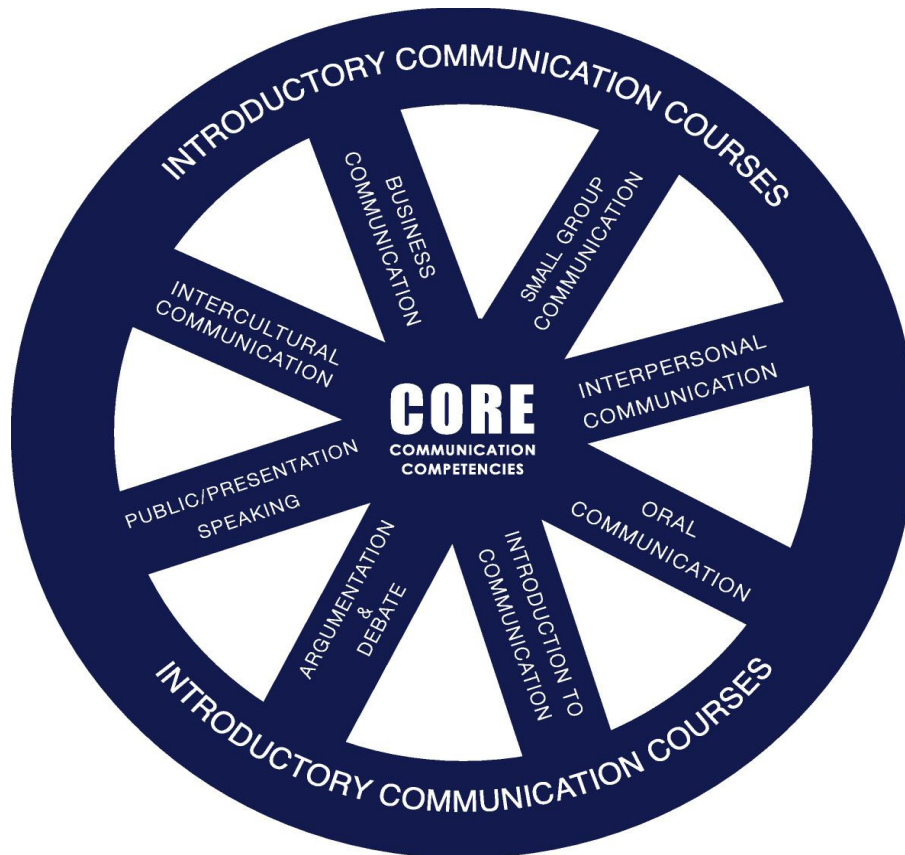


National Communication Association Core Competencies Task Force Report December 16, 2013



Core Communication Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses

1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self
2. Practicing Communication Ethics
3. Adapting to Others
4. Practicing Effective Listening
5. Expressing Messages
6. Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes
7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

National Communication Association

Core Communication Competencies Task Force Report

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Task Force Members

Isa N. Engleberg, Prince George's Community College (Chair)
Lynn Disbrow, Huntingdon College
James Katt, University of Central Florida
Scott A. Myers, West Virginia University
Patricia O'Keefe, College of Marin
Susan Ward, Delaware County Community College

Brief History

Shortly after the 2011 NCA Convention, five colleagues from different institutions in different states created what we call the Core Competencies Group (CCG). We sought to investigate and answer the following question: *Is there a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts?*

For two years and with the addition of a sixth member, the CCG has worked diligently to answer the above question using a carefully planned, reproducible methodology that sought the input from communication educators and scholars. (See Methodology section of this report.)

In 2013, NCA President Steve Beebe invited the CCG to become the NCA Core Competencies Task Force. With a slight difference in wording, President Beebe charged the Task Force with the following goal: To investigate and identify, if possible, a set of core competencies applicable to introductory communication courses within and across a variety of communication contexts.

Moreover and ideally, the competencies identified should be understood and embraced by educators *within* the communication studies discipline and ultimately by constituencies *outside* our discipline (other faculty, administrators, students, media, and the public).

