

Critical Concerns for Oral Communication Education in the United States and the United Kingdom

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Introduction

An examination of oral communication education in the U.S. and U.K. identified four critical concerns:

1. Today's college students are not getting adequate oral communication education.
2. Oral communication education is being relegated to a "module" in another discipline-specific course.
3. When an oral communication course is included in the general education curriculum, that course tends to be narrow rather than broad in scope.
4. An increasing number of college faculty who teach oral communication courses do not have a graduate degree in the discipline.

Solutions to each concern are offered and suggestions are provided about how decision-making bodies can address these concerns.

This article first examines the essential role of oral communication before identifying four critical concerns and offering suggested solutions for oral communication education in the United States (US) and, to some extent, the United Kingdom (UK). These concerns may be indicative of similar issues affecting oral communication regionally, nationally and even internationally. If so, then the suggested solutions offered herein may provide direction. If not, then being proactive rather than reactive may prevent some or all of these concerns from becoming reality.

The essential role of Communication

"We listen to a book a day, speak a book a week, read the equivalent of a book a month, and write the equivalent of a book a year" (Buckley, 1992, p.623). A study of how college students spend their time communicating showed that nearly 72% of their day is spent listening and speaking, while reading and writing comprise less than 29% of their day (Emanuel et al., 2008a). Not only do people spend considerable time communicating, communication skills also are essential to personal, academic, and professional success. In a report on fastest growing careers, the U.S. Department of Labor (Career projections, 1995) states that communication skills will be in demand across occupations well into the next century. Good communication skills fuel self-confidence and enable a person to exert more control over their life. Such a person knows how to effectively research, conceptualize, organize, and present ideas and arguments. This is critical to citizen-participation which is the foundation of a democratic society. There is an ever-increasing

body of evidence that echoes the importance of communication skills. Morreale, Osborn, and Pearson (2000) collected and annotated nearly 100 articles, commentaries, and publications which call attention to the importance of the study of oral communication in contemporary society.

Becker & Eckdom (1980) list several studies which indicate that speaking skills are more important to job success than are specific technical skills. A survey of 500 alumni who earned their Ph.D. from Michigan State University between 1982 and 1993 found that conflict resolution, communication, and teamwork skills were rated as vitally important skills that are needed to have successful careers (Crawley & Klomprens, 2000). When Diamond (1997) asked 1,000 faculty members from a cross-section of disciplines to identify basic competencies for every college graduate, skills in communicating topped the list. Harrell & Harrell (1984) stated that no skill is more important to a successful career in business than good communication. Satir (1988), a pioneer in family enrichment, described family communication as the largest single factor determining the kinds of relationships we make with others.

Mosvick and Nelson (1996) state that about one-third of a person's time on the job is spent working in groups or teams and attending meetings or preparing for meetings. Felder et al. (2000) reported that engineering leaders ranked communication skills to be more important than technical skills. A study by Darling and Dannels (2003) reported that the types of communication that engineers rated as most important included message construction skills, teamwork, negotiation, and asking and responding to questions. A national survey of 1,000 human resource managers identified oral communication skills as valuable for both obtaining employment and successful job performance (Winsor, Curtis & Stephens, 1997).

Murphy (1996) held workshops on transferable skills with staff from a wide range of disciplines at eighteen universities across Australia. Among key transferable skills, these faculty consistently identified oral communication as one of the most important. Similarly, surveys conducted by the University of Sheffield and Hatfield Polytechnic of among employers in the UK identified oral communication as the most important transferable skill (Thornley, 1992). Surveys of staff and of students consistently identify oral communication skills as one of the most important communication skills that a student can bring into the workplace (Murphy, 1996).

Communication is the vehicle that allows the human race to recall the past, think in the present, and plan for the future. It enables people to manage relationships with others and to interpret and interact with the environment. Effective communication is a learned skill. Most people are born with the physical abilities to acquire necessary communication tools, but such potential does not guarantee that they will learn to communicate effectively.

The Communication discipline is concerned with improving students' abilities to communicate in a variety of ways, as well as with expanding knowledge of how people communicate. The Communication discipline is both one of the oldest and one of the newest academic disciplines. The ability to speak clearly, eloquently and effectively has, for centuries,

been recognized as the hallmark of an educated person. In ancient Greece, classical rhetoric emphasized the need for a student of the art to become familiar with logic, human motivation, principles of language, and performance. The ethical responsibilities of the orator were also emphasized. The study of rhetoric continued into the Roman era and beyond, when it was one of the original seven liberal arts considered necessary for a good education.

Today, the discipline is much broader, encompassing intercultural communication, gender and communication, and the study of communication in many other specific contexts. Its intense focus on what, when, where, how, and why humans interact is what is so special about the Communication discipline. Communication has provided both the means and meaning of cultural advancement.¹

Most would acknowledge the significant role of communication in history and in present culture. And few would argue with the overwhelming amount of research and testimonials which all point to the importance of effective communication for success in business and in life. But are today's college students getting the kind of communication training they need?

Concern 1: Today's college students are not getting adequate oral communication education.

There is mounting evidence that students may not be getting the kind of communication training needed for success in today's rapidly changing world. A report by the Business Higher Education Forum found that "newly hired graduates have impressive academic skills. However, graduates lack communication skills and the ability to work in teams and with people from diverse backgrounds" (Graduates are not prepared, 1997, p.4). Executives with Fortune 500 companies indicated that college students need better communication skills including motivating people, delegating authority, listening, direction-giving, and group problem solving (Graduates are not prepared, 1997). The executives stated that the qualities and skills they seek in their "perfect candidate" center around how well that candidate will relate to co-workers and clients. Communication skills, teamwork, and interpersonal skills top the list of desirable qualities. Murane and Levy (1996) cite case studies of high-wage companies which claim that essential skills for future workers include problem solving, working in groups, and the ability to communicate effectively. Economist D.N. McCloskey (1994) stated, "We are living in a communications revolution comparable to the invention of printing... In an age of increasing talk, it's wiser talk we need most" (p.16).

