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Karen Kangas Dwyer
University of Nebraska - Omaha

Robert E. Carlson
University of Nebraska - Omaha

Jennifer Dalbey
University of Nebraska - Omaha

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Impact of High School Preparation on College Oral Communication Apprehension

Karen Kangas Dwyer
Robert E. Carlson
Jennifer Dalbey

Oral communication skills are needed at all levels of the workplace, from interviewing for a job, leading a training session for employees, to communicating with co-workers and supervisors. Academically, many colleges now require speech communication within their core curriculum, so their students become proficient in public speaking fundamentals (NCA, 1998b).

However, the education and training used to refine public speaking skills are not always intertwined with high school curriculum in preparation for college. Without communication skills training, communication apprehension (CA), "the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78)", may be high upon entering a college classroom and even influence a student's decision and ability to complete a college degree (Ericson & Gardener, 1992; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989). Unfortunately, the communication fears students experience may never be addressed before college because often students are not offered classes or experiences in which public speaking skills and practice are required.

If communication skills and communication anxiety are not addressed in secondary education, the negative
impact of CA can influence a student’s life, possibly forever. Those who continue to report high CA often will leave college, drop specific college courses, receive lower grades, become less motivated, and receive fewer job opportunities, interviews and promotions (Daly & Leth, 1976; Disalvo, 1980; Ericson & Gardner, 1992; Frymier, 1993; McCroskey, et al., 1989; Monroe, Borzi, & Burrell, 1992; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998; Richmond, McCroskey & Davis, 1982). Consequently, it seems important to help students decrease CA levels in their secondary education.

The purpose of this study is to query the relationship between student CA levels and high school speech preparation and public speaking experiences. Although past research has maintained that there is a connection between success in college and CA levels (McCroskey, et al., 1989; Monroe et al., 1992), few studies, if any, have focused on high school courses, high school public speaking experiences, and CA levels of students as they enter college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public speaking and effective interpersonal communication in the workforce are essentials for career advancement and success in the business arena. Associations such as the National Communication Association (NCA) and the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) have created taskforces for researching how to further speaking and listening skills because of their importance in academic settings and in the workplace (NCA, 1998a).

The NCA suggests, “...educational programs for all students should be developed that enhance self-esteem, assure equal op-
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portunity for career development, and offer exploratory experiences in a variety of careers” (Bresler, 1998, p. 31). Employers in business and industry insist that those they hire understand communication processes and are skilled in oral communication (Sprague, 1996).

Today, communication and teaching organizations support the need for communication skills training (Lewis & Schaps, 1995). Public speaking instruction and practice throughout a student’s elementary, secondary and post-secondary education help to define and refine the student’s knowledge and ability to speak publicly. However, in order to be competent in public speaking, students need the opportunity to learn the skills and to overcome their anxiety about public speaking.

Communication Apprehension. Between 15 and 20 percent of college students report an overall or traitlike CA, “a relatively enduring personality-type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts” (i.e., public speaking, meetings, group discussions, and interpersonal conversations) (McCroskey, 1997, p. 85). In addition, over 70% of individuals report an anxiety associated with communication in the public speaking context (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998).

The problem with experiencing CA is that it can lead to communication avoidance and can negatively impact every aspect of a person’s life—school, work, and friendships (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Those who experience high CA (HCAs) are more likely to drop out their senior year of high school than those reporting lower CA (LCAs). Even though socioeconomic factors are predominant, CA scores tend to account for 26 percent of the variance in students’ decisions to leave before high school graduation (Monroe et al., 1992). In addition, CA has been “a significant factor associated with a high school graduate’s decisions about postsecondary education”
HCAs are less likely to enroll in college than LCAs. Several studies have shown that CA is related to both college retention and academic achievement. HCAs often drop a college class with oral communication requirements, even if it is a required course, and HCAs “who remain in courses with high communication requirements are likely to be absent on days when they are scheduled for presentations” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998, p. 62). When relationships between college students’ motivation to study and their CA levels were examined, HCAs tended to report less success in the classroom and decreased motivation (Frymier, 1993).

When it comes to cognitive achievement, significant negative relationships between CA and cognitive performance are consistently reported (Bourhis and Allen, 1992). HCAs tend to suffer lower overall grade-point averages (GPAs) and evaluations (McCroskey, 1977; Powers & Smythe, 1980; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Data from two, four-year longitudinal studies show that HCAs are significantly more likely to drop out of college when compared to LCAs, and HCAs tend “to drop out significantly more after only one year” (Ericson & Gardner, 1992, p. 127). Another study of undergraduate college students reports that HCAs who did not overcome their CA in the first two years of college also were likely to drop out of college (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989).