The Case for Core Competencies in Introductory Communication Courses

In most academic disciplines there is *one* introductory course. That course presents an overview of the discipline and introduces fundamental, discipline-specific principles and competencies (e.g., Introduction to or Fundamentals of: Accounting, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Economics, Management, and Marketing).

While few dispute the centrality of an introductory communication course in the communication curriculum and its importance as a general education requirement, the nomenclature and content of introductory communication courses lack consistency. Rather than one course, the communication discipline offers a menu of courses (e.g., Introduction to Human Communication, Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, Group Communication, Argumentation and Debate, Business and Professional Communication, Survey of Communication) that purportedly introduce students to the core principles and practices of effective and ethical communication.

According to the latest national survey of U.S. Basic Courses (208 respondents) published in *Communication Education*, about 50% of our Basic Course students take public speaking; a growing number (36%) take a “hybrid” course that typically includes units in interpersonal communication, small group communication and public speaking; and the remaining 14% take a course that focuses on communication theory, or on a single communication context such as interpersonal or group communication.¹

In a “Message from the President” in *Spectra*, Rich West wrote that the consistencies found in the introductory courses of other disciplines “does not exist in communication. . . . I’m left wondering about the value of our content diversity, especially as we try to articulate the foundation of our field to the uninitiated.”²

This multiple approach to the introductory communication course raises two significant questions, the answers to which often provoke heated debate:

- Are communication courses that qualify as “basic” or “introductory” mutually exclusive? In other words, would a student taking public speaking be prepared to communicate effectively in interpersonal, group, presentational, intercultural, and social media contexts?
- Why hasn’t the communication discipline been able to develop and agree upon a set of core competencies for introductory courses?

In reviewing the literature, we discovered that most of the literature about basic/introductory course competencies literature primarily focuses on only two curricular domains. The first is the overall communication curriculum and academic standards for that curriculum as a whole. The second domain focuses on individual courses by type: specific competencies within a single unit or course, the assessment of competencies within such units, and pedagogy for teaching the unit or course. Metaphorically, East is East (the overall curriculum domain), and West is West (the course-specific domain), and never the twain have met as a set of core communication competencies.

Benefits to NCA Members and the Communication Discipline

As the project developed, Task Force members thought it important to explain how a set of Core Communication Competencies for introductory communication courses can benefit the NCA, its members, and the communication discipline.

As we see it, a set of core communication competencies can strengthen the integrity of the communication curriculum and enhance the rigor, relevance, and validity of the discipline’s introductory courses as well as the discipline as a whole. Recognized core communication competencies can also clarify and enhance the domain of communication studies within the academy.

In support of these claims, we offer five benefits that accrue from identifying a set of core communication competencies and competency-specific instructional templates as the foundation for introductory communication courses:

¹ Sherwyn P. Morreale, David W. Worley & Barbara Hugenberg, “The Basic Communication Course at Two- and Four-Year U.S. Colleges and Universities: Study VIII—The 40th Anniversary,” *Communication Education*, 59 (2010): 405-430.

² Rich West, “Message from the President,” *Spectra*, 48 (May 2012), p. 1.

1. Identify a clear set of objectives for communication studies in introductory courses within and across a variety of contexts.

Rather than perceiving introductory communication courses as a narrow and seemingly simplistic (e.g., just public speaking, only interpersonal communication) or a bewildering hodgepodge of unrelated subjects, core communication competencies demonstrate the “core that holds” the discipline communication studies.

Rather than being perceived as amorphous, undemanding, and solely skill-based, core competencies represent a sophisticated, highly structured system for introducing students to the study of human communication.

2. Demonstrate the need for as well as the rigor, depth, and breadth of communication studies as the basis of disciplinary advocacy, targeting decision makers in educational, professional, corporate, and community agencies.

Rather than confining the basis for curriculum development arguments to the political exigencies of campus politics, core communication competencies also encompass the expressed needs of educators, employers, civic groups, and community members.

3. Provide a more integrated, understandable, and persuasive rationale for developing, supporting, defending, and enhancing introductory/basic communication courses as general education and graduation requirements

Rather than struggling to defend the integrity of introductory courses, well-developed core competencies will match or surpass other general education and graduation requirement courses in terms of academic rigor and the ability to meet empirically-identified student needs.

