrators can ensure instructors have access to standardized assignment descriptions and rubrics, and access to sample lesson plans and course materials. This framework can clearly set expectations for instructors and provides a straightforward approach to sharing course resources in one central location that instructors will then use throughout the semester. Although many ICC administrators already use some version of a template course shell, it is incredibly important when courses could transition online at any time (e.g., during crises such as COVID-19). Building out the course shell in advance allows ICC administrators and instructors to be prepared to transition their course online if the situation requires it by removing some of the work many ICC administrators and instructors experienced during the initial transition to remote learning during Spring 2020. This practice is also valuable beyond COVID-19 and outside crisis situations as a template course shell can serve as a useful tool during face-to-face instructor training.

Second, considering a relational approach we recommend ICC administrators engage in behaviors that promote the development of interpersonal relationships with their instructors where they get to know them beyond their role as an instructor. Visiting instructor offices, saying hello and checking in when passing each other in the hallway, and having an open-door policy where instructors can stop by with questions are all relational strategies that would allow ICC administrators to facilitate important relationship building. However, these traditional relationship building strategies were not available due to COVID-19 restrictions that encouraged social distancing. Arguably, during crises it is more important than ever for ICC administrators to check in with their instructors. Thus, we offer some solutions adapted to online contexts—these suggestions could also be useful for ICC programs that always teach online. ICC administrators could hold office hours via a

platform like Zoom to recreate the sense of an open-door policy online and give instructors the opportunity to *stop by* and ask a question. Although not as flexible as the traditional notion of an open-door policy, online office hours ensure instructors know the ICC administrator has set aside time to connect with instructors, answer questions, and engage in collaborative problem solving. Similarly, we recommend ICC administrators host collaborative lesson planning sessions via a platform like Zoom to recreate the shared office environment many ICC instructors experience on campus. Creating this space allows for instructors to build community between themselves and to share ideas and resources with the goal improving instruction in the classroom. Expanding the idea of community building, ICC administrators could also host online social gatherings (e.g., game nights) that offer the opportunity for instructors to get to know each other and the ICC administrator in a less formal setting. These suggestions do not entirely recreate the relational approach that can be used in the face-to-face context, but they do offer points of connection that are more challenging to get in an online, mediated environment as was experienced during COVID-19.

### **Limitations and Future Research Direction**

Our findings should be considered in light of a few limitations. First, this study focused solely on ICC administrators' perspectives. As such, we did not interview ICC instructors and their experiences are presented here through the lens of the ICC administrators we interviewed. Future research could focus solely on exploring the experiences of instructors teaching the ICC or could investigate administrator and instructor perspectives at the same institution. This line of research would be able to extend our current theorizing about a rhetorical/relational goals approach to course administration by further understanding the needs instructors have when teaching the ICC. Second, although we were able to interview ICC administrators from several different types of public institutions (e.g., small and mid-size regional institutions, large research-intensive institutions) many administrators we interviewed worked at predominantly white institutions. As other research showed, COVID-19 affected communities of color at much higher rates (Abedi et al., 2021); therefore, our research may not reflect the role race played in the experiences of ICC administrators. Future research could specifically explore how the pandemic affected historically Black colleges and universities and Hispanic serving institutions to

understand how the unique needs of students and instructors at those institutions informed ICC administrators' relationship management.

Opportunities for additional research on ICC administrators' relationship management also emerged based on our findings. Although not central to this study, several participants discussed their role in facilitating instructor-instructor relationships. They suggested that by building a community between instructors, instructors were able to support each other and provide each other resources which supported successful implementation of their ICC programs. Here there are two avenues for future research. First, explicitly exploring how ICC administrators work to create communities of practice within their program to support the successful implementation of the ICC. Second, exploring how instructors engage in relationship and community building between each other and what benefits they draw from those relationships. Exploring the development of instructor-instructor relationships will help scholars further understand the function of relationship management in the administration of the ICC.

The role of an ICC administrator is complex and involves a variety of different responsibilities that at times compete with one another (Anderson et al., 2020; Fassett & Warren, 2011). Guided by relationship management theory (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), we suggest that ICC administrators used rhetorical and relational approaches to relationship management to build trusting relationships with their instructors. Our participants explained that having trusting relationships with their instructors helped them adapt to the remote environment necessitated by COVID-19 because instructors trusted the ICC administrator to make appropriate changes to the course and the ICC administrator trusted the instructors to implement changes and successfully transition their sections online. By proposing a rhetorical/relational goals approach to course administration, we expand introductory communication course and communication education research and theorizing beyond the classroom and consider the organizational setting it occurs in. College and university classrooms are not isolated spaces learning occurs in. By applying organizational communication theory in the communication education context, we have begun to explore the role institutional and departmental structures play in the classroom which became incredibly important in light of the national crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



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