When the Harvard Medical School surveyed more than 2,000 patients about their office visits, poor communication emerged as the most important factor affecting patients' trust in their doctors and as the most likely reason for dissatisfaction and cause for switching physicians

¹ (For a brief history of oral communication, see "Why Harvard Destroyed Rhetoric" by Jay Heinrichs in *Harvard Magazine* online at <http://inpraiseofargument.squarespace.com/harvard/> and an accompanying article – "No Public Speaking at Harvard" – by Margaret Gutman Kosko written August 18, 2006 posted July 22, 2010 on *Inside Higher Education* online at www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/08/18/klosko).

(Keating, et. al., 2002). The Harvard study, published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, highlights a need that America's medical schools acknowledge: physicians need better communication skills. Physicians long out of medical school are discovering that improving patient communication can lead to more accurate diagnoses, better patient compliance, higher retention rates, more referrals, lower staff turnover, reduced malpractice premiums, and fewer lawsuits (Patients consider, 2002).

Communication skills are as essential to the legal profession as they are to the medical profession. Willett (1984) argues that the importance of effective communication skills between lawyers and clients is equaled only by the imperative need for sustained instruction in the development of communication skills for the lawyer. Especially important are nonverbal communication skills in "reading the client" during interviews. Willett points out that courses in law school rarely provide more than trial practice, trial preparation, or settlement and negotiation. Fledgling attorneys must look elsewhere to develop the nonverbal communication skills required for effective interviewing.

A review of education literature by the University of Hawaii's General Education Project states: "Both in and out of academe there has been agreement that students need to develop skills such as writing and oral communication, logical and critical thinking, computer utilization, mathematical analysis, and formal reasoning" (Review of General Education, 1996). In virtually every study and re-evaluation of desirable student outcomes resulting from an undergraduate general education curriculum, written and oral communication are inextricably linked.² With this reality, it is logical to conclude that oral communication courses would be as prevalent as written communication courses in college core curricula. But they are not.

The question is: Are oral communication skills essential in this information age? If so, then today's students and future leaders cannot afford an education devoid of oral communication instruction. In considering what should be included in a well-rounded college

² See, for example:

Report of the University General Education Committee. (June 30, 2008). Mercer University
Retrieved, January 15, 2010, www.mercer.edu/oie/qep/GenEd08.pdf

General Education in the 21st Century. (2007). Center for Studies in Higher Education. University of California,
Berkeley. Retrieved, October 15, 2009. <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/GEC-WEB.FINAL.pdf>

Improving the Transfer of General Education Credit: Alternative Policies for Florida Public
Postsecondary Institutions. (Summer 2003). Retrieved, February 10, 2010,
<http://askew.fsu.edu/current/masters/actionreport/su2003/Matthew%20Bouck%20-%20Improving%20the%20Transfer%20of%20General%20Education%20.pdf>

University of Iowa's Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Reaccreditation Subcommittee Report Common
Academic Experience: The General Education Curriculum. (n.d.). Retrieved February 10, 2010,
<http://www.uiowa.edu/reaccreditation/pdf/Common%20Academic%20Experience-Final.pdf>

Review of General Education Literature. (Spring 1996). University of Hawaii General Education Project. Retrieved,
February 3, 2010, <http://www.hawaii.edu/ovppp/gened/litrev.htm>

Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs. (1994). Prepared by
participants in the Project on Strong Foundations for General Education, The Association of American
Colleges. Retrieved, February 3, 2010, <http://wise.fau.edu/~ecou1533/strongfoundations.htm>

education, there is widespread agreement that the primary goal is for students to learn critical habits of mind. “A necessary prerequisite for studying the human world is an ability to communicate in it. Therefore, it is essential that students become proficient in their reading, writing, and speaking” (What will they learn?, 2009, p.7).

Oral communication in the general education curriculum

Although faculty, administrators, and potential employers express concern about students’ lack of effective oral communication skills, few universities have implemented campus-wide requirements to develop these skills. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni surveyed 100 four-year institutions and found that “most are not insisting that students study what they need to know” (What will they learn?, 2009, p.2). A Boyer Commission report (Reinventing undergraduate education, 2001) revealed that only 17% of the survey respondents reported that oral communication skills are taught in their university’s required introductory courses, and about 27% reported that their university does not offer any courses or activities to promote development of these skills.

A 2011 survey of 1,700 public and private colleges and universities from across the United States revealed that about half (N=853 or 50.2%) offer an oral communication course among their general education requirements³. Of these, 59.8% *require* an oral communication course instead of making it optional to students. In short, less than one-third (30.0%) of the 1,700 public and private colleges and universities surveyed *require* their students to complete an oral communication course in route to earning a degree. The picture is almost identical at the 817 *public* colleges and universities surveyed where less than one-third (32.6%) *require* an oral communication course instead of making it optional to students* For the 266 public schools surveyed that *require* an oral communication course in their core curriculum, less than half (46.2%) listed oral communication skills as an educational goal for their graduates. This is either a case of “under promise and over deliver,” or it is a commentary on the understanding (or *misunderstanding*) US colleges and universities have about the essential nature of oral

