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# Lobbying as a Means for Expanding the Communication Instructional Base in Higher Education III

**Craig Newburger[1], Patricia L. Donat[2], and Sherwyn P. Morreale[3]**

1. Ohio and Federal Southern District of Ohio Practicing Attorney, USA
2. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), USA
3. University of Colorado Colorado Springs (Emerita), USA

## ABSTRACT

Based on several national mandates, this essay examines the support for and importance of active advocacy among our discipline members in framing the conversation about oral communication proficiency, leading instructional design, and assessing student learning on our campuses. Recommended action involves the development and implementation of a coordinated strategy for engaging both institutional accreditors and those charged with the development and modification of individual campus general education requirements regarding the importance of communication scholars and instructors as principal designers of learning goals, subsequent learning activities, and the corresponding assessment of oral communication instruction on college campuses.

**KEYWORDS:** instructional communication, higher education, coordinated lobbying strategy, accreditation, advocacy, general education requirements, designers of learning goals, learning activities, and assessment

**CONTACT** Craig Newburger • E-mail: craiglaw2015@gmail.com • Ohio and Federal Southern District of Ohio Practicing Attorney • 9435 Waterstone Blvd. • Cincinnati, OH • 45249

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# Introduction

In 1996, the National Communication Association (NCA) adopted a public policy statement related to the role of communication courses and communication faculty in general education. That statement, which was revisited and revised in 2012, 2017, and 2018, provides a rationale for the lobbying efforts to be recommended in this present essay:

> The National Communication Association supports and defends the inclusion of an oral communication course or courses in college and university General Education Requirements and the instruction of that course or courses by faculty trained in the discipline of communication. The NCA maintains that student delivery of oral presentations without rigorous training and evaluation by Communication faculty does not constitute Communication competency.

A revision to the policy statement in 2012 adopted by the NCA Legislative Assembly also outlined specific action steps to advance this agenda. These actions included a plan to add a web page publishing the resolution as well as a plethora of resources to support advocacy efforts. The web page would include links to scholarly articles and related resources, including assessment instruments. The 2012 resolution also called for financial and human resources to implement the resolution, including staff time, additional materials for the web page, permissions for copyrighted material, assessment projects, and expert consultation on developing courses that align with general education goals (NCA, 2012). Since that time, active support and lobbying on behalf of the accomplishment of these actions has been limited. The action plan as articulated in the resolution also appears to have not been implemented. Thereby, 12 years hence, this essay intends to examine, and perhaps answer, two somewhat different but related questions.

First, should members of the communication discipline develop an updated approach to the issue that includes a coordinated strategy for engaging with institutional accreditors and those charged with the development and modification of campus general education requirements, regarding the importance of communication scholars and instructors as the principal designers of learning goals, subsequent learning activities, and corresponding assessment of oral communication instruction on college campuses?

Second, have members of the communication discipline passively allowed others to determine how communication instruction is integrated into institutional general education requirements, despite existing broad interdisciplinary support that oral communication instruction is an essential learning outcome of general undergraduate education?

This essay, the third iteration on this matter, re-examines the importance of and need for active lobbying on the part of the communication discipline and disciplinary members in framing a needed conversation about the inclusion of oral communication instruction in higher education (Newburger, 2015, 2018). Moreover, the essayists themselves support the mandate in NCA's public policy statement (NCA, n.d.) calling for communication faculty to provide the training and evaluation necessary to lead instructional design and assessment of student learning related to students' communication competence on our higher education campuses.

Specifically, the essay begins by painting a picture of a communication program that handled this critical matter effectively. Then, historical interdisciplinary support, and disciplinary support, for basic communication instruction in postsecondary education is outlined. Relatedly, that discussion of the importance of instructional communication is followed by an overview of the inclusion of oral communication in accreditation standards across the country. Next, and similarly, an overview is provided about the inclusion of communication in Quality Enhancement Plans (QEP) as required by the Southern Association of Colleges and School Commission on Colleges (n.d.d). Against this backdrop, the essay concludes with a call for a discipline-wide approach for lobbying to expand communication instruction in postsecondary general education requirements.

## Communication Programs Under Siege

Hess (2012) detailed how his communication department avoided possible elimination of its university-wide requirement of oral communication. The threat to the basic course was triggered by a major revision to the university's general education program. Hess detailed how to "sell" communication instruction to those who were in the position to support his department's curricular contribution to university undergraduates:

> In the absence of any voice on the committees, we began by talking with those who had decision-making power. Another faculty member and I talked to each of our sector's representatives on the Academic Senate and on the Academic Policies Committee to make a case for the importance of oral communication, taught by faculty with training in the field, and to find out what we could do to make our case heard. I also talked to both the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and to the college's Associate Dean for Integrated Learning, who was highly involved in the curriculum revision process. These conversations helped us to get some of our message out, and at the very least, made it clear that the department was going to fight hard for required coursework in oral communication taught by qualified faculty. These conversations with leaders who saw the department from an outside perspective also offered some ideas about productive directions we might take in our response. (2012, p. 4)

The Hess example demonstrates how individual departments might approach advancing communication instruction across their local undergraduate core curriculum. Future research may examine scenarios that led institutions to eliminate their speech/public speaking requirement from their general education curriculum, only to later realize the need to restore oral communication to the college curriculum, either as a general education requirement, or as an embedded curricular model, often with co-curricular academic support. Additionally, future research may also examine how periodic departmental program reviews are used as a tool to spread the good word about our disciplinary strengths while arguing for new resources.

## Historical Interdisciplinary, and Disciplinary Support, for Basic Communication Instruction in Postsecondary Education

### Historical and Interdisciplinary Support

The need for postsecondary communication instruction has been repeatedly stated for decades. One example, the National Education Goals Panel, was formed in 1990 after a meeting of President George H. W. Bush and states' governors. The organization was established to report on the nation's progress toward six education goals adopted at the meeting. On July 27, 1993, resolutions of the above panel regarding "Assessing the National Goal Relating to Postsecondary Education—Goal Five" were adopted. Goal Five stated that:

> . . . The National Education Goals Panel believes that it is both feasible and desirable to develop a national sample-based postsecondary assessment system that will provide regular national and comparable state indicators of college graduates' ability to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems. In assessing students' abilities to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems, the system should be designed to reflect students' differing fields of study and occupational areas. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993)

The "Goals 2000: Educate America Act," signed in 1994, charged the National Education Goals Panel with reviewing and promoting voluntarily submitted national content, student performance, and opportunity to learn standards (Newburger, 1996, 2015, 2018). Currently, the Association of American College and Universities (AACU, 2007) includes effective oral and written communication among its six recommended intellectual and practical skills: inquiry and analysis; critical and creative thinking; written and oral communication; quantitative literacy; information literacy; and teamwork and problem solving.

### Disciplinary Support

Over time, communication scholars and researchers have also written extensively about the importance of instructional and communication education. Over the first 2 decades of the 21st century, a series of three studies empirically affirmed that importance and provided support for the centrality of the communication discipline's content and pedagogy (Morreale et al., 2000; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Morreale et al., 2017). Similar to those three earlier studies, the results of a recent fourth study also argue that communication, and specifically oral communication education, is critical to students' future personal and professional success (Morreale et al., 2023). Thematic analysis of 2,155 articles, identified in academic and popular press publications extending from 2016 to 2020, provides support for the centrality of the communication discipline's content and pedagogy. Other research teams studied and reported about the opportunities for instructional communication scholars related to instructional preparedness and the transition to remote learning at the start of the 2020 pandemic (Morreale et al., 2020; Westwick & Morreale, 2021). Similar to this present essay, in 2023, Morreale and Westwick wrote about advocating for and valuing instructional and communication education across the academy.

In support of these writings by communication scholars, effective communication skills often are listed as one of the most important skills for new employees and, as such, are often the focus of strategic planning and institutional initiatives to prepare students for the workforce. Strong communication skills are a critical component of almost any career; even more so as one advances in their respective fields. In 2021, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) listed verbal communication skills as fourth on a list of attributes sought by employers (up from seventh in 2020) with 73% of respondents looking for evidence of this skill (Gray, 2022). Communication skills are listed as a top requirement for any job, no matter the specific field; they are employers' most required soft skill by far. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 80% of business presentations were already virtual, and since then, that number has increased exponentially (Duarte, 2013).

These writings about the importance of instructional communication and the development of communication skills in higher education point to the need to consider the presence, or the lack of presence, of communication in accreditation standards across the country.

## Oral Communication in Accreditation Standards in the U.S.

Institutional accreditors (formerly identified as regional accreditors) have an important role in upholding the quality standards for higher education in the United States. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (AAJC) Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) have a combined membership that includes most degree-granting institutions in the United States, with over 3,000 members. As such, accreditation standards as established by their members set the stage for general education curriculum across the country and for ensuring that the next generation of graduates leave their college experience with the knowledge and skills to communicate effectively in a rapidly changing world.

Institutional accreditors have taken varying approaches to framing the content of general education within institutions of higher learning, with some providing a more explicit recognition of the importance of communication instruction than others.

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) explicitly includes oral communication in its recently published *Standards for Accreditation:*

> **Standard Four: The Academic Program; Undergraduate Degree Programs**
>
> 4.15 Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing

> learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind. (NECHE, 2021, p. 9)

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC) includes communication more broadly, without an explicit identification of oral communication. Standard 2: Student Success, 2.3 states:

> All degree programs include a general education framework to ensure the development of broad knowledge, skills, and competencies related to communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, information literacy, civic responsibility, and the ability to engage with diverse perspectives. (ACCJC, 2024, p. 3)

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) requires institutions' general education programs to include a breadth of knowledge with a requirement for coursework from broad disciplinary areas.

> Core Requirement 9.3 (General Education Requirements): The institution requires a general education component at the undergraduate level that: (a) is based on a coherent rationale. (b) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree program. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for the baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent. (c) ensures breadth of knowledge. These credit hours include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics. These courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession. (SACSCOC, 2024a, p. 18)
>
> Note: Coursework in neither oral nor written communication is required and may not be used to document compliance with the standard.
>
> Courses in basic composition that do not contain a significant literature component, courses in oral communication, and introductory foreign language courses are skill courses and not pure humanities courses. Therefore, for purposes of meeting this standard, none of the above may be the one course designated to fulfill the humanities/fine arts requirement in CR 9.3. The institution is responsible for making a persuasive case that at least one of the courses it requires to meet the humanities/fine arts area does not "narrowly focus" on skills. (SACSCOC, 2024b)

Although SACSCOC member institutions may require communication coursework as part of their general education program in alignment with their mission, coursework that focuses on skill proficiency in the humanities disciplines is excluded as a means of demonstrating breadth of knowledge.

The Higher Learning Commission provides even greater flexibility to institutions in designing their general education programs. The Higher Learning Commission's Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support, Core Component 3.B. states:

> The institution offers programs that engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in mastering modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments.
>
> 1. The general education program is appropriate to the mission, educational offerings, and degree levels of the institution. The institution articulates the purposes, content and intended learning outcomes of its undergraduate general education requirements.
> 2. The program of general education is grounded in a philosophy or framework developed by the institution or adopted from an established framework. It imparts broad knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and develops skills and attitudes that the institution believes every college-education person should possess. (Higher Learning Commission, 2020)

A review of these general education accreditation standards highlights the important role of accreditors in providing a broad framework for general education and the essential role of institutional faculty in defining general education content within these overarching requirements. As this review describes, although some institutional accreditors explicitly require oral communication as part of general education, others provide flexibility to institutions in identifying essential general education knowledge and skills. As a result, it is important that communication faculty understand the importance of engaging both in the conversations regarding the language of accreditation standards, as well as in how standards are defined within the institution. Accreditation standards are reviewed and revised on a regular basis. If communication skills are valued as an essential skill, an organized effort to consider their inclusion is needed not only at the institutional level, but also at the national level through advocacy regarding the framework for general education.

## Communication in Institutional Quality Enhancement Plans

Communication faculty can leverage existing accreditation processes to highlight the value of their discipline to student achievement and student success, to build effective relationships with colleagues across their campuses, and to educate the campus community regarding communication as a scholarly discipline. Accreditation processes often include opportunities to describe institutional initiatives that highlight the work of communication faculty and the development of communication skills such as in public speaking and interpersonal communication. Examples of communication faculty and administrators who used accreditation processes to advance the value of their discipline, engage campus constituents, and support good practices in the integration of communication in curricular and co-curricular activities are now provided.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) requires institutions undergoing decennial reaffirmation review to prepare a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). These plans reflect institutional initiatives to enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of institutions and must focus on student learning or student success initiatives. Executive summaries from institutional QEPs are published on SACSCOC's website.[1]

1. https://web.archive.org/web/20230128180646/https://sacscoc.org/quality-enhancement-plans/

A recent review of QEP topics demonstrates how communication remains an important outcome for institutions. The following are executive summaries of three recent institutional QEPs that illustrate campus-wide efforts to improve student communication knowledge and skills. These QEPs were selected because they represent the most recent QEPs developed by institutions relevant to the topic of this article. The institutions represented include both a public and private institutions, as well as institutions that are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Each QEP was developed by an institution undergoing reaffirmation review in 2020.

**1. Dillard University Quality Enhancement Plan: "Talking on the Oaks"**

Oral communication skills, essential for academic and professional success, are honed during interaction both in and out of class. Students' capacity to communicate with faculty and staff impact both opportunities to engage and learning outcomes. Dillard students often come from backgrounds in which traditional academic skills in English and Language Arts have not been fully cultivated. The cultural norms for oral communication of our students place them at a disadvantage in both traditional academic and professional settings. The QEP Goal is –

> To foster an institutional environment that prepares students to be effective and competitive oral communicators in a diverse, global, and technologically advanced society.

To achieve this overarching goal, Dillard intends to develop students' oral communication skills to be effective and appropriate communicators in all situations. Key SLOs identified for the QEP include:

1. Students will demonstrate effective oral communication competency during academic advising by articulating their academic goals and asking appropriate questions to gain understanding of their requirements for academic progress (AY1-AY2 transition).
2. Students will demonstrate effective discipline specific oral communication during selected upper-level courses in their major (AY3, AY4).
3. Students engaged with co-curricular activities that connect with coursework or enhance skills necessary for successful entry into the workforce (undergraduate research, mock trial, student leadership, athletics, . . . ) will demonstrate effective oral communication, through the delivery of well-organized, fitting, and meaningful speech appropriate to the setting and audience.