HCAs report less self-esteem and less self-efficacy (Dwyer & Fus, 1999; McCroskey & Richmond, 1975). They tend to report more reticence, less willingness to communicate, higher levels of shyness, and more audience anxiety when compared to LCAs (Burgoon, 1976;
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In the work environment, HCAs tend to report fewer employment interviews; fewer job offers and fewer promotions than LCAs (Daly & Leth, 1976; Disalvo, 1980; McCroskey & Leppard, 1975; Richmond, 1998; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998; Richmond, McCroskey & Davis, 1982). Overall, HCAs report more job dissatisfaction and greater likelihood of getting fired or quitting (Richmond, 1998).

Communication Skills Training in High School. One way to help HCAs overcome the debilitating anxiety is through communication skills training that teaches specific preparation and delivery skills (Freemouw & Zitter, 1978; Fawcett & Miller, 1975, Rancer, 1993). As accrediting institutions and assessment processes are holding academic programs more accountable for retaining students, as well as preparing them with specific employable skills, communication skills acquisition often comes into focus. Since communication experiences in high school predict college GPAs (Powell & Collier, 1990), prime consideration should be given on how to strengthen oral communication skills. Communication skills training should start at the elementary and secondary levels (NCA, 1998c) because of its relationship to prediction of college success.

The National Communication Association (NCA) has recommended competency statements for speaking, listening, and media literacy at the high school level. The document “Standards for Speaking, Listening and Media Literacy in K-12 Education” outlines four categories of essential communications skills to be covered in elementary and secondary education including: 1) the fundamentals of effective communication (e.g., understanding of the components of the communication process, knowledge of the role of communication in relationships, sensitivity to diversity
and ethical issues, and appropriate and effective communication strategies to resolve conflict); 2) speaking (e.g., understanding the speaking process, ability to adapt communication strategies appropriately, and use language that clarifies, persuades, and/or inspires while respecting differences in listeners' background); 3) listening (e.g., understanding the listening process, ability to use appropriate and effective listening skills, and manage barriers to listening); and 4) media literacy (e.g., knowledge of the ways people use media in both social and cultural contexts, the complex relationship among audience and media content, and the use of that media to communicate to a specific audience) (NCA, 1998c). Based upon the suggested competencies, communication skills training should play a major role in preparing students for post-secondary education and career success. However, public speaking or oral communication classes are often not part of the required curriculum at many high schools (Hall, Morreale & Gaudino, 1999).

High School Curriculum. Curriculum has been deemed organizational bound, meaning individual schools and school districts often adopt their own specific curriculum guidelines. This organizational-bound curriculum is a primary influence on the learning that may or may not occur in high school (Lee, 1993).

Proper curriculum tracking (core requirements for a designated emphasis) can predict how well a student will be prepared for post-secondary school or a career (Lee & Bryk, 1988; Lee, 1993; McKenna, 1994). Course tracking and track placement are the best predictors of academic achievement. This tracking is a better predictor of academic achievement then either attitudes, behavior or student backgrounds. Students who have taken more academically inclined courses such as math, foreign language, English, science, and social studies demonstrate increased learning (Lee, 1993). High school tracking tendencies are usually geared toward broad categories of learning subjects including
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math, social studies, science, and civics (Jenks & Brown, 1975; Jenks, 1985). However, speech communication training often is not part of high school tracks (Hall et al., 1999).

Business, industry and labor are very concerned that high school graduates are prepared for work, in terms of basic skills or ability to solve problems and learn on the job. In 1991, the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCAN) began defining competencies high school graduates need in order to meet the changing demands of the workplace (McKenna, 1994). Oral communication, one such skill, is considered one of the most important skills needed in the workplace (Garary & Bernhardt, 1998). Therefore, it would seem essential for secondary schools to equip students with this needed skill.

Currently studies in high-school curriculum regarding oral communication have been conducted on a state level (Chesebro & Gaudino, 1991). In 1981, oral communication was required by only 26 states as a part of a language arts curriculum (Book & Pappas, 1981). In 1994, a national curriculum survey of K-12, found eleven states had no standard for speaking and listening skills; one state had intentions of developing a standard, three states said they were currently working on their ability to assess such skills, and 21 states had begun inclusion of these skills into curriculum (Litterst, VanRheenen & Casmir, 1994).

