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## Advocacy, Mentorship, and Collaboration: Working with Assistant Directors to Enhance and Sustain the Introductory Course

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## Advocacy, Mentorship, and Collaboration: Working with Assistant Directors to Enhance and Sustain the Introductory Course

### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Huber is an Assistant Professor and Director of Public Speaking at the University of South Florida. She is a former Assistant Director of the Introductory Course at Southern Illinois University. Her major research interests are in Communication Pedagogy and Performance Studies. She would like to thank the community of current and former assistant introductory directors and instructors who have informed research in this area, and specifically: Chris McRae, Richie Hao, Christi Saindon, Molly Cummins, Meggie Mapes, Benny Huang LeMaster, Ryan McGeough, Stevie M. Munz, Deanna L. Fassett, and Brooks Oglesby. She would also like to thank Brooks Oglesby and Elizabeth Hintz for their work developing research on the introductory course at the time of this publication. She would like to thank Jonathan M. Gray, John T. Warren, and Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway for their work and mentorship as directors of the introductory course at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale during her time as an assistant director. She would also like to thank David Payne and Elizabeth Bell for their guidance, leadership, and continued commitment to the foundational course at the University of South Florida and to Patrice Buzzanell for her role in developing the position of assistant course director at USF. Finally, she would like to express her gratitude to the reviewers for their feedback in the development of this essay.

## *Basic Course Forum*

# **Advocacy, Mentorship, and Collaboration: Working with Assistant Directors to Enhance and Sustain the Introductory Course**

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*Aubrey A. Huber, University of South Florida*

As an undergraduate student the introductory course invited me into the field of communication.<sup>4</sup> As a graduate student the introductory course was integral to forming my approach to pedagogy by offering me my first opportunity to teach. As an assistant director the introductory course supplied me with administrative and professional experience and expertise, and inspired my commitment to pedagogical scholarship, which I continue to home in my position as an introductory course director. Although it is common in some institutions to employ assistant directors to help course directors coordinate the introductory course, assistant director positions are not the norm in all communication programs. In my experience, advanced graduate students apply for (or are assigned) the position of “assistant director.” Depending on the institution, assistant directors may also be referred to as general education assistants or basic course interns. The primary source of funding for these

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<sup>4</sup> I utilize “introductory” and “foundational” in lieu of “basic” throughout this essay to move beyond skills-based assumptions and to emphasize how these courses situate our discipline theoretically and paradigmatically, which follows similar arguments made by pedagogical scholars in communication (Fassett & Warren, 2008; Fassett, 2016; Lefebvre & Lefebvre, in press; Mapes, 2019; McRae, 2010). Fassett (2016) writes, “A ‘foundational’ course is significant because it helps form a foundation or stable platform from which to build. An ‘introductory’ course introduces or provides a first exposure to a particular set of ideas, values and experiences. A ‘basic’ course does this too, but the term also illuminates a value judgment about what might be more obvious or less challenging to learn” (p. 127).

positions is therefore graduate teaching assistantships. Within departments with graduate programs, assistant directorships could also be configured as an internship or practicum, or count toward credit hours toward the degree program. Within departments without graduate programs, assistant directorships could also be developed in conjunction with junior and contingent faculty interested in introductory course development. In these instances, paid course releases or stipends designated from the department's operating budget could work to compensate assistant director positions. These positions may even be a way that departments acknowledge the increasing amount of labor placed on contingent faculty and actively work to monetarily recompense some of the strain put on these teachers who are essential to delivering our curriculum, as noted by Mapes (2019).

In this essay, I argue that cultivating assistant director positions is an essential strategy for the recruitment and preparation of future course directors who will lead our foundational and introductory courses. Not only are these positions important for training future directors, they are crucial for engaging communication teacher-scholars in pedagogical research about the introductory course.

