

**Virginia Tech
Basic Course Division
Program of Excellence Award Recipient
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1. Please describe your program.

The program at Virginia Tech—and the focus of our nomination—involved two courses and a support program:

- Communication Skills I and II (“CommSkills”)
- Public Speaking – face-to-face and Virtual Public Speaking (VPS)
- CommLab – a resource and practice center for student speakers

a. What is the content of the course (public speaking, hybrid, interpersonal, other)? What is the format of your course (large-lecture, small intact class, other)?
CommSkills -- This hybrid course sequence is designed for first-year students to satisfy requirements for the major and for Virginia Tech’s general education program. The goal of the courses is to develop practical writing and speaking skills necessary for success in college and career, such as interacting with teams, making in-class presentations, and communicating with peers, professors, and the public in person and in writing. Such skills include various types of communication required in the discourse community: interpersonal communication, group discussion, public speaking, listening, problem-solving, and audience-centered writing. Students who complete the sequence successfully are exempt from any further requirement for Public Speaking.

Public Speaking -- Because Public Speaking is a requirement in some disciplines (although not general education) and is often transferred to VT from community colleges, it necessarily has fairly standard content. The course uses a traditional public speaking text, students study informative and persuasive message preparation and delivery, and they give speeches to their classmates. Two models are used for course delivery. The “interchange” model is offered during the academic year; it is a flipped course with online and face-to-face instruction. A course director is responsible for course content, consistency across sections, and GTA training. Details of this design were described in the nomination packet and are spelled out in the following:

Preston, M., Giglio, M. & English, K. (2008). Redesigning public speaking: A case study in the use of instructional design to create the Interchange Model. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 20*.

The second model is Virtual Public Speaking, a wholly online course. This course is offered only in the summer and taught by instructors and GTAs. VPS has a more professional focus and was designed to make use of newer online presentation technologies that students might eventually use in the workplace, such as podcasts and webinars.

CommLab -- CommLab was designed to support student speakers as they prepare and rehearse speeches. This support center is housed in the VT library, at the heart of the campus. Students meet with Commlab coaches, peer mentors, who are trained to assist with any aspect of speech development. These coaches have taken either CommSkills or Public Speaking, and they enroll in a training course when they begin their work in the lab. The coaches assist students with apprehension, research, organization, visuals, and delivery for individuals and groups. Many of those students are enrolled in Public Speaking or CommSkills, but the lab is open to any VT student. Coaches are also invited

to speak to other classes about oral presentations and strategies for reducing apprehension.

b. How many sections are offered each semester? How many students are in each section?

CommSkills – 28 sections per semester, 22-24 per section, approximately 650 students

Public Speaking -- 24-26 sections per semester, 40 per section, approximately 1000 students (Note: The Interchange Model relies on a larger section that is divided into groups of 20 for practice and delivery.)

Virtual Public Speaking – 6-8 sections, summer session only, 22 per section, approximately 150 students

CommLab – CommLab employs 10-12 coaches per semester and logs approximately 900 visits by student clients per semester

c. Is your course part of general education at your institution? Which students at your institution are required to take the course?

CommSkills – Yes, communication majors are required to take the course; for other majors—business, building construction, real estate—the sequence is an alternative to freshman composition courses.

Public Speaking -- The goals for the current gen ed program excluded courses that emphasized oral communication without a writing component. Because most students enrolled in Public Speaking are non-majors, the university has supported the course financially as a service course. The course is required by various majors, including computer science and business. However, a new gen ed curriculum will be implemented Fall 2018, and Public Speaking will be included.

d. Who teaches the course? What are their credentials?

CommSkills – This course is taught by full-time instructors, a few with PhDs, most with master's degrees

Public Speaking – This course content, schedule, assignments and quizzes are developed by the course director, a full-time instructor—Ms. Brandi Quesenberry. The class is delivered by GTAs who are primarily responsible for speech development and grading of speeches.

