# A Regional Analysis of Communication Education in U.S. Community Colleges

## Richard Emanuel

*This research project investigated the status of communication education in U.S. community colleges. Data analysis was conducted on usable surveys (N=290) from community colleges in each of the six accreditation regions. Results focus on institutional, faculty, and curriculum characteristics as well as instructional resources, and professional support and challenges. A regional analysis provides a meaningful comparison of individual communication programs with the "typical" communication program in the region, and it enables faculty to identify their program's relative strengths and weaknesses. Regional accreditation ensures the quality of and adherence to academic standards. For oral communication competency to remain key component of the community college mission, strong advocacy from professional associations like the National Communication Association (NCA) and strategic action by regional accrediting agencies is needed.*

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The Community College Section of the National Communication Association (NCA) embarked on a unique and ambitious research project to assess the state of communication education at U.S. two-year colleges.  The project, which began in 2002, involved dozens of state and regional coordinators throughout the country.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports that in 2006, 45% of all undergraduates and 45% of all first-time freshmen attended one of the 1,186 two-year and community colleges in the United States. Every year, approximately 11.6 million students enroll in community colleges; 6.6 million of these students take credit courses.

The focus of this study is public community colleges.  Data were not sought from independent proprietary institutions. As a result, the study sought data from the 986 AACC-classified public community colleges. The data are analyzed by accreditation region.[i]

This study begins with a report of previous relevant research, a rationale for the national survey, the importance of an analysis by accreditation region, and a description of the study's methodology.  Significant results are presented followed by a discussion of common currents, distinctive differences, critical concerns, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

**Prior Research**

There is very little research focusing on community college communication programs, and most of it is out of date. However, there have been two recent, comprehensive studies which focus on communication education at community colleges across the U.S.

A survey of the basic communication course at two and four-year institutions (Morreale, Hugenberg & Worley, 2006) summarizes institutional demographic data as well as information about course orientations and enrollment, course administration and organization, instruction and pedagogy, technology and distance education, and assessment and evaluation.

The communication discipline needs to regularly collect and analyze national data on the status of communication education in U.S. community colleges. In many cases, a general education communication studies course is the only communication course that community college students take during their entire college career, but information is lacking about the types of courses, class size, faculty qualifications, and technological support.

Engleberg et al. (2008) provided a comprehensive study of communication education in U.S. community colleges.  However, this analysis did not focus on regional similarities or differences.  For more than three decades prior to the Engleberg et al. (2008) study, there has been no comprehensive national survey of community college communication departments.  And no studies have provided analysis of these programs by accreditation region.

The ability to compare one's own communication program with the "typical" communication program in the region enables faculty to identify their program's relative strengths and weaknesses.  This kind of comparison can also aid community college deans and other administrators in making informed decisions about how to strengthen their school's effort to teach students essential oral communication skills.  A survey released by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in January 2008 reports that less than a third (30%) of employers gave a high rating to college graduates on their oral communication abilities (Jaschick, 2008); Nearly one-fourth (23%) gave college graduates a low rating.

Exploring communication programs by accreditation region is also important because regional accreditation is the most recognized and accepted type of accreditation in the United States ("College Accreditation," 2007).  Accreditation also determines a school's eligibility for participation in federal (Title IV) and state financial aid programs.[ii]  Proper accreditation is also important for acceptance and transfer of college credit. Accreditation ensures the quality of and adherence to academic standards.  Finally, regional accreditation agencies possess the power to create or otherwise impose academic standards for critical competencies like oral communication.  Colleges interested in gaining or maintaining their accreditation must comply with those standards.

There are six regional accreditation agencies for all 50 states and U.S. territories – Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association for Schools and Colleges, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and Western Association of Schools and Colleges.  A list of each regional accreditation agency and its respective states and territories is provided in Appendix 1.

## Study Origins and Purpose

As previously noted, the Community College Section of the National Communication Association (NCA) initiated a large-scale survey project designed to provide more information about the current status of the communication education in U.S. community colleges.  In addition, state coordinators were recruited to work with their regional coordinators to identify and develop a list of community college contacts in their state and to encourage these contacts to respond to the survey.