In arguing for a re-conceptualization of the basic course as one that is foundational to the communication discipline, Fassett and Warren (2008) emphasize, "we must remind ourselves that our work in the introductory course itself IS research" (p. 26). We therefore must cultivate a community of scholars who will continue to generate and engage in research about the introductory course. Assistant directors of the introductory course can and should be integral members of this community. In the following essay, I advocate for assistant director positions as a way to recruit and educate future course directors, which will strengthen and invigorate the introductory course and its community by 1) providing instructional support and 2) generating research about the introductory course.

Assistant director positions address growing concerns about professional development and job placement. As such, these positions function as a recruiting strategy for future course directors who will lead introductory and foundational courses. Assistant director positions enable graduate students to work with course directors to learn the administrative and instructional pragmatics of directing an introductory course and develop particular disciplinary expertise. This on-the-job education functions much like teaching internships required in colleges of education, in which teacher education students work with practicing teachers to gain instructional experience before earning their degrees and their first teaching jobs.

Strengthening the introductory course community means we must, as course directors and faculty, advocate for and sustain assistant director positions. Recently, I was able to advocate for and receive an assistant director position at my own institution. I was able to procure this position as an assistantship for an advanced graduate student. To advocate for this position, I created a detailed proposal, which I then presented to the Chair of the department. The proposal established the need for the position and the utility of the position for the department, for graduate students, and for the course itself. To practically advocate for assistant director positions, I encourage faculty to draft similar proposals, which should include data about similar positions from peer and aspirational institutions. This data establishes a standard for the position. It is also important to organize and detail the labor performed by introductory course directors to establish a need for an assistant. Similarly, I urge faculty to demonstrate how the assistant director positions are crucial to the course by offering instructional support, by generating employable, specialized expertise, *and* by producing research that invigorates the course itself.

First, assistant director positions address immediate needs within departments to provide instructional support for multi-section introductory courses. Assistant directors often work with course directors to organize and facilitate instructional meetings and workshops, aid in scheduling, develop curriculum, organize and execute program assessment, address teaching concerns that arise, and engage in instructional observation and feedback.

Second, assistant director positions also function as more than just professional training. Broadly, job calls seek candidates with expertise in particular areas of research, methods, and specific content. Job searches for directors of the introductory course would (and do) benefit from a pool of candidates who likewise have experience and expertise as assistant directors. The ability to direct the introductory course should not be viewed simply as a value-added criterion; it is specialized expertise. Assistant director positions enable scholars to cultivate and develop this expertise. Searches for introductory course directors should be grounded in an expectation for such expertise similar to calls for specialists in research areas and methods. With their experience and expertise, assistant directors are therefore well positioned to apply for and be hired as introductory course directors.

Finally, assistant director positions can generate research about the introductory course to bolster and revitalize the discipline, as suggested by Fassett (2016). In collaboration with course directors, assistant directors have the opportunity to

generate meaningful research about the introductory course including the ways in which instructors are prepared to teach the introductory course. Similarly, as administrators of teacher training programs, assistant directors are uniquely situated to develop new and innovative research on teacher education in the introductory course. Moreover, graduate students who work as assistant directors have the rare opportunity to offer insight about teacher training from student-teacher-administrator perspectives. In other words, assistant directors are positioned to be on the cutting edge of introductory course research. As faculty, we should work to support and sustain these positions as vital members of the introductory course community. For example, as an introductory course director in my department, I am presently collaborating with an assistant director to examine and theorize the current introductory course program for educating and preparing new instructors.

By advocating and supporting assistant director positions we, as introductory course faculty and directors, can find ways to innovate and vitalize the introductory course. Not only do assistant director positions serve as a recruiting function for the introductory course, they provide instructional support, cultivate specialized expertise in introductory course pedagogy, and have the potential to generate meaningful research to contribute to ongoing scholarship about the introductory course. Like me, many of my introductory course director colleagues got their start as assistant directors. Let us continue to boisterously support these positions to continue to add to the richness of our field.

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