

Lobbying as a Means For Expanding the Communication Instructional Base: A Second Look

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Members of our discipline should agree that communication scholars and instructors be the principal designers of the learning goals, subsequent activities and corresponding assessment of communication instruction on college campuses. There is ongoing broad interdisciplinary support that communication instruction be an essential learning outcome of general undergraduate education.

Are we, as a discipline, effectively marketing our curricular product as a general education requirement, not buried in choices among communication alternative elective credits? Are we failing to exploit a credible foundation of external support for selling communication instruction as a general education requirement across the undergraduate core curriculum? Should undergraduate communication instruction be taught by members of the communication discipline? This essay examines the support and importance for operationalization of political action that should be taken by our discipline to advance communication instruction as a general education requirement for postsecondary students.

Intra-disciplinary Sampling

Morreale, Myers, Backlund, and Simonds (2016) gathered longitudinal and descriptive data on the nature of the basic communication course, continuing a tradition dating back to 1968. In their ninth iteration they reported and discussed data in the following categories: (a) general description of the course; (b) course administration; (c) assessment, standardization, and assignments and grading; (d) course content and pedagogy; and (e) media, technology, and online teaching. The study involved those communication skills tied to specific assignments common to the basic course and concepts identified in NCA's Core Communication Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses (2014), produced by NCA's Task Force on the role of communication in general education

The authors sampled members of NCA's Basic Course Division, which resulted in a total of 188 respondents (21 from two-year schools, 167 from four-year schools). In a prior study (eighth iteration), Morreale et al. (2010) randomly selected from the NCA list of 1,295 communication programs resulting in a total of 208 respondents, 165 from four-year schools and 43 from two-year schools.

The above sampled populations involved members of our discipline identified by NCA and the NCA Basic Course Division. In 2015, Jeffrey J. Selingo opined that ...“there are some 5,300 colleges and universities in the United States, everything from beauty schools to Harvard. Though we often refer to them collectively as “the American higher-education system,” it's far from an organized system. In essence, they operate as 5,300 little fiefdoms” (see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/07/20/how-many-colleges-and-universities-do-we-really-need/?utm_term=.0bd116bf81b8).

The above intra-disciplinary communication studies have provided an essential guide for communication academics. To date, however, no surveys have been published that describe how many of the total universities and colleges nationwide, accredited by the six

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regional accrediting associations, require basic communication instruction (whether limited to oral communication or otherwise) for all undergraduate students, regardless of major. Such broad based data regarding communication instruction requirements for all undergraduates distinguished from communication instruction as a general education requirement option, to be chosen from among multiple alternative options have also not been reported.

A logical next step would be to conduct a comprehensive survey of all universities and colleges with accreditation reviewed by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE), North Central Association of Colleges and Schools-The Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC), Northwest Commission on Colleges & Universities (NWCCU), Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges.

Interdisciplinary Support For Basic Communication Instruction

On March 31, 1994, the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” was signed into law. As part of "Goals 2,000" the National Education Goals Panel was established to review and promote voluntarily submitted national content, student performance, and opportunity to learn standards (Newburger, 2015, 1996). Prior to the signing of the law, on July 27, 1993, resolutions of the above panel regarding "Assessing the National Goal Relating to Postsecondary Education--Goal Five" were adopted. Goal Five stated that "... The National Education Goals Panel believes that it is both feasible and desirable to develop a national sample-based postsecondary assessment system that will provide regular national and comparable state indicators of college graduates' ability to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems. In assessing students' abilities to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems, the system should be designed to reflect students' differing fields of study and occupational areas” (National Education Goals Panel, 1993).

More contemporary support for advancing communication instruction general education requirements for postsecondary students is continually provided by numerous sources. Liberal Education, America’s Promise (LEAP) posits, for example, “a national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative that describes essential learning outcomes for college students in the 21st century (About LEAP, n.d.). LEAP details “Intellectual and Practical Skills” that include six subcategories, several of which are manifest in the basic communication course: inquiry and analysis; critical and creative thinking; written and oral communication; quantitative literacy; information literacy, and teamwork and problem solving” (Essential Learning Outcomes, n.d.).