³ Undergraduate students at Alabama State University who assisted with the survey of colleges and universities in the United States include: Tim Acres, Stephanie Adams, Jordan Anderson, Jaquill Banks, Brandon Barnes, Tim Barnett, Matthew Bates, Alexis Brand, Najee Bright, Arkia Brooks, Amaria Brown, Samantha Bruno, Angelo Carson, Cherrelle Carter, Andrew Cook, Jordan Creel, Phillip Davis, Jermaine Dorsey, Jazmina Early, Alonnesia Edwards, Bianca Embry, Jasmine Evans, Shari Ford, Jacquinta Franklin, Marcus Frazier, Robert Frinks, Charlotte Garner, Alvini Givens, Courtney Gooch, Clarence Hall, Yabobbie Hamilton, Meldrick Harper, Lashundra Harris, Leslie Harris, Dustin Hayden, Jasmine Head, Demarious Heard, Ray Hill, Lashiel Holloway, Latavia Holmes, Takeira Holston, Hakim Jarboh, Shavon Johnnie, Megan Johnson, Shanlia Kelly, Leslie Knight, Carlos Kyles, Dominique Larkin, Clifford Laurore, Darrick Long, Kasadra Martin, Stacy Massey, Darryl McMillian, Stephen Meek, Relena Miller, Shawpanica Moncrief, Alfred Moore, Edward Moseley, Naomi Moss Cornell, Markita Myree, Tuipulotu Ofahulu, Kayla O’Neal, Edward Owens-Jones, Bianca Paige, Qwna Penn, Brittany Peterman, Kayla Peterson, Ricky Pierce, Desmond Powell, Gavin Randall, Deontae Rex, Alexis Rogers, D’Andre Russell, Dennis Sanders, Shannon Shackelford, Kenya Sheats, Robert Singleton, Blaise Smith, Adrian Snell, Rashad Snell, Evelyn Strauter, Brittany Summerville, Julian Taylor, Chrissshadiya Tyree, Joseph Varnon, Michael Warren, Kierra White, Brittani Whitfield, Ashley Williams, Destiny Williams, James Williams, Celandria Yancy, and Deamber Young.

communication skills.

Data from 290 two-year colleges in the United States suggests a somewhat stronger role for communication courses in the general education curriculum (Engleberg et al., 2008). This is important since about half of all freshmen and sophomores in the US are enrolled at two-year colleges, and many of those students transfer to four-year institutions (Fast Facts, 2011). The data indicate that 46% of the nation's two-year colleges require Public Speaking, 13% require Fundamentals of Oral Communication, 22% require both, and 19% require neither course in the general education curriculum. A national study of two-year and four-year colleges (Morreale et al., 2006) reported that more than half of the responding institutions ($n=306$) require a basic oral communication course in their general education curriculum.

In Alabama, 33% of public colleges require Public Speaking, 10% require either Public Speaking or Fundamentals of Oral Communication, and 3% require only Fundamentals of Oral Communication in the general education curriculum.

Most states have at least one decision-making body whose responsibilities include formulating, monitoring, and/or evaluating both the principles of the general education curriculum and/or the curriculum itself. For Alabama, that decision-making body is the Articulation and General Studies Committee (AGSC). The AGSC was created through legislative act in 1994 to "simplify the transfer of course credit between public institutions of higher education" (What is the AGSC?, 2007). Part of the committee's charge was to develop and implement "a statewide general studies and articulation program that facilitates the transferability of coursework among all Alabama public colleges and universities" (n.p.). This is an ongoing effort by the 10-member AGSC Committee.

The fact that only about 40% of Alabama's colleges and universities require some kind of oral communication course is not surprising. The AGSC-approved general education curriculum gives students the option to take an oral communication course or to avoid one entirely! The AGSC's approved general education or "core" curriculum consists of 41 semester hours in four areas including 6 hours in written composition (Area I), 12 hours in humanities and the fine arts (Area II) including 3 hours in literature and 3 hours in the arts, 11 hours in the natural sciences and mathematics (Area III) including 3 hours in math and at least 8 hours in the natural sciences, and 12 hours in history, social, and behavior sciences (Area IV) including at least 3 hours in history. Students must also complete a 6-hour sequence either in literature (Area II) or in history (Area IV).

Area I - Written Composition - states: "Effective written communication skills are essential in a literate society" (What is AGSC?, 2007). This rationale translates into a 6-hour English composition requirement for every college student in Alabama. In addition, every student must also complete at least 3 hours of literature (Area II), and possibly 6 hours of literature if they choose the 6-hour literature sequence instead of the 6-hour history sequence. In addition to the 3 or 6 hours of literature in Area II, students are also required to complete 3 hours in the arts. The remaining 6 hours (or 3 hours if they completed the literature sequence) must be

taken in the humanities and/or fine arts. An oral communication course is one of several courses in the humanities from which students may choose to complete their Area II requirements. So, students who have had an English course throughout their school years are now required to take at least 9 more semester hours of English at the college level. But these same students, who likely never had a single oral communication course in their life, may choose to take an oral communication course at the college level or avoid it altogether.

Responding to a proposal made to the AGSC to repackage Area I (renaming it “Written and Oral Communication”) to offer a total of 9 hours that focus on both written and oral communication, the AGSC Executive Director stated “while many [AGSC members] agree in principle to the increased need for oral communication throughout the curriculum, they feel there are other factors that prevent them from making it mandatory for all college students” (K. Sessions, personal communication, October 19, 2007). Primary among these “other factors” is the financial cost to hire enough communication instructors at the “big” schools (Auburn and Alabama). In fact, after the proposal, the AGSC indicated that if a workable plan could be developed to provide enough communication instructors at the “big” schools, they might be more amenable to the idea of requiring a communication course in the core curriculum. But when a workable plan was offered, the AGSC balked. In short, the AGSC acknowledges that oral communication skills are essential, but they claim they cannot afford to require Alabama’s college students to receive essential instruction in this key discipline.

