NCA Basic Course Division
Program of Excellence Nomination

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Description of UNLV Basic Course Program

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Communication Studies has a unique and robust basic course program. Rather than attempting to incorporate the entire communication field into one hybrid course, the department offers two courses that address issues related to the fields represented within the department: public communication and interpersonal communication. Furthermore, in the past year the department has revitalized a third course in its basic course program that now serves as the centerpiece course in the college’s learning community program. All three of the basic courses are primarily staffed by a combination of visiting instructors, master’s level graduate students and qualified part-time instructors who report to the Basic Course Director. The courses in the program serve three purposes: to attract majors, to serve the needs of client departments, and to benefit the growth of the department.

COM 101: Oral Communication- UNLV’s introduction to public speaking course. Each semester the department offers roughly 40 sections, with 30 taught in the lecture-lab format. A visiting instructor delivers the lecture and supervises five-six graduate teaching assistants who run the labs where students work on and deliver their speeches. Labs and stand-alone sections are capped at 27 students and each pupil is responsible for four speeches, a midterm, a final and a series of quizzes. Of the four speeches, two must be persuasive and two must be informative, and each requires a student to use a different organizational pattern. The speeches each increase in time, with the first and shortest speech required to be between four and six minutes, and the last and longest speech required to be between seven and nine minutes.

Each of the sections of COM 101, whether they are of the lecture-lab model or the stand alone variety, share common expectations, though there is room for individual instructor freedom. The general requirements in terms of assignments, grading breakdown and the rubric used for assessing speeches are the same regardless of section; however, individual instructors may choose to cover chapters in any way they wish, bring in material from outside of class, and can deliver their lectures in their own style. They also create individual examinations from a common test bank, but must also incorporate a small number of questions from their own lecture material.

COM 101 also utilizes a customized textbook (Stephen Lucas’ The Art of Public Speaking) that generates revenue for the department while enhancing the material covered in the class. The content of the textbook now more closely mirrors the rhetoric aspect of the major, as well as contains a gathering materials chapter designed to help students research specifically at UNLV. The custom textbook saved students roughly $50 from the actual textbook cost, and still generates about $7,000 in revenue for the department that is used to, among other things, support graduate student professional development.

COM 102: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication- The other traditional basic course the department offers. Due to budgetary and space considerations this class is offered only in a large lecture format, and serves approximately 450 students a semester.
This course is staffed by visiting instructors and a few part-time instructors as needed. Students take four sectional examinations, a series of quizzes, and have a contract grading system for the final exam component of their grade. Students are given the choice after their first exam whether to take a cumulative 100 question final examination, or write a 6-8 page research paper designed by the instructor. If they do not submit a contract they automatically default into the exam option. Assessment tests of this model of delivery demonstrate far greater performance for students in this course under the large-lecture style than was seen in the stand alone courses in previous years.

COM 102 also utilizes a customized textbook, a version of Kory Floyd’s *Interpersonal Communication: The Whole Story*, where we wrote six-eight page “mini-chapters” that focused on a particular aspect of the content chapter in the book. This book now introduces topics related to courses we offer at the upper division level. This custom book reduced the cost to students by roughly $50 a copy and generates about $3,500 in revenue for the department dedicated primarily toward graduate student professional development.

**COM 100: Education, Career and Personal Development** - The only basic course not required of Communication majors, but still an integral part in the college’s Freshman Learning Community Program (FLCP). This course was revived in Fall 2008 to serve as the “fulcrum” course in the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs, and is designed to help incoming freshmen with the transition to college life. Students who take COM 100 are all freshmen and also take COM 101 concurrently. There are linked assignments for both courses within the FLCP. For example, in COM 100 students complete a service learning project, and in their COM 101 classes they give speeches related to their experience with those projects. The program has been successful largely due to this course and the College recently authorized an expansion from three to five FLCP sections for Fall 2009.

COM 100 is staffed through the College’s Advising Center as these individuals are most ably suited to teach this college transition course. These instructors are compensated as any other PTI, but they are under the supervision of the Basic Course Director.

**Training and Supervision Overview** - With the exception of the Advising staff for COM 100, all instructors go through a training program at the start of each academic year. Over the course of this four-day training session instructors are trained on the ancillary materials for the textbook by the author of the book (or an author of the ancillary materials), receive intensive training on speech grading, are introduced to university and departmental policies ranging from such things as copying to sexual harassment, and produce their syllabi and lecture notes for the first month of the semester. During this orientation GTAs also get time with their immediate VI supervisor to go over any issues relevant to their particular assignment. Additionally, graduate teaching assistants all must complete a three credit course, COM 725: College Teaching in Communication, with the Basic Course Director during their first semester in the program. This class serves as a practicum for first-year GTAs where they finish developing course materials, discuss issues that arise in their classroom, and learn about various teaching philosophies and approaches that help aid them in developing as college instructors.
**Rationale**

UNLV’s Department of Communication Studies Basic Course Program is distinctive in several ways, each helping to further the mission of the National Communication Association. First, the curriculum in both of its main courses (COM 101 and COM 102) maintains rigor in an effort to effectively introduce two different sides of the discipline to students. Second, the program itself has demonstrated innovation in each of its classes by trying new pedagogical strategies for increasing the efficacy of instruction. Third, the robust and intense training program for instructors has served as a model for other departments at UNLV seeking to train their own GTAs, and has also resulted in notable scholarship by its communication GTAs. Finally, the program itself has expanded this year with the addition of COM 100, making the entire program a fundamental part of the learning community program within the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs.

