

**Texas State University  
Basic Course Division  
Program of Excellence Award Recipient  
2011**

**Marian L. Houser**  
[mh53@txstate.edu](mailto:mh53@txstate.edu)

**Kristen L. Farris**  
[kfarris@txstate.edu](mailto:kfarris@txstate.edu)

**1. Please describe your program.**

- a. What is the content of the course (public speaking, hybrid, interpersonal, other)? What is the format of your course (large-lecture, small intact class, other)?**

The basic communication course at Texas State University is entitled “Fundamentals of Human Communication” or COMM 1310 in our course catalog. We use a hybrid approach to teaching this course in which we teach our students about fundamental communication skills and principles and then discuss these skills and principles in the following contexts: interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking interactions. We have a variety of delivery methods in our course (lecture-breakout lab format, stand-alone small sections, and half online/half face-to-face), but the majority of our students are serviced by the large lecture and breakout lab section format.

- b. How many sections are offered each semester? How many students are in each section?**

We offer 5 large lecture sections of the course (with approximately 390 students enrolled in each section) each full semester and 2 large lecture sections of the course each summer. In the fall, we generally also offer approximately 75 stand-alone sections of the course (with approximately 30 students enrolled in each section).

- c. Is your course part of general education at your institution? Which students at your institution are required to take the course?**

Our course is part of the general education requirement at Texas State and all students are required to take COMM 1310 before graduating. However, students are able to transfer credits in from other institutions as a substitute for our course.

- d. Who teaches the course? What are their credentials?**

Our teaching team consists of full-time faculty (both tenure and non-tenure track), per course or part time faculty, and graduate students. Generally, our faculty either have earned a doctoral or Master’s degree, while our graduate students are currently pursuing a Master’s degree.

- e. What training opportunities are provided to your instructors? What content is covered in training?**

Our instructor training program includes a pre-semester teacher training program and a series of “just-in-time” workshops that are associated with a graduate course entitled “Teaching Communication Studies.”

### *Pre-Semester Teacher Training*

The course directors and the basic course administrator (graduate teaching assistant) plan and host a five-day Teaching and Learning Academy (TLA) one to two weeks prior to the start of each semester. New instructional assistants are required to attend each day, with graduate teaching assistants and adjunct instructors attending the final day of the academy. Each day of training is organized to meet the following objectives:

1. Understand COMM 1310's principled approach, learning objectives, lecture/lab format, and its importance to the department, college, and university.
2. Understand and be able to administer, fairly and consistently, basic course policies.
3. Be able to use TRACS university software to set up grade book, post announcements, etc.
4. Be able to Plan, Prepare, Present, and Assess an experiential lab that meets the course's learning objectives outlined in the student guidebook.
5. Be able to use communication in the classroom to develop teacher-student relationships that yield appropriate power and influence.
6. Be able to manage student misbehaviors in and out of the classroom.
7. Be able to conduct class sessions while making a favorable impression, being confident, poised, organized, credible, and appropriately assertive.

Each day of the TLA is organized into Instructional Modules: Perceptions, Power, and Learning in the Classroom; First Impressions: Preparing for Your 1st Class; Dark Side of Being a Lab Instructor; Lab Demonstrations; and Basic Course Administration. Though this course is standardized, it is our hope to help each new instructor locate their personal "teaching voice" to create course ownership.

### *"Just-in-Time" Workshops*

To avoid information overload for the new instructional assistants, six preparatory workshops are held at pertinent times throughout the semester.

- Diversity and Communication Assignment
- Exam Administration
- Interpersonal Communication and Conflict
- Informative Presentation Assignment
- Small Group and Team Problem-Solving Assignment
- Course Wrap-Up

## **2. Please describe the goals and outcomes of your program.**

- a. **If your course is part of general education, please describe how your course aligns with your general education goals.**

COMM 1310 is part of the general education curriculum at Texas State, and we were tasked with assessing the following competencies:

### **Core Objectives/Competencies Outcomes:**

- **Critical Thinking:** Students will demonstrate creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information.
- **Communication:** Students will effectively develop, interpret and express ideas through written, oral and visual communication.
- **Teamwork:** Students will recognize different points of view and work effectively with others to support a shared purpose or goal.
- **Personal Responsibility:** Students will relate choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making.

