

1990

## Evaluating the Basic Course: Using Research to Meet the Communication Needs of the Students

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### Recommended Citation

Bendtschneider, Lyn B. and Trank, Douglas M. (1990) "Evaluating the Basic Course: Using Research to Meet the Communication Needs of the Students," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 2 , Article 14.  
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol2/iss1/14>

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## **Evaluating the Basic Course: Using Research to Meet the Communication Needs of the Students**

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*Lyn B. Bendtschneider  
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The faculty and the director of the basic course ought to be primarily concerned with the extent to which the basic course fulfills the communication needs of their students. However, this is typically not one of the more important concerns of basic course directors when they develop and/or evaluate the courses offered at their institutions. Departmental and program reviews seldom, if ever, look specifically at how well student needs are being met by particular courses. Instead, the major focus for many basic course directors in the developmental and/or evaluation of their courses is on concerns such as course objectives and content, instructional materials and methods, enrollment, staffing, and budget. It is true these concerns are extremely important to the faculty and students of the basic course. However, this concentration on the obvious has resulted in the unfortunate tendency to assume the students' communication needs are being met by the basic course with little evidence to document our claims.

Basic course directors have a number of sources from which to draw information when developing and/or evaluating their courses. Frequent basic course conferences and panels addressing concerns relevant to the basic course give us a fairly good picture of the instructional approaches and content of the basic courses around the country. Apparent trends in instructional patterns, course content and materials, staffing, and administrative support on the national level are reported

approximately every four years by the Speech Communication Association (SCA) (Gibson, *et al.*, IV; Gibson, *et al.*, III; Gibson, *et al.*, Reexamination). In fact, a knowledge of basic course operations drawn from the SCA sponsored surveys offers a baseline from which institutions can measure their own course activity (Boileau, 80). Although the SCA reports claim to be nothing more than a record of the current practices reported by the survey respondents, Pearson and Sorenson observed departments frequently use these studies to determine to what extent their curriculum is consistent with the curriculum of other speech communication departments (1). Boileau noted many basic courses are modeled upon what the directors identify as the typical course in the national SCA basic course surveys or even on a memory of their own instructors' approaches (74). However, it cannot automatically be assumed the basic course curriculum represented by the national surveys will adequately fulfill the communication needs of students at every institution.

Understandably, the need to be near the academic mainstream is a very real pressure on basic course directors. Demonstrating that one is following the norm enables directors to counter potential arguments for adaptations in the course and serves as a political tool to aid directors in achieving their goals. We are not advocating that the basic course undergo significant change. Our position, simply stated, is that any evaluation of the basic course ought to include a focus on the outcomes of instruction in that course. In order to do that, we need to make legitimate efforts to determine the extent to which the basic course fulfills the students' communication needs. In fact, an evaluation which demonstrates the basic course meets these needs can also serve as a powerful political tool.

Satisfying the students' communication needs is one of two goals which institutions reportedly attempt to meet in the basic course. The other is to introduce fundamental speech communication theories and principles (Pearson and Sorenson

1). Yet, it seems satisfaction of the communication needs are generally assumed rather than empirically demonstrated, especially when departmental reviews are undertaken. For example, Morlan noted that comments about the following should be included in the final report of a basic course evaluation: staffing, facilities, "textbooks, supplementary materials, question banks for exams, etc. . . . [and if possible] favorable reactions from students" (4). Although evaluation procedures such as value-added assessment or competency based assessment remain controversial, it is obvious that a complete determination of the students' communication needs cannot be achieved without the involvement of those directly affected by that assessment. We agree that communication faculty are academically and professionally qualified to specify the principles and theories of communication to be included in a basic course. However, the students and alumni are in a better position to decide if the course actually meets their perceived communication needs (Pearson & Sorenson 25). If the resource were utilized properly, basic course directors actually have an infinite number of sources by which they can demonstrate their courses meet the students' needs: the students themselves. Students always have and always will evaluate our courses and our teaching. Our only choice in this area is whether we want to use those evaluations to make our courses the best educational experience it can possibly be for future students.