**Maintaining Rigor:** Both COM 101 and COM 102 have recently undergone extensive improvements, establishing common standards, grading practices and expectations. Additionally, the customized textbooks for each course allow the department to introduce students to both sides of the communication discipline covered by the department at an early stage. All sections of COM 101 use the same rubric to grade speeches, and tests in both COM 101 and COM 102 are all drawn from the same respective test banks (with a few exceptions for lecture-specific questions). Each month every instructor must submit grade updates for their students to the BCD, and at the conclusion of every semester class averages are used to evaluate the rigor of each course. In instances where grades are extreme on either side of the spectrum the BCD works with the instructor to improve grading practices.

The customized textbooks for both sections also have improved the quality of information taught in both courses. Students in COM 101 now learn more about the rhetorical tradition and its relationship to public speaking, while students in COM 102 are exposed to more in-depth discussions about particular theories and concepts through customized “focused applications” at the end of each chapter. Each of these additions strengthens the content of each course, and with regard to COM 101 the course now does a better job of explaining the “why” behind the “how” of public speaking.

**Annual Speech Contest:** Every semester the top speaker from each section of COM 101 competes in a speech contest where all COM 101 instructors serve as first round judges, and select “celebrity judges” evaluate the final seven contestants. Prizes are collected by all instructors from companies in the community, and have included, among other things, stays at Las Vegas Hotels.

**Pedagogical Improvements:** Both COM 101 and COM 102 have undergone a change in their manner of delivery over the last three years. In Fall 2007 COM 102 moved from small self-contained sections to a large lecture delivery format. Over the course of the next two years we have found through assessment that the large lecture format has produced stronger student improvement. This also allowed the department to save a
significant amount of money on part-time instruction and more effectively streamline student experiences in the course. In Spring 2008 we also moved to a large lecture delivery system for COM 101, with students attending a large lecture, but breaking out into lab sections to deliver their speeches.

Both COM 101 and COM 102 implemented the use of classroom response systems for quiz delivery and as a means of taking attendance. Instructors in the large sections using this technology also received training in how to use the “clickers” to conduct instant polling during their lectures to improve student engagement and to maintain the capability of classroom discussions in a large lecture atmosphere.

The basic course program also has developed an online version of COM 102 which has been extremely popular and effective. With regard to COM 101, the program experimented with a hybrid-online version of COM 101, but due to a variety of variables specific to UNLV the class was not as popular or effective.

In Spring 2009 three of the large lecture/breakout lab sections of COM 101 experimented with yet another way of improving the course. Using a rotation system where students went to lab two days and lecture one day during a speech round, we increased the amount of teaching time in the course. This idea was actually proposed by one of the GTAs while taking the College Teaching in Communication course in Fall 2008.

Next, the research component of COM 101 has been augmented through a collaboration with the campus library. Members of the library staff helped craft the UNLV specific custom chapter on Gathering Materials for the COM 101 textbook, and also visit with every section of COM 101 to introduce students to the library and how it can help them when developing their own speeches.

 Finally, the revitalization of COM 100 through the learning community program has allowed the development of a service learning aspect for the basic course program. It also invited the creation of linked assignments within two classes in the program. Students participate in a service learning project in COM 100, and then deliver an informative and persuasive speech derived from that experience in their linked COM 101 course. This helps students better see the connections between their classes and the real-world applicability of what they study. The program clearly has a track record of trying innovative techniques in the delivery of course material.

**Robust Training Program:** The basic course program at UNLV contains a regimented and detailed training program for instructors. Training begins several weeks before the start of the semester when all instructors receive a copy of the department’s *Teaching Manual for the Basic Course* and the textbook and ancillary package for their respective course. They are asked to review the materials in time for the start of the four day orientation schedule which begins the week prior to the start of the semester. The second component of the training program is the required Fall course for all first year GTAs, COM 725: College Teaching in Communication. Finally, all instructors are encouraged
to participate in the workshops offered through the university’s Teaching and Learning Center.

The teaching manual contains all the information necessary to develop a syllabus for either COM 101 or COM 102, as well as guidelines for grading and requirements and responsibilities for all teachers in the program. At the four day orientation students unpack this manual with the BCD as well as go over a variety of other issues pertinent to their job, the department and the university.

At orientation all instructors participate in grading exercises designed to help streamline the grading practices and expectations within the basic course program. They also receive training from a representative from student conduct on how to handle classroom disciplinary issues as well as report plagiarism. Furthermore, instructors receive instruction on the university’s sexual harassment policy and the rules and regulations regarding FERPA. GTAs also get time to work with their supervising Visiting Instructors and develop their lecture notes and first speech assignments. Finally, they are prepared for entering the classroom on day one. This orientation approach is viewed as a model for the rest of the campus’ departments and as a result has received an exemption from the general university GTA teaching training program that occurs during the same time period.