We have created assignments targeting each of the core competencies and have aligned our course goals with the broader competencies created by the Higher Education Coordinating Board in Texas.

### **b. What are the goals and outcomes of your course?**

COMM 1310 also addresses the following learning outcomes in our course:

1. List, describe, and explain the five principles of human communication and identify how they are integrated into the interpersonal, small group/team, and presentational speaking contexts.
2. Analyze and appropriately manage interpersonal conflict by using the five principles of human communication.
3. Identify and describe appropriate adaptive messages in intercultural communication situations and demonstrate appropriate affective responses to intercultural communication interactions.
4. Develop, organize, and deliver an informative presentation integrating the five principles into your presentation.
5. Describe and demonstrate how to effectively and ethically use the five steps of group problem solving (reflective thinking) while applying the five principles.
6. Develop, organize, and deliver a persuasive presentation integrating the five principles into your presentation.

### **3. How is your course assessed?**

#### **a. Please list and briefly describe any assessment projects conducted in the last few years.**

*Pre-Post Assessment of Course Learning Objectives.* This study sought to examine the effective means of assessing whether goals and objectives set within the basic communication course were met. The study outlined specific techniques used to evaluate learning outcomes to ensure that the course retained its relevance and general education status. A pretest-posttest design was utilized to determine whether students' scores on cognitive, behavioral, and affective assessment instruments improved from the beginning to the end of the semester. Results

indicated students' scores improved on each of the primary learning indicators for the course including: an assessment of communication knowledge, conflict management skills, and intercultural communication apprehension. For more information, please see LeBlanc, Vela, and Houser, 2011.

*Development and Validation of Assessment Rubric for Student Speeches.* The study sought to examine the assessment tools used to demonstrate student learning of public speaking skills in the basic communication course. Statistical analyses were conducted to determine the validity of two assessment instruments (Informative Presentation Assessment Form and Persuasive Presentation Assessment Form) measuring student public speaking competency. Students' speeches were assessed with the rubrics developed by the course directors and by the Competent Speaker Form (Morreale, 1994). Results established concurrent validity of the two assessment instruments used to measure students' public speaking competency for the informative and persuasive presentations. Another goal of the current study was to assess the change in student public speaking behaviors after receiving public speaking instruction. A pre-post design was used to determine whether trained or untrained students would improve more throughout the course of the semester. Results revealed the trained group experienced a greater increase in competency than the untrained group. For more information please see Farris, Houser, and Wotipka, 2013.

*Instructor Training Program.* The purpose of this study was to develop an assessment tool to reflect the links between preparatory training and teaching effectiveness of basic communication course instructors. In two parts, the study explores the use of a 360° assessment method from three differential perspectives: (1) instructor classroom observations via an evaluation form developed from training objectives, (2) student surveys regarding perceptions of instructor effectiveness, and (3) instructor perceptions of their own self-efficacy and communicative behavior in the classroom. Part one of the investigation was a pilot study to initially examine the Instructor Observation Instrument via the 360° assessment method. The goal of the second part of the study was to refine and validate the observation instrument designed for classroom observations. A 21-item measure consisting of three dimensions resulted and was deemed highly reliable. The three dimensions include Classroom Interaction, Activity Interaction, and Instructional Inference.

No relationship was found between the evaluation of the instructor and the students' perceptions of their instructor's credibility or clarity in the classroom. Additionally, no relationship existed between student evaluation scores on the university-sanctioned instrument and the faculty observers' ratings of the instructor.

A significant, negative relationship was found between instructors' perceptions of self-efficacy and the observers' ratings on the Observation Instrument. However,

no relationship was discovered between the communication concerns felt by instructors and the raters' observation of the instructors' effectiveness.

