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## The Impact of Communication Center Visits on Students' Performance and Engagement

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*Research Article*

# The Impact of Communication Center Visits on Students' Performance and Engagement

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## Abstract

*This study sought to empirically evaluate the extent to which visiting the communication center before delivering the first major speech in an introductory communication course improved students' academic performance and engagement. A total of 262 students were included in this study, half of whom visited the communication center prior to their first speech, and half of whom did not. Between-subjects MANOVAs showed that students who visited the communication center had significantly higher speech grades, course grades, and attendance than students who did not. Likewise, those who visited the communication center also had higher levels of behavioral and cognitive engagement, but not agentic or emotional engagement.*

*Keywords: assessment, basic course, communication center, engagement, performance*

## Introduction

Oral communication is often cited as one of the most important skills for college graduates, but one that employers struggle the most to find (Burning Glass, 2019;

Hart, 2018; Levy & Canon, 2016; NACE, 2016). At least 70 % of undergraduate institutions include oral communication outcomes as part of their general education program (Hart, 2016), and numerous studies have shown that the introductory communication course helps students build communication skills, reduce communication anxiety, and meet learning outcomes (e.g., Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2014). However, employer studies like these suggest that colleges and universities need to be doing even more to help undergraduate students build communication skills. To help fill this gap, many colleges and universities have begun to integrate communication skills in curriculum programming beyond the introductory communication course by developing Communication Across the Curriculum (CxC) programs (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009), which embed communication skills development in courses across majors. This includes communication centers, supported either within the introductory communication course or as a campus-wide resource (LeFebvre et al., 2017), where students can receive individualized communication coaching. The purpose of this study is to focus on communication centers supported within an introductory course. Our goal is to evaluate if visiting the communication center affects students' academic performance and engagement while enrolled in an introductory communication course.

### **Communication Centers**

Communication centers—which are also sometimes referred to as speech centers, communication labs, speech labs, or by other names—are spaces on campus where students can receive individualized coaching and feedback on a variety of communication skills (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Communication centers often provide a variety of services, such as assistance with topic brainstorming and selection, support for doing research, guidance on developing speech outlines, feedback on speech delivery and visual aid development, coaching to reduce communication apprehension, interview skills practice, and access to space and technology to practice and record presentations.

A recent survey of the basic course found that, of the institutions responding to the survey, 42.9% of two-year schools and 21.6% of four-year schools currently have a communication center to support students (Morreale et al., 2016). These proportions represent a marked increase in communication centers from 15.4% and 19.9%, respectively, of respondents to a similar survey just six years earlier (Morreale et al., 2010). The proliferation of communication centers on college and university

campuses is in response to universities seeking ways to supplement the work of the basic course in meeting departmental, school, and state requirements for communication competency (LeFebvre et al., 2017; Morreale et al., 2010). Additionally, there is also a notable transition from communication centers that primarily or exclusively serve students enrolled in an introductory communication course to multidisciplinary communication centers that serve students across the institution (Jones et al., 2004; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Despite the investment in communication centers on college campuses, little empirical research has been conducted to evaluate the extent to which communication centers impact student academic performance and engagement in the introductory communication course. The present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

### **Effects on Academic Performance**

While there are relatively few empirical studies that investigate the impacts of communication centers, the limited extant research has demonstrated positive effects on students' academic performance. For example, Yook (2012) found that universities with communication centers had higher rates of student persistence to graduation; both Yook (2012) and Von Till (2012) argued that this was linked to stronger academic performance, due in part to increased interaction, more mentoring from students and faculty, and increased campus involvement. Within a communication center that specifically supported students in a public speaking class, Davis et al. (2017) found that students who utilized the communication center had stronger organizational outcomes and higher speech grades, but not stronger speech delivery or lower communication apprehension. Similarly, other studies found that students who visited a communication center as part of their introductory communication course received higher scores on their public speaking assignments (informative, group, and persuasive speeches) and found the feedback in the communication center helpful (Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Jones et al., 2004). Furthermore, students who visited the communication center multiple times had increased confidence (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012) and decreased speaking anxiety (Dwyer et al., 2002; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012), which in turn helped students excel during graded classroom performances (Nelson et al., 2012).

