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## Directing the Winds of Change: The Basic Course and General Education

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## **Directing the Winds of Change: The Basic Course and General Education**

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*Joseph M. Valenzano III*

“Since changes are going on anyway, the great thing is to learn enough about them so that we will be able to lay hold of them and turn them in the direction of our desires. Conditions and events are neither to be fled from nor passively acquiesced in; they are to be utilized and directed.” – John Dewey

These words, spoken by American education reformer John Dewey near the turn of the twentieth century, remain relevant today—specifically for Basic Course Directorss (BCD). Change is a constant in higher education, sometimes moving at a rapid pace, other times at a more glacial rate. In the past such changes have been a boon for Communication departments, resulting in the addition of the basic course to general education requirements. Now, however, forces of change in general education threaten to remove the basic course from the list of required or recommended courses on several campuses—that is, unless, as Dewey advises, departments become proactive and “lay hold of” the forces of change.

The basic course provides the curricular and financial foundation of Communication departments across the country, and if removed from the list of required courses could decimate a unit. This is why BCDs must

educate themselves on the shifting focus of general education taking place within the American Association of Colleges and University (AACU), and relevant accrediting bodies. Then, to maintain the place of communication education in the curriculum for their students, they need to adapt their courses in a way that responds to the new interdisciplinary outcomes-based direction of general education.

In this essay I will argue that changing the approach to designing the foundational communication course is necessary to better secure the place of the basic course in general education at any institution. To make this case I first demonstrate how tenuous placement in general education can be by briefly describing the history of the structure of general education programs and detailing how it is changing today. I then explain how the basic course's current configuration in many cases continues to leave it vulnerable to elimination or reduction within general education programs. Finally, I propose a way for BCDs to pivot their class designs in such a way that not only preserves the place of the basic course in the undergraduate curriculum, but creates a stronger course that is less likely to be threatened in the future.

## **GENERAL EDUCATION: A PRIMER**

In order to appreciate the gravity of the situation facing undergraduate education it is essential to understand the fluid history and current context of general education programs in higher education. In this section I provide a brief history of the ever-changing structure of higher education. I will then explain what the AACU

and other accrediting bodies across the country are asking institutions to move their general education programs towards today.

### ***A Brief History of General Education***

The history of general education is the story of managing curricular tensions within America's colleges and universities. The first tension is definitional, whereby general education is often conflated with liberal education. This is the "depth versus breadth argument" that is all too common even today. The second involves curricular choice and required courses. It is the most prevalent, and has resulted in several significant adjustments to the undergraduate experience since the nineteenth century. Then there is the friction between what the government and higher education institutions see as the purpose of higher education: skills versus knowledge. Finally, on campuses everywhere we find the fight between disciplinary and departmental interests, and the desire for an interdisciplinary foundation in a student's education. To understand the myriad dimensions of the debate over general education it is important to understand its definition and history.

General education is often conflated with liberal education when, in fact, they are different aspects of a curriculum. Liberal education involves the pursuit of "knowledge for its own sake," while general education refers to curricula designed to help students do things, such as think critically and behave ethically (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, pp. 342-343). These are not mutually exclusive, per se, and in fact what we now refer to as a university or college's general education program com-

bines both the knowledge component of a liberal education and the practical dimensions of general education so that “undergraduates should acquire an ample store of knowledge, both in depth, by concentrating on a particular field, and in breadth, by devoting attention to several different disciplines. They should gain the ability to communicate with precision and style, a basic competence in quantitative skills...and a capacity to think clearly and critically.” (Bok, 1986, p. 54). General education, as Cohen and Brawer (1996) argue in the case of community colleges, is necessary to ensure that all students receive both knowledge and skills in their education. Thus, today, general education involves educating students about the broad concerns of multiple disciplines while training them in the theories and practices of one area of specialty. This model, however, is a recent phenomenon in higher education and although common, is delivered within various different structures on campuses across the country.

Higher education did not always subscribe to the major/concentration area model of curriculum delivery. In fact, Harvard University initially required a set curriculum for all students. This set curriculum was not general education, but rather the education every student received—there were no majors (Boning, 2007). In 1828 a document known as the Yale Report first raised the specter of curricular reform by opening a debate over the true purpose of higher education, calling upon university education to focus on developing the minds of students (Bourke, Bray & Horton, 2009). This report proved a bit before its time, because it was not until the presidency of Charles Eliot in 1869 that Harvard reformed the undergraduate experience by creating an in-

dividualized elective system for every student, thus resulting in a broader range of course offerings available to students (Miller, 1988). It exponentially and irrevocably increased the influence and importance of academic departments on college campuses (Wehlburg, 2010).