## Method

Through the auspices of the NCA, the survey was posted on the association's website and made available to all potential respondents, many of whom were not affiliated with the association. Data collection began in January 2005 and was concluded in October 2005. E-mail reminders were sent to potential respondents during this period.

*Instrumentation*

The survey questions were developed by the project's national committee with input from external experts. The questionnaire included 36 items designed to obtain data and gain insights from communication education programs in U.S. community colleges.  Questions sought to

assess institutional, faculty, and curriculum characteristics as well as instructional resources, and professional support and challenges.

*Data Collection*
Data collection was divided into two phases. In Phase 1, regional coordinators and state representatives identified and contacted as many community colleges with communication programs as possible. The goal was to identify at least one reliable contact person at every community college in every state.

Although a total of 579 survey contacts were initially identified, elimination of duplicate contacts resulted in contacts at 502 community colleges with communication programs. This number represents almost 51% of the 986 AACC-classified public community colleges in the United States.

In the second phase of the project, the 579 community college contacts were sent e-mails requesting that they complete the survey posted on NCA's website. Survey responses were received from 42 states.

Of the 579 possible respondents, there were 290 usable surveys. Of the 290 responses, 21 were duplicates; that is, 21 colleges had two respondents. Twelve of these duplicated college responses came from faculty members at different campuses, but still part of the same college. No two respondents from the same college were exactly alike in their responses. For this reason, the duplicate surveys are included for a total N of 290 usable surveys, a 50% response rate. Surveys were grouped according to their appropriate accreditation region.  Data analysis was conducted on usable surveys from each of the six accreditation regions.

## Results

Results are presented for each of the five areas of inquiry: institutional, faculty, and curriculum characteristics as well as instructional resources, and professional support and challenges.

*Institutional Characteristics*
Table 1 shows the number and proportion of responding schools in each accreditation region. The largest proportion of schools is from the Western accreditation region (47%), and the Southern region has the smallest proportion of responding colleges (13%).

Table 1
*Accreditation region, number of schools, number of colleges in each accreditation region, and the percent of colleges from each region that responded to the survey*

|  | Number of responding colleges | Number of colleges in the accreditation region | Percent of colleges from the region that responded to the survey |
|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 120 | 333 | 36 |
| Western | 57 | 122 | 47 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Southern | 41 | 309 | 13 |
| Northwest | 37 | 76 | 49 |
| Middle States | 28 | 102 | 27 |
| New England | 7 | 44 | 16 |
| Total | 290 | 986 | |

Table 2 shows the average enrollment in each accreditation region and the proportion of responding schools with more than one campus. The New England region (*n*=7) has the smallest average enrollment (4,588) and the smallest proportion (43%) of multi-campus community colleges. The Northwest accreditation region has both the largest average student enrollment (13,838) and the largest proportion (84%) of multi-campus colleges.

Table 2
*Average student enrollment and percent of colleges with more than one campus*

| | Average enrollment | Percent with 2+ campuses |
|---|---|---|
| North Central | 8,539 | 56 |
| Western | 12,871 | 57 |
| Southern | 10,466 | 76 |
| Northwest | 13,838 | 84 |
| Middle States | 12,317 | 54 |
| New England | 4,588 | 43 |

*Faculty Characteristics*
The average number of full-time communication faculty seems to hover around three or four (See Table 3 below). The exception is in the Middle States accreditation region where the average number of full-time communication faculty is eight. Communication faculty with a Master's degree generally out-number those who hold a doctorate degree by a margin of about 3 to 1.

Table 3
*Minimum, average, and maximum number of full-time communication faculty*

| | Min. | Avg. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 0 | 3 | 12 |
| Western | 0 | 4 | 11 |
| Southern | 1 | 5 | 35 |
| Northwest | 0 | 3 | 12 |
| Middle States | 1 | 8 | 20 |
| New England | 1 | 2 | 4 |

The data also reveal that in only two regions – Middle States and New England – more than half of the colleges (61% and 71% respectively) have at least one full-time communication faculty member who does <u>not</u> have a degree in communication (See Table 4).  However, less than one-third (30%) of the colleges in the Western region have unqualified full-time faculty teaching communication courses.

Table 4 also reports the average number and proportion of full-time communication faculty who do *not* have a degree in communication.  Except for the Western region, half or more of the full-time community college communication faculty nationwide do *not* have a degree in communication!

