

**REVISED RESOLUTION ON THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION
IN GENERAL EDUCATION
ADOPTED BY THE NCA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
NOVEMBER 17, 2012**

AUTHORS

**Cheri J. Simonds
Jacquelyn Buckrop
Mark Redmond
Deborah Hefferin Quianthy**

RESOLUTION

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 Communication faculty.

I. Introduction

As many general education programs across the country are undergoing major revisions, many department chairs, faculty, and basic course directors are finding themselves in the unenviable position of having to make the case for inclusion of their communication course in general education. This is a re-occurring theme at basic course business meetings, national and regional conferences, and on list-serves. As such, this justification for the resolution will serve to arm communication faculty with the arguments they may need to save their programs. This justification is based on the premise that because national level associations (e.g. AAC&U, AASCU) have clearly identified communication as critical to preparing undergraduate students to become engaged citizens in the 21st century; then communication courses should be included as a foundational part of general education. The following rationale for the resolution above will first address these national trends in general education and then align specific communication curricula that address the principles of excellence proposed at the national level.

II. National Trends in General Education

In *Making the Case for Liberal Education*, Humphreys argues that a consensus is emerging about the breadth and depth of education that Americans need to compete and succeed in a “knowledge-intensive economy, a globally engaged democracy, and a society where innovation is essential to progress and success” (2006, 1). That consensus rests on the value of a general education as founded in traditional liberal education practices.

The National Communication Association recognizes current national trends that support a broad general education (Gen Ed) for undergraduate students and supports the claims that communication skills are critical to the citizenry and workforce of the 21st century. A 2006 survey among business leaders revealed that 73% of employers believe that colleges and universities should place more emphasis on communication skills, critical thinking and analytical skills, and applied knowledge in real-world settings (Hart Research Associates, 2009, p.5)

The Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) formed the Red Balloon initiative to re-imagine general education. Vice President, George Mehaffy, describes the goal of the project is to “provide students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they will

need to become successful participants in careers, engaged citizens in a democracy, and thoughtful leaders in the global society of the 21st century” (AASCU). Similarly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) acknowledges the value of general education at the secondary level through its LEAP initiatives. Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) is a “national advocacy, campus action, and research initiative” that advocates liberal education (*An Introduction*, nd, p.1). Both initiatives are in response to the changing landscape of industry, the economy, and social and political climates that demand a more informed, more creative, and more vital citizenry. These organizations have traditionally advocated for all students to receive a powerful and horizon-expanding liberal education so that they may compete and succeed in this changing and demanding environment. AAC&U defines a Liberal Education as

an approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and includes a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

General Education is defined as “the part of a liberal education curriculum **shared by all students**. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual and civic capacities” (*AAC&U, emphasis added*). Two of the four learning outcomes, *Intellectual and Practical Skills*, and *Personal and Social Responsibility*, are well suited to the typical oral communication course in general education. In fact, written and oral communication is specifically identified under Intellectual and Practical Skills. Furthermore three of the seven “principles of Excellence” are also suited to oral communication instruction: *Teach the Arts of Inquiry and Innovation*, *Connect Knowledge with Choices and Action*, and *Foster Civic, Intercultural, and Ethical Learning* (*An Introduction*, p. 6).

Although many campuses face economic crises and calls to review their curricular offerings so that students may complete their degrees more quickly, we also note that chief academic officers, faculty members, and industry professionals have renewed interest in and attention to general education (Hart Research Associates 2009, 1). New pedagogies and practices are being incorporated into Gen Ed (such as learning communities, thematic courses, upper-division requirements, etc.) across the country and reflect what faculty and other professionals report as important foci for teaching and learning, but they also represent an emerging consensus among employers who report on what they seek in college graduates.

Employers are echoing the call for more emphasis on college learning outcomes. In a 2010 national survey, “employers indicated that two- and four-year colleges should be placing more emphasis on several key learning outcomes to increase graduates' potential to be successful, contributing members of today's global society” (AACU, 2010, p.3). The areas in which employers feel that colleges most need to increase their focus list written and oral communication skill first, followed by critical thinking and analytical reasoning, the application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings, ethical decision making, and teamwork skills (Hart Research Associates 2010, p.9). It should be noted that the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes were developed “through a multi-year dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of

recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education” (*An Introduction*, p. 6).

