

Communication: Humanities' Core Discipline

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Dozens of studies support the fact the communication skills are essential for success in contemporary society. Evidence suggests, however, that today's college students are not getting the kind of communication education that business and industry leaders advocate. And yet, graduates lament that today's college students are not getting adequate training in essential communication skills. In too many colleges and universities, communication is not included in the general education curriculum. Alabama's Articulation and General Studies Committee's ([AGSC](#)) core curriculum should be amended to require both written and oral communication. The National Communication Association ([NCA](#)) should lead efforts to re-establish oral communication as a core discipline and skill for every college student. Finally, a case is made for a broad-based Fundamentals of Oral Communication course as the preferred choice in the core. The kind of in-depth State-wide analysis offered here will clarify whether or not what is happening to oral communication in Alabama's colleges is typical. If so, there may be a national credentials and core curriculum crisis when it comes to communication. If not, that evidence would bolster an already strong case for the recommendations offered here.

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The essential role of communication

“We listen to a book a day, we 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). Not only do we 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](#) (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 1997 survey of personnel managers found that oral communication skills were ranked as the most important factor in helping graduate students obtain employment ([Winsor, Curtis, & Stephens](#)). A survey of 500 alumni who earned their Ph.D. from Michigan State University between 1982-1993 found that conflict resolution, communication, and teamwork skills were rated as vitally important skills that are needed to have successful careers ([Crawley & Klomparens](#)). 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). An abundance of empirical research studies all point to the importance of a broad range of communication skills.

The scope of the discipline

Communication is the vehicle that allows us to recall the past, think in the present, and plan for the future. It enables us to manage our relationships with others, and to interpret and interact with our environment. 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 one's 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 listening, intercultural communication, group communication, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, gender and communication, and the study of communication in many other specific contexts. No other discipline makes human interaction its unique focus. This intense focus on what, when, where, how, and why humans interact is what is so special about the Communication discipline. From drawings on cave walls, to the bits and bytes of computer code, to academic and political debates, to just trying to get a date, communication has enabled the human race to define ourselves, record our history, and tell our story. It has been the means and meaning of our cultural advancement.

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

Are today's college students prepared?

There is mounting evidence that students may not be getting the kind of communication training needed for success in today's rapidly changing world. [Hanna](#) (1978) reported growing concerns among business leaders about the lack of communication skills among graduates. The concerns stem from a report by the Business Higher Education Forum, an organization of Fortune 500 executives, which 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](#)," 1997, p.4). [Hanna](#) (1978) discovered a similar call for a broader approach to communication training. Responses from 55 CEO's of various companies suggested that courses offering communication education for the business community should help students develop the skills involved in motivating people, delegating authority, listening, direction giving, and group problem solving. Executives with Fortune 500 companies indicated that college students need better communication skills ("[Graduates are](#)," 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) states, “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 recently 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 ([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.

Although faculty, administrators, and potential employers express concern about students’ lack of good oral communication skills, few universities have implemented campus-wide requirements to develop these skills. A Boyer Commission report (“[Reinventing undergraduate](#),” 2001) reveals 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. Data from 290 two-year colleges nation-wide suggests a somewhat stronger role for communication courses in the general education curriculum ([Engleberg et al.](#), 2007). 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. This is consistent with other national surveys. [Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley](#)’s (2006) survey of 305 two-year and four-year colleges in the United States shows that over half of the respondents (50.2%) reported that their basic course is required in their institution’s general education requirements. The Public Speaking course is required at 62% of these institutions; the Fundamentals of Oral Communication course is required at 36%. Only 2% of institutions indicated that they expect students to complete the basic communication course in the first year.

The AGSC core curriculum

Alabama's Articulation and General Studies Committee ([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, p. 1). 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" (p.1). This is an ongoing effort by the 10-member AGSC Committee, three of whom represent Alabama's two-year college system.

The AGSC's approved general studies 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](#)), 11 hours in the natural sciences and mathematics ([Area III](#)), and 12 hours in history, social, and behavior sciences ([Area IV](#)). 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, p. 3). This rationale translates into a 6-hour English composition requirement for every student. 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. A Communication course would be one of several courses in the humanities from which students could choose to complete their Area II requirements.