Table 4
*Full-time faculty who teach communication but who do NOT have a degree in communication*

| | Percent of colleges where at least one full-time communication faculty member does NOT have a degree in communication | Average number of full-time communication faculty who do NOT have a degree in communication | Average proportion of full-time communication faculty who do NOT have a degree in communication |
|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 43 | 2 | 64 |
| Western | 30 | 1 | 42 |
| Southern | 37 | 2 | 66 |
| Northwest | 37 | 2 | 66 |
| Middle States | 61 | 4 | 53 |
| New England | 71 | 2 | 90 |

Table 5 reports the average number of adjuncts hired, the proportion of colleges with fewer full-time than part-time faculty, and the percent of schools where part-time faculty teach half or more of the communication courses offered.  More than half of the colleges in the Western, Middle States, and North Central regions have *fewer* full-time than adjunct communication faculty members.  Except for the Southern and Northwest regions, more than half of the schools have part-time faculty teaching the majority of the communication courses offered.

Table 5
*Average number of adjuncts hired, proportion of colleges with fewer full-time than adjunct faculty, and percent of schools where adjuncts teach 50% or more of the communication courses*

| | Average number of adjunct communication faculty hired | Average proportion of colleges with <u>fewer full-time than adjunct</u> communication faculty members | Percent of schools where half or more of the communication courses are taught by adjuncts |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 8 | 68 | 54 |
| Western | 7 | 79 | 54 |
| Southern | 8 | 49 | 35 |
| Northwest | 6 | 44 | 37 |
| Middle States | 13 | 71 | 58 |
| New England | 8 | 43 | 67 |

*Curriculum Characteristics*

The majority of schools in each region require at least one communication course in the school's general education curriculum. Ninety percent of colleges in the Southern region, 89% of schools in the Western region, and 86% of schools in the North Central region require at least one communication course in the general education curriculum. A communication course is a core requirement in a smaller proportion of colleges from the Middle (71%), Northwest (59%), and New England (57%) regions.

Table 6 shows that Public Speaking is the most prevalent required communication course in the general education curriculum. Other common courses include Fundamentals of Oral Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and Small Group Communication.

Table 6

*Percent of colleges that require communication courses in their general education curriculum*

| | Public Speaking | Funda-mentals | Inter-personal | Small Group | Bus. or Profess. | Inter-cultural | Argum & Debate | Oral Int/ Perf Std | Mass C/ Media |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 76 | 44 | 29 | 11 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Western | 96 | 29 | 53 | 29 | 10 | 22 | 35 | 16 | 2 |
| Southern | 88 | 59 | 41 | 15 | 27 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Northwest | 91 | 36 | 41 | 50 | 18 | 23 | 9 | 5 | 18 |
| Middle States | 65 | 60 | 40 | 10 | 5 | 10 | 0 | 5 | 15 |
| New England | 50 | 50 | 25 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 |

Because 143 (60%) of the colleges that responded to this question offer more than one required communication course, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

Table 7 identifies the percent of colleges in each region that offer various communication courses. Again, Public Speaking is taught by the largest proportion of colleges in each region. In addition, a majority of colleges in all but the New England region offer Interpersonal Communication. Small Group Communication is taught in a majority of schools in the Western and Northwest regions. Fundamentals of Oral Communication is offered by a majority of colleges in the Southern and Middle State regions. A majority of schools in the Western region offer Oral Interpretation, and a majority in the Northwest, Middle States, and New England regions offer Mass Communication. Business/Professional Communication is taught at a majority of colleges in the Middle States region, and Intercultural Communication is offered at a majority of schools in the Western and Northwest regions. A majority of colleges in the Western

region offer Argumentation and Debate, and the majority of schools in the Middle States region offer Voice & Diction.

