Student Perceptions of Value: A Qualitative Study of Student Experiences in the Communication Center

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Cover Page Footnote

Research Article

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to understand student experiences in and perceptions of a new communication center. Researchers conducted 22 semi-structured qualitative interviews with students who visited the communication center and conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Overall, the findings suggest that students had positive experiences and indicated some areas for future development. The primary value of communication center lies in the knowledge and perceived credibility of the coaches. The communication center also serves as a unique site for addressing communication apprehension and helping students transfer communication skills to other contexts. To continue to develop, additional resources are needed to invest in coaches, space, and marketing in order to adequately serve the needs of all students.

Keywords: advocacy, basic course, communication center, fundamentals of communication, qualitative interviews

Introduction

Communication centers are known to be a valuable resource on college campuses, offering students opportunities to receive assistance with coursework (Nelson et al., 2012), develop advanced communication skills (Yook & Kim, 2013), and build connections across their university (Dwyer et al., 2002). Previous research has indicated that communication centers can also help decrease students' communication apprehension (Dwyer et al., 2002). Despite the contributions communication centers have made toward increasing communication skills (Dakum & King, 2015), little research has focused on how students perceive these centers.

The aim of this study was to understand undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of the Communication Center. In this article, we report on a small interview study (N = 22) of student clients in the inaugural year of a communication center. Findings from this study could help similar centers frame the importance of their presence on college campuses, provide insights about areas for improvement, and help students understand the value of using the center's resources.

Literature Review

Communication centers (also referred to as speech labs, communication labs, or speaking centers) are on-campus, supplemental, academic resources where students can work with a trained peer coach to receive help with communication-oriented skills (LeFebvre et al., 2017; Turner & Sheckels, 2015a). Typically considered the oral communication equivalent to writing centers, communication centers give students an avenue to practice and refine vital communication skills. Despite their relatively recent emergence on college campuses, communication centers are invaluable resources that need support in order to encourage the use and development of necessary communication skills (Von Till, 2012).

The first communication center established in higher education traces back to 1947 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Wynn, 1947), and communication centers as we know them today emerged in the 1980s. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, communication centers saw a rapid and steady rise to prominence before almost half of the established centers closed by the mid-1990s (Morreale, 2001; Weiss, 1998). The decline of communication centers during this time can be attributed to issues such as inadequate funding, lack of leadership, and a lack of grounding in a particular disciplinary department (Sellnow & Martin, 2010). Currently, it is unclear whether communication centers will vanish again from on-campus academic resources or if they will continue to prevail as the emergent

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academic service offered on many college and university campuses; the general value students perceive in going to the communication center, the importance it plays in their academic progress, and the ongoing value they see in the space are also largely unknown. These uncertainties reinforce the need for ongoing research into the development and assessment of these centers.

Most communication centers offer services to undergraduate students, while some also offer services to graduate students, faculty, staff, and even the broader public (Yook, 2006). Services typically include assisting visitors with public speaking (e.g., delivery, verbal and nonverbal communication, and speech writing), outline development, visual aids, interpersonal communication, partner and group speeches, and other issues related to public speaking or communication (Morreale et al., 1993; The National Association of Communication Centers, 2014; Yook, 2006). These services are rendered through peer coaches, who are trained to help students meet the assignment requirements and provide specific feedback (Yook, 2006). Peer-to-peer tutoring services are integral to communication centers and ultimately aid in their success (Wilde et al., 2006). By working with peer tutors, students benefit by practicing oral communication with a peer in real-time. One-on-one coaching services can address student concerns regarding their presentations and work to improve the quality of student work (Davis et al., 2017). Von Till (2012) and Hobgood (2010) suggest that not only do communication centers expand on the instruction and depth of a speaking foundation, but students also valued the feedback and instruction they received.

While some communication centers are open to all students at the college or university, others exclusively support students who are enrolled in the introductory communication course (LeFevre et al., 2017), which is the oral communication course that typically meets a general education requirement for all students and is sometimes referred to in the discipline as the Basic Course. Dwyer and Davidson (2012) noted the essential role communication centers serve in communication departments and in meeting general education requirements at the university level. Communication centers can be a vital supplement to what is included in classroom instruction (Nelson et al., 2012). Not only do communication centers help the university reach curriculum goals and achieve student graduation outcomes, but they also benefit the student clients and the staff members who operate the center (Davis et al., 2017; Malterud & Stewart, 2019). In combination with the introductory communication class, communication centers can be a crucial component of a robust communication curriculum for students of all majors.