Students perceived stand-alone instructors to have significantly higher levels of credibility than lab instructors. Students did not perceive a difference in the use of clarity behaviors or instructor effectiveness whether instructed by a stand-alone instructor or a lab instructor. However, stand-alone instructors perceived themselves to be more capable in the classroom than lab instructors. No differences existed in communication concerns based on position. Although the final statistical test for instructor observation only approached significance, it is important to note that lab instructors scored higher than stand-alone instructors on the observation instrument suggesting they are more likely to effectively implement the skills covered during training sessions than the stand-alone instructors in the course. This piece is currently under review. Please email Kristen Farris at [klfarris@txstate.edu](mailto:klfarris@txstate.edu) if you would like to see this piece.

- b. Please provide a reference list of any assessment publications you (or your colleagues) have for your course.**

#### References

Farris, K. L., Houser, M. L., & Wotipka, C. D. (2013). Assessing the transition of student public speaking competence. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 25, 161-206.

LeBlanc, K., Vela, L., & Houser, M. L. (2011). Improving the basic communication course: Assessing the core components. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 23, 61-92.

- 4. Why do you think your application stood out to the review committee?**
- a. In other words, what makes your program distinct? You may want to refer to the rational of your full application for this answer.**

The course directors believe that several factors lead to our receiving this award. First, we acknowledge that the sheer size of our program makes us stand out as we service approximately 6,000 students each year. Second, we know that our instructor training program is one of the few to focus not only on course logistics and how to teach COMM 1310 but we also emphasize instructional communication strategies, principles, and theories. Third, we use our assessment methods to truly understand what our students are learning and how to improve our instruction. As one reviewer remarked, "this program is thoughtfully constructed, carefully assessed, and actively seeks to meet the needs of the student population that it serves." Finally, our ability to align our course objectives with

the mission of our university and goals of the general education council stood out to the reviewers of this prestigious award.

**b. What new initiatives have you implemented since your award?**

We have changed two major assignments in our course since receiving this award. First, we created a diversity paper in which students are tasked with taking on the perspective of someone who is different from them. They are asked to write a two-four page paper in which they describe the experiences of this diverse population. Students then have an opportunity to discuss in class what they learned about their roles and how this may influence their intercultural communication competence (a learning objective of our course and a state-mandated core competency for our course).

Second, we have created a group problem-solving project which culminates in the presentation of a persuasive speech in order to target the state-mandated core competency of teamwork and ethical decision-making. Texas State University published “We are Bobcats” messages which focus on values important to our institution including: We are Academically Successful, We are Proud, We are Responsible, We are Healthy, and We are Caring. Our students first select their groups of four to six students and one of the five “We are Bobcats” messages. They are then tasked with identifying a campus-based problem associated with their specific message. The students then engage in Dewey’s problem-solving process and identify a solution that would either minimize or eliminate the problem. Finally, students construct a persuasive presentation using Monroe’s Motivated Sequence to demonstrate to the audience that the problem exists and that it impacts the audience members directly and to provide evidence that their solution will actually work. Students then have the opportunity to ethically evaluate each member’s contribution to the group project.

We have also continued to conduct assessment projects which focus on both student learning and instructional effectiveness. Currently, we are collecting data using the Theory of Planned Behavior as the framework to determine whether instruction in COMM 1310 influences students’ likelihood of actually enacting the five principles from the text (Be aware of your communication, Effectively use and interpret verbal and nonverbal messages, Listen and respond thoughtfully to others, Appropriately adapt messages to others) in their personal and professional lives.

We are also currently analyzing data on an assessment project which experimentally examines whether the use of the “We are Bobcats” messages as part of the COMM 1310 group problem-solving project helps students to identify with Texas State University.

**5. What insights or advice do you have for future applicants as they prepare their materials for this award?**

We would encourage future applicants to think about how their basic communication course aligns with their departmental and university mission, values, and goals. Further, it would be fruitful to discuss how the assignments in the course help students to achieve these goals and competencies. We would also encourage future applicants to specifically discuss the instructional training program for their teaching team and the assessment methods used to determine the effectiveness of these training programs and instructors in the classroom. Finally, we would tell future applicants to demonstrate how they assess student learning in the basic communication course and how they use that data to create continuous improvement of course and general education outcomes.