All GTAs also must take and pass COM 725: College Teaching in Communication during their first semester. This class serves two purposes. First, it is a business meeting where students can discuss issues that arise in their classes, and where the BCD can remind them of certain responsibilities and deadlines associated with instruction. Secondly, it exposes new GTAs to both practical and theoretical elements associated with teaching. For assignments GTAs complete all necessary activities for teaching in the basic course (i.e. create tests, lecture notes, speech assignments), as well as write short papers on pedagogical theories. In the last three years two graduate students have won “Top Paper” in the Basic Course Division at NCA for term papers produced in fulfillment of this class.

During their employment as instructors in the basic course program, all teachers are encouraged to take part in workshops offered by the Teaching and Learning Center on campus. These can help with classroom issues, incorporating technology into the classroom as well as crafting good assignments. This allows for a continuation of professional development for instructors within the program.

Re-starting COM 100: Perhaps the most unique element of the basic course program at UNLV is the newly re-deployed COM 100 course, and the integral role played by the basic course program in the college’s learning community programs. COM 100 helps students acclimate to college and is designed to attract majors, increase retention and graduation rates as well as improve student scores. Students in COM 100 also take the same COM 101 section and have some assignments linked to both courses. In Fall 2009 COM 102 will also become a part of at least one learning community section, so students in the cohort will experience the entire basic course program in one semester.
Departments, Programs and Personnel

The basic course program at UNLV involves several different categories of individuals. The first group, those of administrators, takes care of scheduling, curriculum development, some assessment, screening of applicants, and record-keeping. The second group, the instructors, is a more complex group but they are the “front-line” of the basic course program. Thirdly, the program also includes people outside of the department, like librarians and members of the registrar’s office, who collaborate with the BCD in enhancing the basic courses.

Administrators (2): There are several levels of administrators within the basic course. The Chair of the Department of Communication Studies formerly served as Basic Course Director at UNLV, and as head of the department now supervises the Basic Course Director. Ultimately, the chair signs off on schedules proposed by the BCD, and chairs searches for Visiting Instructors who will teach under the supervision of the BCD.

The BCD develops the semester schedule for the basic course, recruits part-time instructors, conducts the orientation program, teaches COM 725 every Fall for new GTAs, adjudicates plagiarism and classroom discipline issues with basic course sections, develops the curriculum for each basic course, and helps screen applicants for assistantship positions as a member of the graduate faculty. The BCD also assesses performance of all instructors in the basic course. Each year one second year GTA assists the BCD in the performance of his duties in the area of record keeping.

Instructors (3 VIs; 12 GTAs, 7 PTIs): There are three primary classifications of instructors within the basic course program; however, on occasion, faculty teach a section within the basic course thus creating a fourth class of instructor. The first level of instructor are the Visiting Instructors. Currently, there are three Visiting Instructors, and two only work in the basic course program. For COM 101, Visiting Instructors serve as lecturers for the large sections of public speaking and supervise 5-6 graduate teaching assistants who conduct the breakout/lab sections of the large lecture class. Visiting Instructors also teach some stand-alone sections of their own for a total of a 4/4 teaching load.

Graduate Teaching Assistants teach two or three lab sections under the direction of a Visiting Instructor. In the summer between their first and second years they are afforded the opportunity to teach a stand alone section for the first time. GTAs on two lab assignments also serve in some other capacity within the department. The primary function of lab instructors is grading speeches, however they also conduct speech workshops in the labs, and in their second year they deliver one lecture during the semester to the large lecture class. This allows all graduates the opportunity to say they served as both a lab instructor, stand alone instructor and had the opportunity to lecture in a large class setting. Visiting Instructors and GTAs only cover about 75% of the sections of COM 101 and COM 102, which creates the need for the third classification of instructor within the basic course program.
Part-time instructors (PTIs), are hired each semester on a class by class basis to cover the sections that need instructors. There is, however, only a finite amount of money allocated for PTIs. PTIs only teach within the basic course. COM 100 employs five different PTIs, mainly through hiring members of the Advising Center, for each of its five sections. Over the last two years the department has been able to reduce the number and increase the quality of its PTIs through the switch to large lecture delivery.

**External Participants (10):** The development of the Basic Course Program involves collaboration with other departments and parties on campus. The first group worthy of note is the library staff who has helped develop the custom textbook for COM 101 as well as integrate library training into the basic course curriculum. The second party is the registrar’s office, specifically the scheduling coordinator, who works with the BCD each semester to ensure rooms that best fit the needs of the program. Finally, the chair of each department in the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs and the Dean of the college work with the BCD to develop the modules and linked classes within the learning community program.