CommLab – This program is has oversight of a course director and an associate course director, who is responsible for daily operations. Both are full-time faculty, one with a PhD and one with an MA. The associate director teaches the training course for CommLab coaches.

e. What training opportunities are provided to your instructors? What content is covered in training?

CommSkills – New instructors meet at length with the course director before the semester begins and twice a month thereafter. The CommSkills faculty team meets monthly to share strategies and discuss problems. All instructors and students use the same texts and *CommSkills Course Guide* so that there is consistency across sections; the course guide includes grading policies, assignments, and examples.

Public Speaking – GTAs attend a week of orientation delivered by the course director; then they with her weekly across the semester. All GTAs and students use the same texts and *Public Speaking Course Guide* so that there is consistency across sections; the course guide includes grading policies, assignments, and grading rubrics.

CommLab – The training course for CommLab coaches includes fundamental concepts in oral communication, strategies for interaction with clients, and familiarity with the course guides for both courses. The new coaches shadow experienced coaches as they help students with group or individual presentations.

2. Please describe the goals and outcomes of your program.

a. If your course is part of general education, please describe how your course aligns with your general education goals.

CommSkills – This sequence is approved for general education, Area 1, Writing and Discourse. Approved courses must meet most of the following goals:

1. Understand the use of words as basic tools of thought;
2. Engage in defining, developing, and understanding ideas through the process of writing;
3. Understand modes of verbal discourse that are central to college-level academic work, such as argument, interpretation, analysis, and metaphor;
4. Develop clear and effective prose through attention to style, grammar, and other elements of composition;
5. Engage in planning, inventing, editing, and revising as elements of the writing process;
6. Read texts and write analytical and interpretive prose as a reciprocal means of expanding powers of understanding and imagination; and
7. Participate in verbal discussion of texts and ideas as an essential element of discourse and communication.

CommSkills addresses each of the goals, including #6. Students read Virginia Tech's common book as part of the course; however, they don't write "interpretive prose."

Public Speaking –The new general education has Discourse outcomes that have been written more broadly and will allow the inclusion of Public Speaking:

1. Discover and comprehend information from a variety of written, oral, and visual sources.
2. Analyze and evaluate the content and intent of information from diverse sources.

3. Develop effective content that is appropriate to a specific context, audience, and/or purpose, and reflective of critical thinking.
4. Exchange ideas effectively with an audience.
5. Assess the product/presentation, including feedback from readers or listeners.

The emphasis has been shifted to the process of creating, practicing, presenting, and evaluating writing and/or speaking. This process is emphasized in Public Speaking. CommSkills will also fit well with the new discourse outcomes because of its emphasis on writing and speaking process.

b. What are the goals and outcomes of your course?

CommSkills –

Having successfully completed the two-course, six-hour sequence, students will be able to develop and present effective written and oral discourse in a range of communication contexts. They will develop and employ a repertoire of communication strategies that meet personal, professional, academic, and societal goals. Across two semesters, students will accomplish the following goals as they strive to become more effective and confident communicators:

- Analyze communication situations, including the relationships between and among presenter, audience, context
- Perform basic research, using print resources, on-line resources, and interviews
- Use steps of writing process to build oral and written presentations
- Develop and present messages effectively, adapting to the opportunities and constraints in a range of communication situations, including formal and informal, public and private, collaborative and individual
- Evaluate messages of self and others, employing critical listening and analysis tools
- Recognize ethical dimensions of discourse for presenter, audience, and context
- Explain the differences and connections between verbal (oral and written) and nonverbal communication channels
- Employ rhetorical sensitivity in intercultural, multicultural, and cross-cultural communication contexts
- Employ and choose appropriate technology and media for different goals and contexts

Public Speaking (face-to-face and virtual) – Because of the pending change in gen ed, Public Speaking has been revised to emphasize the role of ethics in the curriculum. The new outcomes include the following:

- Demonstrate ethical practice throughout the process of developing, presenting, and evaluating speeches.
- Identify components of audience analysis as part of message preparation.
- Select topic, researched content, and language appropriate to specific audience context.
- Identify organizational pattern to enhance audience understanding.
- Demonstrate the ability to cite sources to support the message.
- Evaluate and create effective presentational aids to support speeches.