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Though little research has been done on the effectiveness of communication centers (Turner & Sheckels, 2015b), the research that does exist shows that communication centers have a positive impact on student communication learning outcomes, both in and beyond the introductory communication course. For example, several studies have shown that students who visit communication centers as part of their public speaking courses earn higher grades on speeches (Davis et al., 2017; Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Jones et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2012). Students who visit the communication center also had increased confidence and lower public speaking anxiety, especially if they visit the communication center multiple times (Dwyer et al., 2002; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Centers have a significant role in helping students boost academic performances in not only communication classes, but also (and sometimes especially) in non-communication courses (Yook & Kim, 2013), and are associated with higher rates of student retention and persistence to graduation (Yook, 2012). Assessment data show that communication centers are accomplishing their missions of improving students' oral communication abilities and "exceeded expectations for their success" (Yook, 2006, p.163). As a result, communication centers fill an essential role in giving students additional resources to adequately prepare for oral presentations (and other forms of communication) in classes that may not otherwise receive any instructions for effective communication practices.

While existing research assesses the effects of communication centers on student academic performance (see above), establishes best practices for training (e.g., Fabian, 2019; Turner & Sheckels, 2015a), identifies useful tools (e.g., Howard, 2017; Norander & Rouse, 2017) and provides guidance for how to support students with a range of identities and needs (e.g., Lampkin, 2017; Sorenson, 2017), very little research has examined student perceptions of the communication center, particularly one that is embedded in an introductory communication course. Only a couple of studies have examined student perceptions of the communication center and needs for improvements using quantitative and qualitative survey data (Anderson et al., 2015; Strawser et al., 2018), but none have sought to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences in and perceptions of the communication center through in-depth student interviews. Because interviews often elicit richer responses than open-ended survey items, interviews might provide deeper insights about how students experience and perceive a communication center that is integrated into an introductory communication course. To fill this gap, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students perceive their experiences in the communication center?

RQ2: What do students' responses suggest are the most important investments for developing communication centers?

Method

Context

This study was conducted at a large, research intensive public university in the Mid-Atlantic region. The Communication Center studied here began in the Fall of 2018 and was completing its first year of operation when this study was conducted. At this institution, the Center is a required component of the university's introductory communication course that is a required course in the university's general education program, Fundamentals of Communication. All students must visit the Center at least once while they are enrolled in the introductory course but may set appointments to visit as often as they would like. While the Center was established to solely support the Fundamentals of Communication course and primarily fulfills that mission, it began to allow walk-in appointments for all students, faculty, and staff regardless of major, college, or discipline on a somewhat limited basis during the semester that this study was conducted.

The Center is located in a corner of the undergraduate library in the campus's primary student center and consists of some open tables in the midst of a large active student study space and an adjacent single room equipped with video recording equipment (the OneButton Studio). The Center is staffed by undergraduate peer coaches who have strong presentation and feedback skills; many of the coaches were recruited because of their successful work in the introductory communication course, and others were recruited from the university's highly ranked debate and forensics teams. All coaches went through a summer training program and attended weekly training meetings during the fall and spring semesters and received feedback from the Center's graduate student coordinators after being observed in coaching sessions.

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Participants

Participants included 22 students who had previously visited the Communication Center. Of these students, eighteen were female and four were male. Thirteen students self-identified as white, four as Asian, four as Black or African American, and one as multiracial (Black or African American and white). Participants represented a variety of majors, which was expected because they are in a general education course required for all undergraduate students.
Procedures

All students complete an exit survey when they complete a Communication Center appointment; the end of this survey included a checkbox that allowed students to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in an interview about their experiences in the Center. Students who checked this box were sent an email inviting them to participate in an interview and were asked to sign up for an interview time using a SignUpGenius link. All students who signed up were interviewed and included in this analysis.

When students arrived for their interview, they were given a consent form to read and, once the audio recording began, were verbally asked whether they consented to participate in the interview and were asked to choose a pseudonym. Next, the interviewer conducted a semi-structured interview about the student's experiences and perceptions of the Center, and the student was asked to complete a brief demographic survey before leaving (see Appendix A). Students who completed the interview earned 15 research credit points (out of a course total of 1000 points) for their participation.

Afterward, all interview recordings were transcribed using Rev.com, an online transcription service. Members of the research team listened to the recordings and corrected the transcripts for accuracy. Next, all researchers read the transcripts multiple times and generated a set of initial codes from the transcriptions, then met to discuss the codes, and repeated this process two more times until a set of major themes were developed, consistent with the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, IRB #1389756-2.

