Role of Communication Courses and Communication Faculty in General Education

2017 Review Committee: Cheri J. Simonds, Melissa Broeckelman-Post, Scott A. Myers, Joseph P. Valenzano III, and Joshua Westwick on behalf of the Educational Policies Board

Current Resolution (adopted by the SCA Legislative Council, November 1996; revised by NCA in November 2012)

The National Communication Association supports and defends the inclusion of an oral communication course or courses in college and university General Education Requirements and the instruction of that course or courses by Communication faculty.

Proposed Revised Resolution (Revised April 2017)

The National Communication Association supports and defends the inclusion of an oral communication course or courses in college and university General Education Requirements and the instruction of that course or courses by faculty trained in the discipline of communication.

Rationale and Supporting Materials

History of Revisions
Second revision submitted by Cheri J. Simonds, Melissa Broeckelman-Post, Scott A. Myers, Joseph P. Valenzano III, and Joshua Westwick on behalf of the Educational Policies Board in April 2017.

First revision submitted by Mark Redmond, Jacquelyn Buckrop, Deborah Hefferin, and Cheri J. Simonds on behalf of the Educational Policies Board and Basic Course Division in November 2012.

I. Introduction

The Educational Policies Board is requesting that the Legislative Assembly pass this resolution in support of the role that the oral communication course or courses play in college and university General Education requirements, although no specific actions are expected to be taken by the National Communication Association if the resolution is passed and no resources are needed to implement the resolution.

As many general education programs across the country are undergoing major revisions, many department chairs, faculty, and basic course directors are finding themselves in the unenviable position of having to make the case for inclusion of their communication course in general education. This theme is recurring at basic course business meetings, national and regional conferences, and on list-serves. As such, this justification for the resolution will serve to arm communication faculty with the arguments they may need to save their programs. This justification is based on the premise that because national level associations (i.e., Association of American Colleges & Universities; Association of American State Colleges and Universities) have clearly identified communication as critical to preparing undergraduate students to become engaged citizens in the 21st century, then communication courses should be included as a foundational part of general education. This rationale for the resolution will first address these
national trends in general education and then align specific communication curricula that address the principles of excellence proposed at the national level.

II. National Trends in General Education

In *Making the Case for Liberal Education*, Humphreys (2006) argued that a consensus is emerging about the breadth and depth of education that Americans need to compete and succeed in a “knowledge-intensive economy, a globally engaged democracy, and a society where innovation is essential to progress and success” (p. 1). That consensus rests on the value of a general education as founded in traditional liberal education practices. Several national organizations, including the National Communication Association, have reinforced Humphreys’ claim.

The National Communication Association recognizes current national trends that support a broad general education (Gen Ed) for undergraduate students and supports the claims that communication skills are critical to the citizenry and workforce of the 21st century. A 2015 survey among business leaders revealed that employers believe that colleges and universities should place more emphasis on communication skills (85%), teamwork (83%), critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills (81%), and applied knowledge in real-world settings (80%) (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

The Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) formed the Red Balloon initiative to re-imagine general education. Vice President George Mehaffy described the goal of the project as “provid[ing] students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they will need to become successful participants in careers, engaged citizens in a democracy, and thoughtful leaders in the global society of the 21st century” (Association of American State Colleges & Universities, n.d.). Similarly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) acknowledged the value of general education at the secondary level through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, which is a “national public advocacy and campus action initiative” that advocates liberal education (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.a). Both initiatives are in response to the changing landscape of industry, the economy, and social and political climates that demand a more informed, more creative, and more vital citizenry. These organizations have traditionally advocated for all students to receive a powerful and horizon-expanding liberal education so that they may compete and succeed in this changing and demanding environment. AAC&U (n.d.b) defined a Liberal Education as:

> an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

General Education is defined as “the part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities” (AAC&U, n.d.b; bold emphasis added). Two of the four learning outcomes—*Intellectual and Practical Skills and Personal and Social*
Responsibility—are well suited to the typical oral communication course in general education. In fact, written and oral communication is specifically identified under Intellectual and Practical Skills. Furthermore, three of the seven “Principles of Excellence” are suited to oral communication instruction: Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation, Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action, and Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning.

Although many campuses face economic crises and calls to review their curricular offerings so that students may complete their degrees more quickly, we also note that chief academic officers, faculty members, and industry professionals have renewed interest in and attention to general education (Hart Research Associates, 2015). New pedagogies and practices are being incorporated into Gen Ed (e.g., learning communities, thematic courses, upper-division requirements) across the country and reflect what faculty and other professionals report as important foci for teaching and learning; these pedagogies and practices also represent an emerging consensus among employers who report on what they seek in college graduates. The areas in which employers feel that colleges most need to increase their focus list oral communication and teamwork skills first, followed by written communication skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, and the application of knowledge in real-world settings (Hart Research Associates).