Noteworthy in all this is the fact that no one seems to question the value of **written** communication skills. Nor does anyone flinch at the notion that students must take 6 hours of composition and at least 3 hours of literature classes at the college level to strengthen these skills. Nor does anyone take issue with having to earn a “C” or higher in these courses as an acceptable measure of competency. All this is in addition to the English composition and literature courses students have had nearly every year from first grade through high school. And yet, oral communication is rarely taught prior to college and is often listed as optional in many general education college curricula.

In the UK, there is no systematic approach to help develop oral communication skills. While most teachers would agree in principle with the need to help their students become more effective public presenters, faculty often focus on their content material rather than on student learning. In short, teachers face a constant balancing act between content and skills development where content usually wins out.

Murphy (1996) identified the specific nature of the functional skills encompassed by oral communication as:

- identifying the task—to present information, to develop an argument, and so on;
- sorting, selecting, and organizing the information;
- audience analysis;

effective use of voice;
use of presentational aids and technology;
use of nonverbal skills;
and adapting to the audience.

In 2009, the UK's Office for Standards in Education published its second report on the implementation of 14–19 reforms, including the introduction of Diplomas. A total of 23 consortia were visited and assessed. The report indicated that while the main subject learning of the Diplomas was generally going well, other elements, and particularly functional skills, needed more attention. Specifically, “work in functional skills lacked coordination in just under half the consortia visited” (Implementation, 2009, p.4). The report stated that even though the functional skills “form an integral part of the Diploma, [they] had a lower priority than the principal learning” (Implementation, 2009, p.11). The reason for this is that unlike content or so-called principal learning, “functional skills tended to be undertaken in the home institution, with relatively little collaboration between centres. As a result, students on the same Diploma course could have significantly different learning experiences in functional skills” (Implementation, 2009, p.12).

A 2011 review of curricula at 125 colleges and universities in the UK further confirms that students may not be getting adequate instruction and/or experience in the “functional skill” of oral communication⁴. Most colleges require that potential students must have basic competence in the English language. The British Council runs an International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) in many countries which students from overseas can use to check language proficiency. Almost every college in the UK has set minimum IELTS levels for university admission. Other recognized tests include: the Cambridge Proficiency Certificate, the Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is also used as a standard English proficiency examination for university admission in the United States for non-native English speakers.

Universities in the UK require an oral communication course *only* if the student's academic emphasis is something like speech and language therapy. There appears to be no school-wide oral communication course, requirement, or competency measure at universities throughout the UK. However, this is not atypical since universities in the UK do not follow the US core curriculum model.

Guiding principles

One way to explore why oral communication is or is not included in the general education

⁴ Undergraduate students at Alabama State University who assisted with the survey of colleges and universities in the United Kingdom include: Arriel, Butler, Latonya Elsberry, Robert Holston, Deangelo Hunter, Reginald Jackson, Ra'Sean Jones, Brittany Lewis, Brandi Moore, Carrie Patterson, Rashad Snell, Mildron Tate, Anterio Thomas, and Darlene Thomas.

curriculum is to evaluate the guiding principles that give rise to that curriculum.

College Learning for the New Century, a report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, provides a list of the essential learning outcomes for college students. It states that college students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining intellectual and practical skills including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and **oral communication**, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving. *A Taxonomy of Student Outcomes*, a report produced by the U.S. Department of Education (Terenzini, 1997), identified the following essential communication and computational skills: Reading, writing, and **oral communication**; quantitative/computational skills; information acquisition skills (technological and otherwise) (p.13). This domain includes skills in reading, written and **oral expression**, numeric calculations, and information acquisition (including the use of libraries, information technologies, and listening) (p.37).

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges is the regional accrediting agency with oversight responsibility for degree-granting public colleges in 11 southern states, Latin America, and nine other international sites (Commission, 2009). Its purpose is to ensure that “institutions meet standards established by the higher education community that address the needs of society and students” (§1). Its *Standards of Accreditation* requires that every SACS-accredited institution “offers degree programs that embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with its stated mission” (Principles, 2010, p.17). These same *Standards* require that institutions “focus on learning outcomes” (Principles, 2010, p.19), that they identify expected outcomes, and they assess the extent to which they achieve these outcomes including student learning outcomes (Principles, 2010, p.25). But these standards are not always met. As a report on general education requirements at 100 of the nation's leading colleges and universities put it: “While most colleges today claim they are providing a strong general education curriculum, in fact, they do so in name only” (What will they learn?, 2009, p.3).

The guiding principles the AGSC used to develop the general education curriculum for Alabama's public colleges do **not** include a set of generally accepted student competencies or student learning outcomes that the curriculum is designed to meet. Even when there is a set of stated student learning outcomes at a particular school, there often seems to be a disconnection between the school's stated outcomes and its general education requirements. One clear example of this ‘disconnect’ is seen at Auburn University.

Auburn University's general education student learning outcomes include “effective oral communication skills” (Auburn, 2009, n.p.). And yet, their general education requirements include 12 semester hours of English courses but **no** oral communication courses! At the very least, there is a disconnection between Auburn's stated general education outcomes and their general education course requirements.

It is also interesting to note that the objectives for the two required composition courses at Auburn University, ENGL1100 and ENGL1120, are strikingly similar. Objectives for

ENGL1100 state that students will “become adept at using writing processes,” “develop and articulate a claim,” “support the claim,” “become proficient in the conventions of standard written English,” “assess...rhetorical effectiveness,” and “make critical judgments” (Objectives...1100, 2009, ¶1). Objectives for ENGL1120 reflect more of the same. Students will “continue to develop...proficiency at using writing processes,” “develop and support claims,” “apply correctly the mechanics of documentation and citation,” and “further develop the student’s critical reading skills” (Objectives...1120, 2009, ¶1). Thus, the objectives of the second composition course reflect a continuation of the **same** skills outlined in the first composition course. While Auburn University says it values effective oral communication by including it as a key general education outcome, it offers **no** course requirement in its general education curriculum to achieve this outcome.