4. Strengthen the rationales and justifications for diverse approaches to introductory communication courses.

Rather than having to justify the diversity of introductory communication courses on a case-by-case basis, core competencies provide a cohesive framework for communication studies within and across a variety of contexts

Rather than refuting challenges and criticism for not offering a single introductory/basic course, core competencies demonstrates the plasticity of communication studies in meeting the diverse needs of communities, institutions, programs, faculty, and students.

5. Specify an essential knowledge base for those who teach introductory communication courses as well as those who study communication instruction.

Rather than tolerating the misperception that “anyone can teach speech,” the competencies and templates substantiate the academic and pedagogical knowledge base required of qualified instructors in introductory communication courses. The competencies and evolving templates also create new avenues for research in communication education and instructional communication scholars. Equally important, the scope and significance of the competencies are comparable to and even surpass those claimed by other academic disciplines

Methodology

The Core Competencies Group (CCG) developed a multiphase research plan to investigate and answer the question: *Is there a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts?*

Phase 1: Preliminary Work by Individual and CCG Members

The original five members of the Core Competencies Group worked independently to develop, based on their expertise and teaching experiences, *a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts.*

When the competency items were collected and collated, 21 non-duplicated competencies were identified. For several months the CCG members exchanged frequent, detailed emails that analyzed the competencies using the following composite definition and criteria derived from competency literature:

A core communication competency is an expected level of performance that integrates appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, is stated in general terms, and broadly applies to the majority of introductory communication courses in higher education.

A core competency for an introductory communication course

- *focuses on the performance of an educational goal,*
- *reflects the expectations articulated in valid communication scholarship for introductory courses,*
- *is expressed clearly in terms of measurable behavior,*
- *uses understandable standards for judging competencies that are not dependent on the performance of other learners,*
- *informs learners as well as academic professionals and publics about what is expected in a basic communication course,*
- *apply within and across a variety of communication contexts, and*
- *may include performance elements that cut across other core competencies.*

Phase 2: Competency-Specific Templates

In addition, to seeking a set of core competencies for introductory communication courses, the Task Force developed detailed templates for each competency that include the following items:

- Competency statement
- Brief rationale
- Selected subtopics/units
- Selected assessment measure
- Selected references

Not only do these templates substantiate the unique qualities of each competency, they also provide evidence validating the significance, depth, and breadth of the competencies. For departments and faculty members searching for ways to strengthen or defend their introductory course, the templates represent a reasonable prima facie case for supporting communication courses as general education and graduation requirements. (See Core Communication Competencies and Templates Document.)

Phase 3: Focused Group Sessions

Focused group sessions were held at the following professional meetings in which participants were invited to review, critique, and suggest revisions to the competencies:

- 2012 NCA Convention Program on Introductory Course Competencies
- 2013 ECA Basic Course Conference
- 2013 ECA Program on Assessing General Education Competencies
- 2013 Virginia Association of Communication Arts and Science Convention
- 2013 NCA Preconference on Core Competencies in Introductory Communication Courses
- 2013 NCA Department Chairs Breakfast (an information session)
- 2013 NCA Convention Program on Introductory Course Competencies
- 2014 ECA Program on Introductory Course Competencies (April 2014)

Using an iterative process that included a broad spectrum of communication educators and scholars, participants indicated their preference for particular competencies and wrote suggestions for adding, deleting, modifying, combining, and/or separating core competencies. Initially, at the 2012 NCA Program on Core Competencies, ten competencies were presented in the focused group sessions. Post-session analysis and revision consolidated the original ten into seven competencies. These competencies were used in subsequent sessions. At this point in the process, more than 100 individuals have participated in the process of reviewing and making suggestions to improve the core communication competencies. The response has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive.

Phase 4: Task Force Results, Analysis, and Recommendations

The Core Competencies Group met at the 2013 ECA convention to review the ECA Basic Course Conference results as well as material collected in additional literature searches. Changes were made in the wording of several competencies as well as in Template items. A similar discussion and revisions followed the 2013 NCA Convention based on several feedback sessions.