Each semester the BCD and VIs who teach COM 101 meet with representatives from the Lied Library to discuss how to improve library instruction within COM 101. The group has developed class assignments for the “library day” designed to help students research their first speech while learning the skills that will help them research in the future. Furthermore, when the department wrote the custom textbook for COM 101 the library staff helped write a portion of the gathering materials chapter to ensure its content helped students research specifically at Lied Library.

With the number of class sections offered within the basic course program, and the room space issues faced by our campus, working with the registrar’s office to make sure we have space for our classes is essential. Each semester before the course schedule is finalized and rooms are assigned, the BCD meets with the Scheduling Coordinator to make sure the right rooms are reserved and the labs are assigned classroom space for all basic course sections. This enables the labs to take place in the same building cluster as the large lecture, and also allows instructors who teach back-to-back classes to use the same room for both classes, minimizing the travel time between classes for the instructor. Without this working relationship some class sections would remain “unassigned” potentially until the start of the semester.

Finally, COM 100 and COM 101 sections dedicated to the learning community program involve more than just the BCD in terms of planning. Since these classes are linked to another class within the college it has created the need to work with the Dean and department chairs to make sure classes are offered within the LC at times that do not conflict with each other. Additionally, these other parties are solicited to help identify and implement service learning projects and common assignments between the three linked classes.
Goals of the Program

The UNLV Basic Course Program serves both the department and the university, and has an eye toward developing ways to serve the community as well. Four goals are associated with the department, two with the university and one with the community. In this section I will detail each of these goals and how the courses seek to achieve them.

Department Goals: The primary goal of our large basic course program is to *introduce students to the two areas of concentration within the department*. COM 101, thanks to the custom textbook and revamped curriculum, now introduces students in a small way to the history and tradition of rhetoric, while COM 102 introduces students to the interpersonal side of the department. Although the field of communication is much larger than these two areas, they are the two primary foci of the department and these courses provide an opportunity for the department to show students what a communication major at UNLV involves.

The second departmental goal for the basic course program is to *attract majors to the department*. There are over 3,000 students who take courses within the basic course program every year and most are first year students who are undeclared. This presents a unique opportunity to encourage interest in the field within a large number of students. Additionally, many of the instructors for COM 101 and COM 102 are either current GTAs, or were previously GTAs in the department and know the field, department and major. They use the more streamlined and meaningful content of each course to promote the major to students in their classes. Finally, through activities such as the speech contest and the learning community program students are encouraged to explore different dimensions of the major and see how it overlaps with a variety of different interest areas.

While the course serves as a vehicle to attract majors, it also *delivers content that satisfies the needs of client departments*. Although none of the three courses within the program are university requirements, they are required by several colleges on campus, most notably the College of Business. That college supplies roughly 60-70% of the students in the basic course program and does so with the goal of improving their students written and oral communication skills. COM 101 and COM 102 work to do this despite the large lecture nature of the courses.

COM 101 requires students develop written outlines in an organized fashion and then deliver speeches based off of those outlines, thus satisfying the needs of the College of Business. COM 102 still retains a term paper option for students and also has business-related elements written into the custom textbook that illustrate the connection of the course’s content to the College of Business. For example, the customized focused applications “Metaphors at Work,” and “Breaking Bad News can be Hard to Do” take interpersonal concepts and apply them to workplace settings. These adjustments and assignments help to maintain our commitment to serving the needs of our largest client departments, while simultaneously introducing students to the field of communication.
The fourth and final departmental goal met by the basic course program is the training and mentoring of GTAs, most of whom plan careers in teaching communication. Many of our GTAs seek careers in education and wish to use their MA to continue teaching at the collegiate level. In fact, we work closely with our local community college, the College of Southern Nevada, and many of our GTAs end up teaching COM 101 and COM 102 there part-time upon graduation.

Our program is designed to provide extensive training for GTAs, as well as allow them a myriad of teaching experiences while they work toward their degree. Every August we hold an extensive orientation program and all GTAs must complete COM 725: College Teaching in Communication in their first semester. They also are assigned a veteran instructor (a Visiting Instructor) as a supervisor for the first year when they serve as lab assistants. This allows them to “get their feet wet” as instructors in the classroom, but focus their attention on developing strong grading and evaluation practices.

During the summer between their first and second years GTAs are allowed to teach a stand alone section for the first time, thus giving them full responsibility over an entire class. This extends their experience from the lab to becoming an instructor of record. In most cases during their second year they return to the role of lab assistant, although if the opportunity and need is there then second-year GTAs may be assigned stand alone courses. Regardless, all second-year GTAs deliver one lecture in a large lecture environment. This allows them to leave the program having experienced instruction as a lab instructor, an instructor of record, and as a large lecturer—albeit, just for one day. This variety of pedagogical experiences allows our GTAs to leave the program as well-rounded instructors capable of teaching the basic course at most institutions.

**University Goals:** The basic course program contributes to two university-wide goals. All three basic courses (COM 100, COM 101, and COM 102) helps accomplish both of these goals in a variety of different ways.