In Alabama, nearly two-thirds (65%) of its public colleges list oral communication as one of the key student learning outcomes achieved by and through their general education curriculum. However, less than one-third (30%) of those same schools require an oral communication course in their general education curriculum. Many colleges and universities do not provide any academic goals in the form of student learning outcomes. For those that do, most list oral communication skills among the most desired outcomes, yet many of these schools do not require an oral communication course.

Just how widespread is the ‘disconnect’ between mission and course requirements – between policy and practice? The answer may be seen in the national report of the *University Learning Outcomes Assessment* compiled annually by the Center for Learning Outcomes Assessment, Inc., at Indiana State University. This study taps a sample of more than 18,000 undergraduate students to assess seven key learning outcome domains – critical thinking, self-awareness, communication, diversity, citizenship, membership and leadership, and relationships. An examination of the lowest scored items in each domain reveals low levels of oral communication skills in six of the seven domains. The report offers one possible explanation that “student’s low levels of oral communication behaviors may be a cause or an effect of passive learning in the classroom” (n.p.).

Many of today’s college students are not getting adequate oral communication education. Despite lofty mission statements and student learning outcomes that focus on oral communication, many schools do not require oral communication in their general education curriculum. At best, these schools are being disingenuous; at worst, they are being academically negligent.

Solution 1

At the state level, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education and the AGSC should translate sound principles into best practices and require an oral communication course in the general education curriculum for all two-year and four-year colleges in Alabama. Area I of the

AGSC general education curriculum should be renamed “Written and Oral Communication” and should include a total of 9 hours that focus on both written and oral communication with at least one 3-hour oral communication course.

At the regional level, SACS should hold colleges accountable for fulfilling the *Standards of Accreditation*. That is, if the college has a stated mission that includes oral communication competency for its graduates, then the course of study should be compatible with that stated mission.

Even if these agencies will not act, colleges can and should strive to improve their core curriculum. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni aptly concluded their 2009 report, *What will they learn? A Report on General Education Requirements at 100 of the Nation’s Leading Colleges and Universities*, by stating that “colleges and universities must make improving general education an urgent priority. There are ample opportunities to do so.... Boards of trustees, in collaboration with faculty members, should insist on a course of study that will ensure students learn the things they need to know” (p.23).

Likewise, universities in the UK can give attention to the functional skill of oral communication. Short of making oral communication a school-wide requirement, universities can at least establish standards, provide instruction, and assess student mastery of oral communication skills as students matriculate.

Concern 2: Oral communication education is being relegated to a “module” in another discipline-specific course.

The SACS *Principles of Accreditation -2010 Edition*, section 3.5.1, states that “the institution identifies college-level general education competencies and the extent to which graduates have attained them” (p.27). A review of degree requirements at Alabama’s two-year colleges reveals that nearly two-thirds (64%) of the schools list oral communication as a desirable student competency along with reading, writing, fundamental mathematical skills, and computer literacy. However, these two-year colleges lack a consistent method of evaluating minimum oral communication competency. Central Alabama Community College’s *2009-2011 Catalog* states that minimum competency is demonstrated “by a student achieving a grade of ‘C’ or higher” (p.68) in courses that address the key competencies. These courses include English 101, 102, 131, Speech 106, 107, Math 100, 116, or a higher level math course.

Nearly a fourth of Alabama’s two-year colleges (6 of 25 schools) require a Speech course to address the oral competency requirement **unless** the requirement is accomplished through “the integration of oral communication proficiencies within a required discipline-specific course” (Jefferson, 2010-2011, p.55), or unless oral communication competencies “represent an integral module in a required discipline-specific course” (Gadsden, 2009-2010, p.59). Lurleen B. Wallace Community College’s *2009-2010 Catalog* states that “all degree seeking students must successfully complete...Fundamentals of Oral Communication (SPH 106)...” (p.39). However,

their degree requirements state that students “must complete 3 semester hours in Speech unless provisions for addressing Oral Communication Competencies represent an integral module in a required discipline-specific course” (p.44). In other words, basic instruction in oral communication is being relegated to a module in a course in a discipline other than communication.

Commenting on the American Council of Trustees and Alumni report, Fish (2009) agrees with the key content areas in which 100 of the nation’s leading colleges and universities are evaluated. However, he points out that “credit for requiring composition will not be given for courses that are ‘writing intensive’..., or for courses in disciplines other than English and composition..., or for courses in public speaking, or for remedial courses. In order to qualify, a course must be devoted to [English composition].” Fish further states that “courses that center on another content and fail to provide concentrated training in those skills are really courses in another subject.” This same argument, applied to oral communication, would necessitate a dedicated oral communication course in the general education curriculum. In short, attempting to provide adequate oral communication education in other-discipline courses fails to provide concentrated training in oral communication.

The final report of the Committee on Written and Spoken English (1998) at Washington University reached a similar conclusion:

While the Committee is unanimous in supporting the need to develop oral communication, it is not clear that the burden for such training could be assumed by [other-discipline] courses. Not only is the incorporation of oral presentation skills into the curriculum difficult, but student presentations also consume a great deal of class time.... To support courses in oral communication it would be important to persuade students that their future career opportunities will also benefit from [those courses]. There are very few professions or businesses today that do not depend on the speaking abilities of their employees, be it in the form of comments before a judge or Committee, presentations to clients, or collaborative work with colleagues (Committee on Written and Spoken English, 1998, ¶6 and ¶46).

