

**Arguments against Increasing Class Size in COMS 103**  
**Prepared by Kevin Meyer on behalf of**  
**Ohio University's Basic Course Program**

**1. The experience of our COMS 103 students should be our first priority.**

The question should be how to make the experience of students in COMS 103 better, not how to reduce instructor workload. Increasing class size does nothing to enhance the learning experience of COMS 103 students. No research demonstrates that better student outcomes are associated with larger class size in the basic course. If anything, increasing class size risks creating a worse experience for students (see Bibliography). Extant literature concerning class size in the basic course and issues of class size within education, more generally, suggest that smaller class sizes are better. Specifically, some previous literature indicates that public speaking classes are especially sensitive to class size.

**2. Increasing class size reduces instructional time as well as preparation time between rounds of speeches.**

Increasing class size in COMS 103 would logistically require more speech days, thus reducing instructional time and preparation between rounds of speeches. Specifically, an extra day of speeches would be required for both the Informative Speech and the Persuasive Speech, due to the time limits of these presentations and the number of students speaking each day. It is also likely that an extra day would be required for the third "big" speech (which is currently either a Ceremonial Speech or one of the instructor's choosing).

Although time limits for the Informative and Persuasive Speeches vary from instructor to instructor, most instructors require 5-7 minutes for these speeches (other common time limits are 4-6 minutes or 6-8 minutes). Thus, 12 speeches per day is really the upper limit with a 100 minute class, given the university required 10 minute break as well as time between speeches for comments and debriefing or question and answer periods. Reducing the time limits is undesirable because it literally reduces the amount of experience a student has speaking in front of an audience.

COMS 103 students already think that there is not enough preparation time between rounds of speeches as it is. Increasing the number of speech days would make students feel as if they were more rushed and stressed between speeches. Such perceptions can have a negative impact on student evaluations of instructions at the end of the term, even though the instructor has no control over the standardized schedule.

### **3. Cutting content or speeches from the basic course curriculum is undesirable.**

In a quarter system, there are barely enough instructional days to cover the minimum content and presentational assignments that are necessary and recommended for the basic communication course. To cut any single speech or segment of course content waters down the curriculum to an unreasonable point. To cut any single speech or segment of course content would impede the pedagogical goals and objectives of the basic course. What is sacrificed if cuts are made? Imagine a basic course without a Persuasive Speech or a unit on nonverbal communication. What is covered in COMS 103 that is not important enough to retain in the curriculum? Unlike many other classes, instructional time is a serious concern in a basic course that operates within a quarter system. As such, the basic course is more sensitive to time than many other classes.

### **4. Increasing class sizes is not in line with our competitor institutions.**

Our competitor institutions have average class sizes below our current cap of 25 students per section. In fact, our sections are too large as it is now when compared to other institutions (see Appendix and read in full). The University of Wisconsin-Madison has reduced class sizes in the basic course to 13 students. Many other institutions have caps below 20. As it is, our class sizes compare poorly to other institutions. Any plan to increase class size places us further out of step with our competition.

### **5. Increasing class sizes would negatively affect our ratings in national college rankings.**

Class sizes above 19 negatively affect our national rankings (see Appendix). Thus, any decision to increase our class sizes would negatively affect our entire institution.

### **6. Class sizes should be reduced.**

In order to improve our national rankings, be more in line with our competitor institutions, and provide a better learning environment and educational experience for our students, class sizes in COMS 103 should be reduced to a maximum of 22 students per section or less. We should be moving in the opposite direction.

### **7. Increasing class sizes would potentially increase the public speaking anxiety of some students.**

One of the primary purposes of COMS 103 is to provide a comfortable environment for students to gain public speaking experience. The class is often the first public speaking class that our students have ever taken. Their anxiety is typically high enough without adding the undue stress of speaking in front of an extremely large audience. Decreases in overall course enrollment, and resulting

decreases in revenue, could occur if communication apprehensive students decide not to enroll in our course or take it at another institution with smaller class sizes in order to transfer in the credit.