The focus on mental development in the Yale Report and Harvard curricular changes were not the only events during the nineteenth century that indelibly left their mark on general education. The government passed one of the single most important pieces of legislation, the Morrill Land-Grant Act, in 1862. This law provided funding for each state to establish at least one institution of higher learning devoted to the development of skills and knowledge in agriculture and mechanics (Wehlburg, 2010). This federally-backed focus seemingly ran counter to the development of the mind sought in places such as Harvard and Yale. With this act, the government promoted education aimed at supporting industry, but it also opened the doors of higher education to a larger segment of the population. The Morrill Land-Grant Act thus initiated a debate over whether education should equip students with, as Martin Luther King, Jr. would later state in his commencement address to Morehouse College in 1948, “noble ends, rather than means to an end.” The end result of both this piece of federal legislation and the internal machinations of schools such as Harvard and Yale was the gradual elimination of a coherent undergraduate education in American colleges and universities, and a focus on advancing knowledge in a number of specific disciplines (Gaff, 1983).

A desire for a stronger curriculum led to several general education reform movements throughout the twentieth century. The first to note took place at Harvard under the direction of Eliot's successor, Abbott Lawrence Lowell. Lowell dismantled his forebear's elective structure in favor of a distribution model of undergraduate education. Students now could not select whatever courses they wished to study, and instead were required to take foundation courses in biology, physical sciences, social sciences and humanities so that there was a general experience for all students (Thomas, 1962). This model became quite popular due to its common curriculum that still preserved some degree of choice for students, and many other institutions across the country emulated the approach in principle (Cohen, 1988). As more and more schools adopted a general education program that provided information relevant to all students, the format and content of the model began to vary. General education reform thus took the form of a reaction to the overspecialization of the elective system by redeploying an integrated approach to general education through the departmental model (Wehlburg, 2010).

Efforts to begin formalizing a combination of the disciplinary structure of institutions and the desired integrated general education curriculum began again at Harvard in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1945 Harvard published a report entitled "General Education in a Free Society," which detailed a need for such a combination (as cited in Wehlburg, 2010, p. 6). Although the specific recommendations of the report were not adopted, the idea of protecting against students overspecializing in specific areas without understanding the integrated nature of knowledge fundamentally al-

tered general education. Since the publication of the Harvard report institutions have sought to balance the needs of what all students should know with the needs of education in specific disciplines through some form of the distribution model.

The tension between these two concepts that are central to the mission of higher education saw more tumult in the 1960s and 1970s. The government again burst the doors of access wide open with the Higher Education Act of 1965 which created scholarships and loans for students, and ultimately created a more diverse student body than ever before. As a result, students demanded a general education program that reflected their diversity and helped prepare them for the workplace (Gaff, 1983, Boning 2007, Wehlburg, 2010). This resulted in a smaller general education program, more discipline specific electives, and fewer interdisciplinary courses for students. Students and faculty made little effort to connect the general education courses all students took to the content within their specific domains of study. With the pendulum swinging back toward specialization—this time through a concerted effort of both students and faculty—the perception of general education as something to be “checked off” as having been completed grew.

The course based distribution model of general education ultimately came under fire in a report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1977). It called the state of general education a “disaster area” and argued it destroyed the integrity and value of an undergraduate degree. This report was not without its effects, as it sparked another wave of reform in higher education. Schools across the country changed



the structure and foci of their general education curriculum, but largely maintained some semblance of a distribution model. Between 1977 and the turn of the twenty-first century, general education remained a slave to the ideas of the elective and distribution models, and sought to balance the teaching of knowledge with the training in skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. Change took the form of adding new classes and distribution areas to the general education curriculum, rather than examining and adjusting the existing problematic model (Brint, et al, 2009).

In recent years, however, educational associations such as the AACU and national accreditation agencies have sought to remedy this reliance by shifting the focus from what students do while they are in school, to what they can do when they finish it. In the next section, I detail the current efforts of general education reform to better explain how BCDs can seize control of reforming their own courses, for the purpose of better positioning them as part of general education in the future.

### ***Reforming General Education in the Twenty-First Century***

Reforming general education seems to be a constant effort on college and university campuses across the country. In fact, according to a 2009 report by Hart Research Associates commissioned by the AACU, 89% of member institutions were “in some stage of assessing and modifying their general education program” (p. 2). Additionally, of that number, 56% also indicated that general education had become a priority for their institution, but half also indicated their programs did not integrate well with major areas of study (Hart Research

Associates, 2009). In effect, for the majority of institutions, general education had evolved into something separate from a student's educational experience—a checklist of sorts that had little to no relevance to their college education.