Findings: Student Experiences

Overall, student responses to the Communication Center were positive; no students reported explicitly negative experiences with their sessions, although some interviewees (Interviewees Kevin and LeBron) expressed frustration at the course

requirement for going to the center. Through our coding, we found three primary themes across student responses: first, that the value of the Communication Center was linked to students' experiences with the coaches; second, that the Center was a site for working through communication apprehension; and third, that some students were able to articulate the value of communication to their future academic or professional pursuits, while others were more hesitant to see value. These findings are further discussed below.

Finding 1

> Communication Center value lies in coaches, their resources, and perceived credibility.

Each interviewee was asked specific questions that reflected on their experiences in the Center and their experiences with their coaches; for each participant, the value of the Center and the perceived credibility and helpfulness of the coach were closely interlinked. Nearly all participants used positive words to describe their coaches, using words such as "informative," "professional," "caring," and "understanding" to describe their coaches and their responses to their questions.

However, coaches created value and credibility not just through such affective appeals and attributes; they also built ethos with the students through their knowledge of communication generally and communication coursework in particular. The following excerpts reflect the ways that a coach's deep knowledge of the Fundamentals of Communication class shaped student experience and appreciation of the coaches in the center:

> She knew so much about the COMM challenges that I didn't even think to ask, just telling us how we're supposed to write it, and what to include if there's the word count. So if we don't really know what else to write in COMM challenges this is what we can do, use stuff from textbook. So I thought it was really good. (Alexus)

> She understood exactly what the teacher was going to be looking for, so that really helped me to check all the boxes on the rubric that was supposed to be done. And then she just read through it and we talked about it, if I needed to change anything she'd tell me how to do it

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better, or which way would sound better so that … Because I was going overtime by two, three minutes, so then she was like, "Okay, maybe we can try to cut this off and just say this sentence instead." She was really helpful. (Amelia)

She seems very credible because she was flipping through the text like she knew it like the back of her hand. I was like, "Whoa." (Charlotte)

In the excerpts above, coach expertise is articulated through deep knowledge of not just communication concepts and tools ("she was flipping through the text…"), but the class as well. Comments from interviews such as Alexus and Amelia above demonstrate how students seek out the Center for additional help on their assignments in Fundamentals of Communication class for additional clarification. This allows student coaches to build expertise through their deep knowledge of the class and makes the space an important place for answering supplemental questions that instructors might not ordinarily have time to answer within class constraints. This leads to our observations in Finding 2, wherein students also report seeing the Communication Center as a therapeutic space for working through communication apprehension.

Finding 2

The Communication Center is a unique site for addressing communication apprehension.

A wide range of emotions, particularly nervousness, anxiety, and fear, were expressed across the interviews. These emotions were primarily confined to the experience of public speaking and the challenges offered in the Fundamentals of Communication class for which the students were visiting, rather than specifically to the experience of going to the center, though the visit the communication center itself was a source of apprehension as well:

I think you guys are really nice. I just walk up all nervous like, "This is my first time here." Everyone is like, "Oh hi do you need help?"

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> Everyone is really nice. Even if you're confused they're like, "Oh yeah we're helping you. You got it. It's okay." I like that. (Alexus)

Here, Alexus states that the experience of going to the Center itself is an experience fraught with a range of emotions, though the coaches who greet the student immediately assuage those concerns upon arrival. Ensuring that students are greeted by coaches in ways that are reassuring and confidence-boosting is clearly important when working to address communication apprehension in the communication center. For other respondents, the communication center was a helpful place for working through general communication anxiety in response to existing fears of public speaking, likening the communication center to a "therapy session":

> Because when she saw me getting really flustered she's just like, "It's okay, not everyone likes speaking, it's such a weird thing to do but you'll be fine." I was like, "I know." So it was kind of like a therapy session too. So it was nice. (Amelia)

Here, Amelia describes the importance of the coach's general demeanor in relationship to the value of the center, though here it relates to the affective experience of calming nerves "like a therapy session" in addition to improving the quality of work on the speech assignment that students bring to the center.

In addition to creating rapport with the coach, comfort in the space itself was a key to alleviating apprehension for some participants. Participants articulated a range of needs for space in the Center—either finding an open space or more private space to create an environment that was less intimidating and alleviated anxiety. In some cases, rooms with lots of equipment were actually perceived as a bigger source of concern for students, as Carolyn states here about the OneButton Studio, a room equipped to record and playback speeches:

> Honestly, I thought it'd be more intimidating because I thought I was going to be in the One Button room at first and I kind of was like, "Oh no," because I just saw a big video camera and I was like, "That's big."