The module problem

Some of Alabama's two-year colleges (Central Alabama, Gadsden State, Jefferson State, LBW, Shelton, and Trenholm) include a requirement in Area II which states 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. [Jefferson State Community College's 2006-2007 Catalog](#) states: "The oral communication competency is a requirement of the [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools](#)...[that] may be accomplished through the integration of oral communication proficiencies within a required discipline-specific course(s)" (p.51). This is problematic for several reasons:

1. Attempting to meet oral communication competencies in a module taught in another discipline's course is NOT a part of the AGSC approved core curriculum.
2. Communication instruction is being reduced to a "module" in a course rather than providing students an entire course in this critical discipline.
3. It implies that a "module" addressing oral communication competencies is somehow equivalent in value to an entire course in Communication
4. Oral Communication competencies are being measured without providing students with broad-based, complete communication instruction by qualified communication professionals.
5. 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.
6. No other discipline is being treated this way. Only communication is being "farmed out" to other courses. Imagine if the requirement was for students to take 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 instructors are teaching math and evaluating students' competency in mathematics? What if the requirement was for English? Would English faculty be concerned if a psychology teacher or a history teacher evaluates students' competency in English?

7. This treatment of an important discipline and a critical set of skills may “open the door” to other disciplines being “farmed out” and reduced to a module in other courses.

8. No compelling rationale is provided for treating oral communication competencies in this way.

9. It would be hard to imagine that the accrediting body - the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools - would condone this kind of approach to fulfilling the oral communication competency.

To assess whether and to what extent oral communication competencies are being addressed as a “module” in another discipline-specific course, one need only compare the number of basic composition ([ENG 101](#)) classes with the number of oral communication ([SPH 106](#) and [SPH 107](#)) classes offered during the same term. ENG 101 is a required course for all students in Alabama's community colleges. If the colleges with the “module” option are addressing oral communication competencies in a Communication course, then the number of ENG 101 and SPH 106/107 classes would be the same. However, if there are more ENG 101 classes than SPH 106/107 classes, this would indicate the extent to which the “module” approach is being used.

The table below indicates the number of ENG 101 and SPH 106/107 courses offered Fall 2007 at the six community colleges that have the “module” option. There are a little more than half as many SPH 106/107 courses as ENG 101 courses. This suggests that about half the students at these colleges are getting a “module” in oral communication while the other half are getting an entire course in oral communication. That is, even the colleges with the “module” option are not uniformly or consistently implementing that option.

Number of ENG 101 and SPH 106/107 classes offered at two-year colleges that have a communication “module” option

	ENG 101	SPH 106	SPH 107
Central AL	25	11	1
Gadsden	41	26	2
Jefferson State	20	4	15
LBW	15	7	0
Shelton	33	10	11
Trenholm	7	0	0
TOTAL	121	58	29

Source: Fall 2007 class schedules

Communication in the general education curriculum

A description of the communication courses required in the general education curriculum of Alabama's colleges is listed below.

<u>Two-Year College</u>	<u>Communication course required in general education curriculum</u>
Alabama Southern-----	Public Speaking
Bevill State-----	Public Speaking
Bishop State-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Calhoun-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Central Alabama-----	Speech <u>OR</u> a communication "module"
Chattahoochee Valley-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Drake-----	None
Enterprise-Ozark-----	Public Speaking <u>OR</u> Fundamentals of Oral Communication
Faulkner-----	Public Speaking
Gadsden-----	Speech <u>OR</u> a communication "module"
Ingram -----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Jefferson State -----	<u>AS degree</u> : ENG 102 <u>OR</u> Speech <u>OR</u> communication "module"
Jefferson Davis-----	Public Speaking
Lawson -----	Public Speaking
LBW-----	Speech <u>OR</u> a communication "module"
Northeast-----	Public Speaking
Northwest-Shoals-----	Public Speaking
Reid-----	None
Shelton-----	Speech <u>OR</u> a communication "module"
Snead-----	<u>AS degree</u> : A communication course is one of many Humanities options; <u>AAS degree</u> : Speech
Southern Union-----	Public Speaking <u>AND/OR</u> Ethics
Trenholm-----	Speech <u>OR</u> a communication "module"
Wallace-Dothan-----	Fundamentals of Oral Communication
Wallace-Hanceville-----	Speech cannot be used as a single course to satisfy Area II requirements (9 total hours is required in Areas I & II)
Wallace-Selma-----	Public Speaking <u>OR</u> Fundamentals of Oral Communication
<u>Four-Year University</u>	<u>Communication course required in general education curriculum</u>
Alabama A&M-----	ENG 205 (General Speech) offered as an elective
Alabama-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Alabama-Birmingham-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Alabama-Huntsville-----	None
Alabama State-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Auburn-----	None
Auburn-Montgomery-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Jacksonville State-----	EH (English) 141 (Oral Communication) offered as an option
Montevallo-----	Fundamentals of Oral Communication
North Alabama-----	Fundamentals of Speech (Public Speaking)
South Alabama-----	A communication course is one of many Humanities options
Troy-----	Fundamentals of Speech (Public Speaking)
Troy-Dothan-----	Fundamentals of Speech (Public Speaking)
Troy-Montgomery-----	Fundamentals of Speech (Public Speaking)
West Alabama -----	Public Speaking

It is clear that when there is a required communication course, that course tends to be Public Speaking – 12 of 40 schools require it. Four schools offer a broad-based Fundamentals of Oral Communication course – two schools require it and two offer it as an alternative to Public Speaking. A communication course is an option at 14 schools and there is a “module” option at six schools. Four schools have no communication course requirement in their general education curriculum. At some schools, 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. Imagine the outcry that would be heard if an English composition course were listed as an oral communication course!

