

Basic Course Director Duties and Responsibilities

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It was while sitting in on my own graduate teaching assistant training at the University of North Texas that I realized I wanted to be a basic communication course director. I recall participating in an activity entitled, *The Pope and the Rabbi*, which illustrated the communication process model so beautifully, and reflecting on the power of engaging pedagogy and effective teaching. I fell in love with the teacher training process and have devoted my career to not only directing this course, but also nurturing a pipeline of future Basic Course Directors (BCD) not only within my institution but across the country. It is in this role, that I get to prepare future teachers and scholars of communication—teachers who teach every first year student at our institution and thus, every major in our department. I have directed the basic course at Illinois State University for the last 17 years and will continue to do so for years to come. More recently, I have been able to parlay my experiences at ISU into mentoring novice BCDs at other institutions as they navigate their careers in terms of administration, training, teaching, research, and service. This course is my passion and I hope to be involved in the basic course in some capacity until the day I retire.

As a Basic Course Director, I have attended the Basic Course Directors' Conference over the years and realize that this conference serves as a training ground for those of us in this role. Each year, a group of current and former BCDs get together to discuss issues related to the administration of the basic course. We offer advice for those new to the role and discuss ways to advocate for the course on their respective campuses. We often commiserate on the challenges we face and provide the necessary social support that is often needed during those challenges. In this way, this conference has provided many opportunities for BCD mentorship. I recall a particularly enlightening discussion at one of these meetings on the duties and responsibilities of the BCD. As we compiled this list, I was astounded at the magnitude of these tasks.

But before I get to that list, let me provide just a brief background that precipitated this essay. At the Basic Communication Course Director's Conference held in Phoenix, AZ, Steven Beebe, NCA President, unveiled his platform for strengthening the role of the Basic Course in our discipline. In describing his initiative, Steven aptly states, the basic course is the *front porch* of our discipline (Beebe, 2013). He argues that in many cases, the basic course is the course that welcomes students to general education as well as the study of communication. When Dr. Beebe identified the basic course as his NCA presidential initiative, I was delighted. When he requested that I chair the task force on strengthening the basic course, I was honored and humbled. During our task force retreat, I was asked to write this essay on the Duties and Responsibilities of a Basic Course Director. I am happy to do so.

If the basic course is the *front porch*, then the Basic Course Director represents the *foundation* of our discipline. We are the ones responsible for training teachers who prepare our students with the communication knowledge and skills they need to pursue their academic, personal, professional, and social goals. In many instances, this may be the only communication course students will ever have. Thus, the implications for the Basic Course Director's duties and responsibilities on the discipline as a whole are astounding. The list that was generated at the Basic Course Director's Conference a few years ago is an excellent place to start with identifying what a BCD needs to be able to do to serve the discipline in this capacity. Basic Course Directors have several specific duties that can be organized around the following categories: Advocacy, Curriculum Development, Training, Assessment, and Management and Leadership (See Appendix A). Note that these are the same categories for which NCA Basic Course web link is now organized as per the task force recommendations.

Advocacy

First, BCDs must be strong advocates for the course within their departments, colleges, universities, and communities. All too often at the Basic Course Director's Conference, we hear of BCDs finding themselves in the unenviable position of having to defend their course for inclusion in general education. As these programs go through the revision process, BCDs need to be at the table in those discussions, which means they need to be serving on any university level committees where conversations about general education are taking place. To arm them with these arguments, NCA recently adopted a resolution on the role of communication in general education (Simonds, Buckrop, Redmond, & Hefferin, 2012). This resolution aligns the various communication knowledge and skills to national general education initiatives and serves to provide evidence that these skills are integral to accomplishing general education goals. While this resolution will be helpful in making the case for communication in general education, BCDs need to look to the specific general education goals at their respective institutions to engage in a similar process (for more information on how to do this, see the Mapping and Alignment exercise under the Advocating tab on this web link).

Curriculum Development

Once BCDs conduct a mapping and alignment exercise of their course to general education, they need to develop a curriculum that will serve to accomplish course specific as well as general education goals. They need to be able to select course materials that will address certain student learning outcomes, develop assignments and assessments that will tap into those outcomes, and develop and maintain course materials that will aid instructors in delivering the course. And because general education programs vary from institution to institution, BCDs may find themselves in the position of having to create content to meet these specific needs, which means they need to develop their own textbooks or student workbooks.

Training

If communication courses are to be central to general education, BCDs will need to provide training for how instructors can accomplish general education goals and provide some kind of common experience for students. For example, BCDs will need to train instructors how to implement the common assignments and assessments that tap into specific general education goals. In addition, if we have a role in general education, it typically means we are responsible for multiple instructors teaching multiple sections. In some cases, the course is taught by seasoned faculty, but in other cases, it is taught by graduate teaching assistants who have little or no experience in teaching. Thus, BCDs must provide training on teaching in general (including instructional practices like leading an effective discussion or activity and instructional communication variables like teacher immediacy, credibility, and clarity) and teaching communication specifically (including communication pedagogy, speech evaluation training and effective feedback), and general in-class and out-of classroom management (grade grievances, upholding course policy). For the novice instructor, BCDs may need to consider a peer mentoring program and an ongoing professional development seminar to round out training.