Phase 5: Future Research and Dissemination

Task Force members hope to resume their work as members of an independent Core Competencies Group. We plan to conduct additional research, analysis, and the dissemination of our findings and recommendations.

Results

The focused group session recommendations and Task Force member discussions and conclusions have been consolidated into a set of seven core competencies and related Templates for introductory communication courses. These results do not include revisions that may be made after the 2014 program at the Eastern Communication Association Convention in April 2014 and from additional literature search data, analysis, and conclusions.

The Core Competencies and Templates

The following core competencies for introductory communication courses are neither fixed nor inflexible. They are subject to change given advances in the communication discipline, communication education, and an analysis of institutional, department, and faculty goals as well as related student needs. The numbering does not indicate an order of preference, but is used to more easily identify and discuss each competency.

Core Communication Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Monitoring and Presenting Your Self2 Practicing Communication Ethics3 Adapting to Others4 Practicing Effective Listening5 Expressing Messages6 Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes7 Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

Each of the above competencies is supplemented with a two-page template that includes the competency statement and a brief rationale as well as selected subtopics/units, assessment methods, and references. The templates are not comprehensive. They only provide guidelines and examples rather than constituting an all-inclusive inventory. (See the Core Communication Competencies and Templates Document.)

Definitional Consistency

The Task Force discovered and relishes the fact that, when put in sentence form, the seven core competencies are consistent with the NCA Definition of the Communication Discipline which follows:

NCA Definition of the Communication Discipline: The discipline of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.

See the Competency Key below to understand how the following definition aligns the Core Communication Competencies with the NCA definition.

Core Communication Competencies: Introductory communication courses focus on how we¹ create,⁷ adapt,³ express,⁵ and respond⁴ to messages that effectively and ethically² generate meaning⁶ within and across a variety of contexts.

Competency Key:

1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self
2. Practicing Communication Ethics
3. Adapting to Others
4. Practicing Effective Listening
5. Expressing Messages
6. Identifying and Explaining Communication Processes
7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

Criteria and Recommendations

Criteria

The Core Communication Competencies Task Force was charged with writing and submitting a report that summarizes our goals, methods, conclusions, and recommendations to the NCA President. In addition, the Task Force was charged with distributing its findings via NCA channels (such as the NCA website or other forums) including submitting its work to other publication venues (e.g. *Communication Education* or other journals) for wider distribution.

President Beebe's charge requested that the Task Force consider three criteria as we developed our project and report. These criteria have been integrated into the project and reflected in this report. Our responses to each of the three criteria are noted below:

- 1. President's Charge:** NCA, although financially healthy, has limited financial resources and a finite number of talented national office staff members. I would welcome realistic recommendations given the financial and human resources available to implement your recommendations.

Response: If NCA chooses to distribute the report or a summary to its members, there may be financial and human resource implications. The Task Force will seek additional avenues for distribution: Electronic reports sent to regional and state associations, relevant NCA unit leaders, interested NCA members, and others. Task Force members also plan to submit an article about the project for publication.
- 2. President's Charge:** I would welcome recommendations supported by communication research and best practices as reflected in both theoretical and pedagogical principles and practices.

Response: The Templates that accompany each competency include examples of best practices and selected communication research.
- 3. President's Charge:** Recommendations should have applications to a variety of institutions including community colleges, four-year institutions, comprehensive universities as well as doctoral-granting universities.

Response: The Task Force members and focused-group participants represent all types of higher education institutions. The core competencies apply to the all types and levels of educational institutions that provide introductory communication courses.

Recommendations

The Core Communication Competencies Task Force offers three broad recommendations:

1. The NCA should disseminate the Core Competencies and Templates Document to NCA members and make it available to other academic/professional associations, indicating whether the document comes with or in the absence of formal NCA approval.
2. If the NCA seeks formal approval of or informal support for the Core Competencies and Templates Document, the materials should be disseminated to a wider audience as a means of supporting the legitimacy and value of competency-based introductory communication courses.
3. The Core Communication Competencies Task Force should be concluded with members returning to their status as the Core Competencies Group, which will continue to research and update the Core Competencies and Template Document and conduct further research.