Developed through broad-based involvement by stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, employers, and other external constituents, Dillard's aspirations are for an achievable and impactful QEP promoting the development of students' oral communication skills to enhance learning outcomes. Talking on the Oaks advocates strategies for use within both academic and student success programs to strengthen students' oral communication skills and prepare them to be effective oral communicators in their academic career and early professional life.

The QEP assessment is criterion-based, focusing on student competency at specific points during academic progression. In addition to assessing student competencies, student reported self-efficacy is monitored for change over time at the institution level.

The QEP supports and develops professional skills of faculty and staff for the betterment of the academic environment and prepares students for life after Dillard. Improved oral communication skills directly impact students' capacity to be engaged citizens addressing important issues in the changing landscape of higher education and in a diverse, global, and technologically advanced society. (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, n.d.c)

2. **Guilford College Quality Enhancement Plan: *Speak UP*: Unifying Presentation for an Inclusive, Connected World**

Guilford College is investing in faculty development, resources, and educational support services to ensure the success and sustainability of our new QEP: *Speak UP: Unifying Presentation for an Inclusive, Connected World*. *Speak UP* will benefit the College by furthering its academic principles, supporting its strategic priorities, and fulfilling its mission to provide students with a "transformative, practical, and excellent liberal arts education that produces critical thinkers in an inclusive, diverse environment." *Speak UP* will engage students critically with intellectual content and deepen their learning experience as it challenges them to consider inclusiveness for accommodating the needs of diverse constituencies.

The goal of *Speak UP: Unifying Presentation for an Inclusive, Connected World* is to improve students' performance and attitudes about public presentation as vital to effective public discourse.

The learning outcomes related to public presentation competency for *Speak UP* include: 1) Performance: Students will demonstrate "performance" competency, as evidenced by a public presentation, and 2) Attitudes: Students will demonstrate improved "attitudes" toward public presentations.

We plan to further these outcomes through: 1) expansion of curricular and co-"curricular opportunities for students, 2) faculty development in teaching and evaluating public presentations using Universal Design for Learning techniques, and 3) providing strong, focused support for students and faculty through an internal collaborative support and development structure within Hege Library's Academic Commons. The Academic Commons partners include librarians and learning technologists, Learning Commons tutors, Disability Resources professionals, and the Directors of Faculty Development, Research and Creative Endeavors, the Honors Program, and Institutional Research and Effectiveness. A QEP Coordinator will ensure sustainability of *Speak UP* in close partnership with this team.

Guilford College's Assessment Committee is responsible for the administration and oversight of the assessment of student learning with respect to the curriculum, the core values, and goals of the College. Internal assessment data will provide a framework for the Assessment Committee to support the progress of Guilford College's new QEP.

The QEP developed as the result of nearly two years of study, reflection, and refinement of ideas among institutional constituencies—students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and administrators. Membership of the QEP Plan Development Committee represented many areas of the College, facilitating broad inclusion in the process and the distribution of the plan details across the community. (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, n.d.d)

3. **Grambling State University (QEP) Elevating Oral Communication to the Top of the Class: Speak On It…**

The purpose of GSU's QEP is to foster student mastery of oral communication and its fluidity regardless of the setting, mode of delivery and irrespective of the students' academic major. With the elimination of the Speech/Public Speaking requirement from the General Education curriculum in 2009, there is an increased need for a structured approach to ensure that students attain competencies in communication that will have a positive impact on student learning, institutional success rates, as well as marketability/employability of GSU graduates. National research among stakeholder groups such as faculty, employers and students, documents the need to strengthen students' communication skills, which will prepare them for success throughout their college experience, as well as their professional entrance into the career of their choice. The QEP has evolved from institutional need and data, as well as a diligent and collaborative selection process, which included key stakeholder involvement and representation. As an institution of the 21st century of higher learning, GSU is compelled to effectively prepare and produce a student equipped to be competitive in the global marketplace. Thus, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), Elevating Oral Communication to the Top of the Class: Speak On It… ***provides GSU the opportunity*** to focus direct attention on a leading soft skill required of college graduates and by prospective employers across industries and sectors. The intentional infusion of specific oral communications-based learning outcomes delivered in the University College's First Year Experience 101 and 102 courses, will establish a clear framework for broad impact in key areas of competency and student learning.

The QEP's overarching goal is:

**To produce effective, competent, and confident oral communicators.**

This goal includes four (4) student learning outcomes (SLOs) and focuses on the integration of the SLOs in the University College First Year Experience curriculum. This component will establish foundational skill building and awareness related to speaking and presentation skills among the freshman population. Specific and collaborative co-curricular activities are also included in this component.

**QEP Goal: To produce effective, competent, and confident oral communicators.**

**SLO 1:** Students will identify their apprehension as related to oral communication.

**SLO 2:** Students will use key delivery oral communication techniques (i.e., maintain eye contact, vocal variety, use of appropriate gestures, etc.)

**SLO 3:** Students will identify appropriate presentation styles by audience (setting, audience types).

**SLO 4:** Students will develop and execute speeches. (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, n.d.b)

As illustrated in these examples, communication faculty can leverage institutional initiatives to build support for oral communication instruction on their college campuses even if a course in oral communication is not required for all students. These initiatives provide models for restoring oral communication as an essential skill. Some rely on content modules in first-year experience courses; others rely upon embedded assignments within more advanced courses from other disciplines. Some rely upon instructors outside the discipline; others rely on peer coaches. Some include co-curricular programs and the inclusion of support for oral communication through academic support services or communication centers. Some focus solely on oral communication; others include interpersonal communication and visual communication.

When relying upon instructors outside the communication discipline or on peer coaches, active participation of communication faculty whose academic research and teaching background is specific to oral communication skills (eye contact, gesticulation, vocal cues, communication apprehension, etc.) is essential. Acknowledgment of the essential engagement of communication professionals, who can provide expertise in the design and implementation of oral communication in curricular and co-curricular programming, is needed to evaluate program effectiveness. A comparison of the effectiveness of individuals trained outside the discipline to provide instruction and feedback regarding speech/public speaking with the effectiveness of traditional general education coursework in oral communication is needed.

When using isolated content modules in orientation courses or dispersed instruction in oral communication skills across the curriculum, it also is important to consider the role that an absence of a foundational, comprehensive course has on the effectiveness of instruction provided by faculty members from other disciplines who, while embedding assignments in their courses that include oral presentations, may retain an emphasis on instruction in their disciplines as primary. In this model, oral proficiency and effectiveness may simply become an adjunct rather than a focus of student learning. A comparison of the effectiveness of this approach with and without the inclusion of a foundational oral communication course is needed.

Likewise, the models for Communication Centers that provide academic support services for students with both written and oral communication need to be examined. In most cases these centers are not perceived as a replacement for traditional instruction in written communication but may be perceived as adequate to support the development of proficiency in oral communication. In addition, when combined with a dual purpose of supporting both written and oral communication, the emphasis may be weighted toward written communication with greater resources and staffing directed toward supporting writing effectiveness. Because Writing Centers are more prevalent and long-standing on college campuses, the oversight of these units may focus on professionals with expertise in composition, with less emphasis on expertise in oral communication. A comparison of the services provided, staffing support, and training for these multipurpose communication centers is needed.

These examples illustrate opportunities for members of our discipline to participate in communication-related programmatic and/or curricular development for the postsecondary level. Nationwide surveying of universities and colleges and a comparison of the effectiveness of the approaches described above could detail how postsecondary academic institutions provide communication instruction and could guide our discipline's efforts for promoting basic course instruction.

## Nationwide Lobbying for Communication Instruction in General Education Requirements

Nationwide survey data may lead to the development of a broad curricular model that can be adapted across campuses involved in communication-related programmatic and/or curricular development for the postsecondary level. Newburger (2015, 2018) advocated for a broad discipline-wide approach using our national, regional, and state communication associations to join in forming an active coalition to lobby for increased communication instruction in postsecondary university general education requirements. Such a coalition would involve a collaborative, means-oriented arrangement that allows our national, regional, and state associations to pool resources and combine efforts to effect change.

The National Communication Association (NCA):

> engages in two types of work related to public policy. First, communication scholarship informs discussion about public issues, and the association sometimes takes corresponding positions on these issues. The association has provided funds to communication scholars to form public policy working groups that work to translate existing communication research findings into recommendations that can inform and impact public policy. Second, NCA advocates for public policy that supports the professional efforts of our members. (National Communication Association, n.d.)

Newburger (2015, 2018) argued that considering the imminent and immediate potential harm resulting from political inaction, perhaps the NCA Legislative Assembly should consider calling for and supporting a public policy working group charged with making recommendations for how our discipline can operationalize and implement a methodology for our discipline's political involvement for expansion of basic communication instruction across the postsecondary undergraduate core curriculum (general education requirements). He further argued that a working group may include chairs of national and regional basic course and instructional development divisions and representatives from our discipline's state associations. The group could focus on making recommendations to current institutional accrediting agencies and university general education committees or related campus entities. Recommendations should also target campus departmental faculty engaged in program reviews regarding the use of reviews as a tool to spread the good word about strength and importance of our discipline's active engagement while arguing for new resources.

Newburger (2015, 2018) further argued for assertive lobbying of institutional accrediting agencies, advancing recommendations that the principal designers of the learning goals, subsequent activities, and corresponding teaching and assessment of oral communication instruction on college campuses should include qualified faculty with disciplinary background specific to oral communication instruction. The ultimate goal would be reflected in accreditation standards expressly requiring essential skills in oral communication. Moreover, it should be expected that qualified faculty with disciplinary background specific to oral communication be included in the development of appropriate student learning outcomes, the design of associated learning activities, and in the assessment of their effectiveness. Such language written into accreditation standards would enable members of our discipline to make compelling arguments for expansion of basic communication instruction as an undergraduate general education requirement.

Lobbying accrediting agencies to consider the development of communication proficiency as an essential skill could be an effective strategy for building the regulatory framework to support local faculty at institutions with their own inclusion efforts. However, even in the absence of such regulatory language, institutional faculty have significant opportunities to leverage accreditation processes to promote communication instruction and support as illustrated by the institutions featured in this article. The public policy working group recommended above appears to be the necessary first step to support programs that may come under siege, while correspondingly providing support for the expansion of oral communication instruction across the undergraduate core curriculum.

To advocate for change more effectively, however, it is essential to gather data to clearly identify the urgency of action to identify the current state of communication instruction and the opportunities for advocacy and action. To date, no surveys have been published that describe how many accredited institutions nationwide require basic communication instruction (whether focused on oral communication, hybrid communication, writing, or some combination thereof) for all undergraduate students, regardless of major. Although all institutional accreditors include standards related to general education, the required coursework is typically not prescribed, resulting in significant variability in how individual institutions define general education in accordance with their missions. For those institutions that include communication as a general education outcome, comprehensive data regarding the design, instruction, and assessment of communication, and its inclusion as a requirement for all undergraduates also has not been reported. Additional information is needed to better understand the role of communication professionals in the development of accountability standards, student learning outcomes, the design of instructional environments and learning activities, and the assessment of learning. A survey of institutions and their accreditors is needed to examine the role of oral communication in general education curricular design, pedagogical practices, evaluation of faculty qualifications, the identification and assessment of student learning outcomes, and student support resources and the qualifications of support service staff. To better understand accountability structures for ensuring the development of students' oral communication skills, additional information is needed regarding the inclusion of oral communication in the adoption of higher education good practices, accreditation standards, student achievement accountability reporting, and student learning outcomes.

## Conclusion

This essay began by calling the readers' attention to the National Communication Association's 1996 public policy statement focused on the importance of communication courses and the role of communication faculty in general education. To advocate for the importance of communication instruction in postsecondary education more effectively, disciplinary faculty and administrators need to better understand the role of institutional accreditors. A survey of institutional accreditors regarding each agencies' current accreditation standards and policies that support the role of communication as an essential general education requirement, their process for review and revision of their standards, their schedule for review, their procedures for input during the revision process, and information about the composition of the committee charged with review and revision recommendations is needed. With this knowledge, communication professionals will be better able to plan their public advocacy efforts. In addition, a national survey of institutions is needed to comprehensively catalog current practices on college campuses. Documenting collegiate communication instruction, its placement in the curriculum (e.g., orientation, general education, advanced practice), its designation as a graduation requirement or elective, its instruction and assessment by communication faculty would assist the discipline in highlighting the urgency of these efforts. Detailing the co-curricular strategies to promote broad-based support and provide opportunities for further skill building and practice would further contribute to a comprehensive understanding of current practices and identify potential allies for public advocacy efforts. Finally, additional communication scholarship is needed to clearly identify and articulate the best curricular and co-curricular strategies for teaching and strengthening students' communication competency. The results of this work could and would be used to inform national, regional, and local advocacy campaigns for the inclusion and expansion of communication instruction in higher education. The authors of this essay look forward to a groundswell of support for these recommendations and stand ready to support such efforts.

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# Effective Communication for Department Chairs: Thinking Like a Leader, Acting as a Colleague

**Mark Hickson III**[1]

1. University of Alabama at Birmingham, USA

**ABSTRACT**
This is the third essay in a three-part series that the author has been working on. The first and second parts appear in earlier volumes of the Journal of the Association for Communication Administration.

**KEYWORDS:** leader, chair, communication

## Introduction

Despite the critical role that department chairs play in academia, there have been relatively few publications about what a chair needs to do and what a chair does not need to do in regard to communication. Our discipline has much to offer those who want to be chairs of communication departments and academic departments in general. The principles that we engage in through interpersonal communication, group communication, and organizational communication apply to chairs in most academic departments. We need to suggest ways to communicate that are practical as well as theoretical.

**CONTACT** Mark Hickson III • E-mail: hicksonm70@gmail.com • Department of Communication Studies • University of Alabama at Birmingham • 1720 University Blvd • Birmingham, AL • 35294

Books on departmental chairmanship have been popular over the years. Since many of these were popular in the 80s–90s, various changes have taken place, including: renewed interest in use of electronic media and subsequent instantaneous access to others around the world (Hickson & Stacks, 1992). There has been reduced financial support for higher education from federal and state governments. Grant monies from governmental and private agencies have also decreased. To compensate for these losses, tuitions have climbed at an accelerating and alarming rate. At the same time, interpersonal communication problems have continued as we search for solutions to short-term and long-range challenges in colleges and universities. The roles of leaders have multiplied.