In summation, existing research has shown that communication centers have positive impacts on student public speaking performance and other aspects of academic performance. However, despite Preston's (2006) call for more research

about communication centers, the empirical studies published since that call have been few, and none have clearly measured the size of the effect communication centers have on student performance. To help fill this gap, this study will measure the impact of visiting the communication center on three measures of academic performance by testing the following hypotheses:

H1a: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will earn a higher grade on that speech.

H1b: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will have higher class attendance.

H1c: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will have higher final course grades.

We are choosing to focus on students who visit the communication center early in the semester because the coaching received during that first appointment has the possibility of impacting students for a greater proportion of the class. Additionally, this decision omits students who visit the communication center during the last week of the semester merely to earn credit; at which point, it is too late for the coaching received in that appointment to impact their performance in the course. Finally, though attendance is not in and of itself a measure of academic performance, it is being examined in the present study because it is an indicator that is typically highly correlated with student performance and demonstrates a level of engagement in the course (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009).

### **Engagement**

In addition to querying whether visiting the communication center is associated with stronger academic performance, it is important to assess whether visiting the communication center is associated with higher levels of student engagement. Engagement is defined as “the extent of a student’s active involvement in a learning activity, or in school more generally” (Veiga et al., 2014, p. 39), and is both a necessary condition for and one of the best indicators of learning (Kuh, 2009). Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that student engagement has numerous positive outcomes, including a positive impact on students’ emotional and

cognitive interest (Mazer, 2013), learning (Kuh et al., 2008) and decreased student dropout rates (Archambault et al., 2009; Kuh et al., 2008). Furthermore, increased student engagement has been linked to prosocial classroom behavior, high enthusiasm and interest, increased concentration and strategic thinking, as well as “intentional acts of agency to enrich one’s experience with the learning activity, subject matter, or school experience” (Veiga et al., 2014, p. 39).

Student engagement comprises four dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reeve, 2013). Behavioral student engagement manifests as general participation in the learning experience which can take place both inside or outside the classroom, including social and extracurricular activities associated with academia (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement is “how strategically the student attempts to learn in terms of employing sophisticated rather than superficial learning strategies, such as using elaboration rather than memorization” (Reeve, 2013, p. 579). Emotional engagement is defined as the “positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school, and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). Agentic engagement involves “students’ constructive contribution into the flow of the instruction they receive” (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 258), and includes behaviors such as asking questions, offering insights, expressing interest in the topic, and seeking clarification.

Finding out whether visiting the communication center increases student engagement could help to empirically establish the link between communication centers and the broader university outcomes related to academic performance beyond the public speaking classrooms, as posited by Yook (2012) and Von Till (2012). However, while establishing a relationship between engagement and communication centers does not specify a direction to that relationship, as it may be higher levels of engagement that lead students to attend communication centers, it is just as probable that communication centers lead students to engage more in their classes. Thus, being able to identify which specific types of engagement are connected with communication center usage can have substantial implications for understanding student academic success in colleges and universities. Accordingly, we posit the following hypotheses:

H2a: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will score higher on measures of behavioral engagement.

H2b: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will score higher on measures of cognitive engagement.

H2c: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will score higher on measures of agentic engagement.

H2d: Students who visit the communication center before the first speech of the semester will score higher on measures of emotional engagement.

## Method

### Procedures

This study was conducted at a large Mid-Atlantic university located near a major urban center with high levels of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic diversity. The oral communication program at this university includes two highly standardized courses, a Public Speaking Course and a Fundamentals of Communication Course, each of which utilize the same textbook, Learning Management System (LMS) shell, assignment descriptions, and rubrics across all sections of the course. The courses are taught by a large team of instructors, primarily comprised of graduate student instructors, all of whom go through the same extensive training program and grade norming process. At the time this study was conducted, the Fundamentals of Communication course had just gone through a significant revision that included a new lecture-lab-speech lab format that led to the establishment of a communication center that students enrolled in the course were required to visit at least once during the semester; therefore, only students who were enrolled in that course were included in the initial pool for this study. The online large lecture portion of the course was taught by the Basic Course Director, a tenured faculty who also directed the communication center, and the labs were primarily taught by graduate student instructors (GTAs and GLs) as well as a few adjunct and full-time term faculty.