Although the majority of states do require some training in language arts, students in 35 percent of the states are at risk of receiving none. In a 1999 survey, only 65 percent of states required communication as part of the language arts program (Hall et al., 1999). Out of the 43 state respondents, only 20 states reported standards for communication competence were required for high school graduation (Hall et al., 1999).

Since organizations call for strong communication skills for employees and most universities expect students to be equipped with the communication skills that college-level courses require,
it is important for students to receive oral communication skills training. Though both the workforce and post-secondary educational institutions have called for communication skill acquisition, communication curriculum is not always required in high schools today. In order to help reduce the CA levels students experience upon entering the workforce or a post-secondary educational institute, public speaking competencies should be an important prerequisite for high school graduation.

This study seeks to determine if there is a connection between students' reported high school oral communication training, public speaking experiences, and CA levels upon enrolling in a college introductory public speaking course. Although previous studies have examined the relationship between CA and student performance measured through a student's final grade (e.g., Dwyer & Fus, 1999), few, if any have investigated relationships among the speaking experiences of students, their high school speech preparation, and CA levels. Based on research showing the negative impact of CA on academic and career success and the NCA call for fulfillment of oral communication competencies in secondary education, the following research questions were proposed.

RQ1: Is there a significant difference between students who have taken a speech course in high school and those who have not, in students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference between students who have learned public speaking skills in a high

1 Learned public speaking skills are defined for this study as follows: Learned public speaking skills include communication skills, which provide the respondents with the tools necessary to speak in
school course other than a speech course and those who have not, in students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

RQ3: Is there a significant difference between students who learned public speaking skills in settings or clubs outside of high school courses and those who have not, in students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

RQ4: Are there significant correlations between the students' self-reported number of speeches\(^2\) given in a school setting, and the students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

RQ5: Are there significant correlations between the students' self-reported number of speeches given in settings outside of school, and the students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

public competently. Because of the self-reported nature of the study the perception of what public speaking skills the respondents include may vary (i.e., outlining and formatting, voice inflections, animation, listening skills, audience inclusion methods, delivery, etc.).

\(^2\) Public speaking/speeches is/are defined for this study as follows: Public speaking/speech is the experience/s of the respondents strategically presenting information to a group of gathered listeners. For the purpose of this study, public speaking and speech/speeches are used interchangeably. Because of the self-reported nature of the study, the perception of what event the respondents consider to be a public speech may vary (i.e., formal presentation to a class or organization, presentation to co-workers, an informal toast at a wedding, a campaign address for a class-representative election, etc.).
RQ6: Are there significant correlations between the students' self-reported total number of speeches given, and the students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels?

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were administered during regular class time in the first week of the Fall 2000 semester at a large midwestern state university. The data was collected as part of communication department information and no student's name or social security number was reported in the study. Respondents for the study were 705 undergraduate students (54.5% female, 39.4% male, 6.1% not reported) enrolled in 30 sections of a fundamentals of public speaking course that satisfies a university-wide, oral-communication general education requirement. These sections were chosen based on instructors' willingness to participate. The sample represents approximately two-thirds of students enrolled in this course during the fall session. Respondent's age ranged from 17 to 44 with a mean of 19.7 years.

Measurement. Student information regarding past speaking experience and skills acquisition was gathered using a student demographic information survey specifically including: 1) Did you take a speech course in high school? 2) Did you learn public speaking skills in any other high school course? 3) Did you learn public speaking skills in any other setting or club? 4) How many formal public speeches have you given in a school
setting? 5) How many formal public speeches have you given in any other setting (work, club, etc.)?

CA was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 1982). This 24-item scale assesses overall communication anxiety across four contexts, as well as anxiety in each of four contexts (groups, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking). The questionnaire has demonstrated excellent reliability, validity and predictability in CA research (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). For this investigation, we used only the overall PRCA-24 scores and the public speaking context scores because the purpose of the study focused on high school public speaking skills training and experiences related to the college public speaking course and overall communication apprehension. The obtained reliability coefficients (Cronbach Alpha) for the scales used in this study were .95 for the overall CA measure and .88 for the public speaking context measure.