The rationale for evaluating the basic course on the basis of student and alumni feedback is inherent in the purpose of communication education within a liberal arts curriculum. Communication education benefits students by teaching them to reason clearly and communicate effectively in order to transcend any job or any career (Bradley, 4). Communication education enables and empowers students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation they need to produce effective and appropriate communicative behaviors and messages so they may become more effective participants and

better citizens in our society. Therefore, when evaluating our courses, we need to ask which communication skills are important, useful, and relevant in producing effective and appropriate messages across a variety of situations, including academic and career performance. We ought to be asking those who have taken our courses how relevant and important are the skills in situations where successful performance is essential.

Determining the communication needs of the students has been a focus for other kinds of investigations by a number of researchers. These studies offer a baseline from which to begin demonstrating that a particular basic course meets the communication needs of students. Johnson & Szczupakiewicz argued although educators have numerous suggestions for course content, we don't know to what extent these skills are used in work related activities, nor do we know the amount of similarity that exists between the skills faculty teach and those which alumni use on the job (132). They found that a nationally representative sample of public speaking instructors and alumni of the basic course differed significantly in their attitudes toward the importance of eighteen specific public speaking skills taught in the classrooms and used on the job. Specifically, they recommended faculty consider increasing the coursework focus on presentational speaking, entertaining speaking, handling questions and answers, and small group discussion. Lohr questioned alumni of the basic course and determined the frequency and importance of fourteen communication activities typically used in the alumni's professions in an effort to generate suggestions for types of skills which should be taught in class (248). The alumni suggested that impromptu "of the cuff" speeches, persuasive speeches, and activities to reduce speaking anxieties be given the most importance in classroom activities. Pearson and Sorenson suggested that student and alumni disagreements on the specific types of public speaking skills which ought to be considered most important, i.e. the

interview as an interpersonal communication activity versus small group discussion, are the result of academic versus career performance concerns (21). Becker and Ekdorn reviewed a number of studies which surveyed students, alumni, and employers on aspects related to communication skills. They determined that employers rate verbal and written communication skills as the most important skills for professional careers and alumni typically have trouble with public speaking anxiety and interpersonal communication competencies (12-25).

Speaking abilities do not constitute the entire picture of communication skills, albeit they are typically the only ones assessed under the rubric "basic course." Writing, too, is a communication skill which has received some attention in the academic journals. Faigley and Miller assessed the role writing plays in the professional lives of college-educated individuals and found that those employed in technical and professional occupations spent nearly 30% of their total work time engaged in writing (560). The writing consisted of letters written to outside persons or agencies; intercompany letters and memos and reports. The college-educated people strongly recommended that clarity, grammar, mechanics, and usage be emphasized in writing instruction. Other skills highly recommended were organization, idea development, making an impact on audience, vocabulary, adapting to an audience or situation, problem solving, and reading. Similar rhetorical aspects of writing were perceived to be important to a college education according to alumni (Harwood 281-3). Bataille reported alumni on the job write less than two pages over 82% of the time and over one-half of all writing done is to audiences who may know little or nothing about the subject (280). As a result, the role of audience in the writing process is important. Tebeaux noted several studies reported employees write to many audiences and require the use of common rhetorical skills, indicating that successful writing performance is not as job specific as once thought. Tebeaux

also recommended educators constantly reassess course content by asking alumni such questions as, "How useful are the skills you learned? How can we make our ... courses more relevant in preparing students for the work place?" (427).

Although a wealth of information about the types of skills students need for successful academic and career performance can be drawn from the relevant literature, it is only part of the evaluation process. The most important step requires demonstration that the course under review fulfills the communication needs of the students and this can only be achieved with verifiable evidence drawn from a sample of students who have taken that particular course at that particular institution.

Such was the purpose of a recent study undertaken at the University of Iowa. We sought to determine the extent to which specific speech communication and writing skills taught across various sections of the basic course fulfilled the perceived communication needs of students in their coursework and alumni in the workplace. As mentioned earlier, it cannot automatically be assumed the basic course curriculum represented by the national surveys will adequately fulfill the communication needs of students in every institution. This claim is particularly relevant to the basic course curriculum offered at the University of Iowa where both written and speech communication skills are taught simultaneously in the basic course. It may also be equally relevant at institutions where the basic course addresses interpersonal communication skills, as well as public speaking skills.