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In this interview, the student expressed relief after having another, adjacent low-tech space to go to for additional feedback on the speech. Consequently, space was another element of the Center that contributed to students' experiences working through communication apprehension.

Another interviewee, Mia, connects larger concerns about communication apprehension with the visit to the communication center and an opportunity for learning in her mock interview explicitly:

> **Mia:** Yeah, I was definitely nervous, but the interviewer made it really easy, like to start feeling comfortable because like she just started with the first question and I was scared that I would stutter a lot….But like, honestly she kept it like a comfortable environment so I hope that kind of helped? But, yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** Good. Were you nervous because it was like an assignment, or because it was a stranger? Or … Like can you speak a little bit more about why you were nervous?
>
> **Mia:** Oh, I was nervous because like it was a stranger and like, I don't know, I kind of like thought the interview felt real. So, it like kind of made me nervous, like if I say the wrong things and then she'll be like judge me because I kind of anxiety about that. Yeah, so I was just nervous because she was a stranger and like, if I would ever see her again she'd probably be like, "Oh, that's the kid that messed up."

Here, Mia articulates a range of concerns building out of apprehension about public speaking and the Center. First, the visit to the Center on its own is something that makes her nervous, and specifically the idea of having to talk to a stranger and "messing up" in front of that person. However, that nervousness turns out to be productive—as Mia notes, an actual interviewer would be a stranger, too, so this was a good place to test out strategies for avoiding stuttering when nervous. These responses reveal how the communication center is unique in the ways it both produces its own forms of communication apprehension, works to address in-class apprehensions students bring to the center, and also offers opportunities for learning about how to deal with apprehension in real-world situations as well.

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Finding 3

> The Communication Center can be a space where students can invent and adapt methods for transferring the skills learned in communication classes.

In each interview, students were asked directly about the future—whether they would visit the communication center again in the future if it were made available for all students, and whether they could see themselves using the information they gained in the center or in the Fundamentals of Communication Course in future coursework or professional pursuits. The results of these questions reflect a range of perspectives that students have about how they believe they will use communication skills moving forward and the role that communication classes play in that path.

For example, some students reflected on their need for communication skills in their future coursework in comments such as this from LeBron: "Obviously, [communication skills] would go with my job as a Civil Engineer. I am going to have to work with groups and probably present with someone else. For whatever company I work for." In addition to connections to future job skills and group work, other students articulated connections between the rhetorical skills students gain in communication classes to what they will need in their future jobs, as follows:

> As an analyst, you would need to be able to conceive questions that you would want to ask, and when you're briefing people, you want to be able to get into detail, but not so into detail that you're continuing to take up their time. And just being able to think on the go. Okay, I want to ask this, how can I ask it deeper, and get a better response. That's something that I've learned from going there. (Alexus)

However, not all students felt this way; some students expressed indifference at the experience, as reflected in this student response:

> I don't think I would go out of my way to go to the Comm Center again just because I think that like practicing is enough for me. And like since I've been once, I told you like I can take the skills with me. And since I've taken COMM 101 in general, I feel like I can handle it. But if it was a really big presentation, if I was in Grad school or

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something, then I would definitely go. But like for the classes I'm
taking now, like their presentations are very small. (Erin)

For Erin, the communication center is just another place to practice an assigned speech, equivalent to other options available. Therefore, it is a valuable site for learning in the sense that practice happens there, but it is not a uniquely valuable site for learning on its own.

Implications for Future Development

With this deeper understanding of students' experiences in the Communication Center, it is important to consider how this information can shape decisions about how to best grow and develop the Center. In particular, we were interested in what implications our findings would have for what types of investments should be made as we continue to develop the Communication Center in support of the introductory communication course and consider expanding it to serve students throughout their time on campus. The primary implication of this study points to the need for resources to properly set up and run an effective, value-added communication center appropriate to student needs so that this communication center does not risk the decline seen by so many others (Sellnow & Martin, 2010). In the case of this study, three specific areas for resources—coaches, space, and marketing—were critical to how the study participants articulated the value of their experiences in the Center.