Table 7
*Percent of colleges that offer communication courses*

| | Public Speaking | Inter-personal | Small Group | Funda-mentals | Oral Interp | Mass Comm | Bus/Prof Comm | Inter-Cultural | Argum & Debate | Voice & Diction | Foren/ Sp.Team | Remedial |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 91 | 70 | 47 | 45 | 45 | 43 | 38 | 27 | 19 | 15 | 23 | 8 |
| Western | 100 | 82 | 53 | 32 | 61 | 28 | 32 | 58 | 75 | 37 | 35 | 21 |
| Southern | 98 | 66 | 32 | 68 | 24 | 32 | 39 | 7 | 15 | 29 | 17 | 2 |
| Northwest | 92 | 81 | 81 | 49 | 27 | 51 | 46 | 62 | 30 | 19 | 14 | 5 |
| Middle States | 75 | 57 | 39 | 68 | 39 | 68 | 61 | 50 | 32 | 57 | 14 | 18 |
| New England | 86 | 43 | 43 | 29 | 14 | 71 | 43 | 14 | 0 | 29 | 0 | 14 |

Because 271 (94%) of the colleges that responded to this question offer more than one communication course, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

In terms of faculty teaching load, there is a clear standard – 5 courses per semester or 4 courses per quarter.  Although the most prevalent academic calendar is the semester system, four of the six regions have at least some colleges that still follow the quarter system (See Table 8 below).   Although the typical communication class has about 26 students (See Table 9 below), the Western region tends to have larger class sizes than other regions.

Table 8
*Percent of colleges on semester and quarter system*

| | Semester | Quarter |
|---|---|---|
| North Central | 86 | 14 |
| Western | 96 | 4 |
| Southern | 100 | 0 |
| Northwest | 29 | 71 |
| Middle States | 93 | 7 |
| New England | 100 | 0 |
| *n=* | 239 | 46 |

Table 9
*Maximum communication class size*

| | Smallest | Average | Largest |
|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 18 | 24 | 40 |
| Western | 25 | 31 | 45 |
| Southern | 15 | 26 | 37 |
| Northwest | 20 | 27 | 42 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Middle States | 15 | 25 | 35 |
| New England | 15 | 25 | 40 |

*Instructional Resources*

A strong majority of colleges in every region have a variety of technology in their communication classroom (See Table 10 below).  Roughly three-fourths of colleges across the U.S. have video recording equipment, presentation software, an LCD projector, and a DVD in their communication classroom.  About half or more of the colleges also have a computer in the classroom.  And half or more of the schools in the Middle States, Northwest, and Southern regions have a "smart" classroom.  Only a handful (7%) of colleges in the Western and Northwest regions reported having no technological equipment at all in their communication classroom.

Table 10
*Percent of colleges with technology in their communication classroom*

| | Video rec. equip | Presentation software | LCD projector | DVD | Computer | Smart class | No equipment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 90 | 86 | 78 | 81 | 65 | 49 | 0 |
| Western | 85 | 78 | 76 | 65 | 49 | 29 | 4 |
| Southern | 88 | 85 | 63 | 63 | 53 | 50 | 0 |
| Northwest | 86 | 78 | 70 | 73 | 59 | 51 | 3 |
| Middle States | 89 | 82 | 82 | 75 | 75 | 79 | 0 |
| New England | 71 | 100 | 100 | 86 | 71 | 14 | 0 |

Because 259 (92%) of the colleges that responded to this question offer more than one type of technology in their communication classroom, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

The majority of colleges in every region except Western (47%) offer distance education communication courses, but in only two regions – Middle States and New England – do more than half the schools have a communication center or lab (See Table 11).

Table 11
*Percent of colleges that offer distance education and those that have a communication center or lab*

| | Offer some communication courses via distance education | Have a communication center or lab |
|---|---|---|
| North Central | 57 | 13 |
| Western | 47 | 17 |
| Southern | 58 | 12 |
| Northwest | 57 | 16 |
| Middle States | 57 | 64 |
| New England | 86 | 57 |

Table 12 shows that barely 10% of schools in each region offer communication across the curriculum. More than half (56%) of the colleges in the Middle States region offer courses for non-native speakers and nearly three-fourths (74%) offer a two-year communication degree. Except for the Middle States region, the proportion of colleges offering a two-year communication degree varies from 14% (New England) to 45% (Western). The North Central and Southern regions lag behind other regions in offering courses for non-native speakers (19% and 12% respectively).