**RESULTS**

Research Question One asked if there is a significant difference between students who have taken a speech course in high school and those who have not, in reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Overall CA scores ranged from 24 to 116. The obtained mean scores were 62.6 (SD=16.4) for the overall CA level and 19.5 (SD=5.2) for the public speaking context level. Of the respondents, 49.5 percent reported taking a speech course in high school and 40.6 percent reported not taking a speech course (9.9 percent
not reported). Group t-tests showed significant differences between groups for overall CA ($t=-1.7$, $p=.04$) and public speaking CA ($t=-3.2$, $p<.01$) (see Table I). Those students who took a speech course in high school reported lower overall CA and public speaking context CA than those who did not take a speech course in high school.

Research Question Two asked if there is a significant difference between students who have learned public speaking skills in a high school course other than a speech course and those who have not, in reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Of the respondents, 50.8 percent reported learning public speaking skills in courses other than speech courses and 41.0 percent reported not learning public speaking skills (8.2 percent not reported). Group t-tests showed significant differences between groups for both overall CA ($t=-4.0$, $p<.001$) and public speaking CA ($t=-3.1$, $p<.001$) (see Table II). Thus, those students who stated they learned public speaking skills in high schools other than speech courses showed significantly lower overall and public speaking context CA levels than those who did not.

Research Question Three asked if there is significant difference between students who have learned public speaking skills in settings or clubs outside of high school courses and those who have not, in students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Of the respondents, 28.2 percent reported learning public speaking skills in other settings and clubs and 62.7 percent reported not learning public speaking skills in other settings or clubs (8.9 percent not reported). Group t-tests showed significant differ-
### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question One: t-test</th>
<th>Speech Course Taken in High School and CA Levels</th>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>Speech Course in H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 624</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 281</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig (1-tailed)</td>
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</tr>
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### Table II

Research Question Two: t-test
Public Speaking Skills Learned in High School and CA Levels

<table>
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<th>PRC Measurement</th>
<th>RQ2 P.S. Skills in H.S.</th>
<th>N (N=635)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig (1-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Overall CA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>281</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Speaking CA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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### Table III
Research Question Three: t-test
Public Speaking Skills Learned in Other Settings or Clubs and CA Levels

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<th>PRC Measurement</th>
<th>RQ2 P.S. Skills in H.S.</th>
<th>N (N=628)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig (1-tailed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall CA</td>
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<td>194</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>64.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Speaking CA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
ences between groups for both overall CA (t=-5.0, p<.001) and public speaking CA (t=-5.3, p<.001) (See Table III). Thus, those students who stated they learned public speaking skills in other setting or clubs showed significantly lower overall and public speaking context CA levels that those who did not.

Research Question Four asked if there are significant correlations between the students' self-reported number of speeches given in a school setting, and reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Of the respondents, 75.7 percent of students reported giving 0 to 10 speeches in a school setting, 10.1 percent reported giving between 11 to 20 speeches, and 2.6 percent reported giving 21 or more speeches (11.6 percent not reported). A Spearman rho analysis showed a significant relationship between self-reported number of speeches given in a school setting and overall CA levels (rho = -.16, p<.001) and self-reported number of speeches given in a school setting and public speaking context CA levels (rho = -.13, p<.01). Thus, students' overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels were inversely related to the reported number of speeches given in a school setting; the more speeches given, the lower the overall and public speaking CA levels.

Research Question Five asked if there are significant correlations between the students' self-reported number of speeches given in settings outside of school, and the students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Of the respondents, 80.0 percent of students reported giving 0 to 10 speeches in a setting other than school, 2.1 percent reported giving between 11 to 20 speeches, and .9 percent reported
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giving 21 or more speeches (17.0 percent not reported). The Spearman rho analysis showed a significant relationship between self reported number of speeches given outside of the school setting and overall CA levels (rho = -.19, p<.001) and self reported number of speeches given outside of the school setting and public speaking context CA levels (rho = -.23, p<.001). Thus, students' overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels were inversely related to the reported number of speeches given outside of the school setting; the more speeches given, the lower the overall and public speaking CA levels.