Perhaps never before has there been so great a need for adaptable and learned citizens who understand difficult problems and can who can work with others to solve problems. We recognize the importance of the major course of study and of co- and extra-curricular activities in building expertise in a given subject area. But we also recognize it is the solid foundation of a general education that helps students see how subject matter can bridge silos and help them live in a complex society. We therefore assert that an oral communication course taught by credentialed communication faculty logically and rightfully belongs in general education. We also assert that an oral communication course is uniquely qualified to address several of the essential learning outcomes identified by current national trends.

III. The Role of Communication Education in General Education

Communication is a life skill that pervades all other dimensions of human development. Communication “cuts across contexts and situations; it is the relational and collaborative force that strategically constructs the social world” (National Communication Association, 2015). As such, communication is foundational to all other academic, professional, and social experiences.

Communication competence is central to a student’s future academic success. Of the four essential learning outcomes that LEAP recommends for student achievement, two outcomes speak directly to skills taught in communication courses. The first outcome is Intellectual and Practical Skills, which includes inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving; the second outcome is Personal and Social Responsibility, which includes civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning. Communication courses are the ideal context for teaching and assessing these skills (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff, 2007; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Morreale, Valenzano, & Bauer, 2017). Speaking and listening assignments afford students the opportunity to formally and informally engage in critical thinking and information and media literacy. Students learn to construct messages as well as to
articulate and defend their ideas while simultaneously critically evaluating the arguments of others. They also learn to question information, examine new evidence, categorize and organize ideas, and create linkages between concepts and their own lived experiences. Moreover, communication skills enhance the professional development of students. In Communication courses, students learn how to present themselves as communicators and thus create positive first impressions in a job interview. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers Job Outlook 2016 survey, communication is one of the highest-ranking skill that employers look for in new recruits. Some of the most important attributes that employers seek in candidates are leadership, teamwork, written and verbal communication skills, problem-solving skills, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills, and tactfulness, all of which can be improved in the context of a communication course. While many employers provide training in company-specific skills which need to be continually updated as technology changes, they are more concerned with an employee’s broader skills such as written and verbal communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and interpersonal skills (Humphreys, 2006).

Communication skills are foundational to student social experiences. The LEAP lists Personal and Social Responsibility as an essential learning outcome to student achievement. While it may be clear to most students that communication courses may enhance their interpersonal relationships, it may be less clear in terms of civic engagement. Because communication courses teach students how to become critical consumers of information from a variety of sources (e.g., journalists, politicians, advertisers), students are better prepared to become informed and ethical citizens in their democracy (Beyer & Liston, 1996; Hunt et al., 2009; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Information and media literacy are essential to an engaged citizenship (Milner, 2002). Democracies function as a result of citizens communicating with one another and competent and ethical communicators are central to a democratic self-governance (Hunt et al.). Thus, communication courses have the potential to enhance individuals’ social and civic lives. In this way, communication students are working towards civic knowledge and engagement, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning.

While this justification for the resolution aligns communication skills to the LEAP initiative, we would advise course directors to examine the specific general education goals at their respective institutions to engage in a similar alignment process. We contend that aligning communication skills and curricula to specific general education outcomes will only serve to secure the role of communication in general education while giving more prominence to our discipline.

IV. The Use of Communication Faculty

One common perspective held in many institutions is that anyone can teach communication and this perspective results in hiring instructors to teach communication courses for which they have little or no academic preparation. Such a perspective belittles the historically strong tradition of communication scholarship originating in the classical rhetorical traditions and proceeding to contemporary quantitative and qualitative research. Education in communication theory and research provides a foundation unique to communication educators. Publications such as Communication Education, Communication Teacher, the Basic Communication Course Annual, and the Journal of Communication Pedagogy reflect the disciplinary commitment to furthering communication education and insuring quality instruction. Faculties with degrees reflecting a strong oral communication tradition bring an expertise and pedagogy that is not found in those with degrees in peripheral disciplines reflected in the Higher Learning Commission’s recognition
of the importance of appropriate faculty credentials for those hired to teach within a given discipline. Efforts to establish or maintain quality instruction of communication as a general education requirement are dependent upon a commitment to staff such courses with qualified communication faculty.

References