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

A total of 300 questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 100 currently enrolled sophomores, juniors, and seniors who had completed the basic course at the University

of Iowa, 100 alumni who had graduated from this same institution between the years 1982-1988, and 100 instructors who were currently teaching the basic course at this same institution. Accompanying each questionnaire was a letter explaining the purpose of the research project and an appeal for participation in the study. All respondents were assured of confidentiality. A follow-up letter was not sent. The instrument consisted of Osgood-type questions, multiple choice questions, and open-ended questions. A total of 53 questionnaires were returned by the instructors, 28 by the students, and 26 by the alumni resulting in an overall response rate of 36%. All data analyses were based on the 107 responses. Groups differed significantly on the perceived importance of writing skills (Wilks Lambda (32,178)=5.96),  $p < 0.0001$  and speaking skills (Wilks Lambda (38, 172)=4.94),  $p < 0.0001$ . These multivariate tests were followed by a series of univariate ANOVAS to determine which specific writing and speaking skills demonstrated significant difference.

Since the basic course at the University of Iowa utilizes the teaching of graduate instructors who develop their own courses based on a general set of guidelines offered by the department, it was important to first determine the specific skills which instructors address in their classes. The instructors' responses to the survey questions provided the basis by which we could assess the nature of the specific communication skills taught in our basic course. The student and alumni responses offered a basis for evaluating the perceived appropriateness and importance of the communication skills taught in the basic course. This information allowed us to determine the extent to which our basic course meets students' perceived communication needs.

## BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE ANNUAL

## RESULTS

### *Respondents' Characteristics*

The instructor respondents were graduate instructors whose teaching experience in the basic course ranged from one to six semesters. The student respondents were, at the minimum, one semester post completion of the basic course and alumni respondents had completed the basic course within the past ten years. The students and alumni cited current majors or current employment in fields such as in business, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, speech pathology, biology, computer science, engineering, sociology, psychology, education, foreign languages, communication, mass media, journalism, art, theater, law graduate research, and the armed forces. The distribution of disciplines was fairly equal among the survey respondents. Due to the low response rate, analyses of differences across demographic factors other than the general acknowledgement of being a student, an alumni, or an instructor of the basic course were not undertaken.

### *Importance of Writing Skills*

The first set of questions assessed the similarity of attitudes among basic course instructors, students, and alumni regarding the importance of numerous writing skills. We asked the instructors, students, and alumni to rate, on an Osgood-type scale (1.7 = not important to very important) fifteen *writing* skills in terms of their importance. The definitions of "importance" noted below for instructors, students, and alumni best fit our conceptualization of the students' communication needs.

The term "importance" was defined for the instructors as how often they taught these skills, how much time they de-

voted to these concepts, and whether they perceived competence in these skills as essential for students' successful academic and subsequent career performance. Table 1 reveals the instructors rated state and develop a central idea, organization, and conciseness and clarity of expression as the top three skills. The three writing skills rated least important by the instructors were mechanics such as spelling and punctuation, report writing, and memo writing.

"Importance" was defined for the students as how often they used these skills in their coursework, how much of their coursework they devoted to performing these skills, and whether they perceived competence in these skills as essential for successful academic performance. Table 1 shows the students rated the three most important writing skills as: organization, state and develop a central idea, and conciseness and clarity of expression. The three writing skills rated least important were documentation of sources, journal or personal writing, and memo writing.

The term "importance" was defined for the alumni as how often they used these writing skills in their work, how much of their worktime they devoted to performing these skills, and whether they perceived competence in these skill as essential for successful job performance. As Table 1 shows, the alumni rated conciseness and clarity of expression, organization, and grammar as the top three writing skills. The three skills rated least important were revising first drafts, documentation of sources, and journal or personal writing.

**Table 1**  
**Importance of Writing Skills**  
**Instructors, Students, and Alumni Comparison of Means**

<b>Writing Skills</b>	<b>Instructors</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Alumni</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
State & develop a central idea	6.47	6.28	5.67	3.01	0.0537
Organization	6.43	6.35	6.30	0.15	0.8605
Conciseness & clarity of expression	6.41	6.21	6.38	0.40	0.6709
Use of supporting material	6.39	6.07	5.96	1.50	0.2269
Expositional or informative writing	6.22	5.39	5.43	5.07	0.0079
Adapting to intended audience	6.22	5.46	5.84	3.74	0.0270
Revising first drafts	6.05	5.43	4.92	5.38	0.0060
Argumentative/persuasive writing	6.05	5.32	5.00	5.04	0.0081
Documentation of sources, footnotes	5.49	5.17	4.00	5.90	0.0037
Editing & proof-reading	5.37	6.00	5.50	1.56	0.2158
Journal or personal writing	5.09	3.85	3.61	7.57	0.0009
Grammar (standard English)	4.92	6.03	6.11	8.72	0.0003
Mechanics (spelling, punctuation)	4.81	5.96	5.88	7.17	0.0012
Report writing	4.07	5.42	5.26	7.57	0.0009
Memo writing	1.90	3.21	5.46	56.96	0.0001
Note: (f 2, 104)					