What makes this data even more shocking is that in 1994 the AACU examined member institution general education requirements and found something similar. They determined that the loose distribution model of general education resulted in three specific problems, all detrimental to a student's education: 1) general education curricula lacked any type of organizing philosophy that students could understand, thus encouraging them to see general education as distinct from their major experience; 2) curricula were fragmented, and even within general education there was no connection between courses students were required to take; and 3) students did not see a valid reason for studying general education content, and thus lacked motivation to learn core concepts within the liberal arts (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 1994). In short, general education was neither general, nor seen as education, and as the Hart Report later indicated, little had changed to remedy these issues in fifteen years.

Despite the arthritically slow response to the calls for general education reform since the late 1970's, there has been some effort to repair the undergraduate educational experience. AACU recently launched the "Liberal Education and America's Promise" (LEAP) initiative to create systemic change in the nation's educational infrastructure. Through the program AACU partners with educators of every level to encourage the inclusion of four components to curricula at every level: assessment,

high impact learning practices, essential learning outcomes and inclusive excellence. In its short existence the program has compiled resources to defend the importance of liberal education and general education from economic, civic and democratic standpoints (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2002).

In addition to the LEAP initiative, the AACU has also encouraged institutions to change their approach to general education from one grounded in the distribution model, to a form that focuses on achieving outcomes. This model does not require courses, per se, but student achievement of core competencies through assessing a variety of educational experiences both within and outside the major area of study. An example of such a program can be found at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. There, general education moved from a convoluted hard to follow distribution model to a core “centered around student achievement of ten distinct learning outcomes” and a commitment “to assessing student achievement of the outcomes” (Fuess, Jr. & Mitchell, 2011, p. 6). The program, now called “Achievement Centered Education (ACE),” “provides students with opportunities to develop and apply relevant skills, knowledge and social responsibilities regardless of their majors or career plans (Fuess, Jr. & Mitchell, 2011, p. 6). Students must pass an ACE-certified course for each outcome, but multiple courses can fulfill specific outcomes, thus essentially doing away with the traditional required course model for general education.

The changes at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are instructive. They embody the type of systemic change the AACU and accrediting bodies across the country are looking for because the curriculum is guided

by student learning outcomes, something now required by all regional accreditors (Wehlburg, 2010). Their transparent approach eliminated confusion regarding the new general education program, and illustrates that “by detailing their approaches to general education institutions leave little room for guesswork on the part of students or faculty” (Bourke, et al, 2009, p. 234.). Their dynamic attempt to integrate general education into majors creates the possibility for “a new and better understanding of the undergraduate educational experience” (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 10) for students and faculty. The hope of such systemic change at all institutions, as Wehlburg puts it, is establishing “a coherent educational program that combines all of a student’s educational experiences [that] might increase retention and overall learning” (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 10). The drive toward outcomes-based general education programs represents a significant change from the near 175-year tradition of elective and distribution models, and if BCDs do not design their courses with this approach in mind, they may lose their status as a central component of general education at their institution.

### ***General Education: Summary***

The history of general education is one colored by constant change, and today we see the latest iteration of that change. What makes this reform movement different, however, is the shift away from a focus on specific courses and departments toward an outcomes-driven interdisciplinary undergraduate experience. Such a move spells significant change for the way departments, communication included, deliver their major and participate in campus wide curricular endeavors. In the

next section of this essay I explain why it is essential for communication departments and BCDs to remain committed to involvement with their institution's general education programs.

## **THE BASIC COURSE AND GENERAL EDUCATION**

The basic course in communication mirrors general education in several ways. It is an animal that has evolved over time, and is integrated into the undergraduate experience in different ways at different institutions. The attention communication scholars pay it in this regard demonstrates how significant the course is to the discipline. Additionally, much like general education, instruction in oral communication is also seen as essential by external constituencies both on and off campus. What the literature and the definition of the basic course must be attuned to, however, is that both employers and on-campus constituencies believe in the necessity of "oral communication" skills for students, but they do not say what that means, nor do they stipulate it must be provided by communication departments. These vagaries leave the basic course open to criticism and under threat. In this section of the essay I detail the laudable and extensive study devoted to the basic course and demonstrate how it shows the vital nature of the course to departments and the discipline at large. I also illustrate how the demands of external constituencies, although on the surface seemingly endorsements of the basic course, contain a potential threat to the place of the course in undergraduate education. As such, I argue the course must adapt itself to the interdisciplinary outcome-centered nature of general

education reform, or risk losing its position in a student's education.