Challenges, though, are just that. Perhaps the most important quality of a leader in today's world is adaptability, followed closely by innovation, and entrepreneurship. These qualities are all highly dependent on one's ability to communicate in a variety of contexts. Effective communication processes drive a culture where these qualities garner respect and support.

## Background

Academic leaders rarely start out as leaders. Most begin by completing a doctoral degree and accepting a position as an assistant professor. From there, the pathways to leadership vary. The most typical path is to engage in high quality research and teaching, where success leads to tenure and promotion to associate professor and then to full professor. This process usually takes at least 10 years. However, those who end up in leadership roles may progress at a faster pace.

Professors are certainly leaders. By publishing, they contribute substantially to their academic discipline and bring favor from their institutions. Many, in fact most, professors never take administrative positions. For a variety of reasons, others move into managerial positions. Their reasons for doing so are both personal and departmental. Most wish to significantly impact the growth and productivity of their units. They want to add to their institution's prestige.

The purpose here is to outline the communication characteristics and actions that provide leadership opportunities for those who wish to seek them. We begin the process by discussing what a faculty member needs to do to become a department chair.

## The Academic Chair Position

One important way that academia differs from the business enterprise is that there is little training for a person to become a chair. Some faculty members do not understand the position at all. Others think they know what a chair does but soon discover that the position is quite different once they obtain it. The basis upon which a department and a dean select a chair varies. They generally begin by deciding whether to select someone from within the unit or from outside.

The individual who becomes chair from within a department where all of the other members have been colleagues for some time presents the first case. When there is consensus, there is no problem with the selection process. This may be the case when the candidate has been an assistant or associate chair for a year or two. The candidate's colleagues have some experience with how she or he functions in some administrative capacity. Quite frankly, many associate chairs are given considerable responsibility and authority while others are given little of either. Holding the position, in and of itself, is not necessarily a sign of how effective the person will be as chair. The advantage of this approach to selecting a chair is that colleagues know how the candidate acts as a faculty member. Depending upon the responsibilities the candidate has had, the faculty may also have an idea of the administrative approach of the person. Typically, this situation starts out as if everything will remain the same. The greatest difficulty here is separating one's former ties as a colleague from what is now both a colleague and a superior–subordinate relationship.

Second, when the new chair comes from another institution, he or she must learn quickly the culture of the institution, the culture of the department, and the previous power structure of the department. The learning curve is quite high for a new chair from the outside.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge is time management. As a faculty member, one typically has much control over their own time. When one becomes chair, time is usually under someone else's control. The problem of time management and the difficulty in adapting, from minute to minute, has been illustrated by Spicer and Staton (1992):

> 7:30 You arrive at the office and go to make coffee, only to find that someone left the pot plugged in all night and the machine has fried itself. [long day coming you think]
>
> 8:05 Your favorite candidate for a job you are trying to fill calls and withdraws from the position because she got an offer $15,000 better than yours. [money isn't everything, you jerk, you think]
>
> 8:15 Your administrative assistant calls in with the flu. The two of you were going to finalize next year's budget, which was due yesterday. [where are those files anyway, you think]
>
> 8:35 A student in the only class you teach this term stops by to say another student cheated on the last exam you gave. [why am I trying to teach, you think]
>
> 9:05 The dean calls and wants a summary of all faculty publications, papers, presentations, consulting, community service, professional service, dental appointments, and the names of all children. He wants this by 11:00. [ha, you think] (pp. xi–xii)

Perhaps this is an exaggerated view, but it does happen, and even worse. And remember, it is not even lunch time yet. Time becomes a precious commodity.

When I was a chair, my roles were diverse. I had to ask several people to resign. I had to go to the office at 11:00 at night because one of the faculty offices was flooding from a thunderstorm. I had to call an exterminator because there were squirrels in the toilets of the journalism lab. I had to re-start a search for a position weeks after someone had already accepted the position but reversed the decision because his spouse did not like the public school system in our town. I have served on selection committees for administrative assistants and for a dean, a vice provost, and a president. I have served on grievance committees. I have been threatened with lawsuits and physical fights although (thank goodness) neither took place. These are part of the job, and there must be others I never encountered.

The chair position is rather unique. It involves being somewhat of a white-collar factory supervisor who lives in the union hall but reports to the boardroom. The chair is always supposed to know what is going on in the department. That includes knowing the answers to these kinds of questions: (1) Why did Bob not come to the school banquet? (2) Why has Jane not published anything in the past 4 years? (3) Do you really think Bill should get a salary increase for directing the graduate program? (4) Is Melody getting married *again*? And, yes, you are right. Many of these are personal questions. Nevertheless, some deans expect the chair to know not only what *officially* is going on but also what *else* is going on.

All of these personnel issues occur at the same time that the chair is receiving emails throughout the day—from superiors, from faculty members, from other chairs, from faculty at other universities, from alumni, from students. The term, *information overload*, has been around for a long time, but it is certainly more pertinent in the workplace now than it has ever been. Part of the time management approach is knowing what information is needed, what is useful, and determining what is *spam*. In this case, spam may be more than what it is ordinarily considered. It is not atypical, for example, to get an email from some source. That same email is forwarded to the chair from the dean's office, the provost's office, the president's office, and even the faculty senate. But even person-to-person interaction can be spam, which is usually cathartic interaction from a faculty member or a student (Hickson, 2017, p. 4).

Thus, in information theory terms, there is considerable redundancy. Such redundancy occurs not only in emails. When the chair sends the faculty an agenda for the next meeting, she is likely to receive requests from some faculty members to explain what some of the items on the agenda are about *prior* to the meeting. In some other cases, information is entropic. A chair may be asked to write a report with little information about its format, purpose, or ultimate intent.

These issues are managerial issues, but they are also *communication* issues. They involve sending, analyzing, producing, de-constructing, translating, interpreting, and presenting messages. *The effective leader is an effective communicator*. I refer to human interaction here because messages may be communicative, persuasive, cathartic, or some combination. There are several general concepts, tasks, and environmental ambiences that guide such effectiveness.

## General Concepts of Interaction

Here I will discuss eight general concepts of communication that are instrumental in today's academy. First, there is the matter of shared governance. *All* faculty members should be involved in the decisions that affect them. *All* frequently elicits a number of questions. Does that include non-tenure-earning faculty? Does that include adjuncts? Does that include graduate assistants? What about the administrative assistant? The answer is that *all* includes all persons who are *affected*.

Some examples may be helpful in answering these questions. If there are to be changes in the graduate curriculum, all of the faculty who teach graduate courses should be involved as well as some representative graduate students. This curriculum matter does not affect the administrative assistant, undergraduate students, or faculty members who do not teach graduate courses.

Typically, budget decisions affect everyone. If there are issues about basic courses, those instructors (including adjuncts) should be involved in the discussion.

Office space assignments should include everyone. One might find it interesting that many of the issues in departments are about what one might consider *minor* issues. Suppose the department has been moved to a new building. Ultimately, the chair must decide who moves where. What are the criteria for deciding? There are always criteria, but often the chair does not share the criteria with the department. Is it based on seniority? Rank? Administrative responsibility? Function? The chair should share both the final decision and the rationale behind the decision.

In addition to *all*, the question arises as to what constitutes involvement. Are all invited to talk but only a few have a vote? This depends on the issue of concern and what the departmental by-laws say. One of the first challenges for the new chair is to review such documents. They may be out of date. The department may have changed significantly since they were last reviewed.

*All* should be involved in developing and/or amending strategic plans, as well as departmental by-laws for recruitment of faculty, tenure, and promotion (Diamond, 2000). It is useful to have plans to cover 1 year, a short-term (3–5 years), and a long-term (6–10 years). There are times, too, when departments must revise plans even in the middle of their implementation. This is often the case because of resources being further restricted. They may involve increasing the faculty workload.

These issues may occasionally involve receiving new or additional resources. One day, my dean and I were summoned to the president's office immediately. As a new, somewhat paranoid chair, I began thinking about all of the mistakes I had made in the last few months. None of them seemed to call for presidential intervention. In addition, the dean did not know the topic of the meeting. The dean and I sat down. The president told us that our department was going to receive a $400,000 endowment from a national foundation. For our small department, it was as if Santa Claus had squeezed down the chimney 20 times in 1 day. Yet such a sudden influx of new money called for new decisions. When this happens, most plans need reviewing with all parties participating to make the announcement and the new decisions. "What are we going to do with the money?" is a pleasant problem to encounter.

In the context of participation, there is not only the question of who votes, if anyone does, but also how much participation there is. No person or cliques should monopolize the time.

At the same time, we need to remember that no one person monopolizes good ideas. At times, a good idea may come from an unusual place. I was once the lowest person on the totem pole at a university administrators' meeting. One person reported about the millions of scholarship dollars for incoming freshmen. Later another person indicated there were hundreds of students who were within 9 hours of graduation, but they had not enrolled in several years. From another meeting I had attended, I knew how important retention and graduation rates were. At this meeting, I asked if we could create some funding for the near-graduates. The president said that we could work with these former students as well. Almost all of the attendees to the meeting were awe-struck—either that someone could come up with this idea or that *I* would be the one who came up with it. I felt awesome for moments after the occurrence. Perhaps I was the only person who saw the connections. Of course, Dr. Loophole said, "But they may have stopped going to school for some other reason." True, but some may have stopped because of money.

As I was driving home, though, I had a realization. I was the *only* person in the room who taught an undergraduate class. There were deans, provosts, associate provosts, financial aid officers, registrar's personnel, even facilities personnel. However, there was no other person who taught undergraduate students. In most cases, none of them had taught an undergraduate course in decades, if ever.

So even those at the bottom of the ladder may have a good idea, especially if their *experience field* matches well with the content of the problem. Therefore, the second concept is: "No one has a monopoly on good ideas."

Third, for any of these ideas to take effect, there must be a collegial atmosphere where faculty members respect one another**.** When there are disagreements, they should be handled in a fair, professional, equitable, and just manner. Once such a decision is announced, all parties should understand *why* and *how* that decision was made. Such is especially the case if the decision was unpredictable. A collegial atmosphere can be achieved only when there is trust, and trust is related to predictability and reciprocity. When there are interpersonal issues at stake, they should be handled with confidentiality. All parties should agree that once that issue has concluded, it is over, at least for some time. It may be a good idea when a major decision is made also to decide when to revisit the decision.

Fourth, such a culture of trust is best to ensure high productivity and hard work. Even so, part of that trust is built upon the department members feeling that work is rewarded. Fifth, rewards should follow productivity and outcomes**.** In some cases, immediate reward may not be forthcoming because of external limitations. However, the rewards should come as soon as possible after a faculty member has completed excellent work. When funds are not available, the chair and the faculty member should discuss what other rewards might be available.

Sixth, when faculty members present potential innovations to the chair, the initial response should be positive. When the leader begins a response to a proposal with, "But . . .," it affects the innovation in a negative way. Answers beginning with "but" sound like Dr. Loophole (AKA Dr. Negative). Although there may be some kinks in a proposal eventually, the proposer needs time to complete the entire proposal before having it shot down. Because faculty members share their conversations with the chair, a negative first response can lead to a downfall in innovations throughout the department. Thus, the sixth general idea is to be positive to potential innovations in the beginning. Such factors as resource allocation, cost-benefit analysis, implementation, and mechanisms for assessing can be considered later.

Seventh, budget issues should be transparent. Some administrators feel that budgets are for their eyes only. Yet when information is provided to the department, all parties can understand how and why decisions were made. Thus, not only should the numbers be transparent, but the thought process should be also. While minor issues such as how much paper to purchase can be handled in the chair's office, a retracted summer budget should include all concerned.

Finally, faculty members know their colleagues better than anyone else. Tenure and promotion cases should follow that model. Nevertheless, it is the chair's responsibility to maintain high standards for tenure and promotion. These truly are million-dollar decisions. With these principles in mind, what kind of communication activities are important?

## Interaction Tasks

Although not directly related to the general processes of communication, there are at least eight tasks that a chair must undertake. These include:

- Taking directions
- Giving directions

- Listening
- Solving problems
- Explaining decisions
- Encouraging participation
- Encouraging productivity
- Moderating conflict

The chair must learn how to *take directions* from the dean and other administrators. These directions may come in meetings of chairs and/or individual meetings. At times, too, the chair may need to learn to take directions from such people as the dean's administrative assistant. Procedures in universities change frequently, often based on changes in compliance with the federal or state government or other entities. Each university determines *how* it will comply. Budgetary models may change from time to time. If the chair pays careful attention to directions it will save a considerable amount of time.

At times the chair must *share directions* with faculty and others. It is important that deadlines for reports be firmly established. Notices of deadlines should be repeated. This is a case where redundancy is beneficial. Directions should be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

Listening may be the most fundamental skill of an academic administrator. The chair should try to eliminate all distractions when meeting with people. This means asking the administrative assistant to hold telephone calls, or for the chair to resist the temptation to use cell phones and computers while listening to others.

Many individuals enter leadership positions because they like to *solve problems*. The first step in solving them, though, is assessing whether they are really problems. Interactions with other people typically follow one of three courses. First, they communicate. A communicative message involves information exchange without an attempt to persuade. A persuasive message involves trying to motivate another to engage in a particular behavior. The third type of message is a cathartic message. Sometimes individuals just like to vent. The best response in this third case is simply to listen without feeling the need to solve a problem.

In a workshop on leadership that I conducted, one chair said that he could not get anything done because there was always someone coming in with a problem. I asked if they were always problems, and after thinking about it, he realized that many were simply cathartic messages. Although responses to cathartic messages still take time, they take less time than trying to solve a non-existent problem.

I have noticed over the years that conflict often begins not so much by what decision is made but because of the lack of understanding about *how* a decision was made. An administrator may not feel that explanations are necessary. While they may not be necessary, explaining decisions will result in greater compliance and less conflict. In addition, over a period of time, by explaining how a decision was made, the faculty members begin to understand how future decisions are likely to be made.