Significant differences occurred between the mean ratings instructors, students, and alumni assigned to the following writing skills: expository or informative writing, adapting to intended audience, revising first drafts, argumentative or persuasive writing, documentation of sources, journal or personal writing, grammar, mechanics, report writing, and memo writing

We asked the instructors, students, and alumni to rate on a scale of 1-7 (not appropriate to very appropriate) the extent to which they perceived the writing skills taught in the basic course were appropriate for the students' current and future communication needs. The instructors' mean rating was 6.18, students' mean 4.57, and alumni mean 4.50 ( $F = 17.15$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ).

### ***Importance of Speech Communication Skills***

The second set of questions assessed the similarity of attitudes among basic course instructors, students, and alumni regarding the importance of numerous *speech communication* skills. We asked the instructors, students, and alumni to rate, on an Osgood-type scale (1-7 = not important to very important) fifteen speech communication skills in terms of their importance to instruction in the basic course, the workplace, and coursework, respectively. The definitions for importance were the same as for the writing skills. Table 2 shows the instructors rated listening, organizing the speech, and small group discussion as the top three speech communication skills. The three skills rated least important were handling questions and answers, interviewing, and outlining.

As Table 2 shows, the students rated listening, small group discussion, and interpersonal skills as the three most

important skills. The three least important skills were persuasive speaking, interviewing, and analyzing audiences.

Table 2 also shows the alumni rated the three most important speech communication skills as interpersonal skills, handling questions and answers, and listening. The three least important skills were organizing the speech, analyzing audiences, and interviewing.

**Table 2**  
**Importance of Speech Communication Skills**  
**Instructors, Students, and Alumni**  
**Comparison of Means**

Speaking Skills	Instructors	Students	Alumni	F	p
Listening	6.03	5.28	6.26	3.92	0.0229
Organizing the speech	6.01	4.85	5.07	5.42	0.0058
Small group discussion	5.98	5.25	5.53	2.14	0.1223
Informative speaking	5.96	4.64	6.00	8.36	0.0004
Persuasive speaking	5.79	4.64	5.65	4.90	0.0093
Analyzing audiences	5.79	4.35	4.92	8.19	0.0005
Gathering support materials	5.73	5.07	5.50	1.60	0.2066
Presentational speaking	5.62	5.14	5.96	1.84	0.1639
Delivery	5.28	5.07	6.03	2.74	0.0689
Overcoming nervousness	5.20	5.00	5.19	0.12	0.8852
Interpersonal skills	5.09	5.21	6.34	4.68	0.0113
Handling questions and answers	5.00	5.17	6.26	5.38	0.0060
Interviewing	4.09	4.60	4.69	1.16	0.3162
Outlining	3.92	4.85	5.11	4.24	0.0170

Note: (f 2, 104)

**Significant differences occurred between the mean ratings instructors, students, and alumni assigned to the following speech communication skills: listening, organizing the speech, informative speaking, persuasive speaking, analyzing audiences, interpersonal skills, handling questions and answers, and outlining.**

**We asked the instructors, students, and alumni to indicate the extent to which they perceived the speech communication skills taught in the basic course were appropriate for the students' current and future communication needs. The instructors gave the basic course speech communication skills an overall rating of 5.58, students 4.25, and alumni 4.53 ( $F = 5.35, p = 0.0061$ ).**

### ***Importance of Speech Communication Delivery Styles***

**Table 3 reports the mean ratings instructors, students, and alumni assigned to the importance of delivery styles taught in the basic course and used in academic coursework and/or and the workplace. The instructor, student, and alumni ratings indicate extemporaneous and impromptu delivery are perceived to be the two most important delivery styles. However, all groups differed significantly in their ratings of all four delivery styles.**