#### **8. Increasing class sizes causes rater fatigue.**

In addition to the fatigue that hearing more speeches places on students as audience members (thus creating a marathon of speeches for them to listen to), increasing the amount of speeches that an instructor must listen to and grade reduces the quality of evaluation. There is some question as to whether effective evaluation can extend beyond listening to six speeches in a given day, let alone twice that number. Fitting more speeches into a single day is certainly not recommended. In addition, the chances of instructors catching plagiarized speeches when having to grade more speeches in a short amount of time is likely to be lessened. Thus, academic dishonesty issues may become more prevalent due to increased class sizes. Even if students just think that instructors will not catch plagiarized speeches because they have to hear and grade more in an individual class, students might be willing to risk getting caught. Policing academic dishonesty is easier in smaller classes where instructors can devote more attention to each outline on draft days.

#### **9. The suggestion to increase class size indicates an insensitivity and lack of respect for the basic course.**

To merely suggest that class sizes be increased in the basic course reflects a lack of concern for the importance of the basic course in our discipline and within our School. The basic course is the bread and butter of our discipline. It is the course where we showcase all that our discipline has to offer to our majors and non-majors alike. Thus, COMS 103 deserves a sacred place within our curriculum. To suggest that we can do more with less negates the importance of the course and ignores the vital financial role that COMS 103 plays in our ability to fund a number of programs and special interests within our School.

#### **10. Increasing class size sets a dangerous precedence.**

Why not increase the class size to 27-30 in all of our COMS undergraduate and graduate classes? If the claim is that we can effectively teach 27-30 students in COMS 103, what prevents someone from requesting us to match those enrollment figures in all of our classes? If GTAs can supposedly teach 27-30 students in COMS 103, then why can't faculty teach that same number in their classes?

#### **11. Increased class size harms instruction.**

Would faculty members want enrollments of 27-30 in their classes? Of course not! As experienced instructors we know from both intuition and experience that smaller classes create better instructional climates for generating discussion,

engaging students in learning and participation, and providing individual attention to student needs and concerns. Increased class sizes are undesirable from the perspective of both instructor and student needs. Students feel more anonymous and are less inclined to participate or attend larger classes.

**12. Several of our classrooms cannot handle larger numbers.**

Many of the classrooms that we currently use for COMS 103 in Central Classroom Building, Lasher Hall, Bentley Hall, and the Research & Technology Center do not support class sizes larger than 25 students. To add more desks to these rooms would increase crowding and create climate concerns in these classrooms. Finding other rooms would create scheduling difficulties that may not be resolvable.

**13. Increased class sizes create the potential for more classroom management problems.**

Increased class sizes mean more audience members for instructors to monitor while they are trying to evaluate student speeches. On both presentation and instructional days, more students create more potential for discipline and classroom management problems that negatively impact the experiences of both other students and instructors.

**14. GTAs should be given smaller class sizes.**

It seems especially unreasonable to ask GTAs, many of whom are inexperienced or beginning instructors, to teach and manage larger classes. COMS 103 should be a pleasant and positive introduction to college teaching, not a juggling act.

## Bibliography

Blatchford, P., Russell, A., Bassett, P., Brown, P., & Martin, C. (2007). The effect of class size on pupils aged 7-11 years. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 18*, 147-172.

This multimethod study found that smaller class sizes resulted in more individual attention, a more active student role, and higher quality teaching.

Breniman, L. R. (1963). How many are too many? The problem of class size. *Western Speech, 27*, 173-176.

This study found an average enrollment of 23.3 in the basic course. The survey results indicated that respondent universities believed that 20 was the optimum class size in speech.

Finn, J. D., Gerber, S. B., Achilles, C. M., Boyd-Zarahias, J. (2001). The enduring effects of small classes. *Teachers College Record, 103*, 145-183.

Hierarchical linear modeling in a randomized study indicated that smaller class sizes have both immediate and enduring beneficial outcomes for students.

Gibson, J. W., & Hanna, M. S. (1986). How vital is the basic course in the 1980s? *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 57*, 20-23.