Research Question Six asked if there are significant correlations between the students' self-reported total number of speeches given, and the students' reported initial overall CA levels and public speaking context CA levels? Of the respondents, 61.7 percent of students reported giving 0 to 10 speeches total, 12.1 reported giving between 11 to 20 speeches, and 7.7 reported giving 21 or more speeches (18.5 percent not reported). A Spearman rho analysis showed a significant relationship between self reported number of total speeches given and overall CA levels (rho = -.20, p<.001) and self reported number of total speeches given and public speaking context CA levels (rho = -.20, p<.001). Thus, the more speeches students reported giving, the lower the overall and public speaking CA levels they tended to report.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine if high school speech preparation and other public speaking ex-
Experiences are related to CA levels college students report upon beginning a college-level public speaking course. The results show that when students who took a high school speech course were compared to those who did not, there was a significant difference in reported overall and public speaking context CA levels. In addition, when students who reported learning public speaking skills in any high school course were compared to those who reported they did not learn public speaking skills in any course, there was a significant difference in their overall and public speaking context CA levels. In other words, when students reported learning public speaking skills in high school (e.g., in speech, English, or business classes) their CA levels decreased. This finding reinforces previous research that has shown communication skills training even within other coursework is related to decreased public speaking anxiety levels (Fremouw & Zitter, 1978; McCroskey, 1982).

Within the last decade, national surveys have found that less than 50 percent of the states incorporate communication skill acquisition into state standards (Backlund, Brown, Gurry & Jandt, 1992; Litterst, Van-Rheenen & Casmir, 1994) while 65% at least require oral communication as part of the language arts curriculum (Hall et al., 1999). Some high schools do integrate the NCA’s standards for speaking, delivery skills, audience inclusion, listening and media literacy for K-12 (NCA, 1998c) not only in public speaking courses, but also in curriculum-wide courses. The NCA standards include four categories of communication competencies that high schools are asked to integrate into their skill acquisition base as part of their curriculum (NCA, 1998c): 1) a demonstration of knowledge and...
understanding of communication; 2) a demonstration of competent speaking techniques; 3) a demonstration of competent listening abilities; and 4) a demonstration of media literacy. This study reinforces the importance of teaching oral communication skills training and including these standards across high school curriculum.

This investigation also found a significant (although modest) relationship between the reported numbers of speeches given and reported CA levels. The more speeches students reported presenting in high school or outside the high school doors, the less overall CA and public speaking context CA they tended to report. Participation and practice in public speaking help students gain speaking confidence (Lee, 1993). Thus, practicing public speaking skills through an increased number of speaking events in high school seems to be related to decreased student CA levels.

Communicator skills training and opportunities to practice public speaking should play a major role in preparing students for life after high school (Lewis & Schaps, 1995). Thus, one important suggestion based on the results of this study is that NCA's communication competencies should be integrated into a curriculum-wide high school philosophy, prioritizing the acquisition of communication skills within each course of a student's curriculum track. The acquisition of these skills may help students make the decision to further their education and stay in college because of decreased CA levels (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; Frymier, 1993; McCroskey et al., 1989; Monroe et al., 1992). In addition, a curriculum-wide oral communication philosophy could help students who need communication skills go directly and successfully into the workforce after

This present study's findings have implications for basic course instructors and directors. Instructors will continue to be faced with teaching students who have a wide range of public speaking skills training and experiences. Consequently, pre-course assessment of communication skills may be essential to accurately determine progress during the course. It is also essential for making decisions about teaching strategies and adjusting them for a particular group of students. In addition, basic course directors need to consider and assess pre-college public speaking experience in order to accurately report the assessment of college basic course effectiveness.

Certain factors limit the interpretation of the results of this investigation. This study was based on records from one communication department at one university from a single semester of courses. Thus, research should continue to query the impact of high school preparation and experiences on college CA levels to provide more generalizations.

Future research needs to include the non-college-bound population because college students were the only participants in this study. Consequently, the students who did not go to college were not represented. Since this study reinforces the importance of high school public speaking skills acquisition, future research should query high school public skills-based training — both the curriculum and the communication skills taught throughout the curriculum— and whether students chose those public speaking experiences and courses or were forced to take them. Investigation
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should be conducted on whether types and amounts of high school public speaking skills training have any relationship to students' change in CA level from the beginning to the end of a college public speaking course.

Future study should investigate how public speaking skills are taught within extracurricular activities in both urban and rural settings. In addition, future investigation should examine the curriculum requirements for public speaking skills at the state levels, as well as at the district and local school levels to find out why public speaking is not part of all curriculum tracks.

Finally, this study strengthens the support for public speaking skills training at the high school level. Learning public speaking skills and using them seems to be related to decreased communication anxiety speakers report when faced with new speaking experiences. As we have long surmised, the more speaking experiences and skills training students report, the more confidence and less CA they report and the more likely they are to succeed academically, socially and vocationally.

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