At the state level, the AGSC lists specific criteria for oral communication courses taught in Alabama’s public colleges. Oral communication courses must:

- include historical foundations of rhetoric;
- include performance in oral communication including both verbal and nonverbal messages and an ability to overcome speaker apprehension;
- emphasize critical thinking skills including research skills, audience awareness, and ethical assessment;

- emphasize organizational skills including logical arrangement and linguistic choices;
- emphasize language facility including grammatical correctness, audience appeal and appropriateness;
- ensure that competent performance in oral communication is necessary for passing the course (Specific Guidelines, 2010, ¶1-5).

The notion that all of these criteria can be adequately met in some other discipline-specific course strains credibility. This “module” approach is not even an attempt at “communication across the curriculum.” The reality is that there are no “communication across the curriculum” programs at any of Alabama’s public two-year or four-year colleges.

Data from 290 two-year colleges across the United States (Engleberg et al., 2008) reveal that only 11% (26 of 285) schools have a communication across the curriculum program. Of these, 92% (24 of 26) require an oral communication course in their general education curriculum. Only one of the 290 two-year colleges has neither an oral communication degree nor a required oral communication course in their general education curriculum. Speech (oral communication) at this college is located in the English department. And even writing-across-the-curriculum programs are academic supplements to not replacements for required English composition courses.

Friedland (2004) claimed that many colleges are recognizing a need for oral communication across the curriculum. The rationale is that many small colleges do not have faculty in communication. The article describes a pilot program in oral communication “coaching” provided by faculty in theater and education. This is flawed reasoning that exposes an unwillingness to hire the needed faculty. Another example of this flawed reasoning is St. Olaf College in Minnesota. They had a four-year grant to establish an oral communication across the curriculum program. Their rationale was that “some [colleges] have no communication faculty at all; others have communication departments that are too small to meet a campus-wide need for communication instruction” (FIPSE grant, 2000, ¶1). These small colleges have sufficient numbers of faculty in other core areas like English and mathematics. This approach is an indictment of the school’s unwillingness to hire adequate numbers of fully qualified oral communication faculty.

A “module” approach to oral communication is problematic for several reasons:

1. Oral communication instruction is either not provided at all, or the instruction is being reduced to a “module” in a course rather than providing students an entire course in this critical discipline;
2. The evaluation of students’ ability to demonstrate oral communication competency is being done by instructors who are not trained or properly credentialed in oral communication;

3. Diminishing oral communication to a “module” in some other discipline’s course is inconsistent with the approved guidelines and criteria for oral communication which state that “course grading criteria must ensure that competent performance in oral communication is necessary for passing the course” (Specific Guidelines, 2010, ¶4);
4. No other key competencies are being treated this way. Only oral communication competencies are being “farmed out” to other courses. Imagine if the requirement was for students to complete 3 semester hours in mathematics unless provisions for addressing math competencies represent an integral module in a required discipline-specific course. Would the trained, properly credentialed math faculty be concerned that non-qualified or under-credentialed instructors are teaching math and evaluating students’ math competency? What if written communication competency was treated like oral communication competency? Would English faculty be concerned if a psychology teacher or a history teacher were the evaluator for the written communication competency?;
5. This kind of treatment may “open the door” to other essential skills being “farmed out” and reduced to a module in other courses;
6. No compelling rationale is provided for treating oral communication competencies in this way.

Many courses throughout university curricula require students to orally present material as a major component of the course. However, merely assigning communication projects and grading them will not by itself promote better communication. At least two English composition courses are required in most college general education curricula. The rationale is that written communication skills are important. However, no rationale ever seems to be provided as to why it takes two courses to meet this basic skill especially since students have had English composition courses throughout their academic life. Similarly, at least one mathematics course is required in most general education curricula to meet computational competency requirements. The missing piece is almost always the oral communication component. Either an oral communication course is required, or it is not required, or it is relegated to a “module” in another discipline’s course where it is somehow taught, demonstrated, and evaluated.

Solution 2

While this “module” problem seems to exist only among some of Alabama’s community colleges for now, the real concern is that if this practice goes unchecked and unchallenged, it may spread to four-year colleges. A reasonable and more academically responsible approach is to address oral communication competency in the same manner as written communication competency. That is, since there are required English composition courses in the general education curriculum to address written communication competency, the same rationale should require an oral communication course to address oral communication competency.

At the state level, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education and the AGSC have an opportunity to provide leadership by renouncing the academically unsound practice of a course being reduced to a “module” as part of another discipline’s course. Oral communication skills are too important to students’ success to merit anything less than a full-fledged course.

At the regional level, SACS should hold colleges accountable for fulfilling their *Standards of Accreditation*. SACS could also clarify that their intent is for qualified oral communication faculty to evaluate oral communication competencies.

Whenever oral communication courses are taught, whether in the US or the UK, universities ought to “police” themselves and hold themselves academically accountable to offer instruction by qualified personnel that is sufficient to equip students with essential oral communication skills.

Concern 3: When an oral communication course is included in the general education curriculum, that course tends to be narrow rather than broad in scope.

A nation-wide study of two-year and four-year colleges revealed that for those institutions that require a communication course in their core curriculum, the majority (62%) of those institutions (N=124) offer Public Speaking (Morreale et al., 2006). One-third (13 of 40) of the public two-year and four-year colleges in Alabama require Public Speaking, ten percent require Public Speaking or Fundamentals of Oral Communication, and one university requires only Fundamentals of Oral Communication. A communication course is an option at eight Alabama colleges, and there is a communication “module” option at seven of the 25 two-year colleges. Five Alabama colleges have no communication course requirement or option in their general education curriculum.