The first university-wide goal the basic course program contributes to relates to increasing student’s oral and written communication skills. As we discussed this in relation to the previous goal of serving the needs of client departments, I will not elaborate further here, except to point out that COM 100 also has written work as a component of the course, and the linking of assignments through the learning community program allows students to develop their oral communication skills in speeches within COM 101 that cover experiences in COM 100.

All three courses also contribute to the university’s retention efforts. With their emphasis on serving the needs of client departments and attracting majors, COM 101 and COM 102 both aim to keep students at UNLV by providing a strong early experience in the classroom. Additionally, COM 100 and the learning community program have as a primary goal, increasing the college’s retention rates. By helping students see the connection between courses and providing them with an opportunity to use their knowledge in service learning projects students the idea is students will establish a
stronger connection between themselves and the campus thus minimizing their desire to leave the university.

**Community Goals:** The basic course program conducts two efforts aimed at helping serve the needs and goals of the community. The Department of Communication Studies resides in the College of Urban Affairs, and there is a push for more involvement with the community in every course within our college, and those attached to the basic course program are no exception.

One of the community goals enumerated by the college is the development of service learning projects. We have done this in COM 100 and used the experiences in those courses to create specific speech assignments in the COM 101 courses concurrently taken by those students. The projects involve work for various non-profit institutions in the valley. In Fall 2008 students delivered presentations on these projects to their classes as well as to members of the college’s and university’s central administration staff.

The other effort employed within the basic course program to develop connections within the community is the Speech Contest we hold every semester. All instructors canvas the community in search of prize donations for the contest and in several instances members of the donating businesses attend the speech contest. We also promote all the companies that support the contest within campus publications and newsletters. Over the past two years, despite the economic difficulties in the Las Vegas Valley and elsewhere, we have actually seen a rise in the quantity and quality of the donations we have received. Although small, these efforts have helped develop strong associations between the department, the college, the university, the students and the community.
Outcomes of the Nominated Program

The UNLV basic course program employs several different means of assessing the effectiveness of its curriculum. Furthermore, it makes adjustments and improvements based upon the results of the assessment information. This section first discusses the various means by which each of the three basic courses are assessed, and then explicates programmatic developments that have taken place as a result of the assessment data. Finally, plans for future assessment improvements are offered.

Assessment Procedures: Due to the unique nature of each basic course, the department uses different measures to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in each course. This section is divided between the three courses to most clearly describe the procedures for assessment in each course.

COM 101: The department uses five different means of assessment for the Oral Communication course, two of which are specifically designed for this course.

The first method of assessment is a pre/post test administered to a group of randomly selected class sections. The population includes both large-lecture sections and small stand-alone sections so that the data from each can be compared. The pre-test and post-test are identical and contain questions from the test bank all instructors use to develop their Midterm and Final exam. The tests contain 25 multiple choice questions, and are administered at the start of the second week of classes which is after the add/drop registration period ends. The post-test takes place following the final lecture and before the start of the last round of speeches to ensure all material from the textbook has been covered.

Where the assessment tests primarily measure student improvement in the course, the second means of assessing the course focuses on measuring and maintaining instructor rigor. At the conclusion of every semester the final grades for every student are averaged to provide a mean for each section. Then, the means of each section are averaged to create a “mean of the means” for all sections. Although there is some minor statistical slippage, this number provides a point of comparison for all sections. The goal is to achieve a “mean of the means” of 75%. When a section produces a mean that is significantly lower or higher than the “mean of the means” for that semester then the BCD inquires about the nature of the class in order to determine if any adjustments need to take place.

The department also administers student evaluation forms at the conclusion of every semester. These are official college evaluation forms and contain both numeric assessments of the course, as well as provide students space for written comments regarding their experiences in the class. The results of the evaluations are compiled and then compared to the means found for the department and the college.

One of the challenges inherent in the lecture-lab format is the ability to assess both the lecturer and the lab assistants. Our university does not allow for the use of the official
form for both individuals, so the department has developed an open-ended evaluation form for lab assistants for internal purposes. These are kept by the BCD and are shared with both the Visiting Instructors and the graduate assistants so they may make any necessary adjustments based on the evaluation comments.

The fifth, and final, means of assessment in COM 101 relates solely to the library day all sections hold as part of the schedule. Every section holds a library session conducted by a representative from the library staff. Students are given a quiz developed by both the basic course staff and the library at the conclusion of this session to assess their understanding of the information presented by the librarians. The quiz is application-based and asks students to answer questions in a way that pertains to their individual topics for their first speech. The quizzes are coded, scored and summarized by the library and the results are shared with the basic course staff. Those results then help the group discuss changes to the presentation for the following semester.

**COM 102:** The department employs three different methods of assessing outcomes in the Introduction to Interpersonal Communication course.

The first method of assessment is a pre/post test administered to all sections. The pre-test and post-test are identical and contain questions from the test bank all instructors use to develop their Midterm and Final exam. The tests contain 25 multiple choice questions, and are administered at the start of the second week of classes which is after the add/drop registration period ends. The post-test takes place following the final lecture to ensure all material from the textbook has been covered.