**Table 3**  
**Importance of Speech Delivery Styles**  
**Instructors, Students, and Alumni**  
**Comparison of Means**

<b>Delivery Style</b>	<b>Instructors</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Alumni</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Extempo- raneous - delivery</b>	<b>6.15</b>	<b>4.57</b>	<b>4.53</b>	<b>11.64</b>	<b>0.0001</b>
<b>Impromptu delivery</b>	<b>4.47</b>	<b>4.75</b>	<b>5.84</b>	<b>5.23</b>	<b>0.0068</b>
<b>Manuscript delivery</b>	<b>2.45</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>3.26</b>	<b>5.86</b>	<b>0.0039</b>
<b>Memorized delivery</b>	<b>1.92</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>19.73</b>	<b>0.0001</b>

### ***Preferences for Emphasis of Basic Course***

We asked the respondents to indicate their preference for the emphasis of the basic course. Five possible choices were given: speaking only, writing only, critical reading only, combined speaking and writing, and combined speaking, writing, and critical reading. Table 4 shows the majority of the instructors rated a combination of speaking, writing, and critical reading skills as the preferred emphasis for the basic course. The students and alumni indicated a preference for a combination of speaking and writing with a combination of speaking, writing, and critical reading rated second.

**Table 4**  
**Preferences for Emphasis of Basic Course**

<b>Emphasis</b>	<b>Instructors</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Alumni</b>
Speaking	3.8%	0%	0%
Writing	13.2%	7.1%	0%
Critical reading	15.1%	7.1%	0%
Combined speaking & writing	3.8%	39.3%	53.8%
Combined speaking, writing, & critical reading	62.3%	35.7%	46.2%
Other	30.2%	14.3%	0%

### ***Preferences for Focus of Basic Course Instruction***

Table 5 shows among the three choices listed as potential approaches to basic course instruction, the respondents strongly preferred more practice or performance than theory.

**Table 5**  
**Preferences for Focus of Basic Course Instruction**

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Instructors</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Alumni</b>
More practice/performance than theory	60.4%	64.3%	76.9%
More theory than practice/performance	1.9%	0%	0%
Equal blend of theory & practice/performance	35.8%	35.7%	23.1%

## **General Questions**

Degree of consistency in instruction across sections of the basic course is an often discussed issue in an institution where the instructors develop their own courses under general departmental guidelines. To assess the extent to which the instructors perceived instruction was consistent across sections, we asked the instructors to rate their perceptions on a scale of 1-7 (very inconsistent to very consistent). The mean rating was 2.73. We also asked them how desirable it would be to have instruction consistent across sections. The mean rating for this response was 3.60.

Similar to many other institutions, the basic course at the University of Iowa is a required course. We were interested in estimating the degree to which those who are required to take the basic course perceive it to be satisfactory compared to their other General Education Requirements. We asked the students and alumni to rate on a scale of 1-7 (very disappointed to very satisfied) their level of satisfaction with the basic course compared to the other courses they took to fulfill their other General Education Requirements at the University of Iowa. The mean rating for the students was 4.21. The mean rating for the alumni was 4.61.

Finally, we asked all three groups to indicate whether or not the basic course should continue to be required for all students. The response was a resounding yes from 96.2% of the instructors, 92.3% of the alumni, and 82.1% of the students.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine if students and alumni perceived the basic course at the University of

Iowa prepared them with communication skills they need for successful performance in their coursework and/or work related activities. The instructors' responses provided the basis by which we could assess the nature of the specific communication skills taught in the basic course. The student and alumni responses offered a basis for evaluating the perceived appropriateness and importance of the communication skills taught in the basic course and whether these skills meet their communication needs.

Although statistically significant differences were found between many of the speech communication and writing skills which instructors, students, and alumni thought were important, the vast majority of skills were rated well above the mean. This indicates all three groups perceive the communication skills taught in the basic course at the University of Iowa are important to successful academic and professional performance and appear to adequately respond to the students' communication needs. However, statistically significant differences among the responses indicate a need for reassessment regarding the emphasis on some skills compared to others in the basic course curriculum.