Frequently Asked Questions

During the course of the CCG project, we as well as participants in focused-group sessions posed questions and expressed concerns about using of core communication competencies for introductory communication courses with and across various contexts. These concerns were discussed at length. What follows are responses to several frequently asked questions:

Frequently Asked Questions	Responses
<p>FAQ: Will a set of Core Communication Competencies (CCCs) compel departments to offer exactly the same introductory/basic courses that may not meet institutional, program, faculty, and student needs?</p>	<p>Response: No. The CCCs are <i>not</i> requirements. Moreover, the competencies are highly flexible. They are applicable within and across a variety of contexts. For example, the Self competency applies to self-concept, group roles, leadership, speaker credibility, persuasion, and more.</p>
<p>FAQ: Will faculty members see the CCCs as threatening or compromising their academic freedom?</p>	<p>Response: We hope not. The CCCs are <i>not</i> requirements. They can be combined, modified, and adapted to meet institutional, program, faculty, and student needs. The competencies are designed to encourage new ideas and expand faculty options.</p>
<p>FAQ: Will the CCCs erode or cause the demise of context-focused introductory/ basic courses such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, group communication, etc. in favor of survey courses that encompass all contexts?</p>	<p>Response: No. The CCCs are applicable within and across a variety of contexts that <i>include</i> public speaking, interpersonal communication, among others. The competencies areas (self, ethics, others, listening, listening, expression, communication processes, and message strategies) operate in all communication contexts.</p>
<p>FAQ: Will faculty members be obligated or required to change their introductory/basic courses significantly to encompass the CCCs?</p>	<p>Response: Not necessarily. Many introductory/basic courses <i>already</i> encompass the CCCs, but may not make these underlying competencies evident. Faculty members may consider CCCs that are not represented and decide whether to include them.</p>
<p>FAQ: Will the CCCs be manipulated and applied beyond the purview of introductory/basic courses to identify the scope of communication programs and the entirety of the communication discipline?</p>	<p>Response: No. The Task Force charge <i>only</i> focuses on introductory/basic communication courses. The original Core Competencies Group clearly specified introductory communication courses as the focus of its investigation.</p>
<p>FAQ: Will the CCCs address introductory/basic course pedagogy, that is, how to teach a course using the CCCs?</p>	<p>Response: Not at this time. The Task Force charge, “to identify a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts” did not directly include pedagogy. The Templates, however, provide examples of teaching units, assessment instruments, and references to support pedagogy.</p>

Conclusion

The communication discipline has neither sought nor identified an agreed upon set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts. While few of us dispute the need for or centrality of introductory communication courses in the communication curriculum, the nomenclature and diversity of contemporary introductory courses imply that communication studies is context-based rather than competency-based.

A set of context-free core communication competencies can strengthen the integrity of the communication curriculum and enhance the rigor, relevance, and validity of the discipline's introductory courses as well as the discipline as a whole. Moreover a set of core communication competencies can provide a common understanding and basis for advocating communication studies for those of us *in* the communication studies discipline as well as by those *outside* our discipline.

Members of the Core Communication Competencies Task Force have enjoyed the challenge of this project and are proud of recommending a process that can benefit and serve the institutions, faculty members, and students that offer, teach, and learn in our introductory communication courses.



Core Competencies Task Force Members:

Susan Ward	Patricia O'Keefe	Scott A. Myers	Isa Engleberg	Lynn Disbrow	James Katt
Delaware County	College of Marin,	West Virginia	Prince George's	Huntingdon Coll.	Univ. of Central
Comm. College.	CA	Univ.	Comm. College.	AL	Florida
PA	Patricia.OKeefe	scott.myers	MD	lynn.disbrow	james.katt
sward@dccc.edu	@marin.edu	@mail.wvu.edu	isajk@aol.com	@gmail.com	@ucf.edu

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Before becoming an NCA Task Force, the CCG copyrighted the core competencies and templates to ensure that (a) CCG members are acknowledged and credited with their original work, (b) the methodology is an integral component of the project and any resulting reports or publications, and (c) the CCG may advance the project and seek dissemination to professional associations and educators within and across academic disciplines and educational institutions.