The basic course is a central component to most communication departments across the country, so much so that there is an annual peer-reviewed journal (*The Basic Communication Course Annual*) devoted to examining the class in all its forms. Although the course itself has changed over the years, and even today is delivered in various different formats depending upon the make-up and needs of a particular institution, survey studies tracking those changes consistently appear in some the top journals of the field (i.e., Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Hanna & Huddleston, 1990; Morreale, Hanna, Berko & Gibson, 1999; Morreale, Hugenberg & Worley, 2006; Morreale, Worley & Hugenberg, 2010). The changes to the basic course tracked in these and other studies demonstrate the importance given the course by the discipline.

The expansive literature on the basic course shows support from members of the discipline for education in the skills and knowledge related to oral communication (i.e., Morreale, Osborn & Pearson, 2000; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Morreale, Worley & Hugenberg, 2010). Specifically, Morreale and Pearson (2008) argue for the centrality of communication instruction in the development of social, cultural and vocational skills in students. Hunt, Novak, Sendlak and Meyer (2005) also found that critical thinking skills increase in students who take the basic course, and a later study argued that the basic course is exactly where critical thinking instruction should take place (Mazer, Hunt & Kuznekoff, 2007). In fact, Morreale, Worley and Hugenberg provided a comprehensive examination of the shifting structure and

delivery models of the basic course across the country in their 2010 survey which appeared in *Communication Education*. There is no denying that the discipline pays a great deal of attention to the basic course, and recognizes its importance to the field and undergraduate students.

It is no secret why scholars and departments care about the basic course. As Dance (2002) noted, “in many ways the undergraduate course in basic public speaking is the discipline’s ‘bread and butter’ course” (p. 355). It bears noting that public speaking is not the only format of the basic communication course, but regardless of its focus, the basic course is central to the communication discipline. The course serves several important functions that make this designation apt. First, it serves as the gateway to the discipline for students who may not be familiar with it, thus assisting in the recruitment of students to the major. Second, it serves as the most significant revenue producer for departments, allowing for additional resource allocations to be made to the unit. Third, it provides justification for continuing support of adjunct faculty and graduate programs to handle the significant teaching responsibilities associated with such a large enrollment course, which in turn allows full-time faculty to teach more specialized courses, advise graduate students and conduct research. The financial and recruiting windfall the course generates is yet another reason why the basic course is the lifeblood of the discipline.

The level of student demand for the course is often reliant on its inclusion in general education. For instance, Engleberg, Emanuel, Van Horn and Bodary (2008) found that 83% of two-year institutions require

at least one communication course for completion of general education requirements. Additionally, Morreale, Worley and Hugenberg (2010) found that 55.3% of four-year institutions reported the course was part of general education. This represents a significant number of students who travel through the department, often during their first or second year. In fact, as Deborah Craig has noted, "few departments on campus can boast a core course that is required of every student entering the institution" (2006, p. 245). Such evidence supports the notion that the basic course is a central recruiting and revenue tool for departments, regardless of whether it is a two or four year institution. What is noticeably absent from these analyses, however, is the fact that the primacy of the basic course is driven by the distribution model of general education that the AACU is encouraging institutions to shift away from. A major question facing departments going forward is how to retain the basic course as the place students receive communication instruction when, under an outcome-centered general education model, other units can develop oral communication courses that would compete with the basic course for the same population of students thereby reducing demand in communication departments. The impact of such developments on resource allocation and maintenance of graduate programs could be catastrophic for some communication departments.

The attention the discipline pays to the assessment and academic study of the basic course, as well as the more practical purposes the course serves for departments across the country, indicates the high degree of importance the course holds for the discipline. The National Communication Association (NCA) also articu-



lated as much in 1996 when, in its *Policy Platform Statement on the Role of Communication Courses in General Education*, it endorsed efforts on every campus to include oral communication instruction in general education programs. Their endorsement, however, was for a required course as part of general education, and, as already illustrated, the model of required courses as part of a distribution in general education is gradually going away in favor of outcomes based undergraduate programs. That said, it is an attempt by NCA to leverage the skills associated with the discipline and the interests of external constituencies to generate a place for the basic course in general education.

The importance of oral communication is not simply recognized by those who study it for a living, but by many other groups as well. In fact, both the AACU and NCA often tout the demand for training in communication skills in college curricula. In their 2009 report, Hart Research Associates referenced a study from 2006 commissioned by AACU that surveyed business leaders and executives regarding on what they felt colleges and universities should focus their energy, and it found 73% of them sought more attention on communication skills. Other organizations such as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (2008-2009) echo the same desire. Crosling and Ward (2002) also used business surveys to argue for the inclusion of oral communication training in the education of business students. Even the national accrediting body for engineering includes effective communication skills in their desired goals for undergraduate students studying within their field (Kelly, 2008). Clearly, there is an external interest in the discipline and, specifically, the skills that the basic course

provides. However, given these surveys are recent and ask for more of an effort on training in communication skills it bears noting the implicit argument is that communication departments and their current iterations of the basic course seem to not be doing an adequate job, thus creating a potential threat to disciplinary ownership of training in communication skills. Additionally, these reports focus on oral communication, but fail to define what that means, perhaps contributing to the notion communication departments might be missing the mark in the focus of current versions of the basic course.