As part of the normal assessment practices for the course, all students took a pre- and post-course survey consisting of a variety of measures, allowing for both

within- and between-subjects tests. The pre- and post-course survey data was merged with gradebook and attendance records at the student level, students who opted out of having their data included in course-related research studies were removed, and all individual identifiers were deleted prior to any analysis being conducted, as was specified in the procedures approved by the university's IRB (IRB #1462414). Approximately 1,443 students took the pre-survey, and 1,337 students took the post-survey.

Because we were interested in comparing students who attended the communication center prior to delivering their first major speech to those who did not in order to evaluate whether there might be measurable effects to visiting the communication center early in the semester, we began by identifying students who earned credit for attending the communication center prior to the due date for that first speech. This first presentation was an explanatory speech, similar to informative speeches typically given in most public speaking classes. A total of 131 students earned credit for visiting the communication center prior to the first speech.

In order to equalize group sizes and account for any variance due to instructor and section effects, the dataset was sorted by section number and then by student name. Students who visited the communication center prior to the first speech were identified and selected for inclusion, and the next student on the roster in that same section who did not attend the communication center was also selected for inclusion. If, for example, three students in a row had visited the communication center, the next three in that same section were selected to be in the "did not attend" condition. This process was systematically implemented throughout the entire dataset until there was an equal number of students in the *communication center* ( $N = 131$ ) and *did not attend communication center* ( $N = 131$ ) conditions.

## Participants

A total of 262 students were selected for inclusion in this study, 226 of whom provided their demographic information. The mean age of participants was 19.57 ( $SD = 3.81$ ), though 13.7% ( $n = 36$ ) of participants elected not to disclose their age; 36.6% ( $n = 96$ ) of the participants were male and 49.6% ( $n = 130$ ) were female, while 13.7% ( $n = 36$ ) elected not to disclose their sex. A plurality of the participants were White (34%;  $n = 86$ ), followed by Asian (21.4%;  $n = 56$ ), Black or African American (10.3%;  $n = 27$ ), Hispanic or Latino (9.2%;  $n = 24$ ), Middle Eastern or North African (1.1%;  $n = 3$ ), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.4%;  $n = 1$ ), and Native

Hawaiian (0.4%;  $n = 1$ ), with 9.2% ( $n = 24$ ) identifying with more than one race/ethnicity and 14.1% ( $n = 37$ ) choosing not to disclose their race/ethnic information. The sample was 50.8% ( $n = 133$ ) freshmen, 16.4% ( $n = 43$ ) sophomores, 9.2% ( $n = 24$ ) juniors, and 9.9% ( $n = 29$ ) seniors, with 13.7% ( $n = 36$ ) choosing not to disclose their class.

## Measures

**Course Performance.** Course performance was measured using three different scores taken from the course final grade books: the grade on the explanatory speech; the final grade in the course; and the proportion of classes attended. The speech was graded using a standardized rubric on a 100-point scale; attendance was calculated as a proportion of classes attended, ranging from 0 (never attended) to 1 (perfect attendance). The final course grade was based on 1000 possible points that could be earned in the class.

Consistent with previous research on communication center efficacy, final course grades were used as a metric of overall student achievement in the Basic Course (Dwyer et al., 2002). Additionally, while prior communication center scholarship by Hunt and Simonds (2002) examined informative, group, and persuasive speaking, the primary speech of interest in the present study was students' performance on the explanatory speech. The purpose of the explanatory speech is to explain a complex idea related to the student's major or intended career to a non-expert audience. Similar to informative speeches included in many public speaking courses, the explanatory speech requires students to conduct independent research, develop an outline, and deliver the speech extemporaneously during class. This speech was selected because it was completed approximately halfway through the semester and was the only individual speech delivered by students; all other speeches are with a partner or group. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between all course performance measures.

**Engagement.** Engagement was measured using Reeve's (2013) Student Engagement Scale (SES), which includes four dimensions: Behavioral, Agentic, Cognitive, and Emotional. This scale includes 21 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. In the present study, behavioral engagement included items such as, "I listen carefully in class," and, "I work hard when we start something new in class" ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Agentic engagement was comprised of items such as, "During class, I express my preferences and

opinions,” and, “I tell the teacher what I like and what I don’t like” ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The third dimension, cognitive engagement, included items such as, “When doing schoolwork, I try to relate what I’m learning to what I already know,” and, “I try to make all the different ideas fit together and make sense when I study” ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The final aspect of engagement, emotional engagement was comprised of items such as, “When I am in class, I feel curious about what we are learning,” and, “I enjoy learning new things in class” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Table 2 contains all descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the four dimensions of engagement.