A chair should encourage participation in decision-making. By allowing faculty input only in minor decisions, an atmosphere of distrust ensues. Such encouragement means that the chair should even encourage input when he or she realizes that some faculty will disagree, and a few may even disagree vehemently.

Years ago, a department chair appointed a three-person committee to make a recommendation for a copy machine. The committee took several weeks working on the issue, interviewing salespersons, discussing the finances, and so forth. Then the chair made a decision that was not based on those recommendations. The committee members were furious. Although there could be a good reason for the ultimate decision, the chair never stated it, so morale was down for quite a while.

The chair should encourage productivity. Members of the departmental faculty need to believe that hard work will be rewarded. Chairs need to consider a wide variety of possible rewards. In addition to salary and rank, rewards might include being appointed to committees, not being appointed to committees, release time, summer teaching, and a variety of means of administrative assistance in research and/or teaching.

Finally, chairs need to moderate conflict. To accomplish moderating conflict as well as the other communication tasks listed above, it is important to begin by having an atmosphere where members of the department feel that openness and sensitivity to people as well as issues prevails. Here we call this environmental ambience.

## Environmental Ambience

A number of communication scholars have discussed organizational culture as an essential component to the effectiveness of working groups (Gappa et al., 2007; Gillespie & Robertson, 2010; Lucas, 2000; Rosen, 2014). Here I will refer to *environmental ambience*, which is similar to organizational culture. Such an ambience tells us whether a department is growing and prospering or dying. Academic departments do one or the other. Even if their view is that they are remaining the same, that is unlikely.

We relate this concept to what Schein (2013) calls "humble inquiry" (p. 2). Schein's concept encompasses the leader's responsibility for helping to create and maintain a department's positive organizational culture and consequently its growth. If we consider interactions in terms of a few punctuation marks, we might consider the period, the exclamation mark, the question mark, the ellipsis, and the comma. Schein's contention is that the leader should emphasize the question mark. As anyone who has had children would know, the question mark is probably more effective than the exclamation mark. Using the question mark also is indicative of the leaders not having all of the answers.

Schein (2013) writes: "*Humble Inquiry* is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person" (p. 2). In large measure, such an approach brings to fore a most philosophical question for the chair in the department. That question is: "What are *we* trying to do here?"

The answer to that question has become more complex in recent years with conflicts of interest between faculty and administrators (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Balderson, 1995; Bazelon, 2013; Burgan, 2006; Ginsberg, 2011). In part, this is because as rewards have always been limited for productivity, they have become even more limited. At the same time, a few are moved into administrative positions where salaries are frequently twice that of a faculty member.

The atmosphere partially created by social media and partly by the COVID-19 virus has generated additional problems in dealing with potential criticisms and conflicts. At the heart of conflict management, though, are the same factors that have always been there. This includes keeping negatives in focus without expanding them and maintaining the self-respect of the individuals concerned.

I have always believed that faculty and administrators were all on the same team. Yet there have been recent cases where the concept of shared governance has been eradicated. It is important for administrators to recognize the principles stated above, which may help narrow this gulf. Attention to potential conflicts in advance are quite helpful (Hickson & Roebuck, 2009). Even when rewards are limited, the best means remaining is to create some understanding among all of the parties concerned. Fritz (2013) calls it *professional civility*. Such civility means focusing on the communication that is legal, ethical, and appropriate (Hickson, 2017).

## Conclusion

While management theories and techniques assist in the administration of budgets, class schedules, and the like, it is communication that helps maintain a healthy department where people enjoy working together. The functions mentioned in this paper form a beginning point for further discussion on what it means to be a leader. From what we have seen, it appears that a *good leader* is one who thinks like a leader (for innovation; future planning) and one who acts like a colleague by engaging fellow faculty on an everyday basis about the present and the future of the department.

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# Student Engagement in the Communication Classroom: An Intervention to Encourage Student Success

**Jay Baglia[1], Elissa Foster[1], Kendra Knight[1], and Stephanie Grau[1]**

1. DePaul University, USA

**ABSTRACT**

Universities implement a variety of interventions to address student engagement and retention. This is especially true post-pandemic as faculty attempt to return to a pre-pandemic structure. *Emerging adulthood* aligns with the personal responsibility demanded of college students as well as changes in personal growth. In the current climate, stress has been shown to negatively impact executive functioning, the cognitive processes necessary for academic success. This essay describes an intervention encouraging student self-reflexivity around processes for engagement, academic success, and retention. *Communication Fundamentals for College Success*—a 5-week, two-credit workshop—was developed and delivered by the authors. Curriculum focused on time management, study skills, communication in the classroom, and accessing campus resources. This essay concludes with student testimonials culled from their "Assembling Your Toolkit" assignment.

**KEYWORDS:** executive function, retention, pedagogy, resilience, mental health, COVID-19

**CONTACT** Jay Baglia • E-mail: wbaglia@depaul.edu • College of Communication • 14 E. Jackson Blvd., #1243 • Chicago, IL • 60604

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## Introduction

At our university convocation in August 2022, the provost referenced our *duty of care* as we welcomed students to a new academic year. To the authors, the phrase *duty of care* implied a responsibility to provide more structure as well as more support for our students. Whether due to their synchronous Zoom-delivered or asynchronous online courses or being back in the classroom (but masked), it was our collective understanding that students were still reeling from COVID-19. Whether they had been in high school or college, they were emerging from 2+ years of less-than-optimal learning environments due to the pandemic. Faculty noted that our in-person students in the spring quarter of 2022 seemed to think we were still *on screen*, often staring blankly back at us as we carried out our discussion-based curriculum. We also intuited a diminished sense of personal responsibility among our students, a sort of learned helplessness no doubt encouraged by what we observed to be the pandemic's *whatever-it-takes* practice of open-ended due dates for assignments and loose attendance policies (Carmack, 2023).

Across academia, professors and administrators have been trying to curtail weakening levels of student engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to online teaching prompted us to investigate what we could do in our college to strengthen engagement, increase students' sense of belonging and, with it, student retention. Whether courses occur synchronously or asynchronously, these critical components of engagement and a student's sense of belonging are absent from the vast majority of online modalities (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). As Gillen-O'Neel highlights, both the emotional and behavioral development that comes with a sense of belonging is particularly important for our students as emerging adults. Our sense of urgency to increase a sense of belonging among our students, and a sensitivity to the context of emerging adulthood, prompted us to design and implement the communication-focused educational intervention that is the focus of this article.

Transitioning from the learning environments of high school to college has been—for some time—a discussion of great interest not only to university staff and faculty but within families as well (Marrun, 2018; Mwangi et al., 2020; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). The concept of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) aligns with the greater personal responsibility demanded of college students than of high school students, as well as the closely related changes in personal growth, which often result from social and psychological changes. As Arnett (2000) describes it, the transitional years from the relative dependency of high school to becoming independent (ideally by the mid- to late-twenties) "are the most *volitional* years of life" (p. 469, emphasis original). Part and parcel to growth in this model is effective psychosocial functioning, which was severely undermined by the COVID-19 limitations.

## Initiatives at Other Institutions

University faculty have recognized proclivities, practices, and patterns among undergraduates for some time and, collectively, these behaviors predate the pandemic. Arguably, the pandemic further impaired an already noticeable shift in student learning, cognitive functioning, and communication competence requiring a range of interventional strategies (Son et al., 2020). For example, Archbell and Coplan (2022) note that even though social anxiety is prevalent among college students, little research has been conducted to explore the relationship between social anxiety and academic performance. In their study of over 1,000 undergraduates with multiple majors at a Canadian university, they found that students with social anxiety communicated less frequently with instructors and exhibited lower overall engagement. One recommendation from this study was to move from an instructional paradigm (with a focus on content) to a learner paradigm involving more active participation among peers, leading to more positive relationships and a sense of belonging.

A study focusing on student engagement among an education major cohort, conducted in the United Kingdom by Millican et al. (2024), found that attendance and contributing to the classroom conversation were positively correlated with engagement; however, a wide range of obstacles (transportation, needing to work, and mental health) often prevented students from attending as much as they would have liked. Outcomes such as chronic absenteeism, in turn, create a hesitation to contribute to class discussion and small group activities when they *could* attend, because students felt less competent. Similar to Archbell and Coplan, the authors recommend emphasizing classroom collaboration and creativity, and encouraging students to take a more active role in their learning.

More closely aligned with our project is the work of Myatt and Kennette (2023). In a synthesis of empirical support for the role of positive psychology in higher education, Myatt and Kennette focus on how students motivate themselves to take responsibility for their learning and practice the social and emotional tools that will serve them beyond their university years. Citing research by Zhang (2022) on post-pandemic college students, these authors frame positive psychology as integral to student well-being because of the shared perception (among faculty and students) of a higher incidence of negative emotions on campus. In short, they argue that meta-learning increases satisfaction of faculty and students alike.

Recognizing the need of the current historical moment as well as the opportunity to respond in an evidence-based manner to the needs of our students as emerging adults, the co-authors collaborated in the design, delivery, and evaluation of a for-credit workshop called *Communication Fundamentals for College Success*. This essay describes the conceptual frameworks that informed the design, the innovative use of self-assessment and reflection to support student growth, and preliminary feedback from students.

## Conceptual Foundations

This section first reviews the constructs that explain and provide an evidence base for the design and content of the workshop.

### Student Engagement

Researchers have identified at least four different approaches to explain student engagement: the behavioral perspective, the psychological perspective, the sociocultural perspective, and the holistic perspective (Kahu, 2013). The behavioral perspective has to do with teaching practices and considers how time and effort in purposeful, active learning activities—including attendance—contribute to engagement (Coates, 2007). The psychological perspective owes its name to the internal processes of motivation that are the focus of this approach; this varies considerably student to student and can evolve over time through interventions such as mandatory advising and mentoring (Fredricks et al., 2004). The sociocultural perspective carries with it a constructionist approach, emphasizing the institutional context. For Thomas (2002), the culture of an institution creates in-groups and out-groups, and the resulting bias—whether intentionally or not—leads to poor results across the board for the "fish out of water" (p. 431). Finally, the holistic perspective recognizes the implications of all these perspectives and defines engagement as "the perceptions, expectations and experience of being a student and the construction of being a student" (Bryson et al., 2009, p. 1). Engagement, then, is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond the classroom and includes how work is accomplished in multiple sites including those beyond the classroom—the financial aid office, the library, the computer lab, the cafeteria, the dorm, off-campus or on-campus employment—all places where students can find a sense of belonging, or not. This confluence of influences on the success and emotional life of the student is referred to as "life-load" (Hews et al., 2022, p. 9). We embraced this holistic perspective in our course design.

### Executive Functioning

Although we shifted our focus significantly by the time we offered the workshop, we began with the concept of executive functioning as essential to supporting student success and well-being. Executive functioning refers to self-regulation and cognitive controls such as planning, problem-solving, self-awareness and self-monitoring (Miyake & Friedman, 2012). Executive functioning skills are critical to success in the college classroom. However, as is the case with motivation, students present with these skills to varying degrees based on educational and personal background. In particular, first-generation college students and/or students from underrepresented groups may not have benefited from prior executive functioning preparation—formalized or not—in high school or through other contextual exposure, such as the workplace.

Executive functioning also includes behaviors related to goal-directed decision-making, adapting to new or different directives, and monitoring progress (Miyake & Friedman, 2012). For all adults, it has been demonstrated that stress impedes cognitive function; this includes executive function (Shields et al., 2016) as well as stress caused by social (rather than genetic) phenomena.

University students have been identified as a population at risk for diminished executive function, along with experiencing increased mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2021).

## Social Support and Mental Well-Being

Although increased access to mental health counseling almost certainly helps to alleviate some mental health symptoms, such services are only scratching the surface of needed student support. During the pandemic, students in both high school and college suffered from decreased interpersonal relationships, limited physical activity, less-than-ideal environments for studying (including poor internet capability), and uneven online teaching skills and expertise (Tortella et al., 2021). These experiences can be attributable to confinement-related factors that resulted from lockdowns, social distancing, and remote learning because of the closure of schools and face-to-face human interaction and have led to diminished capacities in the classroom (Tabullo et al., 2022). Because depression and anxiety (including social anxiety) had existed on college campuses prior to COVID-19, many educators and counselors have already implemented a variety of strategies in the interest of keeping students engaged.

## Resilience

Educational counselors and others use the concept of *resilience* (more casually referred to as *grit*) to describe how students get back on track following a setback. Resilience—an aspect of positive psychology—is based in part on the belief that people want to succeed. Resilience in the educational context has been defined as a *bounce back* from events or situations considered stressful, whether originating from adversity, trauma, tragedy, or threat (Smith et al., 2008). With regard to historically underrepresented groups, resilience is especially important for academic success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). In an environment of universities competing for students, cultivating resilience strategies among students is imperative for retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

We acknowledge that executive function, resilience, grit, and even positive psychology are contested terms (e.g., Credé, 2018). We know also that activating students in the classroom and having them develop a sense of belonging and self-efficacy are two of the three major factors (along with perceived worth of the curriculum) in terms of engagement which, Tinto (2010) argues, results in retention. Transitioning out of pandemic-related teaching and classroom management practices will take time. Our contention is that the transformative potential of higher education requires the skills associated with executive functioning, however labeled. Consequently, we planned, scheduled, administered, and evaluated a pilot workshop series to improve students' broad learning capacity via improved skills often related to executive functioning and also related to well-being. The remainder of this essay describes an original "for credit" workshop course in our College of Communication with a focus on defining and teaching those skills associated with executive function but which we packaged (and embraced) as student engagement. What follows is our plan for the workshop, the delivery—the course has now run three times with ever-increasing enrollment—and preliminary outcomes identified in student responses.

## Preconditions and Design of the Intervention

Drawing on our considerable collective experience and success as university professors (each of the three faculty authors has earned university teaching awards in the prior 5 years), we considered how various skills and behaviors could be taught in the context of communication for *success*—asking for help, learning about university resources (i.e., Writing Center, Counseling Services), communicatively engaging in class with both peers and professors, and navigating academic learning software (i.e., D2L). Seeing an opportunity to apply for university funds to support this intervention as a study, we were awarded a small grant that enabled us to support course administration and data management for the purposes of evaluating project outcomes. We also applied for and received IRB approval to collect student data on a number of measures, both qualitative and quantitative, with students enrolled in the class signing consent forms acknowledging participation.

