

***National Communication Association***  
***Policy Platform Statement on the***  
***Role of Communication Courses in General Education***

**Fit with the Goals of the Policy Platform**

There is substantial consensus on the importance of communication skills in the general education of students. Virtually every college or university missions statement makes the development of communication skill a central educational goal. There is also widespread acknowledgment of the vital importance of oral communication in the personal, professional and civic lives of graduates. For decades, the literature of our profession has addressed the essential role of communication in any liberal education and provided documentation of the effectiveness of basic communication courses. The continuation of these basic courses is of major professional concern to SCA members. Beyond the pragmatic needs of departments to offer a range of communication courses, there is a sound educational rationale for remaining central in GE offerings. It is in these classes that our discipline touches the greatest number of students in higher education and thus makes a significant contribution to their lives. Because speech and communication courses have traditionally played such a significant role in GE, and because these required courses are regularly reviewed and reconsidered, it is appropriate that SCA go on record as supporting the centrality of oral communication courses in GE programs.

General Education programs, however titled, feature those courses that are seen as essential to all graduates, regardless of major. Inevitably students would not elect to take some of these courses by they are deemed so essential to a liberal education that the institution as a whole requires them. Unfortunately, there are considerable pressures to reduce the number of courses required in most GE programs, both from students who are more interested in career goals and from faculty members in high unit degree programs. These same forces may also pressure institutions to combine several general education offerings or to tailor classes to the narrow needs of certain professions. Members of SCA should be provided with both sound arguments and official policy statements to counter these pressures.

**Rationale for Consideration by the Legislative Council**

Oral communication education, taught by those trained in the discipline, is essential to the general education of college and university students. Definitions of general education vary. Often, general education is defined in terms of its

basic functions or goals, which are then, in turn, used to determine the curriculum and course content in the GE program. The Association of American College's Task Group on General Education defined general education as "the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes important to learning throughout life." One college describes the fundamental purpose of general education as "the development and integration of every student's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences so that the student can engage effectively in a lifelong process of inquiry and decision making."

Almost all descriptions of GE share two common features. In addition to general knowledge, they include, at least, the development of skills and attitudes. Moreover, they apply the development of these attributes to the lifelong learning of our citizens. Most university mission statements as well as goal statements for GE curricula explicitly acknowledge the importance of both written and oral communication in the lives of educated persons. These goal statements echo Hutchin's classic mandate: "What every human being needs is a grasp of fundamental ideas and the ability to communication with others."

Within such a context, the importance of oral communication study becomes paramount. Preparation for life in the modern world requires communication with a cross section of diverse people who often have conflicting needs and interests. Perhaps more than ever, educated persons need to communication with sensitivity and skill with those of widely different backgrounds, cultural experiences, and values. Effective communication helps maintain a sense of community and an ability to craft consensus in an increasingly diverse and complex world. An oral communication course brings together students from across the institution and provides direct experience in communication within a diverse speech community.

There is no prescribed curriculum for the oral communication component of a GE program. Members of SCA agree that rather than focusing on narrow applications, a required oral communication course emphasizes 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.

To become competent communicators, students must understand the role of their communication choices and behaviors within their social context, whether public or private, with large audiences or with individual partners, within cultures and across cultures. In addition, they should understand the factors that influence their decision-making, and the factors that affect the potential success or failure of their communication efforts. They will need to learn how to translate their goals as communicators into effective messages. Contemporary students need to be aware of the potential of new media and emerging information technologies both to enhance and impair the quality of communication. 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.

Knowledge of these areas provides students with a kind of communication literacy. But if we expect students to become competent communicators, both as senders and as receivers, then we must provide them with the means to develop their knowledge and abilities by including oral communication in the GE curriculum. It is unfair to expect that students will be able to perform satisfactorily without specific educational support. All students should receive direct instruction in these central skills and ideas through a carefully designed oral communication course required in their GE program.

### **Resolution on the Role of Communication Courses in General Education**

Resolved, that SCA supports individual communication department's efforts to include their courses in the campus General Education requirements at all colleges and universities.

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