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**COM 100:** This course shares several of the same assessment procedures as COM 101 and COM 102, but because of its role as the centerpiece in the learning community program it also has some unique means of assessment.
Like both COM 101 and COM 102 the department also administers student evaluation forms at the conclusion of every semester in COM 100. These are official college evaluation forms and contain both numeric assessments of the course, as well as provide students space for written comments regarding their experiences in the class. The results of the evaluations are compiled and then compared to the means found for the department and the college.

More to the point for COM 100, however, are the means of assessing the goals of increased student attachment to the campus, increased graduation rate, and increase in student performance. Each of these goals are more longitudinal than short-term, and so the means of measuring the success of the course in accomplishing these goals are not capable of administration just yet as the course and program just launched in Fall 2008. That said, several preliminary assessment analyses have been undertaken.

First, in Spring 2009 students who participated in COM 100 in the Fall were asked to take a survey on satisfaction and attachment to the university. These results will be compared with other freshmen in the college who did not take COM 100 in Fall 2008, but took the survey during a Spring 2009 advising appointment. The results will indicate whether the course, at least initially, helped increase student attachment to UNLV.

Second, the course is aimed at helping increase graduation rates, and assessment of this will be ongoing over the next several years. Obviously, this goal cannot be measured in the first year, but we will look at credits earned versus credits attempted in the first year for students who took COM 100 and those who did not in the college to see if there is a difference. A larger percentage of credits earned in the COM 100 students would indicate preliminary progress towards achieving this goal.

Third, we will conduct a comparison of GPAs of those who took COM 100 and those who did not within the college at the conclusion of the first year. If the performance is higher in those who took the class and participated in the learning community than those who did not, it will be an indicator of increased student performance as a result of the class.

In Fall 2008 a group from the Department of Public Administration within the college conducted an analysis of the learning community program, with particular emphasis paid to the COM 100 course. They issued a 25-page report detailing areas where the course and program could be improved.

**Programmatic Development:** The assessment procedures in each of the three basic courses have enabled the department to target several areas and make necessary improvements to each class. In this section I will detail several programmatic developments that arose from the assessment measures in each class.

**COM 101:** In Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 the student evaluations indicated concerns over different expectations in different sections, specifically as they pertained to the grading rubric for speeches and the format of outlines required in each section. As the program
aims to develop a consistent experience for students across all sections of the course, the basic course staff met to develop a common grading rubric and common outline worksheet to be used in every section. Additionally, the common outline format was converted into a worksheet that was inserted into the custom textbook for the course.

Following the first year of the large lecture format student comments on both the official evaluation forms and the lab assistant evaluation forms indicated a desire for more contact with the lab assistants who graded student speeches. One change was instituted in response to these comments. All second year GTAs now deliver one lecture in large lecture.

Additionally, first year assessment comparisons saw only a slightly better student performance in large lecture courses, compared to stand alone sections. As a staff, we hypothesized this may be due to the truncated schedule and decreased teaching time created by the switch to large lecture. In response to this problem one graduate student proposed trying a rotation system for speech days to increase teaching time in lecture for students. This suggestion entails students on a three day speech round, taking one day to serve as audience member, one day to perform their speech and on the third day they attend a lecture with the lecturer. As this change is currently being implemented for the first time we have no data to either confirm or disconfirm the effectiveness of this change.

The library assessment quizzes have also resulted in changes to the delivery of that particular class session. The quiz has been modified each time, and the librarians have developed a much more focused presentation to target areas where students seem to have the most trouble (i.e. using proper search engines, formulating research questions, narrowing their topic). In Spring 2009 the session was conducted in large lecture rather than labs for the first time to help free up teaching time and also to broaden the coverage of the specific areas where trouble seemed apparent in previous semesters.

Finally, the grade analysis at the end of the term resulted in an increase in part-time instructor quality. In Fall 2006 several part-time instructors had average class GPAs over 90%, and they were approached and when possible, coached on improving the rigor in their classroom. Eventually, those who fell too far away from the "mean of means" either changed their approach, or left the department resulting in more rigorous attention to speech construction, delivery and evaluation in the basic course.

**COM 102:** One programmatic development has arisen out of COM 102’s assessment. In the first semester of large lecture delivery scores on the pre/post tests indicated that students did much better (an average six correct answer improvement) than those in smaller self-contained sections. As a result, the department now only delivers the course in large lecture format, helping to accommodate more students and provide better instruction of the material.

**COM 100:** As there are only preliminary assessment results in this course programmatic development has been limited. We are adding two sections of COM 100 for Fall 2009 to
accommodate more incoming freshmen, as students in Fall 2008 used course evaluations to laud their experiences. As a result of the Department of Public Administration’s analysis in Fall 2009, curriculum development has been streamlined within the department of communication, with the Basic Course Director now the official supervisor for the course and learning community program. Also as a result of the report, efforts are being made to incorporate more of the campus’ departments (Student Life, Recreation and Wellness, Career Services, etc.) into the course. Representatives from each of those areas will be coming to COM 100 in Fall 2009 to speak to the freshmen about the services they provide in the hopes of helping students acclimate to the campus quicker and feel a closer attachment to the university.