We also recognized the opportunity presented by *dangling* two credits (half of a typical four-credit course) made available to most of our university's undergraduates by the undergraduate pricing structure. Students' tuition package covers the cost of 18 credits per quarter but a full load for most students is four 4-credit classes. In the sciences, those two credits are employed in the *lab* offerings of chemistry and biology; however, they often go unused in programs (like communication and other social sciences) that do not have mandatory lab hours. Given that the workshop would be completely optional and potentially an added time and effort investment for students who were enrolled full-time, the ability to offer this workshop *for credit* and ostensibly *free of charge* was critical to its feasibility.

The decision to design the workshop to run for 5 weeks in the middle of the quarter was also strategic. The course begins in Week 3 and ends prior to Week 8. We learned from the academic advisors in our college that beginning the course after the drop–add period would provide some students with an opportunity to pick up credits they would otherwise lose. In some cases, students also may seek workshop credit because they miss the standard registration window and need to ensure continued progress on their degree. Still other students were drawn to the curriculum itself, recognizing their success in college was contingent on improving their strategy in balancing four classes and, often, employment. We saw the opportunity, then, to offer a communication-focused workshop in the form of a two-credit, 5-week class, specifically within our discipline, and open to students from across the university.

In addition to the learning outcomes for the workshop itself, the team held in mind the following objectives for the project: First, to observe and record improvements in students' self-reported measures of organization and time management skills, help-seeking, growth mindset, and ability to balance different roles and responsibilities in their lives. Second, to cultivate practices of self-reflection and future planning related to their academic lives. Third, to identify the features of the curriculum that students predicted as having the greatest impact on their future success.

The authors met regularly in the fall quarter of 2022 to share resources, short-list topics, and assign modules and, although we received encouragement from the dean and program director, we did not receive any course releases or overload pay to plan and deliver the course. The second author agreed to serve as the instructor of record with others volunteering to guest lecture topics of personal interest and expertise. She was able to do this because of a course release associated with a different project (reducing her 2-quarter load to three classes rather than four), which allowed her to split one teaching assignment in half, teaching two units of the workshop in 2 quarters, each with a 1.5 course load.

## Intervention Design

This intervention is a novel two-credit hour course co-taught by instructional faculty in the College of Communication and two guest speakers (a visit from the head of advising in the college and representatives from our Office of Health Promotion and Wellness). Participants are undergraduate students recruited to the course through flyers posted in student common areas, referrals by advisors, and the campus Continuity and Engagement Office. The course meets for two, 90-minute classes per week for 5 weeks, with the following composite Learning Outcomes. After completing this workshop, students will be able to:

1. Define their own learning styles/preferences and related needs for successful course completion;
2. Apply time management techniques to course workload planning;
3. Interpret course syllabi and assignment instructions in terms of professor expectations for performance and resources needed;
4. Integrate realistic self-care into their college-work-life routines;
5. Practice effective communication, both face-to-face and online, with professors, classmates, advisors, and student support staff; and
6. Define several types of learner engagement strategies.

The course design integrates modules on personal awareness, communication, and relational skills (including mindfulness and self-reflection), coping practices, and growth mindset alongside modules related to executive functioning such as scheduling and project management, goal-setting, and oral and written communication related to active learning. For the purposes of relationship-building and continuity, the instructor of record (second author) is responsible for overseeing the personal awareness and development curriculum. Additional instructors and a staff representative from the Office of Health and Wellness deliver modules related to executive function and other classroom skills designed to build both confidence and awareness of campus resources; including, for example, counseling services (see the Appendix for the schedule of topics). The workshop, then, has ten 90-minute class meetings, with the instructor of record introducing the module on the first class meeting of each week and a visiting instructor coming to the class for the second meeting of each week to reinforce specific aspects of the module. Short readings are assigned for most of the class meetings, utilizing both academic and popular press (i.e., *Harvard Business Review*) publications.

## Assessment

As part of their assessment for this workshop, students regularly contribute written reflections, and the course culminates in an "Assembling Your Toolkit" writing assignment. For each module, three or five concepts or tools are introduced. In the concluding section of this essay, we provide a thematic analysis of the results from the "Assembling Your Toolkit" assignment, with representative quotations pulled from student essays. In the prompt for this culminating writing assignment, students are asked to identify "three tools that you will take from this class with you in your remaining college career and beyond."

## Outcomes From the Toolkit Assignment

Time management, developing a growth mindset (including resilience), self-care, and classroom engagement (participating and active listening) are the four tools named most frequently by students with well over half naming time management and growth mindset, and just under half identifying the importance of self-care. Over a third (40%) spoke to the importance of classroom engagement. Other less frequently identified concepts or skills recorded in these essays include the importance of self-reflection, understanding learning preferences, and cultivating study skills. Here, we provide some representative quotations from this "Assembling Your Toolkit" assignment which operationalizes the dominant themes in the students' own words. These examples help demonstrate how students advance their educational confidence and overcome barriers with both short-term and long-term gains. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been employed for these examples of student testimony.

***Time Management.*** "Quinn," a student enrolled in the Spring 2023 section of this class, writes,

> I have come to realize that successful course completion requires careful planning and allocation of my limited time and resources. I have learned to create realistic schedules, set clear goals, and prioritize tasks to ensure I meet deadlines without compromising the quality of my work.

"Caryn," a student enrolled in the Winter 2024 class, offers this perspective,

> A crucial part of time management is having an overview of what is ahead of you. Mapping out the entire quarter provides a rough idea of which weeks will be the most busy and which weeks may be relatively light.

Also, from the Winter 2024 class is "Nolan" who has this to say about a specific tool he employs to help manage his schedule,

> The first thing that has become part of my toolkit is my Google calendar. I now use this daily to add things to my schedule and to make sure I am not forgetting anything. I also get reminders from my calendar about things I had completely forgotten about which saved me.

***Growth Mindset.*** A second frequently identified concept was developing a growth mindset. "Angie," from the Spring 2023 class, demonstrates her understanding of a growth mindset this way:

> In life, and especially as a student, there are beliefs we have about ourselves when it comes to mistakes or shortcomings. In my experience this usually would show up as saying 'I can't' do something or 'it's too hard.' How I am learning to counter that every day is by saying 'I can't do that yet' or 'it's hard for me right now, but I will get it.'

"Gerry," from the Winter 2024 class, describes growth mindset when she states:

> One of the most impactful ideas I've gained from this class is the idea of a growth mindset. Rather than viewing intelligence and abilities as fixed traits, I've come to think of them as ever-changing and evolving endeavors. Every experience is a chance to grow and learn something new.

Another student from the Winter 2024 class, "Macey," frames growth mindset in terms of potential when she writes, "I do believe human potential is unknown now, so I'll do my best not to sell myself short and put learning (not achievement) first in all that I set out to do."

***Self-Care***. The third most frequently named concept was self-care. Students named lots of different ways they fulfilled this notion of self-care. "Ajla," enrolled in the Winter 2024 class, expresses her commitment to self-care by identifying a practice she learned in a different class but sees the connection to what she was being encouraged to do in the workshop. She writes, "I took a meditation class last quarter and I realized that the way I felt after each session was relief. I could feel myself being grounded and just felt some of that weight being lifted off my shoulders."

Spring 2024 student "Jacqueline" was not familiar with the term self-care and translates it in a way that allows her some grace. She writes,

> This course introduced me to the concept of practical self-care, which differentiated it from mere indulgence. I learned that self-care doesn't have to be grand gestures; it can be as simple as making time for oneself amidst a busy schedule. The discussions about finding moments to relax, such as enjoying a cup of tea or taking a rejuvenating shower, resonated deeply with me.

***Classroom Engagement***. The students' fourth most frequently identified concept was being engaged in the classroom. Spring 2023 student "Luka" lists engagement as the first item in her toolkit. She explains the importance of engagement,

> We talked about student engagement and being more present in the classes one is in. One can simply sit in a class and listen halfway or do something else while the professor is talking, but why would they want to? Why attend a class just to sit in a room? [ . . . ] I had to remind myself to sit in front and ask questions. I found that the results were shockingly good. My grades were improving based on this very valuable tool.

In her narration of engagement, "Charlotte," from the Winter 2024 class, focuses less on active listening and more on asking questions. She explains it this way,

> Before I ask a question, I think about being perceived as silly or stupid. When I was younger, especially in junior high and early high school when I was one of three girls in the advanced math class, I worried about seeming too smart; this I equated with being the goody-two-shoes [ . . . ] I'd never thought of these performances as inherently political

> and reflective of the system. [ . . . ] In going over 'right' (honestly curious, helpful, relevant) versus 'wrong' (aggressive, redundant) questions, I gained an understanding of the value of questions, particularly in a university setting.

In addition to assessing student responses from the workshop, we have also had two opportunities to share preliminary findings with academic audiences. These include a pre-conference at a regional communication conference and to our colleagues on our campus from across programs, schools, and colleges at the annual Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Conference. Feedback from those preliminary experiences acknowledged this effort as a labor of love but also as a legitimate and replicable model for student engagement. Notably, a member of the nursing faculty corresponded with us about applying some of the curriculum to their programs.

## Next Steps

Having successfully delivered four workshops (with more scheduled for the subsequent academic year), the research dimension of the project continues. As we mentioned in the introduction, we applied for IRB approval to collect data from students. In addition to student testimony and other qualitative data derived from student reflections, we have also administered a variety of pre- and post-test surveys which measure aspects of qualities associated with executive function. We have now collected enough responses to achieve saturation in our analysis of the qualitative data, and to identify patterns of significance in the quantitative measures. In short, we are planning a longer, more complex analysis of multiple data points. Our original research protocol included a longitudinal follow-up to the workshop. Students were incentivized to participate in an interview during the quarter following their participation in the workshop; this was unsuccessful. Although establishing the longitudinal impact of the intervention remains an important goal, we have had to consider other approaches; for example, partnering with our Institutional Research team to compare students' pre- and post-participation GPAs, or crafting a short survey to assess the endurance of skills and strategies over time.

Delivering the workshop was not without its challenges. Because the course only starts in the third week of a 10-week quarter, we regularly had to address concerns from the program director and the associate dean about whether there would be sufficient students. We strongly rejected, for example, the suggestion to deliver this course online (to increase enrollment). Instead, we asked for patience as the advising staff helped ensure the interest and, ultimately, helped drive the necessary enrollment figures.

The primary purpose of this essay has been to share our process and some of our results so communication-minded leaders on university campuses will encourage interventions of this nature. Relatedly, as faculty, we appreciated the willingness of academic advisors to be involved. While this unique response to a perceived challenge in the classroom was initiated by our *duty of care* we have also benefited from an *all-hands-on-deck* mindset with our advising staff and staff from the Office of Health and Wellness actively involved. This *holistic* approach to student engagement, then, has multiple benefits because it both responds to the complexity of being a student in today's environment and encourages working together toward a common goal.

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# Appendix

| Topic Schedule | Module Content Class 1 (with Instructor of Record) | Module Content Class 2 (with Visiting/Guest Instructor) |
|---|---|---|
| *Week 1* Foundations for Success | Knowing your learning style; locus of control, & baseline skills. Building a classroom learning community. | Time Management: How to decode your course schedule, interpret a syllabus, plan your quarter. |
| *Week 2* Student Engagement | Understanding introversion and extroversion; cultural norms of communication and classroom behavior. | Communication Practices: How to approach your professor; email norms; using Zoom; presenting in class. |
| *Week 3* Growth Mindset | Understanding locus of control; past experiences of success and challenge; resilience and rebounding. | Study Skills: How to read and take notes—for exams and for assignments; organizing materials. |
| *Week 4* Building Resilience | Mapping social support; identifying signs of distress; identifying and asking for what you need. | Identifying Resources: How to identify sources of support at the university and beyond. |
| *Week 5* Assembling Your Toolkit | Reflection on self-assessments, insights, and personal goal-setting. | Selecting Personal Strategies for Success: A review of strategies from the workshop and anticipating upcoming quarter. |

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# Navigating and Thriving in Leadership: Practical Advice for Elected and Appointed Association Leaders

**Tiffany R. Wang**[1]

1. University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL, USA

**ABSTRACT**
Elected and appointed association leaders face circumstances that can make professional service challenging. This essay offers practical advice for how association leaders can navigate and thrive in leadership roles as they fulfill their duties and responsibilities. Current and past association leaders offer observations and recommendations for success.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, professional service, listening, mentorship, networking

## Introduction

As an association leader, you have opportunities to listen (Rappeport & Wolvin, 2020), coach (Maier, 2019), lead with a purpose (Coleman & Gonzalez, 2019), help members feel seen and heard (Atay, 2024), navigate challenges and unforeseen circumstances (Ford, 2023), create avenues for growth (González, 2021), and reflect on lessons learned to envision the future of the association (McBride & Edwards, 2020).

**CONTACT** Tiffany R. Wang • E-mail: twang@montevallo.edu • Department of Communication • University of Montevallo • Station 6625 • Montevallo, AL • 35115

In this essay, rather than provide advice solely based on my experience in association leadership roles serving as Central States Communication Association Executive Director and Alabama Communication Association President/Conference Planner, I invited academic friends and colleagues to offer tips they would share with elected or appointed association leaders based on their own experiences serving in association leadership roles (e.g., president, conference planner, journal editor, board member). Following each tip, I provide some suggestions about how this tip could be implemented within an association.

## Association Leadership Tips

### Association Leadership Tip #1: Focus on strengthening the association long-term.

As Liz Sills (Lighthearted Philosophers' Society and Speech Communication Association of South Dakota Past President), Associate Professor at Northern State University, explains: "Servant leadership is a good entry point—it's not about you, it's about leaving the association more successful than you found it."

As an association leader, you have opportunities to create and invest in programming that can strengthen the association long-term. Find ways to engage new members who may not have previously engaged with your association before. At CSCA, we expanded our President's Undergraduate Honors Research Conference call to include extended abstracts and works in progress. This allowed undergraduate students who may be in the earlier stages of a research project to attend the conference and receive feedback on their work.

Invest in the next generation of members through mentorship. At CSCA, we offered Next Leaders Network sessions to early career scholars, students, and first-time conference attendees that provided opportunities for members to learn about the association, interact with association members and leaders, and help shape the future direction of the association. We also hosted virtual office hours sessions where students and faculty members could ask questions from and network with association leaders.

