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Editor's Page

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Editor's Page

We are now in the 28th volume of the *Basic Communication Course Annual*, a testament to the dedication of those concerned with the introductory course in communication. Over the years these pages have been graced with significant work that has influenced the nature of the basic communication course, thereby impacting the lives of thousands of students across the country. That said, I am struck by the fact we have no “motto,” no phrase that captures our feeling about this important educational experience. I would like to muse about what might work as a motto for what we do and teach.¹

At the University of Dayton our motto is “Learn, Lead and Serve,” a very Catholic phrase if there ever was one—we are, after all a Marianist institution. I believe that despite their religious ties to this institution, the words need not be religious. They can apply to the way we should treat our roles in the basic course—and so they can be the principles that form how we administer the basic course. We are leaders, learners and we serve numerous constituencies. Let me explain what I mean by learning, leading and serving in the basic course. I want to be clear, though: these words do not tell you how to teach your course, what to teach in your

¹ Portions of this preface were part of an address delivered at the Basic Course Conference of the Eastern Communication Association in April 2015.

course, how many assignments to have or anything so specific. Those are decisions you can and should make. Rather, I am speaking about an approach to determining those things, a way to treat your course, not teach it.

The first element of the motto, “learn,” sounds simple enough. Learning, though, is not something our students alone do, it is a requirement for all of us. First, and perhaps most important, is our responsibility to learn about what we teach. Many people suffer from the misconception that the basic course doesn’t change, and that there have been no new advancements in our understanding of communication as it is taught in that course. Nothing could be further from the truth. Second, it is essential for us to learn about how to administer the course. This area is particularly difficult for many people because there are no doctoral programs in communication administration or basic course direction. Learning can be challenging, to be sure. It takes time and effort—the same time and effort we ask of our students. One area where we need to improve our abilities as a whole is in assessment, a third category of learning we undertake as instructors. I haven’t forgotten the importance of learning for students, after all it’s what we are all about. I think all of us can agree the best thing in the world is seeing a student improve on their presentations as the semester rolls on. That said, we need to stop and consider what it is our students are learning in our course, and what we are trying to teach them. Learning is core to what we do. It is essential, the lifeblood of our purpose.

Being knowledgeable, though is not the only central element of strengthening the basic course, we need leaders. First, leadership requires vision. To lead people

or a course forward requires that you know where you want to take it. You need to know the goals you have in mind and have a general idea for how you will achieve those goals. In addition to vision, leadership requires collaboration. History is bereft of leaders with no followers. They just don't exist, and so to lead you don't just need followers, you need people who want to follow you. Third, leaders must dare to fail. Put another way, they are comfortable with their fallibility—we all make mistakes. The great thing about college teaching is that if we make a mistake, create a poor assignment, or use a reading that doesn't work we can correct the error the following semester. Ultimately, we lead in the basic course by being out in front of curricular innovation, be it on the micro-scale in our courses from year to year, or the macro-scale within our campus general education programs. The ground is shifting there, and we can either help pave the way to a better curriculum for all students, or react to the decisions of others.

Finally, to strengthen the basic course we must finally come to grips with the fact that what we do in it—in fact what we do in every course—is serve others. The most obvious group served by the basic course is our students. A second constituency the course serves which can help inform student learning objectives for our courses is society at large. Possibly more than any other course in a college curriculum, the basic communication course serves society by helping to create citizens. The idea that good speaking skills are a cornerstone of civilization goes back to Aristotle and Quintilian, and so one of the groups who benefits the most from strong basic course instruction is society at large because the students then know how to communicate in a civil

fashion about important issues of the day. Finally, and I know this particular group that we serve is quite controversial for many, is employers. When people question the need for communication to remain in the core curriculum we often cite survey data from employers that indicates communication skills as one of, if not the, top skills sought by employers as a reason why our course is essential. Yet, we also turn around and get defensive whenever someone suggests we serve businesses. We cannot have it both ways, and I respectfully submit that in order to serve the needs of our students we must solicit input from employers—not to have them tell us how to run our class, but rather by helping us understand what they mean by “communication skills.”

Where can we go to learn, lead and serve—to practice this motto I propose? You can start right here in these pages. Here, you can learn about contemporary scholarship examining the practices of the basic communication course. You can use that information to be a leader of innovation in your classroom and for your students. Ultimately, it can help you serve the various groups who benefit from your work. In this volume 28 of the *BCCA* there is much of value for these efforts.

The third edition of the “Basic Course Forum” provides five essays responding to a request for a SWOT Analysis of the basic course. The first of these essays, by Cheri K. Simonds and Stephen K. Hunt, tackles a major concern among basic course scholars and the discipline itself: the usage of the term basic to describe the introductory course. In the second essay Jon A. Hess addresses how we can strengthen the introductory communication course through better alignment with the needs of today’s citizens and employers. Melissa A.

Broeckelman-Post and Brenda L. MacArthur then address a perceived weakness in the basic course literature: comparisons between nontraditional students, multilingual learners and university types. Deanna Fassett, in the fourth entry of this year's Forum, returns to the issue of the term "basic" and suggests some opportunities for relevance that the course allows. Finally, W. Bradford Mello identifies clear learning outcomes and assessment as a key strength of the basic course.

In the lead essay in the research section of this volume of the *Annual* Joshua N. Westwick, Karla M. Hunter and Laurie L. Haleta provide a new perspective on the difference between online and face-to-face public speaking courses. Tara Suwinyattichaiporn and Melissa A. Broeckelman-Post provide us with a second assessment essay, examining the difference in benefits of a traditional public speaking course for Native English Speakers and Non-Native English Speakers. Luke LeFebvre, Leah E. LeFebvre and Mike Allen then examine the use of video technology for improving public speaking competency in students. Finally, Lynn O. Cooper and Rebecca Sietman deliver empirical evidence regarding the assumption that the basic course enhances oral competency and thus improves the chances of personal, academic and professional success.

Each of these essays, in both the Forum and the research portion of this volume, make important contributions to our knowledge, perspective on, and practice in delivering and administrating the basic course. They also pose new questions to consider as the basic course moves into the future.

Joseph M. Valenzano III, Editor
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