A National Association of College and Employers (NACE) “Job Outlook 2012” survey shows that teamwork (4.60 on a 5-point scale) and oral communication (4.59) are nearly equally weighted for skills employers view as most needed in college graduates (NACE, 2011). The Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U) includes effective oral and written communication among its essential learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2002, 2007).

Recognition of the importance of communication instruction is manifest among the six regional accrediting associations. For example, on May 16, 2017, accreditation status as reported by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges,

included Oral and/or Written Communication Skills as one of the top three topics submitted to the senior leadership team (see <http://www.famu.edu>).

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE) published Its “Standards” (Effective July 1, 2016). These standards are listed next.

Standard Four: The Academic Program, Undergraduate Degree Programs

4.15 **Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English;** the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind (see <https://cihe.neasc.org/standards-policies/standards-accreditation/standards-effective-july-1-2016>).

Additionally, the Middle States' Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) Standards for Accreditation and Requirements-- Standard III - Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience, Criterion 5(b) (November 2015), states that institutions that offer undergraduate education, a general education program, free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, offer a curriculum designed so that students acquire and **demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication**, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy (see <https://www.msche.org/standards/>). Another regional institutional accreditor, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission includes as a criterion for review that undergraduate programs must: **“ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking”** (2013 Handbook; see <https://www.wscuc.org/resources/handbook-accreditation-2013/part-iii-wasc-quality-assurance/institutional-report/components-institutional-report/4-educational-quality-student-learning-core-competencies-and-standards-performance>).

Aspirational Foundation

2013 National Communication Association (NCA) president, Steven A. Beebe, asserted that the basic course serves as the “discipline’s front porch,” making it “the most important room in the disciplinary home of communication studies” (Beebe, 2013, p. 3). Dance (2002) asserted that “in many ways the undergraduate course in public speaking is the discipline’s “bread and butter course” (p. 355). Morreale et. al. (2016) expanded, suggesting, “The basic course serves to introduce students to the communication discipline, recruiting undergraduates as majors and acting as the primary means by which communication students learn the praxis of communication education while completing their degrees” (p. 338).

What May Be Going On Out There?

The Rice University example described below presents an isolated look at how communication, as a discipline, may be left as a passive observer when other disciplines, in

this case, English and Linguistics, may be responsible for campus wide communication instruction. Rice University requires undergraduates to fulfill a writing and communication requirement and has a corresponding Center for Written, Oral and Visual Communication to help achieve this end. Originally, the Rice University faculty senate considered the recommendations of a working group report on writing and communication in the curriculum (see <http://professor.rice.edu>).

This report advocated that Rice institute a Writing and Communication Program tailored specifically to the university's needs that matched or exceeded those of sixteen peer institutions [Brown, Cal Tech, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Emory, Harvard, MIT, Northwestern, Princeton, Stanford, U. Chicago, Vanderbilt, Washington U., Yale]. The working group recommended a process for creating this program that began with consultation with nationally recognized writing and communication experts, working with a faculty committee and the goals set forth in the group's report.

Ultimately, the Center's emphasis on writing instruction overshadowed communication instruction to the extent that the oral communication component appears muddled in the translation. Rice's 2010 in-house comparison with the sixteen peer schools (Faculty Senate Working Group Report on Writing and Communication in the Curriculum) acknowledged that few of their peer schools included oral, visual or other communication courses in their requirements. Rice met its goals without overtly including members of our discipline as working group or faculty advisory group members (see https://professor.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Professor/Faculty_Senate/nov28r2.pdf).

As of November 2018, the Director of Rice's Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication (CWOVC) holds a Ph.D. in second language literacy from the University of Toronto, an MA in applied linguistics from the University of Houston, and a BA in English literature from Rice. The Associate Director and lecturer in the Program in Writing and Communication holds a Ph.D. in English literature from Vanderbilt University and a B.A. in English from the University of Notre Dame. None of the Center's undergraduate consultants are communication majors (see <https://cwovc.rice.edu/Staff>; <https://pwc.rice.edu/staff/>; <https://cwovc.rice.edu/consultant-bio-grid>).