### Association Leadership Tip #2: Set aside personal preferences and focus on the bigger picture.

As Kathleen Ranney Bindon (American Accounting Association International Accounting Section Past President), Associate Professor Emerita at the University of Alabama, indicates:

> One thing I definitely got better at with experience was when to compromise and when to stand my ground. It's never all about you and it's rarely personal. You're serving for the good of the organization. Personal preferences at times need to be set aside to move things forward. It's not a matter of making your point and "winning." It's a matter of taking the bigger picture perspective and doing what's best for the organization.

As an association leader, you will experience situations where you need to set aside personal preferences and do what is best for the organization. Make changes to existing processes to ensure that the association is moving forward. At CSCA, finding ways to handle the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be challenging. In 2020, the CSCA Executive Committee voted to cancel the conference since we did not have the infrastructure in place to host a virtual conference with existing resources. In 2021, with additional time to research technology options, we offered a fully virtual conference that offered spaces for members to present papers and participate in discussion panels safely from home. In 2022, we returned to in-person conferencing with additional safety protocols in place (e.g., vaccination requirements, testing, social distancing, masking). We also allowed any members who needed to change their conference attendance plans due to health concerns to receive full registration refunds to ensure that members could conference in ways that they felt comfortable with.

Execute association leaders' visions that may or may not be in line with your personal preferences. At CSCA, the 1st Vice President/Conference Planner typically casts the vision for the coming year's conference. I have worked to execute association leaders' visions while remaining cognizant of the site constraints that might limit what we can do. Innovative themes and session types provide both opportunities and challenges. For example, I worked with hotel personnel to create parlor spaces set with soft furniture to cultivate networking among members, identify dance studio spaces that could be used for early morning yoga, build a boutique-style space with garment racks and full-length mirrors for a professional clothing swap, and rent an in-hotel bowling alley to provide a social event for undergraduate students. When possible, I have tried to say yes to association leaders' requests when it is financially possible.

## Association Leadership Tip #3: Be a responsible steward of the association's resources.

As Christina S. Beck (Central States Communication Association and National Communication Association Past President, *Communication Yearbook* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, advises:

> I envisioned myself as someone who needed to be the best possible steward of the association's resources, including, yes, its financial well-being but also its image, reputation, and relationships with its members. That perspective helped me during some difficult moments when I'm not sure that "a" right decision existed, but I sought to make the choice that I felt would serve the association the best.

As an association leader, you will often have fiduciary responsibility which may involve setting an association budget or deciding what initiatives to support financially at the association level. Do your research to identify ways to maximize the association's resources. At the 2021 CSCA virtual conference, we worked to create a virtual conference without a blueprint to guide us in identifying a technology vendor. Finding an affordable technology vendor who would meet all our technology needs took time and patience. I attended multiple demos from different vendors to learn more about available features. I also signed up for free disciplinary and interdisciplinary virtual conferences to experience the conference from the end user side. During a virtual state communication conference, I learned about a vendor that could meet our association's needs at an affordable price point. After talking to the vendor, we were able to set up a custom site that allowed us to use our existing conference software to build out a virtual conference. This saved us time and money and allowed us to reduce the registration costs so that it was more affordable for members who had limited professional development funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Find ways that you can use association resources to reduce financial barriers for members. At CSCA, we worked on creating a discounted membership tier and registration rate for nontenure track/temporary/adjunct members to make membership and registration more affordable. We developed a Faculty Learning Community for doctoral candidates and early career faculty that provided professional development stipends for community members to defray their conference costs. We identified sponsors to support coffee breaks, snack breaks, and breakfasts so we could provide more free food for members during the conference. This helped reduce the food insecurity that can occur in conference hotels with limited affordable food options in the hotel or nearby.

## Association Leadership Tip #4: Take accountability for the choices you make in your association role.

As Benjamin R. Bates (Eastern Communication Association Past President, *Communication Quarterly* and *Southern Communication Journal* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, suggests:

> I think a journal editor has to remember that it's not your journal (it is the association's and the discipline's). That said, a journal editor needs to remember . . . that every piece you include or exclude is a choice you are making and for which you are responsible.

As an association leader, you will have the opportunity to make choices that impact association members and leaders. With that opportunity comes the responsibility to take accountability for the choices you make. As CSCA experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to make some challenging choices regarding what modalities we would offer for the conference. As we transitioned to an in-person conference experience, some members asked CSCA to offer a hybrid conference to increase access for members who could not or did not want to travel due to financial or health concerns. In my role as CSCA Executive Director, I had to make some difficult decisions about how much technology to invest in at each conference hotel space. Although we would have loved to offer enough internet bandwidth to facilitate a hybrid conference experience, we could not afford to pay for the internet bandwidth and staff personnel needed to offer this modality. After reviewing the technology options, I was able to have some frank conversations with association members and leaders regarding why we were making the decisions we were making to only offer an in-person experience and identify other ways we could promote conference accessibility within our budgetary constraints.

In addition to making decisions about the annual budget, I have also had opportunities to participate in the hotel site selection process. Of course, there is no perfect site for a conference, so you must weigh the pros and cons of each site. For example, some sites are more affordable but have less amenities nearby or are more difficult to travel to. Other sites may not be able to offer a preferred date but may be in a location members would be interested in visiting. As CSCA Executive Director, I worked with our Finance Committee to develop a decision matrix where we could examine past hotel pricing and concessions to identify a site that would best meet the needs of our association and its members. I also invited relevant association leaders to attend the familiarization visits and review proposed hotel contracts so the association could make a well-informed decision.

## Association Leadership Tip #5: Identify ways you can contribute your own expertise.

As Kate LaPierre, Instructional Faculty at University of Nevada, Reno, advocates:

> I believe we undervalue the benefits of our expertise. My [Federally Qualified Health Care center] board utilizes my knowledge of teaching and training, of marketing and I even helped with the rebranding of our organization. I have no experience with Health Communication but that isn't what they needed from me.

As an association leader, you will enter a new role with expertise gained through previous roles that can help your association. As you review the bylaws for your association that outline the expectations for your appointed or elected leadership role, there will be areas where you will be well-equipped to contribute. Prior to serving as CSCA Executive Director, I had served as the association newsletter editor, a program planner for multiple interest groups, an award committee member, an editorial board member, and an elected member at large. This allowed me to understand many of the leadership roles within our association. I was also able to contribute specific expertise related to program design, advertiser and exhibitor solicitation, convention logistics/site selection, meeting arrangement, newsletter development, business/finance management, recordkeeping and dissemination, and website coordination I had gained through association service as well as service to the national association and my university.

It is equally important to identify where you may need to involve others who have expertise you may not have. At CSCA, we work with paid consultants to assist us where we need additional support. For example, we work with a CPA to file our taxes annually, a web developer to maintain and update our association and conference submission websites, and a hotel site selection consultant to help us identify future hotel sites. Although I have some knowledge of business/finance management, website coordination, and convention logistics/site selection, I know I can rely on subject matter experts in those areas to ensure that I am able to successfully complete my association leadership responsibilities.

## Association Leadership Tip #6: Identify ways you can seek perspectives and engage members from across the association.

As Christina S. Beck (Central States Communication Association and National Communication Association Past President, *Communication Yearbook* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, explains:

> Getting to serve as an officer requires the new leader to actively seek perspectives from across the association. . . . Be a good listener and earnestly ask questions. Take the time to learn about the important work that's being done in all areas.

As an association leader, it is important to learn about other parts of the association that you may not have familiarized yourself with in the past. One way you can learn more about the association is to attend business meetings, sessions, and receptions that are sponsored by units across the association. These conference events offer opportunities to listen to and ask questions from association members. Learning more about what priorities are important to different units can help build new relationships and inform future association planning, programming, and priorities.

Another way you can seek perspectives and engage members is to invite groups of members to participate in focus group sessions. At CSCA, we invite different groups of stakeholders together to learn more about their perspectives. Newcomers may be looking to learn how to get involved with the association. Undergraduate students may be interested in meeting senior scholars or learning more about master's programs. Graduate students may be looking to learn more about doctoral programs or want help navigating the academic job market. Past officers might be looking for ways to give back to the association or mentor more junior scholars. Gathering these groups together can provide insights into what the association is doing well and where there is still room to grow.

## Association Leadership Tip #7: Cultivate professional networks that support colleagues.

As Katherine S. Thweatt (Eastern Communication Association Past President), Associate Professor at State University of New York, Oswego, explains, "Service is extremely rewarding and offers a way to support colleagues in their successes. It is professional development that creates professional networks. These networks provide opportunities for connecting students and colleagues."

As an association leader, it is important to find ways to help colleagues cultivate professional networks. Although associations at their best offer unique opportunities to build and strengthen professional networks, sometimes new members can find conferences to be overwhelming especially if they do not have a professional network prior to the conference. At CSCA, we try to offer spaces where newcomers can mingle with association members in a setting that is conducive to building new network connections. This space might be an association-wide reception held at the beginning of the conference that introduces attendees to the host hotel or host city. This space could also be a networking session held during the conference at the association-wide or unit level.

Another way you can help colleagues cultivate their professional networks is through mentoring initiatives. This could mean matching senior scholars with junior scholars at the association-wide or unit level. This could also mean matching conference attendees with similar interests to foster collaboration opportunities. These mentoring initiatives can occur prior to the conference to help prepare conference attendees for what they might expect, during the conference to help conference attendees feel more comfortable, or following the conference to strengthen connections made at the conference throughout the year.

## Association Leadership Tip #8: Utilize professional networks to assist you in your association leadership role.

As Joann Keyton (*Journal of Applied Communication Research* and *Small Group Research* Past Editor, Vice-President of Interdisciplinary Network of Group Research), Distinguished Professor Emerita at North Carolina State University notes:

> Learn from others. Seek advice or comments from those in front of you and those behind you. Good ideas come from different places. You will not be expected to know everything, but you can become an expert as to where information resides.

As an association leader, professional service can sometimes seem like a lonely endeavor especially when you are engaging in invisible labor that might not be fully recognized or appreciated by association members and leaders. Time-intensive roles can often lead to burnout which can impact your ability to perform your responsibilities effectively. When you are serving in a leadership role, it can be helpful to have a professional network of past association leaders who understand the demands of serving in your role. This professional network can provide advice or a sounding board when you are navigating the challenges that might come with your role.

Association leadership may also provide opportunities to invite other scholars to engage in professional service opportunities that can lighten the load of leadership. These professional service opportunities can be beneficial for association members who may be looking for a way to get more involved or interested in taking on an association leadership role in the future. As an association leader, it is also important to prioritize the essential responsibilities that only you can perform. There may also be responsibilities that can be delegated to other association leaders or members who may have subject matter expertise in these areas. In some cases, it may make sense to hire a paid consultant or professional staff member to assist with responsibilities that are outside the expertise area of association leaders and members.

## Association Leadership Tip #9: Organize and protect institutional knowledge.

As Lindsey Sherrill (Alabama Communication Association Vice President), Assistant Professor at University of North Alabama, suggests:

> My biggest advice is to get organized in a way that protects institutional knowledge. One group I served in has shared cloud storage (outside of the official organization) that is updated and accessible to each new leadership team. It's been very easy to see calendars, minutes, [and] bylaw changes. . . . This made leadership transitions seamless and effective. By contrast, working with groups who don't have an accessible repository of institutional knowledge has been far less effective and much more frustrating.

As an association leader, it is important to organize and protect institutional knowledge so future leaders can carry on the work of the association. One easy way to do this is to build in a shadowing period for new officers to learn the role. This could include inviting newly elected officers to committee meetings or having a new officer shadow an existing officer to learn more about the role and responsibilities. If current leaders keep good records regarding processes and procedures, this can make the transition or shadow period easier.

Technology can also facilitate opportunities to organize and protect institutional knowledge. This could involve digitizing historical records in archives or saving digital copies of bylaws and minutes so that they are readily available to future leaders. This could also mean saving email correspondence or copying new officers so they have a sense of what type of correspondence they may receive in the future. Current officers might also pass down records via cloud-based storage so new officers can find information they need for their role.

## Navigating and Thriving in Leadership

When you are appointed or elected to serve in an association leadership role, it can often feel like you are venturing into the unknown (Wang, 2022), because you are not aware of what challenges and circumstances you will face as you serve your association. Although association leadership can be stressful, navigating and thriving in leadership can be possible when you collaborate with your association community and remain focused on the big picture: the association's mission and the association leaders and members you have been appointed or elected to serve.

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# Mapping the Ferment: Mass Communication Research in CIOS-Indexed Journals From 1970–2020

**David J. Atkin[1], Kenneth Lachlan[1], Timothy Stephen[2], and Carolyn Lagoe[3]**

1. University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA
2. University at Albany State University of New York, Albany, NY, USA
3. Queens College of Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

**ABSTRACT**

This study profiles scholarly publishing in the domain of mediated communication, based on an analysis of media-themed communication journals—as indexed in the CIOS's ComAbstracts database—from 1970–2020. Analysis of 22,300 articles from media-themed scholarly journals paints a portrait of scholarly publishing configurations across the domains of Journalism and Communication. Criterion articles were subjected to cluster analysis that yielded a comprehensive *unified field* portrait of interlinkages among topical pairings encompassing 58 topical categories. Results suggest that just 7 of our 37 criterion journal outlets date to the 1970s, 6 additional titles were launched in the 1980s, 10 more in the 1990s, and 14 during the 1990s. As a consequence of this growth in outlets, the bulk of the literature in these journals appeared in the current century.

**KEYWORDS:** mediated communication, cluster analysis, scholarly publishing

**CONTACT** David J. Atkin • E-mail: david.atkin@uconn.edu • Department of Communication • University of Connecticut • 337 Mansfield Rd, Unit 1259 • Storrs, CT • 06269

## Introduction

Roughly a century after Lippmann (1922) helped usher in the study of modern mass communication, assessment of programmatic research continues to shape academic programming. Mirroring the larger media landscape, the study and pedagogy of mediated communication has been dramatically transformed by a rapidly changing digital environment. Digital media now account for a staggering 74.7% of advertising revenue in the U.S. (Yuen, 2023), contributing to displacement of legacy media like newspapers, which saw newsroom employment fall by 57% between 2008 and 2020 (Walker, 2021). Amidst this backdrop of technological change, college enrollments have declined 10% since 2010 (Georgetown, 2016; Hanson, 2024). Importantly, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) reports that enrollment in the Humanities declined by 30% between 2012–2020.