Table 12
*Percent of colleges that offer communication across the curriculum, courses for non-native speakers, a two-year degree, and a certificate program*

|  | Communication across the curriculum | Courses for non-native speakers | Two-year communication degree | Certificate program |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 13 | 19 | 27 | 8 |
| Western | 9 | 40 | 45 | 30 |
| Southern | 10 | 12 | 34 | 2 |
| Northwest | 11 | 30 | 30 | 14 |
| Middle States | 11 | 56 | 74 | 4 |
| New England | 0 | 29 | 14 | 0 |

Forensics/debate is the most prevalent extra-curricular communication activity in every region. However, in only two regions – Middle States and Western – do most of the colleges offer some kind of extra-curricular communication activity (See Table 13). Half of the schools in the Middle States region also have a communication honor society.

Table 13
*Percent of colleges that offer some extra-curricular communication activity and the type of activity they offer*

|  | Offer some extra-curricular activities | Forensics/ Debate | Intramural | Honor society | Toast-masters |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 34 | 83 | 14 | 8 | 3 |
| Western | 51 | 85 | 35 | 27 | 0 |
| Southern | 29 | 73 | 27 | 18 | 18 |
| Northwest | 30 | 50 | 30 | 30 | 0 |
| Middle States | 55 | 67 | 25 | 50 | 0 |
| New England | 20 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Because 24 (10%) of the colleges that responded to this question offer more than one type of extra-curricular activity, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

*Professional Support and Challenges*

On average, at least one full-time communication faculty is a member of NCA. Respondents also identified the most helpful resources provided by NCA (See Table 14 below). The majority of schools in each region cited journals that help faculty teach communication, materials for classroom use, attending the annual convention, and an online archive of communication journals as being most helpful. About half or more of the colleges in every region except New England also cited NCA's *SPECTRA* newsletter as a helpful resource. Fifty-five percent of schools in the Western region cited communication theory/research journals as a helpful resource. Finally, none of the colleges in the New England region selected communication theory/research journals or a directory of communication instructors as helpful resources.

Table 14
*Percent of colleges indicating most helpful resources*

|  | Journals that help me teach communication | Materials for classroom use | Attend an NCA convention | Online archive of communication journals | *SPECTRA* newsletter | Summer conference | Communication Theory/Research journals | ListServ | Directory of communication instructors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 87 | 84 | 69 | 59 | 64 | 48 | 40 | 38 | 27 |
| Western | 80 | 80 | 64 | 65 | 67 | 36 | 55 | 35 | 27 |
| Southern | 93 | 88 | 75 | 73 | 75 | 40 | 48 | 45 | 33 |
| Northwest | 74 | 80 | 63 | 71 | 49 | 37 | 31 | 49 | 29 |
| Middle States | 89 | 74 | 52 | 56 | 74 | 44 | 37 | 37 | 41 |
| New England | 100 | 86 | 57 | 71 | 14 | 43 | 0 | 57 | 0 |

Because 270 (96%) of the colleges that responded to this question selected more than one resource, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

Of the colleges that provide some faculty development support (*n*=219), the vast majority in each region provide some financial assistance for travel to conferences (See Table 15). The majority of colleges in the Middle States region get additional coursework, and the majority of colleges in the Western region get on-campus workshops for faculty development.

Table 15
*Percent of colleges that offers some faculty development support
and the type of support they offer*

|  | Get some faculty development support | Travel to conferences | Additional coursework | On-campus workshops | Departmental retreats |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 84 | 92 | 41 | 34 | 10 |
| Western | 56 | 75 | 22 | 50 | 38 |
| Northwest | 67 | 92 | 21 | 21 | 4 |
| Southern | 85 | 91 | 32 | 41 | 9 |
| Middle States | 89 | 96 | 52 | 40 | 16 |

| New England | 57 | 100 | 25 | 25 | 0 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Percentages for the <u>type</u> of support offered is based on the number of colleges that offer some development support and not the total number of colleges responding to the question.

Because 111 (39%) of the colleges offer more than one type of support, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

When asked to identify significant challenges facing the communication department, the majority of colleges in four regions – Southern, Middle States, Northwest, and North Central – indicated finding qualified part-time faculty is a significant challenge (See Table 16 below).  The majority of schools in two regions – New England and Middle States – stated that hiring qualified full-time faculty is a significant challenge.  Most of the schools in two regions – Western and Southern – indicated financial support to attend professional conferences, and technology in the classroom – Middle States and Southern – as a significant challenge facing the department.   Finally, the majority of colleges in the New England region cited supporting the needs of part-time faculty as a significant challenge, and the majority in the North Central region cited assessment issues in the classroom as a challenge.