The threat to the basic course in these seemingly positive endorsements seems quite clear, but how can the discipline and departments address it? The answer lies in the both the reliance on the delivery of skills as the focus of the basic course, and the move away from the distribution model toward an outcome-driven undergraduate education. The skills focused basic course does not have much, if any, integration with the rest of a student's education, and now many departments are invited to develop courses that help fulfill a communication outcome for their students without having to have them take a course offered by the communication department. In fact, credit hour reduction movements at schools and in university systems across the country are forcing departments like business and engineering to look for places to trim general education credits, and oral communication is one place they have considered eliminating or reducing.

In actuality, this is not the first time the skills focus of the basic course has come under fire. Michael Leff, writing in 1992 upon taking up the role of BCD after

being away from the course for nearly twenty years, observed that the syllabi and structure of the basic public speaking course had not changed much since when he taught it in the 1970s. Additionally, Leff commented on how stagnant the basic course in communication was when compared to efforts to improve and update the basic course in English departments where, “in that precinct, the rhetorical revolution has made a firm imprint on the basic composition course. The venerable ‘product’ model and its accompanying typology of assignments (e.g., exposition, narration, argument) have receded and seem on the way to extinction” (p. 116). What Leff identified in his comparison of the evolution of the basic courses in Communication and English is only further magnified when one takes a cursory look at developments in English pedagogy.

English scholars have taken hold of the winds of curricular change and sought to adjust their basic course accordingly. To that end, they discuss how rhetorical education as conceived in their discipline is central in developing a whole education, one that “offers a bridge between worlds private and public, academic and civil” (Booth & Frisbie, 2004, p. 163.) English departments have sought to redefine the idea of the composition course as a service course by recasting it as connected with the whole education of students, rather than focusing on narrow instruction in grammar and composition (Lane, 2004). Such a shift represents a response to the move towards interdisciplinary integrated general education currently underway, and is helpful for communication departments who wish for their course to remain a relevant part of general education.

Due to the centrality of the basic course in growing the major, sustaining the department and educating students it is essential that BCDs stay ahead of the general education curve and integrate their courses more fully into their university's curriculum. This will help reduce the perception of the basic course as something not connected to their education, while also making the course more meaningful and attractive as an option for students to take in an outcomes-driven general education program. In the next section I will offer a way to adjust designing basic courses in a format neutral manner so that they more clearly connect with other aspects of a student's general education at any institution, while still highlighting parts of the communication discipline and preparing students for the beginning of their professional careers.

### ***“Re-imagining” the Basic Course***

There is no one standard basic course in communication, just as there is no one standard for general education, but that fact should not keep the two from being more directly and intentionally integrated. In fact, such integration will help preserve, and perhaps even enhance, the importance of communication instruction as a part of undergraduate general education. Integration is possible for any institution, regardless of the focus of their basic course. In fact the two dominant types of basic courses are, according to Morreale, Worley and Hugenberg (2010), public speaking and hybrid models as they account for 86.7% of the basic courses in the country. In this section I suggest a plan for “re-imagining” the basic course, regardless of its configuration, that will better integrate the basic course with general

education by focusing on the outcomes both campus and professional constituencies desire. This approach can transform the basic course into an outcomes-based course that serves the needs of students and universities. I also offer a brief example of what this course might look like after following this approach, as well as a discussion of possible challenges BCDs and departments might face in implementing such a change to the basic course.

### ***Out with the Old: Starting the Basic Course from Scratch***

One of the aspects of the history of general education reform that is instructive when beginning course reform is the responses of institutions following the Carnegie Report. Recall that in the decade following the harsh assessment of general education in that report institutions responded by simply adding new courses, essentially patching over the real problems rather than addressing the issues head on. This inevitably further exacerbated the problems with a disjointed and confusing general education program. The lesson here for course reform is to not simply change assignments or patch over the course, but to examine all aspects of the course at a critical, and even microscopic, level. This involves laying aside what a course currently does or what students do during the course (i.e. assignments), and focusing on what students should be able to do when they finish the course. The focus then becomes on skills that transcend contexts, rather than on developing and delivering context specific assignments or tasks. When students are taught to give a speech that's all they will know how to do, but if they are taught how to explain

then that is something they can do in multiple situations, not just in a formal speech.