**Plans for Future Assessment Improvements:** In Spring 2009 the BCD will participate in an “Assessment Workshop” at UNLV, offered through the university’s Office of Institutional Analysis. The goal is to develop both a more comprehensive assessment tool for COM 100, as well as discuss ways to incorporate the pre/post test for COM 101 and COM 102 into exams within the class, thereby increasing student investment in the analysis.

Additionally, the Dean’s Office will be assisting in the collection and analysis of COM 100 data for the purposes of developing the learning community program. This assistance will allow for a more robust analysis than what the department is currently capable of offering.
Dear Beth,

Despite a flagging state and local economy and the attendant impact on the university’s budget, the Basic Course Program at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas continues to provide a quality educational experience for our students and innovative approaches to undergraduate education that have become a model for other departments on our campus. For that reason I am delighted to support the nomination of our program for the 2009 BCD Program of Excellence Award.

Two years ago our central administration directed us to reduce our dependence on the part-time instructors who delivered the lion’s share of our basic courses, COM 101, Public Communication, and COM 102, Introduction to Interpersonal Communication. Moreover, we were directed to do that with no additional full-time faculty resources. Although I was initially skeptical, our Basic Course Director, Dr. Joseph Valenzano, devised a plan to convert the vast majority of our COM 101 classes from stand-alone sections to a large lecture/break-out lab format—with full-time faculty delivering lectures and graduate students as lab instructors—and virtually all of our COM 102 classes to large lecture format. The results were surprising and very positive. Not only did the new formats reduce our dependence on part-time instructors by nearly 90%, but our assessment measures also indicate that the overall quality of instruction in both courses has improved markedly. To achieve that efficiency while at the same time maintaining—even improving—the quality of our courses was gratifying and worthy of note.

At the time of that format change, the department also entered into an agreement to produce custom editions of the textbooks for those two courses that allowed us to more closely adapt course content to our own students. For example, the custom edition of the COM 101 textbook now includes a chapter, written with major assistance from our local librarians, that focuses on locating materials in our own library. The custom editions not only reduced the purchase price of the two textbooks for students enrolled in our courses, but also produced royalty income for the department that is used to enhance the basic courses.

Last year, working with our college advising center, Dr. Valenzano added a third course to our basic course offerings, COM 100, Educational, Career, and Personal
Development. This course became the cornerstone of the Learning Communities program within the college which is designed to ease the freshman transition from high school to university life and improve student retention. Although assessment data for this course cover only one year, there is evidence to suggest that it has begun to achieve those goals. And the program has become a model for other units on campus.

Finally, I must mention the training of graduate teaching assistants who work in our basic courses. That training begins with a week-long, intensive session for incoming graduate students prior to the start of each Fall semester and continues throughout the Fall semester with a pedagogy course required for all graduate teaching assistants in the department. This training regimen, too, has received campus-wide recognition. Indeed, our department is one of only two or three within the university that is exempt from the otherwise-mandatory graduate student training sessions sponsored by the graduate college.

For these reasons, I believe the basic course program at UNLV is worthy of recognition as a Program of Excellence and I thank you and the selection committee for considering this nomination.

Sincerely,

Thomas R. Burkholder, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair
May 27, 2009

Dr. Beth M. Waggenspack, Chair
BCD Program of Excellence Committee
Department of Communication
Virginia Tech

Dear Dr. Waggenspack,

As Director of the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs Advising Center at UNLV I have had the opportunity to observe the dramatic development of the basic course program in Communication Studies over the past several years. All three of the basic courses (COM 101, COM 102, and more recently COM 100) are critical to many of our undergraduate students, and their programming efforts have become models for others across campus who deliver introductory material to undergraduates on a large scale.

Although none of the three basic courses in the Communication Studies are required elements of the university’s general education core, a majority of colleges and departments across campus require their students to take COM 101 and COM 102. This speaks not only to their recognition of the importance of these classes, but the effective manner in which they are taught. Even when the Communication Studies Department shifted the delivery method from smaller self-contained classes to the larger lecture/lab format they now employ, departments across campus never questioned the quality of the education their students received. This is, I believe, a testament to the training and dedication of the instructors in the basic course program.

Speaking of the teachers in the basic course program, I would be remiss if I did not mention that many students come through the Advising Center and remark on how much they enjoyed their COM 101 and COM 102 classes. As these courses are often staffed by graduate teaching assistants who are not veterans in the classroom, the high marks they receive is reflective of the dedication the department takes toward preparing their instructors for these classes. No other courses in our college that are taught by graduate assistants receive such high praise from undergraduates.