Most reasonable people would readily agree that college graduates should be able to communicate effectively. However, there seems to be a disconnect between what most would consider reasonable, even laudable, academic goals and general education requirements. Auburn University is a case in point. Auburn University has seven overarching goals for an undergraduate education (“[Core Curriculum Goals](#),” 2007); key among them is effective communication. Ironically, however, Auburn University has no oral communication requirement in its core curriculum.

The fact that only about 40% of Alabama’s colleges and universities require some kind of communication course is not surprising. The AGSC-approved core curriculum gives students the option to take a Communication Studies (formerly “Speech”) course or to avoid it entirely! And yet, those same students are required to take at least three and possibly four English courses because written communication skills are “essential in a literate society.”

It is interesting to note that the objectives for ENGL1100 and ENGL1120, the two required composition courses at Auburn University, 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” (“[Composition Studies – ENGL 1110](#),” 2007). 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” (“[Composition Studies – ENGL 1120](#),” 2007). Thus, the objectives of the second composition course reflect a continuation of the same skills outlined in the first composition course. This is after more than a decade of elementary and secondary education in which English is taught throughout. And yet, very few high school graduates have ever had an oral communication course.

Recommendations

There is no denying that written communication skills are essential, however, oral communication skills are equally essential in a literate and democratic society. To that end, the AGSC’s General Studies Curriculum should be amended. Area I should be renamed “Written and Oral Communication.” Students should be required to complete 9 hours in this area – 6 hours in written and 3 hours in oral communication. Area II should be amended to require only

9 hours. All other current Area II requirements would remain in place, however, "Speech" would be omitted from the list of disciplines for this area.

The AGSC has established academic [discipline-specific committees](#) that recommend changes to the AGSC. One of these discipline-specific committees is the [Communication Studies committee](#). This 19-member committee consists of 14 members from four-year universities and five members from two-year colleges. Currently, several positions are vacant. This committee should have a full complement of qualified communication faculty who pro-actively promote the role of communication in the core curriculum state-wide and who champion the importance of communication skills in the lives of Alabama's students.

It is worth noting that the 29-member [English and Literature committee](#) has 14 members from four-year universities and 15 members from two-year colleges. It may be that the relatively small number of two-year college members on the Communication Studies committee has, over time, resulted in a diminished voice and diminished advocacy for the discipline.

On a broader scope, the [National Communication Association](#) (NCA) carries the primary responsibility for preserving, protecting, defending, and advocating the Communication discipline. The leadership of this nearly century-old professional organization needs to strongly urge accrediting agencies, college presidents and academic deans, communication departments, and decision-making bodies like the AGSC throughout the country that:

- (1) fully qualified and properly credentialed communication professionals are teaching communication courses, and
- (2) a broad-based Fundamentals of Oral Communication course is included in the general education curriculum.

The critical choice

If the changes suggested here are adopted, the question remains: Which Communication course should be included in the general education curriculum? 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 public institutions of higher education in Alabama.

The basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication class is a hybrid course that includes historical foundations of speech and rhetoric, listening, language, nonverbal, public speaking, voice and diction, interpersonal, problem solving, group dynamics and leadership. The Public Speaking class 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 focuses on communication in dyadic situations. This course is rarely taught in any of Alabama's two- or four-year 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. 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.”

Even the professional organization for the communication discipline - the 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. Nearly three-fourths of Alabama’s two-year colleges offer only Public Speaking ([Emanuel](#), 2005). One reason so many schools choose to offer Public Speaking as their only oral communication course may be that the instructors’ educational training is in English, theater, or mass communication, but not speech or communication studies. Data from a nation-wide study of two-year colleges support this reality ([Engleberg et al.](#), 2007). Forty-six percent of the nation’s community colleges have full-time faculty teaching communication courses that 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. 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 history, 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. [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).

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. Fundamentals of Oral Communication 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.

Conclusion

Relatively little is known about how and by whom communication competencies are being taught and measured at U.S. colleges and universities. An in-depth State-by-State analysis will clarify whether or not what is happening to oral communication in Alabama is typical. If so, there may be a national credentials and core curriculum crisis when it comes to communication. If not, that evidence would bolster an already strong case for the recommendations offered here.

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