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Basic Course Strength through Clear Learning Outcomes and Assessment

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Former NCA President Richard West, writing in *Spectra* during his presidential year, lamented that the basic course in communication lacked national cohesion, especially compared to other disciplines like psychology, political science, or sociology (West, 2012). Some, including myself, may quibble with the comparison to other disciplines, arguing that History 101, Political Science 101 or Sociology 101 do not necessarily look the same at all institutions around the nation. However, West's call for examination of the basic course was a welcome one:

I believe it is time for our organization to undertake a thoughtful examination of the basic course and ascertain its value for a generation of students whose career opportunities, now more than ever, will necessitate some sort of understanding of the power of communication. An examination of the BCC and all its vectors is long overdue (West, 2012, p. 1).

Various groups took up that call, and a national conversation about the basic course and the communication major as a whole began. The results of that conversation produced the strength that I will argue for in this essay. Namely, the basic course in communication now has a set of nationally recognized common student learning outcomes, a plethora of resources available for instruc-

tors, and robust assessment tools to measure the quality of student learning.

Steven Beebe, also a past president of NCA, is well-known for using the metaphor of the basic course as the “front porch” for the discipline. By that he means a course that brings majors into communication study while also serving the needs of general education.

A strong Basic Course—one that is perceived as relevant and of high-quality and that is confirmed through assessment results to offer valued skills—will reflect positively on our individual efforts as educators and on our collective credibility as an association. Our “front porch” course not only should add curb appeal to our discipline, but also should be a place where all are invited to learn vital communication principles and skills that provide lifelong benefits (Beebe, 2013, p. 22).

In his NCA presidential year, Beebe supported two task forces focused on basic course issues. One task force was already in existence and received support to continue working on creating a set of common learning outcomes for a basic course, regardless of course emphasis (hybrid, public speaking). The other task force focused on building a repository of resources for basic course instructors and directors to support the work done at institutions throughout the nation (Beebe, 2013).

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ROBUST RESOURCES

The result of the task force on student learning outcomes produced a set of clear and measurable student

learning outcomes that is available from NCA's website. The task force proceeded in an iterative fashion, incorporating faculty feedback obtained from multiple venues to continually hone the student learning outcomes for a basic course in communication, regardless of type (hybrid, public speaking, other). The core competencies identified are: monitoring and presenting yourself, practicing communication ethics, adapting to others, practicing effective listening, expressing messages, identifying and explaining fundamental communication processes, and creating and analyzing message strategies (Engleberg, Disbrow, Kat, Myers, Okeefe & Ward, 2013). The second task force produced a set of resources available from NCA's website (The Basic Course and General Education). The resources are organized around these categories: advocating for the basic course, developing the basic course, training instructors to teach the basic course, assessing learning in the basic course and leading and managing the basic course. Additionally, NCA's Learning Outcomes in Communication and Measuring Collegiate Learning projects, which are nearing completion will provide clearly articulated learning outcomes for the major, that align well with the outcomes identified for a basic course.

Having such clearly identified measurable student learning outcomes is a significant asset for the basic course. As the importance of assessing student learning outcomes at the collegiate level continues to grow, a nationally recognized set of learning outcomes provides a strong platform for individual institutions to develop and assess the basic course in communication. As Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie (2014) argue in a recent report from the National Institute for Student Learning

Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), assessment has turned the corner from being seen as an externally mandated activity stemming from pressure from accreditation bodies to produce assessment data, to a faculty driven process focused on the improvement of student learning. The communication discipline has adopted a faculty driven model that encourages faculty involvement and leadership. Additionally, starting with clear and widely accepted student learning outcomes for the basic course sets the stage for collecting data to demonstrate, what in many ways we've known all along, a basic course in communication serves students needs well.

Finally, student learning outcomes that also align with what employers indicate they are looking for when hiring college graduates strengthens the position of the basic course. As Hart Research Associates (2013) discuss, critical thinking, ethical reasoning and oral communication skills are high on the list of desired qualities. A basic course in communication ensures students have the foundations to build high levels of achievement in these areas.

Finally, not only do we have learning outcomes, but we have nationally accepted rubrics to assess student learning. The American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubric for assessing oral communication was produced by a team of faculty and administrators and has been adopted by many institutions across the nation (Value Rubric Development Project). NCA's competent speaker evaluation form provides a well-developed rubric for evaluating oral communication skills (Morreale, Moore, Surges-Tatum, & Webster, 2007). As we move forward as a discipline,

building on the call by West to have a conversation about the basic course, and Beebe's presidential initiative focused on improving the basic course, collecting data from the use of these rubrics could provide strong evidence for arguing for the importance of the basic course in general education.

COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Part of the call for this years forum call for papers asked authors to consider communication and the basic course in relation to the future of Higher Education. Many initiatives through out the country are aimed at improving learning in higher education through clearly stated learning outcomes assessment. AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) and Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) work, provide clear statements about what students should know and be able to do upon graduation (Adelman, Ewell, Gaston, & Schneider, 2014; Schneider, 2015). Further examination of both initiatives reveals that the knowledge and skills sought in college graduates are in many cases, knowledge and skills that we as communication educators teach. As the work of assessing student learning outcomes progresses, NILOA's work on tying assessment to assignment design will continue to position the discipline of communication well (DQP Assignment Library). We, as a discipline, have a great tradition through *Communication Teacher* and the GIFTS programs at national and regional conferences of clearly connecting assignments and course activities to particular desired learning outcomes. We have the tools to con-

tinue to make a strong case for the importance of communication study in general education at all levels.

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