If an oral communication course is included in the general education curriculum, the key question is, which oral communication course should be included? The AGSC provides a list of approved general education courses for all of Alabama’s two-year colleges. In the Communication discipline, that list consists of Fundamentals of Oral Communication, Fundamentals of Public Speaking, and Introduction to Interpersonal Communication. These three courses are approved transfer courses for all Alabama institutions of higher education.

The basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication (SPH 106) class is a hybrid course that includes instruction and accompanying skill training in listening, language, nonverbal, public speaking, voice and diction, interpersonal, problem solving, group dynamics, leadership and communication ethics. The Public Speaking class (SPH 107) typically includes coping with communication apprehension, audience analysis, topic selection, research skills, organization, presentation aids, delivery, informative speaking, persuasive speaking, and special occasion speaking. Introduction to Interpersonal Communication (SPH 116) focuses on communication in dyadic situations. This course is rarely taught in any of Alabama’s colleges.

It is worth noting that other disciplines offer introductory courses. For example, the fine arts course options at most colleges and universities include introductory courses in art, music, and theatre. Each of these courses is a broad-based introduction to their respective disciplines rather than more narrowly focused courses like painting, sculpting, musical composing, orchestral conducting, acting or directing.

The choice is whether to provide a broad-based introductory communication course which includes a public speaking component, or to offer only a Public Speaking course that will focus on that specific skill. Since most college students who take a communication class take only one, it is reasonable to offer a course that is as broad-based and exhaustive as possible (Emanuel, 2005). This means that the basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication course should be the preferred course offering since it is broad-based and it includes a public speaking component. The AGSC General Studies core curriculum web site echoes this same perspective. The web site indicates that courses fulfilling the Humanities requirement “should be broad in scope and content rather than specific and should emphasize a global perspective” (What is the AGSC?, n.p.). A two-year college course syllabus for Fundamentals of Oral Communication (SPH106) is provided on the AGSC’s *Approved General Course Listings by Area* (2010) web site. That syllabus clearly specifies that the course will be broad-based and will prepare students to demonstrate a knowledge of intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, and public communication (SPH106, 2004, n.p.).

Even the professional organization for the communication discipline - the National Communication Association (NCA) - is on record supporting a broad-based approach to teaching much needed communication skills (Policy platform, 1996). NCA members agree that rather than focusing on narrow applications, a required oral communication course should emphasize the most basic and universal concepts and skills that cut across many fields such as listening respectfully and critically, explaining points clearly, asking questions to gain understanding, adapting messages to different contexts, and solving problems in groups. The platform statement concludes that, above all, it is imperative that students are introduced to the complex ethical issues that will face communicators in a multicultural and technologically complex society.

The Public Speaking course is narrowly focused and does not address broader communication issues or skills. A 2002 NCA conference presentation, “Communication and Technology in Action,” stated that the speech communication discipline has tended to emphasize public speaking and may be denying itself an opportunity to teach students more about the scope of communication. The panelists went on to say that in most cases, the typical student will only take one course in communication, and therefore that course should be more representative of the field than what is typically offered in a public speaking course (Messman, 2002).

Fundamentals of Public Speaking is more of a how-to “formula” course which covers basic speech writing and delivery “mechanics.” Students demonstrate their understanding of those mechanics by presenting a variety of speeches. Student speeches also take up as much as one-third of the class sessions thereby dramatically reducing the number of lectures an instructor

has to prepare or present. Of the ten senior institutions in Alabama that offer bachelor's degree programs in speech or Communication Studies, only one offers a broad-based course.

Solution 3

At the state level, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education could provide strong leadership by insisting on a broad-based oral communication course as part of their prescribed general education curriculum. Students taking a basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication course are exposed to a wide range of communication contexts and essential skills. Offering Public Speaking as the only required communication course would provide public speaking training at the exclusion of the other kinds of communication skills workers in business and industry continue to advocate.

Colleges need not malnourish their students when it comes to communication education. The Fundamentals of Oral Communication course is a well-balanced academic meal complete with the vital skills and concepts that can well serve today's students and tomorrow's leaders. It should be the main course.

Concern 4: An increasing number of college faculty who teach oral communication courses do not have a graduate degree in the discipline.

Data from a nation-wide study of two-year colleges suggests that an alarming proportion of college faculty who teach oral communication courses do not have a graduate degree in the discipline (Engleberg et al., 2008). Nearly half (46%) of the nation's community colleges have full-time faculty teaching communication courses who do **not** have a graduate degree in the communication discipline. These faculty members teaching out of their discipline represent more than half the full-time communication faculty at their school. For the Southern region (which includes Alabama), 58% of full-time two-year college communication faculty do **not** have a degree in communication (Emanuel, 2008b). They have degrees in English (44%), theater (38%), and mass communication (19%), but not oral communication.

Teaching a Fundamentals of Oral Communication course requires a broad, deep understanding of the field of communication including its theory, research, and techniques. This course, which includes a public speaking component, is a much more challenging course to teach. It requires a well-trained communication professional to guide students through the various contexts and applications of communication. Oral communication education provides instruction and guidance to help students develop and improve their oral communication skills. The effective application of those skills is evidence of communication competence. Morreale, Osborn, and Pearson (2000), in their robust rationale for the centrality of the study of communication, state that "communication education is most appropriate and effective when it is

taught by faculty trained in the discipline and in departments that are devoted to the study of communication” (p.23).