Assessment

Basic Course Directors need to have the requisite skills to conduct assessment of the course and the program. If we are to maintain our centrality to general education, we must be able to demonstrate that our students are able to accomplish general education goals. For example, at Illinois State University, one of our general education goals is that students have gained intellectual and practical skills, allowing them to deliver purposeful presentations that inform attitudes or behaviors. We address this goal with our persuasive speeches, but how do we know that students are actually able to do this effectively? In other words, to address something is not necessarily to assess it. A BCD would need to develop some intentional and deliberate pedagogy to tap into this skill (see curriculum development above) and then train the instructors to deliver this pedagogy to students (see training above). Now that there is a common experience for students, BCDs can collect a sample of the students' work product and analyze them for evidence of effective argumentation and critical thinking skills. These assessment results can then be used to further advocacy efforts in general education (see advocacy above).

Management and Leadership

If BCDs are in the position of training instructors, they should certainly have the authority to both hire and fire them (with due process, of course). I have heard conversations at the Basic Course Director's conference where some BCDs do not make hiring decisions. This astonishes me. You cannot effectively manage people without authority commensurate with the responsibility of the position. BCDs need to be able to observe instructors and provide descriptive and constructive feedback on their performance. They need to have the authority to review teaching evaluations and provide formative feedback for continued teacher growth and development. Additionally, they need the authority and ability to manage any

student and/or instructor conflicts. Finally, BCDs need to supervise office space and supplies as well as create teaching schedules while being responsive to the needs of instructors.

In thinking about the roles and duties of a Basic Course Director (hiring and supervising personnel, training and development, advocating for the course to various institutional and state constituencies, curriculum development, assessment, etc.), it is surprising that there is not, nor has there ever been, a formal training ground to perform these duties. In fact, most of what I learned about my role has been through conversations and commiserations with fellow BCDs at the Basic Course Directors' Conference. So, when Steven Beebe asked us in Phoenix, AZ, what NCA could do to strengthen the basic course, the resounding answer was to provide better training and resources for Basic Course Directors. To make good on that request, the task force recommended and received funding for the first ever NCA Basic Course Director's Summer Training Institute this year in Dayton, Ohio. We modeled this training program after the NCA Chairs' Summer Institutes and hope to be able to offer a similar program on a bi-annual basis.

Since chairing the NCA task force, Steven Beebe has asked me to share our recommendations with department chairs at both the summer institute and the NCA Chairs Breakfast. At these gatherings, I was able to address the magnitude of duties and responsibilities of a BCD as shared in this essay. They, too, were overwhelmed. So, as I close this essay, I hope you will indulge me as I get on a metaphorical basic course high horse a moment. I want to address the chairs of departments who hire Basic Course Directors and ask a few questions for their consideration. The answers to these questions will enable you to evaluate your Basic Course Director position/s in terms of their ability to be effective at your institution. Are your BCDs in a requisite position that afford them the opportunity to serve on university level, general education committees so that they can advocate for your course? Do they have the experience to develop curriculum materials that will address course specific as well as needs of general education? Do they have experience in teacher training and have the authority to hire, supervise, and provide feedback to instructors? Do they have the requisite skills to conduct research on basic course issues including course and program assessment? Are they qualified and willing to perform their duties? And most importantly, do your BCDs have a passion for and commitment to the basic course? And while we are considering these questions, let's also ask: Are your BCDs receiving the departmental support they need to fulfill their duties and responsibilities (adequate compensation, course releases, administrative assistance, summer funding, etc.)? If the answer to any of these questions is *no*, then your BCD may not be in a position to represent your department, your institution, or most importantly, our discipline. If the basic course is truly the *front porch*, the Basic Course Director is the *foundation* of our discipline. If this foundation is strong, our house will weather the storms, if it is weak, it will crumble and fall.

References

Beebe, S. A. (2013). Our "front porch." *Spectra*, 49(2), pp. 3, 22.

Simonds, C. J., Buckrop, J., Redmond, M., and Hefferin, D. (2012). National Communication Association Resolution on the Role of Communication in General Education. Adopted by the NCA Legislative Assembly, November 17, 2012.

Appendix A

List of BCD Duties and Responsibilities

Advocacy

- Serve on departmental, college, or university committees related to the basic course
- Engage in curriculum mapping for assessment of general education

Curriculum Development

- Select textbooks
- Design and maintain assignments and assessments
- Develop/Write textbooks
- Develop/Write workbooks
- Create/Maintain teachers' resource materials

Training—Develop and implement training for:

- Course specific training on common assignments targeted for assessment
- Communication pedagogy training
 - Lesson preparation
 - Presenting content
 - Leading instructional discussion
 - Facilitating experiential activities
 - Speech evaluation training
- Instructional communication variables for effective teaching
 - Teacher immediacy
 - Teacher credibility
 - Teacher clarity
- Peer mentoring program
- In-out of class teacher-student relational management
- Creating partnerships with other campus constituencies (library, diversity and affirmative action, community rights and responsibilities, office of disability concerns, etc.)
- Ongoing professional development

Assessment—Conduct assessment on:

- Student learning outcomes
- Course assessment
- Program assessment
- General education assessment

Management

- Hire instructors
- Supervise instructors
- Provide feedback to instructors
- Review student evaluations of instructors
- Manage the instructor offices