Table 16
*Percent of colleges identifying significant challenges facing the communication department*

| | Finding qualified part-time faculty | Securing funds for professional conferences | Hiring full-time faculty | Technology in the classroom | Support for part-time faculty | Class assessment | Distance learning | At-risk students | ESL or Int'l students | Communication in the gen. ed. curriculum | Transfer/ Articulation agreements | Intercultural/ Diversity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Central | 51 | 41 | 45 | 35 | 47 | 50 | 41 | 33 | 23 | 19 | 22 | 14 |
| Western | 44 | 71 | 49 | 45 | 31 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 36 | 31 | 35 | 18 |
| Southern | 61 | 61 | 41 | 54 | 39 | 29 | 39 | 27 | 20 | 27 | 17 | 22 |
| Northwest | 57 | 37 | 37 | 31 | 23 | 37 | 46 | 26 | 40 | 29 | 31 | 23 |
| Middle States | 59 | 44 | 59 | 67 | 41 | 37 | 26 | 37 | 37 | 26 | 26 | 19 |
| New England | 43 | 43 | 71 | 14 | 57 | 29 | 29 | 14 | 43 | 14 | 14 | 29 |

Because 261 (94%) of the colleges that responded to this question selected more than one challenge, the sum of the percentages for each region exceeds 100%.

**Discussion**

*Common Currents*
There are several commonalities across all accreditation regions.  Median student enrollments range from 4,200 to 12,000.  Most two-year colleges are multi-campus colleges that make policy decisions on a college-wide basis rather than by campus.

The vast majority of two-year colleges require at least one oral communication course to fulfill general education requirements.  While Public Speaking is the most prevalent communication requirement, a Fundamentals of Oral Communication course is also frequently included in the general education curriculum.

Communication departments usually include one faculty member who has a Ph.D. and one who is a member of the NCA.  More than one-third (41%) of all colleges surveyed have at

least one full-time faculty member teaching communication courses who does *not* have a degree in communication!

The typical teaching load is five courses per semester with a maximum class size of 25. More than half the colleges have three or more adjunct instructors teaching communication courses. In fact, adjunct instructors teach the majority of the communication courses at more than a third of the colleges in the South and Northwest, and at more than half of the colleges in all other regions of the country.

Communication programs at our nation's two-year colleges emphasize speech or oral communication. Courses like Public Speaking, Fundamentals of Oral Communication, Interpersonal Communication and Argumentation/Debate are typical communication program courses. Most communication classrooms are equipped with video recording equipment, presentation software, LCD projector, and a DVD player. Several colleges also have "smart" classrooms for their communication courses.

Whether or not communication courses are available via distance education varies widely. Most two-year colleges do *not* have a communication center or lab. Most also do *not* offer communication across the curriculum, courses for non-native speakers, an associate's degree in communication, or a certificate program in communication. For the minority of colleges that offer extra-curricular communication activities, almost all offer forensics/debate.

Journals that help faculty teach their communication courses and material for classroom use were identified as the most helpful resources. While a very large proportion of two-year colleges give some support for faculty to attend professional conferences, a majority of respondents indicated that securing funds to attend professional conferences is a significant challenge. Respondents also indicated that hiring qualified full-time and part-time faculty is a significant challenge for them.

*Distinctive Differences*
This regional analysis also reveals some distinctive differences in communication programs among the accreditation regions. More than half of the colleges in the Middle States and New England regions have more than one faculty member teaching communication courses who does *not* have a degree in communication. In the Middle States, 61% of the colleges have 10 or more adjunct instructors teaching communication courses, and that same percentage of colleges have at least one faculty member teaching communication courses who does *not* have a graduate degree in communication. In New York, 70% of two-year colleges have at least one faculty member teaching communication without a graduate degree in communication. Only the Western region has *fewer* than a third of its colleges with at least one unqualified faculty members teaching communication courses.