Communication was the only field classified among the Humanities to experience growth during that time period, having ranked among the 10 largest BA majors since the late 20th century (National Communication Association [NCA], 2017). This classification reflects one of the primary origins of Communication—focused on humanistic origins in Rhetoric—rooted in the ancient Greek arts (e.g., Rogers, 1997). The second major tradition—focused on social sciences—emerged alongside other disciplines that crystallized during the 20th century (e.g., economics, political science, and sociology). Communication was not seen as having crystallized in that way, however, owing to its highly variegated contexts, methods, and theories (e.g., Craig, 2007).

Given the pressure that structural realignments are placing on college programs, several institutions have restructured and/or eliminated professional media programs (e.g., Dutt-Ballerstedt, 2019). Even legacy programs in broadcasting/electronic/mass media communication now find themselves "grappling with the need to demonstrate their value to their home institutions" (Atkin et al., 2020, p. 453). Assessments of scholarly output arguably represent the most commonly used method to gauge scholarly trajectories (e.g., Griffin et al., 2018).

Further information on research trends can also help settle age-old debates about whether Communication is a field or a discipline. As Craig and Carlone (1998, p. 119) note, the field's "amorphous contours"—involving a diverse set of methods and theories—can undermine the cohesiveness of Communication as a discipline. Is Communication a distinct intellectual discipline in its own right, or simply a loosely organized set of interdisciplinary domains, tenuously connected under the moniker of a field? Rogers (1997) traces the independent origins of different sub-elements of Communication during the 20th century (e.g., Journalism v. Speech/Rhetoric). These divisions are borne out by inconsistent organizational schemes under which Communication programs can be found, often paired with Journalism/Mass Communication units, occupying separate units within a Communication college (e.g., Radio-TV-Film), and/or spread across colleges ranging from Business, Education, or Arts and Sciences.

Although the professional missions in Journalism can differ from the emphasis on theory and methods underpinning broader definitions of Communication, both traditions acknowledge the importance of applied research and teaching (Zarefsky, 2012).[1] Systematic inquiry on research publication trends can thus help map the patterns of scholarly investigation that best exemplify the arc of media research in the field of mediated (i.e., electronic/mass/digital/tele-) communication. Such work could inform administrative responses to research profiles in a dynamically changing media space, alongside strategic planning and curricular innovation. The present study profiles scholarly publishing to trace evolving interlinkages defining the larger domain of mediated communication, based on an analysis of media-themed journals—as indexed in CIOS's ComAbstracts database—from 1970–2020.

## Literature Review

Media research can be placed within a larger tradition of communication scholarship. Craig and Carlone (1998) outline the evolution of speech and journalism in the early 20th century, which was rooted in emerging land grant universities. Bibliometric work has documented scholarly publishing in domains ranging from (Speech) Communication (e.g., Edwards et al., 1988; Griffin et al., 2018; Hickson et al., 2004), Journalism (e.g., Cole & Bowers, 1973), Mass Communication (e.g., Greenberg & Schweitzer, 1989; Schweitzer, 1988), and Advertising (e.g., Zhou, 2005) to Broadcasting and Telecommunication (Vincent, 1984, 1991).

Emulating early work in Psychology, King and Baran (1981) were among the first to assess *mass communication* productivity, examining research output in five media-themed journals during the 1970s.[2] Study results revealed that 6 of the original "Big 10" schools ranked among the 10 most prolific programs. These early profiles of scholarly publishing addressed domains ranging from Journalism to Radio/TV/Film and Educational Technology. Contributing authors tended to be male faculty affiliated with large Communication and Journalism programs based in the U.S.

Schweitzer (1988) extended this analysis to nine mass communication journals from 1980–1985. Vincent (1984) was the first to track scholarly productivity in broadcasting/electronic media, documenting the schools that produced the greatest number of research articles from 1976–1983. He noted a "wide difference" between the faculty productivity and larger reputations of a graduate school. A follow-up study extended this analysis from 1984–1989—encompassing a slightly larger cohort of 15 journals—to reflect changes in the field (Vincent, 1991); he found that roughly 83% of the subjects pertained to " . . . broadcasting and video . . . with cable and STV accounting for 7% of the article research. Articles on new technology amounted to just under 10% of telecommunication article totals" (p. 84).

When comparing quality metrics, Neuendorf et al. (2007) uncovered a high correspondence between subjective (e.g., peer surveys) and objective measures of scholarly standing in the field of Communication; their own national faculty survey found "the only specialty for which a majority of respondents reported there were 'not enough' is Media Information Technologies" (p. 24). Respondents indicated that there were "too many" programs in more traditional subdomains like rhetoric and interpersonal as well as mass communication. In addition to subjective peer evaluations, other prestige metrics have included citation rates, awards, grants, diversity of faculty/students and scholarly productivity (e.g., Lagoe et al., 2019; National Research Council, 2010).

Subsequent work on scholarly productivity has focused on broader measures of Journalism and Communication, extending the profile of research output concentrated in a handful of doctoral-degree granting institutions (e.g., Atkin et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2018). Lagoe et al. (2019) found that the nature of a program can figure into unit productivity norms; that is, the average publication frequency for *journalism* programs was 12.56 ($SD$ = 23.35), roughly half that of *communication/*

*communication studies* programs (26.57; *SD* = 41.22). They concluded that these numbers reflect the greater premium that journalism units place on practice (as opposed to theory and research).

## Mapping Trends in Media Scholarship

When profiling trends in media scholarship, it's useful to situate such work in the context of the larger Communication discipline. Scholars (e.g., Craig & Carlone, 1998) trace the origins of Communication as a discipline that experienced extensive growth and institutional consolidation after the 1950s.

Early on, communication programs emerged from and/or were administratively connected to various eclectic disciplines, including Literature, Journalism, and Speech. These varying intellectual frameworks contributed to the creation of a discipline that lacks the intellectual cohesion that other academic disciplines demonstrate (Park, 2020; Waisbord, 2019). For instance, the discipline of molecular biology intellectually cohered around a unique scientific breakthrough (namely, Watson & Crick's [1953] landmark publication detailing the double-helix molecular structure in *Nature*). Any given communication program may focus on varied areas of the field, including broadcasting, advertising, rhetoric, public relations, and speech communication. Waisbord (2019) characterizes the field as fragmented and bereft of a shared ontological center. Illustrating this, he notes that "communication studies has expanded in a disorganized fashion, with multiple research branches which belong to different intellectual trees" (p. 23).

Units devoted to media began to emerge in the late 20th century, which was a time of rapid growth in pedagogy and research devoted to mass communication (e.g., Eadie, 2022; Rogers, 1997). This coincided with shifts in the larger culture that were shaped (and informed) by the proliferation of mass media. Schulman (2001) argues that the 1970s ushered in a transformation in multiple facets of America's culture and character that reverberated into the new millennium (e.g., social movements like gay liberation and feminism helping popularize the notion of diversity as a strength). Within the larger communication discipline, as well, the 1970s represented a key demarcation point that can help inform the current inquiry (e.g., the Speech Association of America became the Speech Communication Association in 1970).

Craig (1999) identifies seven main themes of Communication research based on underlying practical concepts; they include: critical theory, cultural theory, social psychology, phenomenology, cybernetics, semiotics, and rhetoric. When chronicling the rise of Communication as a discipline, Eadie (2022) saw the 1970s as characterized by a "new dynamism" in existing journals and the inauguration of new journals. He further elucidated five "strands" of communication scholarship–spurred by the proliferation of journals after 1970—which crystallized during that time period; they include:

1. **Communication as Shaper of Individual and Public Opinion**, including work on persuasion and attitude change, credibility, strategic message and campaign construction, and media influences in shaping public opinion and individual perceptions of political and social issues.
2. **Communication as Language Use,** including rhetorical theory, analysis and criticism, discourse and conversation analysis, scholarship on the impact of language in message construction, and analysis of language use, by linguistic and ethnographic means.

3. **Communication as Information Transmission,** including analyses of cognitive and affective changes related to messages presented via face-to-face and media means, as well as the relationship between information and uncertainty in communication systems.
4. **Communication as Developer of Relationships,** including processes by which relationships are formed, maintained, and decayed in face-to-face and mediated environments.
5. **Communication as Definer, Interpreter, and Critics of Culture,** including analysis of media representations, cultural influences on language use and individual interactions, and critical perspectives of underrepresented areas of society (Eadie, 2022, p. 15).

Eadie notes, in particular, that extensive work in media studies began to be produced in the 1970s under the rubric of "cultural studies," focusing on "the interactions between media and society, particularly regarding perspectives from feminist theory and critical race theory . . . (which) would eventually come to rival hypothesis testing as a means for explaining media effects" (2022, p. 14).

These dramatic shifts in the structure and influence of mass/mediated communication have, over time, influenced the literature designed to chronicle them. As Gerbner (1983, p. 4) notes, the 1970s ushered in a "ferment in the field" that asked "questions about the role of communications scholars and researchers, and of the discipline as a whole, in society." He was focused on the "ferment" posed by the potentially subversive influence that political economy and critical cultural studies could wield on the dominant paradigm of functionalist mass communication research (Fuchs & Liu, 2018). Many academic disciplines and subdisciplines first crystallize through varying collections of authors that are connected by some kind of epistemological thread (Spence, 2019), then further develop into cogent and identifiable programs of study. Huber and Morreale (2002) add that in this crystallization, disciplines emerge that share common intellectual histories, research topics, methodologies, and even disputes. Disciplines and subdisciplines thus exist as organic, developing entities, and that the continual process of alignment and realignment may be borne out in their key journals.

Updating Gerbner's (1983) assessment, Fuchs and Liu argue that "Communication Studies" has since been advanced by primary thrusts in the following domains:

> (a) communication studies on a global scale, (b) researching communication in the fast-changing digital media environment, (c) the importance of critical communication studies, (d) the new critical and materialist turn, and (e) praxis communication and ways to address power imbalance in knowledge production. (2018, p. 218)

One obvious example of this media realignment can be found when the *Journal of Broadcasting* changed its name to *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media [JBEM]*. The new millennium was marked by the addition of new outlets like *Electronic News*, sponsored by the Broadcast and Mobile News Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. It's useful, then, to explore the influence of this larger research *ferment* on scholarly research addressing their influence on mass/mediated communication over the past half century. In particular, we offer the following research question to help guide the present analysis:

> Research Question: What are the (a) primary topics and (b) subject groupings that have emerged in mediated communication research from 1970–2020?

# Method

Data analysis was completed in Spring of 2023 using the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship's (CIOS) ComAbstracts bibliographic database. The ComAbstracts database covers approximately 125,000 articles from 150 communication journals with depth to 1915. Our study extracted articles that appeared in criterion mass communication journals after 1969. The present study focuses on peer-reviewed scholarly articles appearing in media-themed outlets indexed in the CIOS database. Each individual article served as the unit of analysis. Per King and Baran (1981), the criteria for including a given article are (1) that it be listed in the table of contents, and (2) exclude book reviews, special reports, notes, addendums, rejoinders, speeches, and the like.

Where past scholarship profiles focused on 5–15 mass communication journals, the current study frame expands that scope to include all CIOS-indexed outlets that address a mass/mediated communication modality in their name (e.g., *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly [JMCQ]*). This list also includes journals referencing processes that necessarily involve the media (e.g., "Press" or "Journalism"). Since we cannot make that assumption of public-relations processes, titles related to that subdiscipline were not included here; similarly, advertising journals are not indexed by CIOS. The list of 38 criterion journals—consolidating a handful of outlets that changed their name during that time frame (e.g., *JBEM*)—appears in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1** *Mediated Communication-Focused Journals Indexed in the ComAbstracts Database*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Advances in Telematics* | *Journal of Popular Film and Television* |
| *American Journalism* | *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* |
| *Australian Stud in Journalism* | *Journal of Radio Studies* |
| *British Journalism Review* | *Journalism History* |
| *Convergence* | *Journalism Practice* |
| *Critical Studies in Media Communication* | *Journalism Studies* |
| *Global Media and Communication* | *Journalism and Communication Monographs* |
| *Harvard Int J of Press/Pol* | *Mass Comm Research* |
| *Hist J of Film, Radio and Tel* | *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* |
| *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* | *Mass Communication & Society* |
| *International Journal on Media Management* | *Media Culture and Society* |
| *Journal of Broad and Elec Media* | *Media History* |
| *Journal of Children and Media* | *Media Psychology* |
| *Journal of Comm in Healthcare* | *Mobile Media & Communication* |
| *Journal of Comp Mediated Com* | *New Media and Society* |
| *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* | *Newspaper Research Journal* |
| *The Journal of Media Economics* | *Psychology of Popular Media* |
| *Journal of Media and Religion* | *Television and New Media* |

After data screening was completed, the number of research articles included in our sample totaled 22,300. All qualifying articles appearing in the current study frame were included, regardless of the author's rank or affiliation. No attempt was made in this study to evaluate the quality of the articles published. Articles in ComAbstracts are classified by CIOS staff using a closed-book coding dictionary of 104 terms, one subset of which represent major areas of focus in communication scholarship (e.g., terms include Television, Conflict, Organizational, Interpersonal, Race and Ethnicity, Political, Radio, Prestige Press, etc.) and the other subset are used to identify papers for which geographic location is relevant (e.g., terms include Asia, Central America, Middle East, Europe, North America, Pacific Rim, Indian Subcontinent, etc.). Functionally equivalent to the National Library of Medicine's "MESHterms," the CIOS's set of classification labels are referred to as "metaterms." CIOS coders apply as many metaterms as appropriate to each article included in the ComAbstracts database. The metaterms function as a standardized keyword set. The set of metaterms associated with the sampled articles were subjected to cluster analysis, an unsupervised learning algorithm, wherein the number clusters existing in the data are not known before running the model (e.g., Forino et al., 2002).