## Results

### Performance

In order to test H1<sub>a-c</sub>, a between-subjects MANOVA with one independent variable (communication center attendance) and three dependent variables (speech grade, attendance, and course grade) was conducted to find out whether there was a difference between students who visited the communication center before the first speech of the semester and those who did not. First, Pearson correlations between the three dependent variables were conducted in order to determine the appropriateness of a MANOVA; all dependent variables were significantly correlated with each other ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 1). Box’s M test for the equality of covariance matrices was significant,  $F(6, 489781.13) = 114.61, p < .001$ , so Hotelling’s Trace values were used. The multivariate test showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two conditions on the performance metrics,  $F(3, 258) = 10.75, p < .001$ , multivariate  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ , power = .99.

**Table 1**  
***Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations of Performance Measures***

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1 Explanatory Speech	84.56	13.67	—		
2 Class Attendance	0.95	0.09	.27	—	
3 Course Grade	864.68	82.89	.62	.49	—

Note. All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ ,  $N = 262$ .

Follow-up between-subjects ANOVAs detected a statistically significant difference between the two conditions on all performance measures: explanatory speech,  $F(1, 260) = 17.52, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ , power = .99; class attendance,  $F(1,$

260) = 9.54,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ , power = .89; and course grade,  $F(1, 260) = 30.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ , power = 1.00. Those who visited the communication center scored higher on all performance measures (see Table 3); thus,  $H_{1a-c}$  were supported. The effect sizes here suggest that visiting the communication center had a meaningful impact on academic performance, accounting for 6% of the variance in speech grades, 11% of the variance in overall course grades, and 4% of the variance in attendance. As the means in Table 3 indicate, students who visited the communication center earned higher speech grades, attended class more regularly, and received higher course grades.

### Engagement

In order to test  $H_{2a-d}$ , another between-subjects MANOVA with one independent variable (Communication Center attendance) was conducted to find out whether there was a difference between students who visited the communication center before the first speech of the semester and those who did not on the measures of engagement. However, there were some students in the sample who did not complete all measures of engagement in their entirety; consequently, the *attended communication center* condition had 108 participants and the *did not attend the communication center condition* had 101 participants.

**Table 2**  
**Alpha Coefficients, Descriptive Statistics, and Pearson Correlations of Engagement Measures**

Dependent Variable	$\alpha$	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Behavioral Engagement	.87	5.66	1.01	—			
2 Cognitive Engagement	.88	5.40	1.12	.79	—		
3 Agentic Engagement	.90	5.16	1.14	.78	.76	—	
4 Emotional Engagement	.91	5.18	1.27	.77	.74	.77	—

Note. All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ ,  $N = 209$ .

In order to determine the appropriateness of a MANOVA, Pearson correlations between the four dependent variables, behavioral, agentic, cognitive, and emotional engagement, were conducted in order to determine the appropriateness of a MANOVA; all dependent variables were significantly correlated with each other ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 2). Box's M test could not be computed, so the more conservative Hotelling's Trace values were used. The multivariate test showed that there was a

statistically significant difference between the two conditions on the measure of engagement,  $F(4, 204) = 2.86, p = .024$ , multivariate  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ , power = .77.

Follow-up between-subjects ANOVAs detected a statistically significant difference between the two conditions on behavioral engagement,  $F(1, 207) = 5.35, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ , power = .63, and cognitive engagement  $F(1, 207) = 4.37, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ , power = .55; those who visited the communication center scored higher on these two dimensions of engagement (see Table 3). Thus, H2<sub>a</sub> and H2<sub>b</sub> were supported. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the two conditions on agentic engagement,  $F(1, 207) = 1.25, p = .27, \eta^2 = .00$ , power = .20, and emotional engagement,  $F(1, 207) = 0.23, p = .65, \eta^2 = .00$ , power = .08). Thus, H2<sub>c</sub> and H2<sub>d</sub> were not supported.