Although the Rice University example is isolated, it serves as an example of a potential missed opportunity for members of our discipline for possible participation in communication related curricular development on the postsecondary level. The nationwide surveying of universities and colleges described above will detail how other postsecondary academic institutions treat communication instruction as a general education requirement and will better guide our discipline's efforts for promoting basic course instruction.

Under Siege on Your Campus?

Hess (2012) detailed how his communication department faced "possible elimination of its university-wide requirement of oral communication. The threat to the basic course was triggered by a major revision to the university's general education program, but support had been eroding for a number of years prior to this event. In this case, the department was able to generate enthusiasm for a revised course, and emerged as a stronger contributor to the students' education" (p. 2). Hess reported four strategic lessons about actions that were taken locally, including tailoring the introductory course to the institution's needs and mission, involvement in university work, making compelling use of assessment, and drawing on support from accreditation requirements.

Most importantly, Hess detailed how to sell communication instruction to those who were in the political position to support his department's curricular contribution to university undergraduates:

In absence of any voice on the committees, we began by talking with those who had decision-making power. Another faculty member and I talked to each of our sector's representatives on the Academic Senate and on the APC to make a case for the importance of oral communication, taught by faculty with training in the field, and to find out what we could do to make our case heard. I also talked to both the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and to the college's Associate Dean for Integrated Learning, who was highly involved in the curriculum revision process. These conversations helped us to get some of our message out, and at the very least, made it clear that the department was going to fight hard for required coursework in oral communication taught by qualified faculty. These conversations with leaders who saw the department from an outside perspective also offered some ideas about productive directions we might take in our response. (p. 4)

The Hess example demonstrates how individual departments might approach advancing communication instruction across their local undergraduate core curriculum. Additionally, periodic departmental program reviews may be a tool for using campus required departmental review processes to spread the good word about our strengths while arguing for new resources.

Nationwide Lobbying

Newburger (2015) advocated for a broader discipline-wide approach using our national, regional and state communication associations to work together to form an active coalition for lobbying to increase communication instruction in postsecondary university general education requirements. Such a coalition would involve a collaborative, means-oriented arrangement that allows our national, regional and state associations to pool resources and combine efforts in order to effect change.

NCA currently “engages in two types of work related to public policy. First, communication scholarship informs discussion about public issues, and the association sometimes takes corresponding positions on these issues. The association has provided funds to communication scholars to form public policy working groups that work to translate existing communication research findings into recommendations that can inform and impact public policy. Second, NCA advocates for public policy that supports the professional efforts of our members” (see <https://www.natcom.org/advocacy-public-engagement/public-policy>).

Newburger (2015) argued that considering the imminent and immediate potential harm resulting from political inaction, perhaps the NCA Legislative Assembly should consider calling for and supporting a public policy working group charged with making recommendations for how our discipline can operationalize/implement a methodology for our discipline's political involvement for expansion of basic communication instruction across the postsecondary undergraduate core curriculum (general education requirements).

Newburger (2015) further argued that a working group may include chairs of national and regional basic course and instructional development divisions and representatives from our discipline's state associations. The group could focus on making

recommendations to current regional postsecondary accrediting associations and university general education requirement committees or related campus entities. Recommendations should also target campus departmental faculty engaged in program reviews regarding using the reviews as a tool to spread the good word about our strengths while arguing for new resources.

Assertive lobbying of current regional postsecondary accrediting associations, advancing recommendations that the principal designers of the learning goals, subsequent activities and corresponding teaching and assessment of oral communication instruction on college campuses should include qualified faculty with disciplinary background specific to oral communication instruction. The ultimate goal would be reflected in future accreditation standards expressly stating something like: **...demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication. Principal designers of the learning goals, subsequent activities and corresponding teaching and assessment of oral communication instruction should include qualified faculty with disciplinary background specific to oral communication instruction.** Such language written into regional accreditation standards would enable members of our discipline to make compelling arguments for expansion of basic communication instruction across local campus undergraduate general education requirements.

Aspirational articles grounded in recognizing our discipline's front porch and bread and butter course must be operationalized in political actions that market basic communication instruction across the undergraduate core curriculum.

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