### ***Writing Skills***

The writing skills which students and alumni rated as significantly more important for successful academic and/or career performance than did instructors include: grammar, mechanics, report writing, and memo writing. This may indicate to basic course faculty the need for more emphasis on the skills of standard English usage, spelling, and punctuation which instructors often assume are already mastered by the time students reach college. It is not surprising that memo writing was not considered as important by the instructors as it was by the alumni since this is a highly job

specific skill. Although report writing could be considered a skill which ought to follow naturally from some of the other writing skills, such as developing a central idea, organization, clarity of expression, etc., the data demonstrate this skill is apparently important to students and alumni and the basic course faculty might consider devoting more classroom time to its discussion and application.

The writing skills which students and alumni rated as significantly less important than did instructors include: expository or informative writing, adapting to intended audience, revising first drafts, argumentative or persuasive writing, documentation of sources, and journal or personal writing. One reason for this disparity could stem from a lack of need for these skills in the students' academic coursework outside of the basic course instruction. Perhaps the students and alumni are not required to utilize these writing skills in their classes and careers as often as assumed. Of note, however, is the degree of agreement between the instructor and alumni ratings regarding the importance of adapting to intended audience. This is consistent with Bataille's finding that over one-half of all writing on the job is directed to audiences outside one's immediate field (280). Perhaps the students' ratings are significantly lower than the instructors' ratings of this particular skill because the students rarely write for audiences other than their instructors.

### *Speech Communication Skills*

The students and alumni rated several speech communication skills as statistically more important than did instructors. These include interpersonal skills, handling questions and answers, and outlining. The basic course faculty might consider devoting more classroom time to the skills of outlining and handling questions and answers as they

are vital to giving organized presentations. As noted earlier, alumni often use handling questions and answers skills in the workplace (Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 135). Also interpersonal skills are among the top three factors rated as most important for successful job performance (Becker and Ekdom; Weitzel and Gaske; Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens). It is impossible that interpersonal skills are not rated highly by the instructors because they assume these skills are being practiced in small group discussion (a skill ranked third among the instructors' ratings). But the importance of this skill should not be taken lightly. In an open-ended response section on the survey, an alumnus stated that "person to person speaking" was a speaking skill he or she used frequently at the workplace. Another alumnus wrote, "The most emphasis should be put on . . . honing interpersonal skills."

A few speech communication skills were rated as significantly less important by the students and alumni compared to instructors' ratings. These include organizing the speech and audience analysis. Perhaps these disparities stem from the lack of opportunities students and alumni are given to apply these skills in their academic coursework and workplaces, respectively. Many of the courses students take at a large university are conducted by lecture which preclude the occasion for small group discussion or individual presentations. Similarly, many careers and jobs do not require public speaking or perhaps presentations given at work are to a well-known audience and do not require extensive preparation or organization. This might explain why the alumni rated audience analysis for the purposes of writing as more important than their rating of audience analysis for the purposes of speaking.

Of note, however, is that student and alumni perceptions of listening, informative speaking, and persuasive speaking skills differed in that the alumni rated these skills as more important than did the students. The alumni ratings were

also higher than the instructors' ratings of these three speech communication skills. It might be that these particular speech communication skills are more important for successful career performance than academic performance. Given that these particular skills are a few of the more essential communication skills the basic course attempts to address, this finding presents an interesting dilemma for educators and suggests the need to examine the opportunities for speech communication across the curriculum.

### ***Speech Communication Delivery Styles***

The findings regarding speech communication delivery styles suggest that students and alumni consider the majority of delivery styles to be more important than instructors indicate. Johnson and Szczupakiewicz reported all four delivery styles are used frequently by alumni in the workplace (135). Memorized delivery, in particular, was rated significantly higher by students and alumni. An interesting finding was the significant difference in ratings instructors, students, and alumni assigned to the perceived importance of extemporaneous delivery. While the instructors perceived this was the most important speaking style, the students and alumni rated extemporaneous delivery significantly lower. The basic course faculty might reconsider the attention given to these speech delivery styles in an effort to reflect the emphases indicated by the students and alumni.