The effectiveness of COM 101 and COM 102 also emboldened the department to spearhead the development of the Freshmen Learning Community Program in our college. In the fall of 2008, the Basic Course Director, Dr. Joseph Valenzano, and I created the first Learning Communities at UNLV. Never before had a college at UNLV attempted to group classes in the manner that we did, connecting 3 out of our 5 classes for new, incoming freshmen. The Department re-envisioned a dormant class (COM 100) as a first-year transition to college course and utilized professional staff from the
Advising Center to teach in the program. The model of linking three courses and using Advising Center staff to teach the class has been cited as a model, not only for the campus-wide implementation of learning communities, but as a model for all urban, public, research institutions by AACRAO (American Association of Collegiate Registrars & Admissions Officers) Consultants from the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Slippery Rock University. This praise has happened in the first year of the program, a testament to excellence in planning, programming, and educational initiative and creativity.

Despite its initial high marks, Dr. Valenzano and the Communication Studies Department have sought ways to improve the learning community and basic course program as they move forward. Through some initial, yet complex, assessment procedures the department has identified several ways to further enhance the learning community program by integrating the elements of its basic course into each of the modules. The service learning dimension of COM 100 is now used as a speech topic for at least one assignment in a linked COM 101 course in each section. Additionally, two of the five learning communities scheduled for Fall 2009 will include COM 102 in linked small self-contained class. These programming efforts have enhanced our student experience as they now better understand the connection between the skills they learn in COM 101 and COM 102 and how they relate to the community in which the students live.

I feel that the efforts undertaken by the Communication Studies Department at UNLV to find ways to further entrench the basic courses of Oral Communication and Interpersonal Communication in university-wide undergraduate education efforts such as LC’s is worthy of distinction. Through its efforts to creatively integrate the basic course into curricula across campus the department has become a campus leader in undergraduate education improvement. I strongly support their candidacy for Basic Course Program of Excellence.

Please feel free to contact me directly in the future regarding the submission of our nomination.

Sincerely,

Adam J. Sikula
Director, Greenspun College of Urban Affairs Advising Center
Dr. Beth M. Waggenspack, Chair  
BCD Program of Excellence Committee  
Department of Communication  
Virginia Tech

Dear Dr. Waggenspack,

This letter is in support of the nomination of the UNLV Department of Communication Studies’ Basic Course Program for the BCD Program of Excellence Award. Communication skills are central to the education of UNLV students across disciplines and the basic courses in Communication Studies are one of the primary ways in which we help our students develop such skills. The program has demonstrated ingenuity and innovation while also significantly contributing to the development of a stronger campus culture for our students.

Although the courses within the Basic Course Program are not general education requirements, many of our colleges and departments require that students take Oral Communication and Interpersonal Communication. For instance, our nationally ranked William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration requires their students to complete both of those courses for graduation as do our College of Business and many departments in the School of Allied Health Sciences. Each of these colleges and departments value the work done in the basic course program as they believe these courses are of significant value to their students.

In addition to the service provided to client departments, the basic course program has also been a locus of innovation in curricular development at UNLV. In the past year the program incorporated a revitalized “college success” course into their curriculum. This course now serves as the centerpiece in a successful effort to develop learning communities within the Greenspun College of Urban Affairs. These learning communities are designed to help with student retention, connection to campus and performance.

Students who participated within the learning community program take both the “college success” class and Oral Communication in their first semester. The Oral Communication classes in the learning community require students to research, compose, and deliver speeches on topics growing from their academic majors, allowing them to build a stronger foundation of knowledge in their content areas before entering into upper division courses. Furthermore, students participate in a service learning experience in their area of interest as part of the “college success” class and then give speeches on those experiences as part of Oral Communication.
The innovation of the basic course program is not limited to the learning community program as they have also enhanced the curriculum of the courses themselves. Their efforts at customizing textbooks have saved money for our students in these difficult times, while improving the content of both Oral Communication and Interpersonal Communication. They have redefined the nature of the course so it better contributes to a liberal arts education, and have used their modest royalties from the textbooks solely to enhance the basic course.

The department developed innovative ways to deliver the course. They have reduced the cost of teaching Oral Communication and Interpersonal Communication by moving to a large lecture delivery method, thus reducing their need for adjunct instructors while also providing more consistent instruction across sections. Additionally, they incorporated the use of classroom response systems into their courses and as a result of these efforts the administrators of the course were invited to participate in a campus-wide committee whose charge was to develop a standard for using those systems across campus.

The department also has been instrumental in helping to model a training method for Graduate Teaching Assistants across campus. They have a robust training program for the graduate students who work as instructors in the program. The program has in many ways contributed to the development of the campus-wide orientation program for graduate teaching assistants which we recently developed. The dedication towards educating the graduate students who teach our students is one of the best on campus, evidenced by the fact they are one of only a handful of departments whose graduate students are exempt from the campus wide orientation session.

It is also important to note the contribution of the Communication Studies’ Basic Course Program to the campus culture. Every semester they hold a speech contest for the top speakers in Oral Communication classes. The contest is well attended and does a terrific job of illustrating the product that results from the efforts in the Oral Communication courses. The service learning component of the learning communities also helps students interact with the community and share their experiences with the campus.

The Communication Studies Basic Course Program is one of the strengths of our university and a source of innovative approaches to improving our students’ experience and education at UNLV. I strongly support their nomination for this award.

Sincerely,

Neal J. Smatresk
Executive Vice President and Provost