NCA’s Learning Outcomes in Communication Project

In 2013, NCA received a grant from Lumina Foundation to fund a two-phase, faculty-driven Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC) project. Phase I of LOC brings together 30 Communication faculty members to answer the question, “When students complete a program of study in Communication, what should they know, understand, and be able to do?” The faculty participants employ a “Tuning” process consisting of five recombinable components to articulate expected student learning outcomes in Communication.

Component I in the Tuning process defines the core of the discipline by identifying critical concepts for the major and generating measurable student learning outcomes based on expected core competencies. Component II maps career pathways for graduates. Component III identifies specific stakeholders—potential employers, faculty colleagues, current and graduated Communication students, and others—and seeks their feedback on the first two steps. Component IV revises the disciplinary core document in light of stakeholder feedback, and Component V disseminates the project’s outcomes to stakeholders and individual campus units nationwide.

Another component of Phase I of the LOC project tests how Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) can be integrated with its Tuning process. The DQP identifies what all college graduates with an associate, bachelor’s, or master’s degree should know and be able to do upon graduation, regardless of major. Faculty groups in the LOC project will test the applicability and appropriateness of linkages between Tuning and the DQP at the start of a Tuning process, throughout the entire process, or at the conclusion of the process. The integration of an academic major’s Tuning process with the DQP that applies to all college graduates marks a truly innovative characteristic of NCA’s LOC project. The outcomes of that integrative process are still untold; the very process of integrating Tuning and DQP already has opened new vistas of inquiry and investigation for the faculty members involved with the project.

The results of Phase I of the LOC project will assist Communication departments nationwide with their curriculum planning and assessment initiatives. The LOC project will provide exemplars and models of a “tuned” Communication major for use by departments in whatever manner is most suitable for the particular context in which the department operates. Faculty leaders and participants from Phase I of the LOC project, as well as NCA National Office staff, will be available for consultation, workshop organizing, and/or public presentation of the LOC’s results and findings.

Phase II of the LOC project will convene an interdisciplinary group of ten faculty members from the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences to investigate how the Communication discipline contributes to the overall quality of any degree, using the DQP as a framework for how specific majors can support robust learning outcomes for all college graduates.

Phase II of the LOC project will generate arguments and analysis for Communication departments to advocate for the value of Communication to the overall quality of an undergraduate degree. Both phases of this project offer Communication department administrators and faculty members the evidence-based, meaningful reference points they require to argue for high-quality student learning outcomes that enhance curricular quality and general education at the undergraduate level.