## **General Preferences**

The basic course at the University of Iowa currently emphasizes a combination of speaking, writing, and critical reading. The instructors strongly indicated they preferred this emphasis, but the students and alumni did not share this opinion. They indicated a slight preference for speaking and writing without critical reading. Perhaps the reason for this finding is the result of this survey failing to include an assessment of the critical reading skills students and alumni perceive to be important in their coursework and workplace, respectively. Because the questionnaire did not address this issue, the students and alumni may have responded in kind, i.e. indicating a slight preference for speaking and writing without reading. However, this finding may also stem from a lack of effective instruction in critical reading or perhaps it is the result of the students and alumni not understanding the role reading skills play in the ability to write and speak well. The basic course faculty ought to consider possible answers and responses to this question. Importantly for us, all three groups reported an overwhelming preference for our current integrated approach to the teaching of the basic course as opposed to the teaching of separate courses in writing and speaking.

Another important finding was the overwhelming agreement regarding the preference for more practice or performance than theory in basic course instruction. This finding is consistent with national trends in basic course instruction where 65% of the basic course directors surveyed reported their instruction consisted of more than a 40-60% ratio of theory to performance (Gibson, *et al.*, 285).

Finally, in spite of the fact that instructors perceived instruction across sections of the course was highly inconsistent, they indicated it was undesirable to achieve consistency. One instructor wrote "It is my impression that

instruction in the basic course is consistent in so far as the departmental guidelines are usually addressed and fulfilled. There is great inconsistency, however in pedagogical beliefs and strategies used in attaining goals set by the department. This makes sense to me. Although the department has a wide variety of teaching philosophies, styles, and temperaments at work, I've found this mixture to be healthy, democratic, and stimulating." Students and alumni rated the course positively compared to the other courses they took to fulfill their General Education Requirements, and strongly indicated a preference for continuing the basic course as a requirement for graduation at the University of Iowa.

### **Summary**

The data reported in this survey offers a fairly clear picture of the specific communication skills which are taught in the basic course at the University of Iowa and perceived as important by students and alumni for successful academic and career performance. It also offers a baseline from which we can measure and evaluate our own course activity. The positive evaluation of the course overall and the generally high ratings of importance the students and alumni assigned to many of the specific writing and speaking skills assessed in this study provide one kind of evidence supporting the claim that the basic communication course offered at the University of Iowa satisfies the students' perceived communication needs.

Obviously, students need the skills which have been identified by experienced faculty as those necessary to help them succeed in their academic coursework. However, they also need communication skills which will carry over after graduation to ensure success in their chosen professions. Through research, including the studies reported in this paper

and by undertaking their own surveys such as this investigation, departments can identify where current lapses exist between those skills taught in the basic communication course and those which students and alumni consider to be important for satisfying their communication needs. It is likely the ratings given for the perceived appropriateness of the communication skills taught in the basic course would improve if the faculty enhanced the course curriculum to reflect the suggestions noted in their own surveys. Although the ideal situations would allow for all of the necessary and requested skills to be addressed, it is an extremely optimistic assumption. The basic course at many institutions is only one term in length for the majority of students and not all the skills can be taught to a mastery level. Fortunately, there are usually other, more specific and more advanced communication courses offered which take up where the basic course leaves off. Also, at many institutions the students' other general education courses are required to provide additional opportunities for students to develop their writing and speaking skills.

## **FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Studies of this nature ought to be conducted by more institutions offering a basic communication course. Not only would the information allow departments to determine whether their particular course meets the communication needs of their students, but it could also provide a data base from which to identify similarities and differences in students' communication needs across institutions. For those who do undertake such a study, it is recommended information be obtained to understand why the discrepancies occur between what instructors think are important skills and those identified as important by students and alumni. For example,

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it could be that instructors presume skills such as grammar, mechanics, and interpersonal skills are already mastered by the time students enter college and this is reflected in their ratings. If these assumptions are true, then perhaps future research ought to analyze the instruction of secondary schools and determine why this necessitates the basic course act as a school correction program.

The student and alumni perceptions ought to be critical to decisions the faculty make about the emphases, various rhetorical concepts, and practices received within the basic course. It is apparent the faculty of the basic course are concerned with the content and structure of the course as evidenced by the SCA surveys published every four years. What is not apparent in the literature is whether the faculty are equally concerned with identifying and satisfying the students' communication needs. In order to accurately meet the communication needs of the students we must first know the nature of those needs. This investigation reflects an attempt to identify legitimate student needs in order to build a curriculum which not only reflects the beliefs of the basic course director, but also satisfies the students' communication needs and prepares them for the "skilled presentation of ideas in a competitive society" (Gibson, *et al.*, IV, 290).

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