This survey of institutions revealed that the majority of universities (55%) had basic course sizes under 22 students per section.

Howard, J. R., & Henney, A. L. (1998). Student participation and instructor gender in the mixed-age college classroom. *The Journal of Higher Education, 69*, 384-405.

This study gathered data through classroom observations, student and instructor surveys, and student interviews. The results of this study found that class size was the largest single significant predictor of student participation. Specifically, larger class sizes were associated with lower rates of student participation. The authors cite other research to argue that lower rates of student participation reduce student learning since participation is linked to learning.

Keaton, J. A., Kelly, L., & Finch, C. (2003). Student perceptions of the helpfulness of the Pennsylvania State University Reticence Program components. *Communication Research Reports, 20*, 151-160.

The results of this study indicated that students report that smaller class sizes help them to improve public speaking skills.

Kuo, W. (2007). Editorial: How reliable is teaching evaluation? The relationship between class size to teaching evaluation scores. *IEEE Transactions on Reliability*, 56, 178-181.

This study found that student ratings of instructors were higher in classes that had enrollment numbers of 20 or less.

Morreale, S., Hugenberg, L. W., & Worley, D. (2006). The basic communication course at U.S. colleges and universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Study VII. *Communication Education*, 55, 415-437.

The results indicated that large classes were one of the top 10 administrative problems facing basic course directors.

Robertson, H-J. (2005). Does size matter? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 87, 251-252.

This article reports a poll in which 90% of Canadian citizens in Alberta believed lower class sizes improved educational quality.

Wolvin, D. R., & Wolvin, A. D. (1975). Speech communication class size in the community college. *Today's Speech*, 23, 11-14.

The results of this survey indicated that it is important for speech educators to work to maintain small class sizes in the basic course. The results further indicated that smaller speech classes provide a better learning environment.

## Appendix

From CRTNET "Announcements and queries #10155" (September, 10, 2007)

Thanks to everyone who replied to my query about public speaking class sizes!

The following is a very basic summary of what I learned. Keep in mind this was in no way a "formal" study, but rather only a very basic summary of a small group of respondents.

22 colleges and universities responded that they have class sizes of 20 or under. The types of institutions varied greatly from the largest universities in the U.S. to the 2-year community colleges and everything in between. Thus, I could determine no trend to suggest that small colleges necessarily have smaller class sizes when it comes to public speaking. Indeed, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has a class size of 13. (I mistakenly believed it to be 18 previously).

Also, 5 respondents (nearly a quarter of those who replied to me) very clearly remarked that their public speaking cap was 19 (exactly 19) because of the criterion established by U.S. News and World Reports' ranking system, which tracks class sizes under 20 at colleges and universities. For larger institutions, reducing public speaking is a simple and effective way to get that number lowered because they offer 50-100+ sections of public speaking per semester. Several others reported as low as 15, but the most common enrollment caps were between 18-20 (again, of those reporting to a specific request for 20 and under examples).

I also received many emails from colleagues who are concerned about their class sizes becoming larger each year due to institutional financial constraints or other reasons. Several respondents indicated concern for class sizes of 28-30. (No one, thankfully, responded with a number over 30).

I could not find any studies indicating an "optimal" number. I think the best way to argue for smaller class sizes is to examine one's competitor institutions, because administrators are more compelled by those arguments. The other argument that may work, if your administrators are receptive to it, is to show them very clearly the actual number of minutes that can be used for giving speeches in each possible scenario of enrollment. At some point, they'll hopefully recognize that 20 minutes of public speaking per student per semester is not sufficient to claim that your institution's students have learned the skill. If class sizes are capped at 20, students can speak for 40 minutes, but if it's 28, they only get 24 minutes of time, etc. (I made up those numbers, but you get the idea: persons who have never taught public speaking might not ever have truly considered the serious limitations to bigger enrollments in a public speaking course.)

Steve Martin  
Assistant Professor of Communication  
Ripon College, Wisconsin (MartinS@Ripon.EDU)