## Results

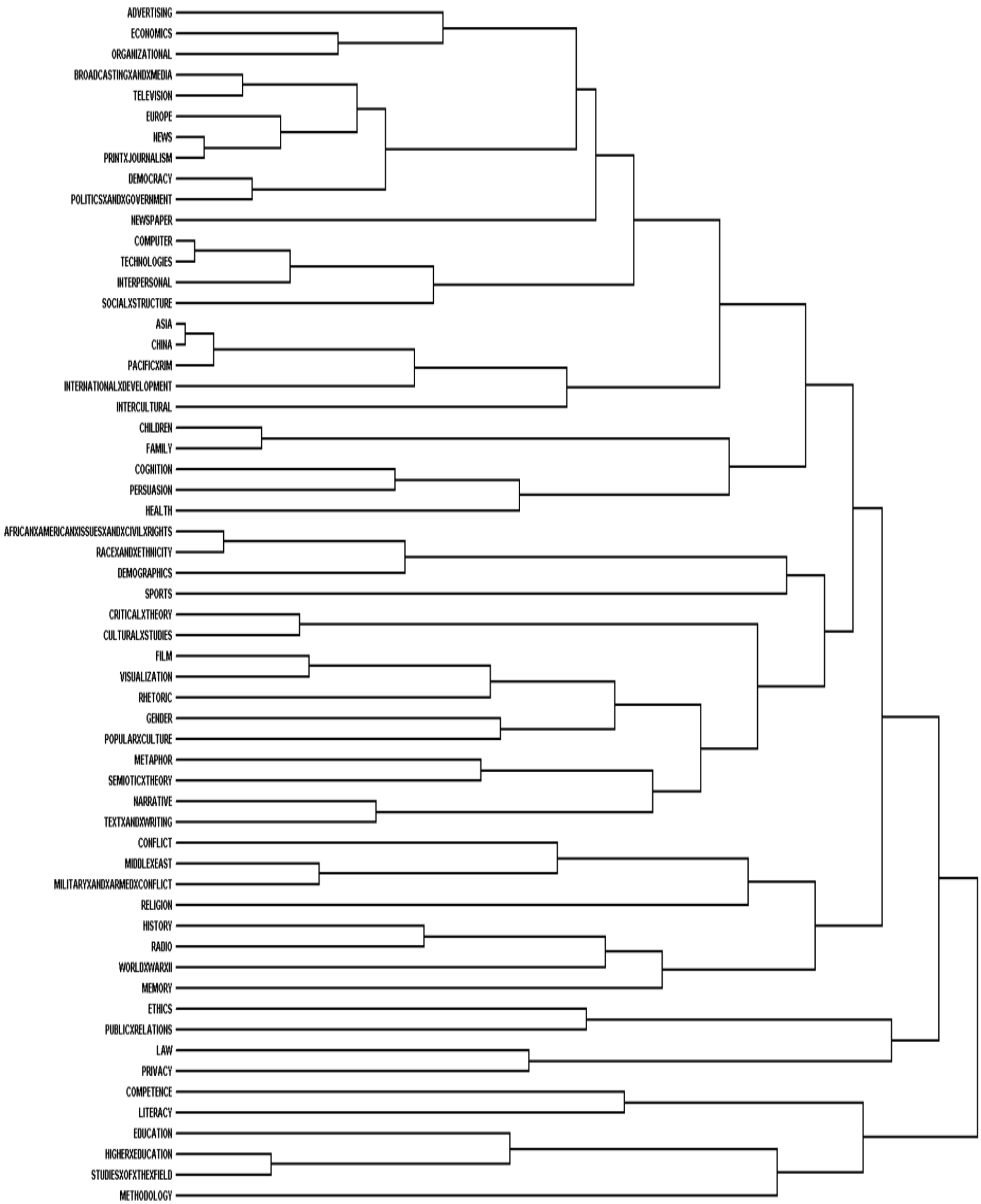
The research subject groupings queried in the Research Question entails a rather more complex analysis of criterion articles derived from journals included in our list, based on 58 metaterm categories that appeared in the sampled articles. Results of the cluster analysis appear in Table 2 on the following page.

Inspection of the dendrogram, a tree diagram illustrating relationships among research topics, depicted one major cluster whose structure indicates the finer divisions within the sampled literature. Since cluster analysis represents a rather novel approach to this literature, it's useful to elucidate the analytical approach employed here. Generally, these trends are interpreted by starting from the right, where all the lines are joined and then following branches to the left to see which cases (in this case, metaterms) are grouped by topic. This information helps render a sensible range of "solutions" between having all the cases in one group (the situation at the extreme right), versus having each case in a group by itself (the situation involving 58 topical categories detailed at the extreme left).

Similar to using a scree plot to guide interpretation of factors in a factor analysis, the determination of clusters from the dendrogram can then proceed. In cluster analysis there is no equivalent to the eigenvalue-greater-than-1 guide commonly applied in exploratory factor analysis; thus, a more conservative approach to interpretation—involving a smaller rather than a larger number of clusters—is in order (see Forino et al., 2002). Here, we examine the content of the various possible groupings to determine where to stop making smaller distinctions (i.e., dividing topical domains into smaller groups).

Inspection of the clusters yields results ranging from pairings involving Advertising/Economics/Organizational Communication (top), to methodological and educational contexts (bottom). The present configuration is by no means definitive. Clustering on the basis of metaterms is advantageous because there are just 100 of them. This obviates the need, as with free text (like keywords, abstracts, or titles), to pass the text through iterations of filters (e.g., to remove common words such as *study, and, have, that, not, research, analysis, communication*, etc.). The approach could entail equivalence words involving different grammatical forms that nevertheless express similar ideas (e.g., organizational, organizing, organization, etc.).

**TABLE 2** *Cluster Analysis of Research in Mediated/Mass Communication Journals, 1970–2020*



However, in general, metaterms from earlier years are not available, which mitigates against comparisons involving cluster analyzed material involving different decades (e.g., 1970–1990 v. 1991–2020). Further clusters on the basis of titles could proceed, but article titles are free language and have to contend with cases where titles are indeterminate (e.g., Benson's [1981] *Another Shooting in Cowtown*). The procedure thus produced some poorly linked minor clusters, which have been omitted here.

As for the evolution of media scholarship over time, the proliferation of journal outlets complicates standardized comparisons across the various decades of scholarship, including the difficulty with mainly citation data (no metaterms, keywords, or abstracts) for earlier work. Taking that into account, inspection reveals a huge difference in the volume of output across our criterion time frame. Analysis of criterion journals suggests that just 7 of our 37 journal titles date back to the 1970s, 6 additional titles were launched in the 1980s, 10 more titles in the 1990s, and 14 afterward. As a consequence of this rapid proliferation in outlets, the bulk of the literature in these journals was produced during the current century.

## Discussion

Using a research design first utilized by King and Baran (1981) to study mass communication scholarship, the present study undertakes a review of research output and trends appearing in several dozen electronic/mass-mediated communication journals between 1970 and 2020. Study results enable us to empirically map out research output during a formative half-century for study in the larger communication field (e.g., Eadie, 2022; Rogers, 1997). The ways in which different research subareas are situated in the cluster analysis, in particular, help document how these diverse traditions are converging in the era of digital media.

Broadly, study results paint a picture of a diverse field that interfaces with disciplines ranging from law and economics to religion and history. Common subdisciplines are often incorporated into unit names reflected in the data—including the pairings of "broadcasting/media" with "television," or "computer" with "technologies"—which share common roots as media modalities. Other configurations (e.g., "radio" and "history") reflect a linkage to a moment in history when a pioneering electronic medium was at its zenith. Similarly, the fact that cognition and persuasion form a primary pairing—which in turn merges with health—makes sense; this can be explained by the important role played by Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behavior, for instance, in explicating the influence of behavioral intentions on actual behavior (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). These domains impinge upon a diverse range of domestic and international or intercultural contexts that also share common roots.

This larger distribution of topics is also influenced by the rapid proliferation of journals during the criterion time frame. Interestingly, the rich diversity of subjects noted here roughly mirrors the dynamically changing media environment since 1970, which in turn prompted the growth of specialized journals designed to chronicle them. The proliferation of journal titles (e.g., *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*) can be explained by Anderson's (2004) Theory of the Long Tail. That perspective links an ever-fragmenting media environment to the stimulation of tastes of ever more obscure fare, which align more closely with consumer interests once scarcity constraints are removed (e.g., relaxation of page limits when a journal moves online). The landscape for media journals has thus emulated the media "marketplace" that they chronicle, which has shifted—"from a relatively small number of universally appealing options (i.e., "hits"), to include more individually appealing options (i.e., 'niche' fare) as well" (Jeffres et al., 2023, p. 9). This finding is consistent with bibliometric analyses in outlets like *JMCQ*, which have seen declines in cognate areas like "law and policy" over the past century, as authors increasingly place such work in niche outlets like *Communication Law & Policy* (Kerr et al., 2023).

Over time, the ebb and tide of Communication departments and schools focusing in each area, along with the most prolific scholars themselves, can be mapped and would make for a useful analysis. We hope to extract this information and integrate it into the project in later work.

Broadly, the breadth of scholarship mapped out here stands testament to the diversity of Communication studies, represents a dynamic entity in the digital age; Craig characterized these amorphous contours simultaneously as a problem and a strength:

> Communication still lacks an established disciplinary core of classic theories and research exemplars. The field comprises diverse academic traditions, each having produced or appropriated its own, more or less coherent intellectual resources, which have converged institutionally under the culturally resonant symbolic banner of "communication" and are only now just beginning to overcome their mutual ignorance. Journalism and media scholars have their reasons for migrating to that banner, as do scholars in cultural studies, conversation analysis, and rhetoric, but they are not the same reasons, and the differences among them and the implications they hold for one another have not yet been much explored. (2008, p.17–18)

One of the challenges for Communication scholars—and indeed, any academic working in a discipline that is driven by rapidly changing technology—is the ability to develop programmatic research and theoretical propositions that have some degree of staying power. Advances in technological attributes, available content, and internationalization make theorizing about mediated communication especially challenging; these challenges bleed into interpersonal and organizational communication as the conceptual distinctions between these arms of the field blur. Having said this, we argue that the links between media modality-based research and more traditional speech/rhetoric domains uncovered here reinforce some degree of coherence in Communication as a field.

Study results can also begin to supplement evaluative information that's helpful for administrators, students, and scholars. For example, from a prospective graduate student's perspective, publishing trends across the domains uncovered here can be analyzed to assess key indicators such as graduate program focus, research interests of faculty, and potential fit with one's interests and expertise. Metrics such as these can be used as one additional indicator to assess whether a particular program will meet a particular student's research interests and needs. Similarly, department heads and deans may be able to use this information to situate their unit's scholarship relative to other units at their institution and across the field. Insights derived from the present study can be used to promote graduate enrollment, promote department visibility (internally and externally), and identify opportunities for collaboration across academic institutions.

Greenberg and Schweitzer (1989) echo these sentiments when recounting how this kind of information is widely used by institutions " . . . to recruit students and faculty, to impress central administration, and to seek external funding" (p. 473). The other key selling point for Communication lies in its centrality to emerging digital economies (e.g., Donsbach, 2006), the presence of which can be seen in prominent topical roots profiled here (e.g., "computer," "technologies"). In this way, media/digital communication can continue to reinvent itself as a popular field—preparing students to work in emerging knowledge economy—alongside traditional domains like public relations and technical writing (Department of Labor, 2019). Interestingly, "social media" did not emerge as a primary term in our analysis. This may reflect a certain "diffusion lag" in the present database (and literature generally), which is now being addressed by newer outlets designed to chronicle the emergent medium (see, e.g., Borah, 2017).

The current study is thus limited in this respect, as several emerging outlets devoted to digital media (e.g., *Social Media + Society*) have yet to be added to the CIOS database. The present panoramic study frame also fails to provide the kind of granular detail that could enable us to see how certain topical domains have evolved across particular decades. In addition, several outlets have recently supplemented their research presence via social media, podcasts, online appendices, and the like, adopting the very kinds of scarcity-reduction techniques (vis page limits) that Anderson (2004) saw characterizing the larger media landscape. Later bibliometric work could proceed on this point; that is, the mediated Communication research traditions documented here which—like the legacy media they've documented—must reinvent themselves in order to survive the disruptions posed by emerging digital media.

Turning to the broader relevance for the field of communication, study findings provide a distilled and succinct overview of publishing trends in a relevant area of the discipline while allowing for a unique glimpse into how publication patterns and key specialties evolve over time. The research configurations mapped out here can help scholars and administrators gain a more panoramic view of trends shaping research and pedagogy in the dynamic realm of mediated communication. General trends and patterns in publication are defining features of any academic field. Such patterns can be used by scholars to define, set parameters around, and establish distinctions between mass/mediated communication and other academic disciplines. The evaluation in what criteria or benchmarks are considered constitutive of "prolific," is worthy of further examination, including the ways in which these benchmarks have changed since the 1970s.

Of course, as Barnett and Feeley (2011) observe, no similar index of scholarly output or quality is complete. Current results are limited by the fact that only mediated/mass communication titles were included in the study frame, which overlooks media-themed articles appearing in more broadly-themed communication outlets (e.g., *Communication Monographs*). Later work could also profitably address citations to research (e.g., Allen, et al., 2013; Lagoe et al., 2012), total number of article pages published, subjective ratings (e.g., Neuendorf et al., 2007; NRC, 2010), placement of doctoral graduates (Feeley et al., 2011), external grants received, and the like.

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## Notes

1. More broadly, as Zarefsky (2012, para 1) notes, scholarly research can help inform one's teaching (and vice versa):

   Research topics often emerge from problems encountered in teaching—explanations that do not make sense, paradoxes I cannot resolve, and so on. Research projects are sharpened by considering how the results affect what or how I teach. Needs to cover broad topics in teaching have motivated research to fill holes in my knowledge. And teaching is improved by asking periodically whether research continues to support conclusions that make sense pedagogically.

2. Interestingly, King and Baran (1981, p. 41) found that schools hosting journal editors had more of their faculty appear in the journals that they housed:

   "The editorship of the *Journal of Broadcasting* was at Temple University for six years in the 1970's, and 23% of Temple's total publication points came from JOB. This might be expected, because that is roughly one fifth of their total, and JOB was one of five journals examined. But the editorship of the *Journal of Communication* was at the University of Pennsylvania for six years in the 1970's and 62% of that institution's publication points came from JOC."

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