The first step to creating an outcomes-based basic course lies in setting aside traditional conventions of the basic course. This means that the basic course no longer should be labeled a “public speaking” or “hybrid” course, but rather a foundations of oral communication course. In this vein the course can focus on students learning certain oral communication skills and abilities, rather than simply being able to deliver a specific speech for a class, present a group project or even regurgitate memorized vocabulary regarding interpersonal communication. Just as AACU is concerned with what students can do when they leave an institution, BCDs should be concerned with what students can do upon completing their course—and they must be open to the idea that what that is may not be what they have been traditionally training them to do in the course. When BCDs are open to rethinking the goals, student learning objectives and specific outcomes of the course only then can they begin to identify what those things are, and that necessarily involves outreach to constituent campus and professional units.

### ***Identifying Constituents’ Needs***

Earlier, I pointed out that both client departments across campus as well as professional organizations strongly desire communication skills training for university students, however they fail to clearly articulate the type of oral communication skills they want taught. Traditionally, BCDs and communication departments interpreted this to mean skill in either public speaking or small group communication. The main responses,

then, are apparent from the 86.7% of schools that focus their basic courses on one or both of these skills. In an effort to focus on multiple oral communication skills some communication departments moved their courses to hybrid models that cover a little bit of several types of communication. As I demonstrated earlier, the problem with both of these models is clear: both client departments and company executives feel students still need more training in these areas because they are still underprepared in terms of oral communication skills when they graduate. So, two questions must be addressed when re-imaging the basic course into an outcome-based experience: 1) what do companies mean when they say “oral communication”?; and, 2) what specific communication skills do client departments feel students need to learn and develop? The answer to these two questions should guide the creation of the student learning outcomes and goals for the basic course.

The communication needs of specific employers will vary depending upon the industry, but this does not mean the basic course should necessarily focus on a broad range of skills. Such an approach will water down the training students receive. Instead, there are two concrete ways to get a better idea as to what oral communication skills employers look for in students who graduate from a specific school. The first is to identify the primary employers who recruit students from your particular campus and engage them in a conversation about what exactly “oral communication” means to them. The second is to speak with alumni about the specific oral communication needs they had in the jobs they entered upon graduation.

Gathering employer data should not be too onerous a task for a BCD. Most institutions have Career Centers that track employers who recruit on campus. Working with them to make contacts at companies that actively try to hire graduates from an institution will help start conversations about the oral communication skills they seek in potential employees. In the event this is difficult, simply examine the employment needs of the community and state in which the institution resides. Look to see who in the community or state is hiring and what types of jobs they are hiring for. Contact their human resources department and ask what types of oral communication skills they seek in applicants. This information is useful when trying to determine what oral communication skills students should be able to demonstrate upon completing the basic course at your institution.

Engaging client departments and colleges on campus is an even easier task than contacting companies and prospective employers of students. It is in a BCDs best interest to reach out to ask faculty in Engineering, Business, Liberal Arts and Education divisions what they feel are the oral communication needs of their students. Ask them what they believe students need to know how to do that a basic course in communication can help provide. In the liberal arts, ask faculty what conceptual links can be made between other general education courses and the basic course in communication. This information will help you both serve the skills needs of students and faculty, as well as integrate the curriculum with the rest of a student's education.

In making these contacts and holding these conversations BCDs must be prepared to find out that what



they are currently doing in the basic course is not what client departments and prospective employers want. For instance, if the course is currently a public speaking course, faculty and employers may report that giving a professional presentation is not what they envision as an important oral communication skill; rather, they may feel students need to know how to listen better, or explain something complex in a short period of time. Public speaking in this situation may not be the best way to instruct students how to do these things. Then again, they might find out they are hitting the mark; nevertheless, the outreach is beneficial.

At this stage of the process it is important for BCDs to pay close attention to how they frame the questions they ask. For example, asking someone what their students' "public speaking needs" are encourages a specific understanding of the course that does not get at the skills and knowledge that should be the outcome of the course. Framing the query around what communication skills do your students need to learn or develop might prove more fruitful. So, before engaging in the interview, follow the rule of being prepared to ask questions that get the answers that will truly be helpful. Additionally, BCDs must avoid the trap of defending the current course design, and be open to change so it can best be understood and thus directed.

### ***An Outcomes Based Basic Course***

Once the oral communication needs of client departments and prospective employers are identified, BCDs can then design the course learning outcomes. These outcomes are called course goals by some, student learning objectives by others, but all invariably focus on

what students should be able to do upon completion of the course. Outcomes and objectives are fundamentally different from assignments, and so they should not be phrased as an assignment, but rather a transcendent skill. The assignments are the means of determining how well the student demonstrates the skills. In this section I will give you some examples of outcomes a basic course might have and how the way they are articulated can provide flexibility in terms of assignments used to measure their achievement.