- Demonstrate effective nonverbal communication.
- Demonstrate strategies for reducing apprehension.
- Evaluate presentations of self and other speakers.

CommLab – Mission statement: Our mission is to provide Virginia Tech students and faculty members with access to constructive feedback and practical resources for improving oral presentations. By visiting CommLab, our clients will gain valuable presentation-related insight and develop the necessary tools to become successful speakers.

3. How is your course assessed?

a. Please list and briefly describe any assessment projects conducted in the last few years.

CommSkills – Because of campus resistance to the acceptance of this course sequence in general education (as an alternative to freshman writing), we had to provide assessment data even to get the course approved. We surveyed enrolled students and conducted focus groups with students who had previously completed CommSkills and could speak to the impact of the course on their subsequent academic success. More recently, the department has conducted an assessment of freshman writing--using a review team, AAC&U rubrics, and sample assignments from CommSkills--as part of its annual assessment requirement for the university. Embedded in the course is also an end-of-semester essay designed to allow students to review their growth in the course.

Public Speaking – Assessment of Public Speaking has been used for departmental and university reports of students' proficiency in oral communication – and even critical thinking. (Assessment of critical thinking was based on students' ability to make decisions about effective speech content.) In each case, a review team rated sampled recorded speeches, using the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form, which is also used by faculty in classes as a feedback tool for students. Students also complete a reflection essay at the end of the course, which yields self-reported considerations of growth.

Virtual Public Speaking – Students complete a pre and post survey of their skills, which has provided excellent data about their self-reported competence with oral communication, speech development, and the use of technology. Their comments in an end-of-semester report also reveal points of growth for the students.

CommLab – Assessment of CommLab is based on clients' feedback after they have completed sessions in the lab.

b. Please provide a reference list of any assessment publications you (or your colleagues) have for your course.

Preston, M., Giglio, M. & English, K. (2008). Redesigning public speaking: A case study in the use of instructional design to create the Interchange Model. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 20.

Preston, M. & Holloway, R. (2006). Case study of a basic course: Using assessment to legitimize innovation. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 18, 283-302.

Preston, M. & Quesenberry, B. (2014 Nov.). Virtual public speaking case study: Maintaining rigor, meeting outcomes, and enhancing relevance for digital natives. *Quarterly Review of Business Disciplines*, 1. 274-285.

4. Why do you think your application stood out to the review committee?

a. In other words, what makes your program distinct? You may want to refer to the rationale of your full application for this answer.

Reviewers indicated that strong points of the nomination were creativity and innovation, assessment, and attempts at continuous improvement. The fact that the program had developed in a coherent way over time was also important. One reviewer mentioned the buy-in of faculty, which we have found essential to providing consistency across sections of the courses.

b. What new initiatives have you implemented since your award?

At the time of this award, we were piloting Virtual Public Speaking. It is now a significant part of our summer offerings. We have also continued annual assessment of this course as it has evolved.

5. What insights or advice do you have for future applicants as they prepare their materials for this award?

Preparation of the nomination packet is no doubt effortful, but certainly worth the time.

- Whether a nominated program receives this award or not, just documenting the important features of a program can help boost visibility in a department or college. Use it as a self-study, share it with your department head or dean, or ask your assessment office to review it to help you develop a new assessment plan.
- Submissions could also get good feedback that would allow for an improved submission in the future.
- Asking colleagues to develop different parts of the nomination would obviously help to reduce the time required of one person.

The models provided by various departments that have won this award reveal some possibilities; they aren't guidelines for other programs. If your program is dynamic and working well to meet student, departmental, and institutional needs—it could be a perfect candidate for this award.