The maximum communication class size is 25 in every region except the Western region where the typical class size is 31. An overwhelming proportion (86%-100%) of colleges in all regions follow the semester system except the Northwest where 71% of the responding colleges are on the quarter system. The typical teaching load in the Northwest region is five classes per

term except in the state of Washington where the typical load is three classes per term.  This is likely due to the fact that 90% of the colleges in Washington (*n*=20) follow the quarter system.

The North Central, Northwest, and Southern regions offer communication courses via distance education at more than half (57% to 58%) of their colleges.  Communication via distance education is most prevalent in the New England region where 86% of colleges report this educational option.

The Middle States region is the only region in which the majority (74%) of colleges offer an associate's degree in communication and courses for non-native speakers (56%).  Finally, the majority of colleges in only two regions – Middle States and Southern – indicated that technology is a significant challenge.

*Critical Concerns and Implications*

These results raise at least five specific concerns.  The *first* concern is that Public Speaking is the most prevalent course to meet general education requirements.  It is worth noting that other disciplines offer introductory courses in the general education core curriculum.  For example, the fine arts course options at most colleges and universities include introductory courses in art, music, and theater.  Each of these courses is a broad-based introduction to their respective disciplines rather than more narrowly focused courses like painting, sculpting, composing, conducting, acting or directing.  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 National Communication Association 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).  One reason so many schools choose to offer Public Speaking as their only speech course may be that the instructors' educational training is in English, mass communication or theatre, but not oral communication or communication studies.

For faculty, 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).

Emanuel (2005) provides a compelling case that students taking a basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication course are exposed to a wide range of communication contexts and essential skills.  Employers seek graduates who can effectively communicate in a variety of contexts and who display competence in Interpersonal Communication, teamwork, and leadership (Business-Higher Education Forum, 1997).  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.

*Second*, the majority of colleges in the Western (89%) and New England (57%) regions require an oral communication course in the general education curriculum (See Table 5).   The concern here is that the accreditation agencies for these two regions have specific guidelines requiring that *all* colleges ensure the development of oral competency ("Information Literacy," 2007).  If the responding colleges from these two regions are accredited and the accreditation agencies are functioning to ensure that academic standards are being maintained, then *100%* of the colleges in these two regions ought to require an oral communication course in their general education curriculum rather than 57% or even 89%.  For whatever reasons, this does not seem to be happening.

Fleuriet (1997) recognized more than a decade ago that although some accreditation agencies have begun to acknowledge oral communication competency as a viable requirement for college students to achieve, the harsh reality is that the communication discipline's role in bringing about that competency is perceived as less and less viable by administration and other members of the academy.  The implication is that communication professionals, including the professional association – NCA, may not be effectively promoting the necessity of oral communication competence.  If they are, they either aren't doing it enough or not enough are doing it.  To their credit, the NCA has produced an important document titled "Communication in the General Education Curriculum: A Critical Necessity for the 21st Century" (2007).  However, a more aggressive advocacy effort may be needed to convince accreditation agencies of this necessity.  Even this does not guarantee a satisfactory outcome. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni report titled "Why Accreditation Doesn't Work and What Policymakers Can Do About It" (2007) claims:

> While accrediting standards call for a strong general
> education, accreditors do not assess whether a school has put
> in place a rigorous "core curriculum" or whether the
> curriculum simply consists of a loosely assembled list of
> distribution requirements…As a result, even the "minimum
> standards" that accreditors purport to guarantee are far from

> sufficient to ensure that students receive anything worthy of
> being called a college education.

According to the September 2006 report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, "unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy in which...knowledge matters more than ever" ("U.S. Department," 2006). Without strong, professional guidance by discipline-specific professional associations like the NCA, any future role of oral communication as a core competency may be in jeopardy.

The *third*, and perhaps the most serious concern, is the persistent use of unqualified faculty to teach communication classes. A qualified communication faculty member is one who has a graduate degree in communication or communication studies versus English, mass communication, or theater. Hiring unqualified faculty to teach communication classes does not speak well of the academic integrity of the college or the accreditation agency that oversees it. The message is that "anyone can teach communication." Using the same [il]logic, anyone who can balance a check book ought to be able to teach business math! Many colleges indicate that hiring qualified full- and part-time faculty is a challenge for them. And yet, there is no shortage of graduate communication programs or graduates of those programs. This may be a place where the NCA can help match instructional need with qualified faculty through a "jobs" page within the association's web site. NCA could also take a proactive role in communicating to accreditation agencies the necessary and appropriate credentials for communication faculty.

