Looking Forward to Meet Needs: A Response to Edwards; Frey, Tatum, and Cooper; and Prentiss

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Basic Course Forum

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The essays you have just read offer valuable insights into the matter of matching communication knowledge and skills with employer needs. This topic is one of the more important issues facing the academy at present. Higher education in America is currently undergoing seismic shifts (Bok, 2013; Crow & Dabars, 2015). The model of higher education we have been developing since the late 1800s has served us well for over a century. But that model was developed to transition higher education from developing teachers and clergy to supporting broader societal needs of the Industrial Age (Davidson, 2017). With a very different nature of work in an Information Age, we need to revise curriculum and pedagogy accordingly.

These necessary changes have an outsized impact on the introductory communication course because of how different today's communication needs are. As Edwards identifies in her essay, survey after survey (such as the annual NACE studies) identify both "ability to verbally communicate" and numerous skills that are more communication than anything else—interpersonal skills, ability to influence others, ability to work in team—as the most important skills employers are seeking. Importantly, our discipline can offer curriculum and learning outcomes that withstand the onslaught of artificial intelligence, which is taking a toll on disciplines like accounting and law where much of the work is being replaced by automation. Knowledge and skills like the ability to understand others (audience analysis), adapt messages to situational parameters, think critically and creatively, solve complex and

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unstructured problems, and collaborate across differences, are increasing sought-after and "robot-proof" (Aoun, 2017).

Meeting these needs requires a curriculum aligned with the needs of a changing workplace. We must also do better in helping students understand how the course prepares them to excel in future jobs so they can articulate to prospective employers what marketable knowledge and skill they have and how it will serve the organization. And, while this forum is focused on meeting employer needs, it is important to keep in mind that the course also needs to meet our responsibility to society. We need an introductory course that also helps future citizens forge a path forward on the looming existential crises—climate change, racial injustice, global health, and more.

Enter this engaging set of essays. Frey, Tatum, and Cooper highlight the need to bring our disciplinary expertise in communicative competence and instructional communication to prepare students to thrive in reverse mentoring situations—more accurately labeled *mutual mentoring,* in recognition of the two-way nature of such professional development. Both Edwards and Prentiss correctly note the need to better prepare our students for communication in mediated settings. Edwards offers a tremendous rationale and vision, and Prentiss provides some fruitful ideas for curricular innovation.

During my time as chair, our department redesigned our introductory course, grounding it in the needs of the university and its employers. We explored employer needs across disciplines by listening to colleagues across all units on campus, and we also talked to employers who hired our communication majors. What we learned was that employers saw a different set of needs than we had in our existing curriculum and from what are found in the discipline's introductory texts (Hess, 2012). The essays in this forum—if taken seriously—will produce a curriculum that differs from today's traditional introductory courses. Not only would they require changes in course topics, assignments, and pedagogy, they may even require new text materials to support their learning outcomes. This innovative thinking is an exciting possibility worth readers' attention.

This latter piece—textbook materials—is an important consideration beyond the curricular focus. If course directors and instructors take some of these changes seriously, we will need textbooks that support updated learning outcomes. That may require some programs to prepare custom materials for their students, a product that online textbook materials can more readily support than in days past. But custom materials are not an option for many. Thus, textbook authors need to lead some of

these innovations by publishing books specifically developed for today's employment and civic needs. Of course, that process will likely have to happen gradually, as publishers are reluctant to deviate very far from market standards with any new book.

Edwards's rationale for a focus on digital communication competence is on target and particularly important. In spotlighting this point, I offer an observation that I hope all readers will take to heart. In arguing that digital communication can be a form of public speaking, Edwards makes a case that we can justify this new emphasis through its fit with the fundamental principles we have long been teaching in public speaking. Perhaps. But don't. Our mission is not to continue what we've done in the past; it's to look forward and ask how our discipline—as it is now, and as it needs to become—can improve the human condition. We must develop curriculum by looking at the present and the future, not the past.

In addition to the excellent ones in these essays, there are many other outstanding ideas that warrant space in this conversation. I would put digital/media/online literacy, including the capacity to identify faulty arguments and propaganda; public deliberation; dialogue across difference; communication ethics; and relationship-building as among the most essential needs for business and humanity. Those areas of knowledge and skill, along with highly sought capacities in creative thinking, problem solving, leadership, and collaboration should all be part of different introductory courses across the nation.

Read and reflect on these essays, talk to those who employ your graduates, examine your student population and their specific needs, and consider your institution's mission. Then look ahead, asking how your course can better meet the needs of a changing world. Use these essays as a starting point—and think beyond them as well. Boldly innovate in your curriculum and pedagogy. Do so, and you will create an introductory course that not only meets employer needs, but also helps lead humanity to a better future.

References

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