Investing in Coaches

Students' experiences with the coaches made the largest impact and deepest impression, and students commented frequently in the interviews that they appreciated coaches who were friendly, approachable, and who could provide clear, constructive feedback. There are two areas in which communication centers should especially invest time in training and development: feedback and communication interaction. First, coaches need to learn to provide a balance of positive descriptive feedback, which is focused on explaining what students are already doing well, and on constructive feedback, which is focused on explaining specific ways that the student can improve (Simonds et al., 2009). Coaches need to learn to lead the feedback process, building necessary skills and agency to conduct effective feedback sessions, and also recognize that they can positively influence students' communication quality and affective response to the communication situation (Hosek et al., 2017). Second, directors should invest time training coaches, with

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particular attention paid to using immediacy behaviors (Witt et al. , 2010) and building rapport (Frisby & Martin, 2010) during the session, particularly for students who have high levels of communication apprehension (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). By helping coaches learn to provide quality feedback and create a positive, affirming climate for student-clients, quality training can yield tremendous dividends for developing a high-impact communication center experience.

Investing in Space

A second area for resource investment is space. Some students found the open seating environment that was integrated into a larger library work-space to be approachable and inviting, while others found the noise and movement of the open space to be distracting. Others preferred a more private space where they could work without distraction and without becoming a distraction to others; although technology was important to have at hand, too much technology can contribute to apprehension in the space. Although the Communication Center currently lacks a dedicated, designed space, studies such as the one reported on here can help to establish the value of such a resource. With the opportunity to design a communication center space, different types of spaces for different types of activities and purposes should be considered. If space allows, a mix of closed presentation practice rooms that block sound alongside open workspaces where coaches and students can discuss research, organization, and other planning stages of the presentation should be incorporated. Each of these spaces should be equipped with up-to-date technology that students will be expected to use in a variety of communication contexts (LeFebvre et al., 2017) In addition to considering varying types of spaces, communication centers should ensure that they have appropriate signage to help students find their way to the communication center and consider ways to make the space attractive and inviting so that students will want to spend time there. At the same time, communication centers should be designed with student and coach safety and supervision in mind, ensuring that no spaces are visually private and that a supervisor is positioned where they can see what is happening throughout the communication center.

Investing in Marketing and Awareness

Many students were unaware of the Communication Center before their visit and uncertain about whether there would be utility in returning after they completed their

Fundamentals of Communication Course. This was likely in part due to the center being new and in transition; these interviews were conducted during the first year that the Center was in operation, when appointments were restricted to students enrolled in introductory communication courses. If this communication center transitions from functioning only as an integrated part of the introductory communication course to becoming a campus-wide resource, we need to develop a marketing campaign to communicate that transition and increased availability to students (LeFebvre et al., 2019). At the same time, more work is needed to help students understand how they can transfer the skills that they are learning in their introductory communication course to other curricular, career, and community contexts so that students better understand the value and utility of what they are learning, as well as see the Communication Center as a place that they can return throughout their university experience.

Conclusion

Although it had only been in operation for less than a year when these interviews were conducted, the Communication Center was already demonstrating value through the knowledge and affect shared via interactions with coaches, as a space for managing communication apprehension, and as a site for helping students transfer communication skills to other contexts. More work is needed to further invest in the coaching team, the space, and in marketing the work of the Center, though this study provides a qualitative assessment that can help to shape future development of this particular communication center while also providing insights for others who are building new communication centers.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What did you bring to the work on in the center?
    a. What assignment?
    b. What class did you bring this for?
    c. How did you feel about the assignment prior to visiting the center?
    d. Where were you in the process?
2. Tell me about your experience in the center.
    a. Can you explain how the session went?
    b. What did you hope to/ what did you accomplish during the session?
        i. Did the coach/tutor help you accomplish your session goals? How? Why/Why not?
    c. What did you like most about the session?
    d. What did you like the least about your session? Why?
    e. How will this session help you with your current school work?
    f. In your session, did you learn anything you can use in future communication tasks or projects? How?
3. How was the center's space and employees?
    a. Who did you work with/ what did you work on during your session?
    b. What were your impressions of the coaches?
    c. Did you feel welcome? Why?
    d. What do you think about the advice you received from the coach/tutor?
    e. Did you disagree with any of the advice a coach gave you? Why?
4. Why did you decide to visit the Center (i.e. personal choice, class requirement, extra credit, recommended by a professor, suggested by a peer)?
    a. If your visit was not required, do you think you still would have utilized the center? Why/why not?
    b. Why did you decide to bring the specific assignment to the center for help?
5. Prior to visiting the center, what did you know about it?
    a. Had you previously visited the center? About how many times?
    b. What did you expect?
    c. What services did you think vs. you knew it offered?
6. What did you find to be the most helpful/rewarding part of visiting the center?
7. Are there any services the center offers that you do not feel are helpful to students?

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8. Are there any services the center does not currently offer but you think would be helpful to students?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add that we did not discuss?
10. What pseudonym would you like to use in this study?

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