The *fourth* concern is the large and ever-increasing number of colleges in which adjuncts outnumber full-time communication faculty and where adjunct faculty teach more than half of the college's communication classes. A recent study published in *The Journal of Higher Education* (Jacoby, 2006) showed "that increases in the ratio of part-time faculty at community colleges have a highly significant and negative impact upon graduation rates" (p.1092). Community colleges where 80% of the instructors work part-time have graduation rates of only 20%. As the percentage of part-time faculty members declines, graduation rates rise. This further accentuates the need to match qualified faculty with instructional needs. It may also be evidence that colleges are not willing to invest in hiring qualified full-time faculty, but are trying to save money by hiring part-time faculty instead.

The *fifth* concern is that only a little more than a third (36%) of U.S. two-year colleges offer an associate's degree in communication. And yet, at four-year institutions, communication is growing in popularity. At more than 300 American universities, communication was among the five most frequently selected undergraduate majors for the class of 2004. At 25 of these colleges, communication was the single most popular academic major ("Popularity," 2004).

## Study Limitations and Recommendations

The 50% response rate in the present study is both a testament to the felt need of respondents and a sound basis for conclusions about the nature of communication education in U.S. community colleges. However, future updates of this national assessment should strive to collect data with

an eye to proportional representation.  Less than 20% of the colleges in the New England and Southern region are represented in the data analyzed here (See Table 1).

Future studies should also collect more data on basic course enrollments. For example, although Public Speaking still ranks first in terms of the number of colleges offering the course, we cannot conclude that it enrolls more students than any other course. Since many community colleges offer several communication courses as general education options, more accurate enrollment data is needed.

Respondents rated "funding to attend professional conferences," as the second most important challenge facing their program. At the same time, of all respondents that get some kind of faculty development support ($n$=219), 90% indicated they receive support for travel to academic conferences.  As previously noted, the survey question did not ask respondents to specify the amount of funding provided for conference travel or the types of conference travel funded. A future study should examine the extent to which faculty are members of other types of professional associations as well as the level of support they receive for attending professional meetings.

## Conclusion

The NCA Community College Section research project has provided an important picture of communication programs in U.S. community colleges nationally and regionally.  If nothing else, the project has confirmed the commitment of community college communication faculty members to facilitate student learning despite a variety of challenges.  The project has also served to clarify the important issues that are vital to the communication discipline and the community college mission.  If strong advocacy and strategic action are provided in support of both the discipline and the mission, then the discipline, the mission, and the students they both seek to serve will be the beneficiaries.

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## **Appendix 1**
### Accreditation Agencies and the states/territories in their region

- *Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools*: Delaware, DC, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands.
- *New England Association of Schools and Colleges*: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, American/Int'l schools.
- *North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*: Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Navajo Nation.
- *Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington.
- *Southern Association of Colleges and Schools*: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia.
- *Western Association of Schools and Colleges*: California, Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Palau, Micronesia, Northern Mariana Islands, Marshall Islands.

## **Notes**

[i] Permission to use the data in this article has been granted by the Community College Research Board, a standing committee of the Community College Section of the National Communication Association. Permission granted March 2008.

[ii] Independent of the accreditation process, the Department of Education requires that institutions submit audits every year and maintain good-standing with the Department in order to participate in Title IV programs. 34 CFR Sec. 668.15. For recent accreditor actions, see, e.g., Karin Fischer and Elyse Ashburn, "Accreditor Puts Florida A & M on Probation for Financial and Administrative Problems," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 Jun 2007; Ashburn, "Accreditor Keeps Community College in Alabama on Probation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, News Blog, 22 Jun 2007 <http://chronicle.com/news/article/2544/community-college-in-alabama-put-on-probation-for-6-more-months> 2 Jul 2007; Elizabeth Redden, "St. Andrews Faces Accreditation Loss," *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 Jun 2007 <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/06/27/sacs> 2 Jul 2007.