Just about any public speaking focused basic course contains modules on informative and persuasive speaking, but these are not necessarily good student learning objectives when described that way. When it comes to informative speaking the core goal is to explain a complicated topic to an audience of non-experts. When the learning outcome is conceived in this fashion, it impacts student topic selection, research requirements and the language skills necessary to accomplish the objective. That said, such a goal can be achieved and assessed through a speech, a small group assignment, or even a brief presentation. Thus, the outcome of the course is the ability to explain complex material, but there are multiple assignments which an instructor might use for the student to demonstrate this skill.

With regard to persuasive speaking, again the outcome is one of effective, ethical advocacy for a position—not the performance of a speech. In fact, advocacy occurs far more often in interpersonal and small group settings than in formal presentations to audiences. The objective, though, when understood as one of ethically advocating a position on a topic opens up different possible assignments to demonstrate this skill. Students could

deliver a formal address, work in a small group or engage in a conversation with a peer about an issue. All of these help students demonstrate a communication skill that crosses contexts.

While I have focused on just two potential outcomes of a basic course, they are by no means the only possible outcomes BCDs might identify by engaging client departments and employers. Perhaps civility, dialogue, collaboration or message analysis are key skills identified through this process. Nevertheless, focusing on the student learning objectives, and not the assignments used to measure them, allows BCDs flexibility in course construction, integrates the course with the needs of the rest of the campus, and positions it well in the push for an outcome-based general education that currently faces higher education across the country. In the next section I briefly detail how one campus, the University of Dayton, followed this approach in re-imaging their own basic course.

### ***Case Study: The University of Dayton***

Over the last six years the University of Dayton has been undergoing a dramatic change in its general education program, and the effect it has had on the basic course is illustrative of the challenges and necessary responses communication departments face with the move to outcomes-based higher education. In the first initial draft of the new general education program the university did not include the basic course, a decision that if left unchecked would have decimated the department. In reply to this draft the department engaged its core constituencies both on and off campus to determine what possible path forward existed.

Two faculty members met with members of departments from all the colleges on campus, as well as employers who hire graduates from the university on a consistent basis to determine their communication needs. The first reaction was one of, at best, ambivalence until the questions were reframed to encourage the respondents to think about the oral communication needs of their students. Ultimately four themes emerged, as there appeared to be a need for a course that would help students do the following: 1) explain complicated ideas to non-experts; 2) advocate a position in an ethical manner; 3) engage in civil dialogue where the goal is understanding, not necessarily agreement; and, 4) critique and respond to the oral messages of others. These four themes became the learning outcomes for the course.

The department then began construction on the new version of the basic course. Initially, multiple means of achieving those goals were tested in different pilot sections, and after three semesters of testing the new basic course began to take shape. This course uses both conversation as well as short presentations about controversial topics to assess how well students learn how to perform the course objectives. The assignments have changed slightly each term to better target achievement of the student learning outcomes, a hallmark of a flexible course that is achievement, not assignment, focused.

The course is also intentionally integrated with other aspects of the new general education program. Specifically, students study some material from classical rhetoricians like Aristotle and Plato whom they encounter in their history and philosophy courses. They also learn outlining and citation skills, which are covered in

English courses as well. There are intentional areas of conceptual integration in the content of the course, but the focus still remains achieving student learning outcomes. Ultimately, the content and assignment are adjusted based upon assessment of student achievement of the core learning outcomes of the course, so it is always in a state of change, but that change is directed by the BCD and the department so that it maintains connections to the campus, university mission and career orientations of students.

### ***Challenges to this Approach***

Re-imagining the basic course is not a simple task, and does not come without challenges. In this section I will detail some of the obstacles to effectively redesigning a basic course from its current configuration as an assignment-focused distribution model fulfilling course, to a substantive outcomes-based component of an integrated general education curriculum.

Making even small changes to the content of the class can be a difficult proposition for a course and a discipline that is prone to instructional inertia. This inertia is borne out of the unique position in which BCDs find themselves: reporting to a chair, and responsible for recruiting, training and coordinating the efforts of a disparate group of instructors who are committed to the course and discipline, but not necessarily any particular institution or its goals. As Weber, Buekel-Rothfuss and Gray (1993) note in the opening line of their essay on basic course leadership, stories about BCDs running into walls with their superiors and the instructors in their charge are not uncommon at all. These same two parties that traditionally cause consternation in BCDs

might resist, to varying degrees and for different reasons, a reformulation of the course. Additionally, in an outcome-based model the course may be in a constant state of flux, thus increasing the attention a BCD must pay to training.