The *SACS Faculty Credentials Guidelines* (2010), specifies that faculty who teach degree courses designed for transfer to a baccalaureate degree, or general education courses at the undergraduate level, or baccalaureate courses, must have earned “a doctor or master’s degree in the teaching discipline or master’s degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (a minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline)” (§1d). No other regional accrediting body specifies that 18 graduate semester hours in a discipline qualifies someone to teach that discipline. Since there is no demonstrable shortage of degreed people in the communication discipline, requiring only 18 graduate semester hours of some kind of communication-related courses unnecessarily diminishes faculty credentials standards when it comes to oral communication.

The Higher Learning Commission *Guidance on Determining Qualified Faculty* (n.d.) states that “faculty teaching in undergraduate programs should have completed a significant program of study in the discipline they will teach...with substantial coursework at least one level above that of courses being taught or developed” (p.1). In a very detailed *Faculty Credentials Operations Manual* (2008), Hillsborough Community College (Florida) affirms the fact that “both full-time and part-time faculty members are required to meet the standards set by SACS” (p.4). For each discipline/program, Hillsborough’s manual specifies the minimum faculty requirements and qualifying fields. For Speech (oral communication), a faculty member must have an earned master’s degree in speech or a master’s degree with at least 18 graduate semester hours in any combination of the qualifying fields. The manual then specifies the qualifying fields as communications, oratory, and speech. Obviously absent from this list of qualifying fields is English and theater.

If English and/or theater were acceptable qualifying fields, then communication faculty would also be qualified to teach English and/or theater courses too. However, this is not happening, nor is it likely to happen. Ironically and inexplicably, however, English and theater faculty often teach oral communication classes. There is no question that English and theater and communication are separate disciplines. Each has their own professional associations, conventions, academic journals, lines of research, etc. Further, there is no shortage of fully qualified and properly credentialed communication graduates nationally, regionally, or in Alabama.

The National Center for Education Statistics survey of degrees in Communication from 1998-1999 shows that 6,650 graduate degrees in Communication were conferred in a single academic year. This figure includes degrees in general communication, advertising, journalism, broadcast journalism, public relations, organizational communication, and radio and television broadcasting. Examining only graduate degrees in communication studies, speech communication, and rhetoric, the National Center’s survey shows the number of degrees conferred was 2,441 in 2006-2007 (Digest, 2007). Based on this data, there were enough people

who earned a graduate Communication degree in one year to fill at least one faculty position at every public two-year and four-year college ($n \approx 1,699$) in the United States!

No, there is no shortage of qualified and properly credentialed communication graduates. But some of those graduates who desire to teach oral communication courses at public colleges are not being hired because English graduates, theater graduates, speech-language pathology graduates, etc. are teaching the courses instead. Imagine the outcry that would be heard if an English composition course was listed as an oral communication course or taught by anything other than a fully qualified and properly credentialed English faculty member!

At some Alabama colleges, the communication discipline has been adopted! Alabama A&M and Jacksonville State both offer oral communication courses with an English course prefix. The implication is that if they are English courses, then faculty with a master's degree in English would be qualified to teach them. This is nothing less than academic dishonesty.

Solution 4

Whether or not a faculty member should have at least a master's degree in the teaching discipline can be addressed philosophically or realistically. Philosophically, one could argue that **any** person with particular skills may be able to effectively teach those skills whether they have a graduate degree or any degree at all. Realistically, accrediting agencies, institutions of higher learning and tradition all call for faculty members who have completed specific academic training with a certain number of courses in the teaching discipline. This is considered by the academic community and those it seeks to serve as reasonable, responsible and prudent.

On a regional level, SACS should follow the lead of the other regional accrediting agencies and delete the "18 graduate semester hours" language. Instead, SACS should reaffirm the value of a graduate degree in communication studies, speech communication, and/or rhetoric as the appropriate degree for those who teach college oral communication courses. Until then, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education should require all college faculty members to have at least a master's degree in the teaching discipline.

Like solutions 1 and 2, this is not a treatise in defense of the communication discipline; rather, it is a recommendation to follow the traditionally accepted pedagogical approach used in colleges and universities across the nation. Like other core skill sets, college students are best served by completing **at least one** core course taught by a properly credentialed faculty member. This is standard practice when it comes to writing and computational skills. And so it should be with oral communication skills.

Conclusion

Alabama has an opportunity to demonstrate a renewed commitment to academic integrity by moving forward with these recommended solutions. On a broader level, the National Communication Association (NCA) carries the primary responsibility for preserving, protecting, defending, and advocating the Communication discipline. Beyond simply drafting policy statements, the leadership of this nearly century-old professional organization can strongly urge accrediting agencies, college presidents and academic deans, communication departments, and decision-making that:

- (1) properly credentialed communication professionals should be hired to teach oral communication courses, and
- (2) a broad-based Fundamentals of Oral Communication course should be included in the general education curriculum if there is one.

Further, the NCA Basic Course Division and the Community College Section can partner to promote oral communication in college general education curricula of U.S. colleges. Studies like the national (Engleberg, et al., 2008) and regional (Community College Section, 2008) study of communication education in two-year colleges and the ongoing basic course survey (Morreale et al., 2006) of two-year and four-year colleges are helpful resources in this effort.

In the UK, the Office for Standards in Education (or equivalent agencies) should undergo an assessment of how best to provide university students with functional skills in oral communication. This effort would, in the long run, best serve the students, the universities, and the future of the UK.

The concerns outlined here point to the heart of how states and regions as well as individual institutions make decisions that affect communication education. These concerns expose a tendency among policy-makers, at times, to do the expedient at the expense of the important. The research continues to confirm that both oral and written communication skills are essential for success in contemporary society. The curricula and faculty at institutions of higher learning should reflect this truth.

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