**Table 3**  
***Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables and the Results of Follow-Up ANOVAs***

Dependent Variable	Attended Communication Center		Did Not Attend the Communication Center		Results
	M	SD	M	SD	
Explanatory Speech	87.99	7.30	81.13	17.26	$F(1, 260) = 17.52, p = .001$
Class Attendance	0.97	0.08	0.93	0.09	$F(1, 260) = 9.54, p = .002$
Course Grade	891.57	61.23	837.79	92.67	$F(1, 260) = 30.71, p = .001$
Behavioral Engagement	5.82	0.95	5.50	1.06	$F(1, 207) = 5.35, p = .02$
Cognitive Engagement	5.56	0.96	5.24	1.24	$F(1, 207) = 4.37, p = .04$
Agentic Engagement	5.25	1.06	5.07	1.22	$F(1, 207) = 1.25, p = .27$
Emotional Engagement	5.22	1.26	5.13	1.29	$F(1, 207) = 0.23, p = .65$

Note. Performance measures N = 262, engagement measures N = 209.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to empirically evaluate the effect that visiting the communication center had on students' academic performance and engagement in

an introductory communication course. Our results indicate that attending the communication center does have a substantial impact on students' academic performance in the class and is associated with some types of engagement.

### Course Performance

Consistent with previous research (Davis et al., 2017; Dwyer et al., 2002; Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Jones et al., 2004), students who visited the communication center had approximately 6% higher speech grades, and visiting the communication center accounted for 11% of the variance in final course grades (with a mean difference of a little over 5% between groups), indicating that H1<sub>a</sub> and H1<sub>c</sub> are supported. While those percentages might seem small on the surface, this suggests that a single visit to the communication center boosted the quality of performances and subsequent grades by a little over half of a letter grade, both on the speech and in the course, which is meaningful growth. Even though we did not examine precisely what students worked on during the coaching session in the communication center (brainstorming, research, outlining, delivery practice, etc.), students' performances were stronger and were much more consistent ( $SD = 7.30$ ) than the performances of their classmates who did not attend the communication center ( $SD = 17.26$ ), as was also the case for final course grades. This result suggests that getting coaching in any stage of the presentation development process is helpful, but future research should evaluate whether there are some types of coaching that are more beneficial than others and if there are specific areas—brainstorming, research, outlining, delivery practice, etc.—that were more impactful. The higher final course grades also suggest that the benefits of using the communication center could persist throughout the semester, and do not just benefit students on the single assignment for which they seek help. This might indicate that students are able to apply what they learn in one visit to subsequent related speech assignments.

Course attendance was also slightly (4%) higher for students who visited the communication center prior to the first speech, supporting H1<sub>b</sub>. However, there are a few possible explanations for this finding, and more research is needed to help further explain this relationship. One possibility is that visiting the communication center early in the semester helps students build confidence, as Dwyer and Davidson (2012) found. Thus, they may appreciate the value of the class, which enhances attendance.

Another possible explanation for higher classroom attendance is that students who are more motivated to succeed in the class are both more likely to attend class and are more likely to set an appointment in the communication center earlier in the semester. Yet another possibility, particularly on a diverse campus, where many students have jobs, children, and other responsibilities, is that those who have fewer constraints are more likely to attend class regularly and have the flexibility to set an earlier appointment in the communication center. While we do not know for certain which explanation underlies the relationship between visiting the communication center and attendance, we did find that the two are related to one another and are also positively correlated with speech and course grades.

### **Engagement**

In addition to having stronger speech and course performances, students who visited the communication center prior to the first speech had higher levels of cognitive and behavioral engagement, but not agentic and emotional engagement. Because student engagement is one of the best indicators of learning and overall student success (Kuh, 2009), this finding helps to explain the underlying relationships between communication centers and overall student success and persistence to graduation (Von Till, 2012; Yook, 2012). Interacting in purposeful educational activities, such as visiting the communication center, may help increase the odds that students “will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, [and] acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century” (Kuh, 2009, p. 698). The significant relationship between the communication center and behavioral and cognitive engagement may be related to the idea that students who are interested in learning new skills—as exemplified in the explanatory speech—would most likely visit the communication center to seek ways to improve their grasp of these new communication skills. Similarly, students that are critically thinking and engaging in the course content (cognitive engagement) and asking clarifying questions (behavioral engagement) might seek other ways to understand and engage in difficult materials (cognitive engagement).