In their essay reviewing the status of the basic course, Morreale, Worley and Hugenberg (2010) reported on the major challenges faced by BCDs across the country. Topping the list was standardizing the basic course across sections, where 46.5% of two-year institutions and 55.6% of four year institutions reported it as a problem. They found that there are also differences between two and four year schools in that “two-year programs appear to more strongly favor teachers using the same syllabus and the same textbook, and meeting the same learning objectives” than four-year schools, and “two year schools permit teachers slightly greater autonomy in determining course content and instructional methods” (p. 417) than their four-year counterparts. The definition of consistency evidenced here is one of course content and assignments, rather than on course outcomes. Viewed this way the challenge to changing to an outcome-based basic course may very well be the disciplinary mindset and focus on assignments and content as the important part of a course, and not the abilities the course is designed to teach.

When the focus is on assignments and content one could look at an outcomes-based basic course and see it as promoting less consistency, but that is not necessarily accurate. So long as the same outcomes exist across sections, there will be consistency on what matters: achievement of the learning objectives. If different instructors use different assignments for students to dem-

onstrate achievement of the student learning outcomes, that is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, forcing someone to instruct and assess assignments with which they are unfamiliar may result in a poorer experience and less actual teaching in the classroom, than if that instructor could use assignments with which they are familiar and comfortable to assess the same learning outcomes. Additionally, in this approach there is no prohibition on BCDs establishing a specific set of assignments for all sections, so long as the assignment is determined to be the best way to assess achievement of the student learning outcomes. In fact, such an approach may be warranted if the BCD is responsible for training and supervising an army of adjuncts and graduate teaching assistants.

The second most significant problem reported by BCDs in that report relates to the first: qualifications of instructors. This problem is more prevalent at two-year schools where the need for more instructors is greater, but just shy of 20% of four year schools reported this as an issue as well. When there is a large enrollment course such as the basic course, schools often understandably must rely on adjuncts and graduate students who are not as committed or well versed in the discipline as full-time faculty. These adjuncts also bring varied levels of knowledge and experience to a course, thus affecting the consistency issue that topped the list of challenges faced by BCDs. Ultimately, such staffing decisions are a necessity for basic course instruction due to the number of sections that must be offered, but it invariably creates a problem for consistently achieving specific course outcomes.

The need for a standardized classroom experience and the horde of adjuncts and graduate students which deliver the basic course present challenges to even the smallest adjustments to the basic course. Such inertia, however, should not lead BCDs to throw up their arms and resign themselves to the status quo, for such an action may have negative repercussions in the face of general education reform. Demonstrating we can deliver a class that achieves the outcomes client departments and employers deem important goes a long way toward delivering a basic course designed for higher education in the twenty-first century. BCDs should not, as Dewey declared, flee from or “passively acquiesce” to such circumstances, but rather should be active directors of change.

### ***Directing Change as a BCD***

General education reform has been a force throughout the history of higher education in this country. It has led to the creation of departments, the proliferation of elective courses in areas of specialization, and an increased connection between education and the workplace. For the longest time the distribution model has dominated the delivery mechanism for undergraduate general education, but the latest iteration of reform seeks to dethrone that approach in favor of an outcomes-driven curriculum. This tectonic change threatens to, at a minimum, reduce reliance on communication departments to deliver the basic course by allowing multiple courses to be developed to achieve particular outcomes. If communication departments and BCDs do not proactively seek to make adjustments to the way they design and deliver their basic course and engage their cam-



pus—in particular the purveyors of general education—then they risk losing the “bread and butter” of the discipline. This does, in fact, play out quite often as there are numerous recent stories of communication departments losing the responsibility for delivery of communication instruction to other disciplines.

In this essay I suggested a plan for re-designing the basic course, regardless of format. This approach, as illustrated by the case study of the University of Dayton, creates a more dynamic experience for students and a more defensible course for communication departments when discussion of general education rears its head. It is imperative for BCDs to educate themselves on the history of general education at their institution and adjust their courses accordingly. It is not enough to rely on the vague workplace recommendations for training in oral communication because in an outcomes-driven general education environment any department can meet such a goal; those clarion calls from employers do not ask for a communication course taught in communication departments, or even a public speaking or hybrid course—simply training in communication, broadly construed. To miss this important distinction is to risk losing the lifeblood of the communication department to other units who argue more completely for the achievement of learning outcomes related to oral communication in courses they develop.

To be sure, it is not a simple task due to the size of basic course programs and the institutional inertia that accompanies courses taught by legions of adjuncts and graduate students. That said, BCDs must live up to their title by directing change, rather than reacting to it. There are no guarantees in life or general education,

and so BCDs must proactively move to maintain the centrality of oral communication instruction by communication professionals in their institution's general education program by engaging departments across campus and prospective employers of our students to determine how best we can use our expertise to prepare our students for the future.

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