The question remains, why were agentic and emotional engagement not higher for students who visited the communication center? One explanation might be that agentic engagement has to do with the level of autonomy a student perceives that they have in the classroom. Increasing autonomy is not necessarily the mission of the communication center; in contrast, the communication center is primarily concerned

with improving the students' communication skills through feedback and coaching from peer mentors. While this feedback facilitates greater autonomy over time, the very act of visiting the communication center is one of help-seeking, not independent achievement. Additionally, emotional engagement is related to the positive or negative reactions that students have with their classmates, courses, and the school at large. Students may not have positively or negatively valenced emotions toward the communication center—instead, seeing it as a resource that can be used to improve their speaking skills (behavioral engagement) and increase their knowledge of the material (cognitive engagement). Furthermore, most students experience at least some degree of communication apprehension and public speaking anxiety when taking an introductory communication course; while research has shown that taking the course reduces communication anxiety (Broeckelman-Post et al, 2020; Hunter et al., 2014), this anxiety may be adding a complicating layer to the emotional engagement that students experience in this course.

### **Practical Implications**

While this study is somewhat exploratory in nature, in that it sought to empirically evaluate the degree to which visiting a communication center as a required component of an introductory communication course improved students' performance and engagement; it provides compelling evidence that coaching in the communication center makes a difference and improves students' achievement of learning outcomes in the course. While the logistics, space, and budget planning components of building such a center might seem a bit daunting at the outset, these findings suggest that integrating communication center visits into introductory communication courses is a worthwhile endeavor that benefits students. The present study also adds to the body of evidence that can be used by Basic Course Directors, Communication Center Directors, and faculty advocating for resources to build a communication center, whether as part of a class or a broader ongoing communication skills development initiative across an entire campus. After all, a report by Burning Glass Technologies and Business-Higher Education Forum (2018) found that communication was one of the most highly demanded skills by employers, even in digital-based professions. Investments in communication centers can help to build students' communication skills in ways that enhance their performance in current and future coursework, as well as benefit students in their future careers and communities.

### **Limitation and Future Research**

Despite the contributions of the present study toward understanding the effect that adding a communication center has on student performance and engagement in an oral communication course, there are several limitations and areas where future research is needed. First, ethical considerations precluded the implementation of a true experimental design to address our hypotheses. More specifically, since we hypothesized that utilizing the communication center prior to the first speech would be associated with higher speech and course grades, it would be unethical to randomly assign students to either attend or not attend the communication center; as participating in the experiment could potentially negatively affect the grades of those in the control (i.e., did not attend) condition. Consequently, we do not seek to determine causality or establish the direction of the relationships hypothesized in this study.

It may have been the case, for example, that behavioral and cognitive engagement predict whether students are more likely to visit the communication center earlier in the semester, not the other way around. Likewise, it is possible that students who were already doing well in the course, who were highly motivated, or who had higher communication apprehension were more likely than their peers to seek coaching in the communication center. Future research should investigate the extent to which motivation, communication apprehension, instructor assignments, and prior course performance influences the likelihood that students will visit the communication center and explore the extent to which those variables might be impacting student outcomes.

Finally, we must be careful when foregrounding grade improvement in the oral communication course because the benefits associated with seeking coaching in the communication center may transcend performance in a single class. One of the primary goals of building a communication center is to promote continuous student development of communication skills that will be applicable beyond the basic course (Schwartzman & Ellis, 2011). Future research should experimentally examine the impact of communication centers on long-term student skills growth and ability to adapt to new communication contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined whether visiting the communication center early in the semester improved student performance and engagement in their oral communication course. Overall, it found that visiting the communication center was

associated with higher student performance—speech grades, class attendance, and overall course grades—as well as higher scores on measures of student behavioral and cognitive engagement. While there is a need for further research, this study is a first step in establishing the degree to which embedding individualized coaching in an introductory communication course can improve student outcomes in the course, as well as potentially improve student communication outcomes throughout their academic and professional careers.

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