Perhaps never before has there been so great a need for adaptable and learned citizens who understand difficult problems and can who can work with others to solve problems. We recognize the importance of the major course of study and of co- and extra-curricular activities in building expertise in a given subject area. But we also recognize that it is the solid foundation of a general education which helps students see how subject matter can bridge silos and help them live in a complex society. We therefore assert that an oral communication course taught by credentialed communication faculty logically and rightfully belongs in general education. We also assert that an oral communication course is uniquely qualified to address several of the essential learning outcomes identified by current national trends.

III. The Role of Communication Education in General Education

Communication is a life skill that pervades all other dimensions of human development. Communication is “a multi-faceted discipline that studies the processes, practices, and products of human signification as its central defining characteristic” (NCA: Communication in the General Education Curriculum, 2003, p. 4). As such, communication is foundational to all other academic, professional, and social experiences.

Communication competence is central to a student’s future academic success. As noted above, leading national organizations have championed the role of communication in liberal education. Of the four essential learning outcomes that LEAP recommends for student achievement, two speak directly to skills taught in communication courses. The first of these outcomes is *Intellectual and Practical Skills* including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving. Second is *Personal and Social Responsibility* including civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning (LEAP). Communication courses are the ideal context for teaching and assessing these skills (Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2009; Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff, 2007; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Speaking and listening assignments afford students the opportunity to engage in critical thinking and information and media literacy (both formally and informally). They learn to construct messages as well as articulate and defend their ideas while at the same time critically evaluating the arguments of others. Additionally, these assignments allow students to question information, examine new evidence, categorize and organize ideas, and create linkages between concepts and their own lived experiences.

Moreover, Communication skills enhance the professional development of students. In Communication courses, students learn how to present themselves as communicators and thus create positive first impressions in a job interview. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers *Job Outlook 2011* survey, communication is the highest-ranking skill that employers look for in new recruits. According to the list, employers also seek recruits with interpersonal and teamwork skills, ethical integrity, and analytical skills—all of which can be improved in the context of a communication course. While many employers provide training in company-specific skills which need to be continually updated as technology changes, they are more concerned with an employee’s broader skills such as written and verbal communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and interpersonal skills (Humphreys, 2006).

Finally, communication skills are foundational to student social experiences. As stated earlier, LEAP lists *Personal and Social Responsibility* as an essential learning outcome to

student achievement. While it may be clear to most students that communication courses may enhance their interpersonal relationships, it may be less clear in terms of civic engagement. Because communication courses teach students how to become critical consumers of information from a variety of sources (journalists, politicians, advertisers, etc.), students are better prepared to become informed and ethical citizens in their democracy (Hunt et al., 2009; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Beyer & Liston, 1996). Information and media literacy are essential to an engaged citizenship (Milner, 2002). Democracies function as a result of citizens communicating with one another and competent and ethical communicators are central to a democratic self-governance (Hunt et al., 2009). Thus, communication courses have the potential to enhance our social and civic lives. In this way, communication students are working towards civic knowledge and engagement, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning (LEAP).

While this justification for the resolution aligns communication skills to the LEAP initiative, we would advise course directors to look to the specific general education goals at their respective institutions to engage in a similar process. We contend that aligning communication skills and curricula to specific general education outcomes will only serve to secure the role of communication in general education while giving more prominence to our discipline.

IV. The Use of Communication Faculty

One common perspective held in many institutions is that anyone can teach communication and this perspective results in hiring instructors to teach communication courses for which they have little or no academic preparation. Such a perspective belittles the historically strong tradition of communication scholarship originating in the classical rhetorical traditions and proceeding to contemporary quantitative and qualitative research. Education in communication theory and research provides a foundation unique to communication educators. Publications such as *Communication Education*, *Communication Teacher*, and the *Basic Communication Course Annual* reflect the disciplinary commitment to furthering communication education and insuring quality instruction. Faculties with degrees reflecting a strong oral communication tradition bring an expertise and pedagogy that is not found in those with degrees in peripheral disciplines. Recognition of this is reflected in the Higher Learning Commission's recognition of the importance of appropriate faculty credentials for those hired to teach within a given discipline. Efforts to establish or maintain quality instruction of communication as a general education requirement are dependent upon a commitment to also staff such courses with qualified communication faculty.

V. Specific Actions the Association will be expected to take if the resolution passes

NCA would be expected to add to its website a resource page devoted to Communication in General Education Resource. This page would house the resolution, supporting materials that departments can use at their respective institutions, links to articles mentioned in the resolution as well as other sources of interest, and copies and links of relevant assessment instruments.

VI. Resources Required (both financial and human) to implement the resolution (to be determined in consultation with the Executive Director) and justification for priority of this expenditure

Resources required include staff time to establish the requested web presence. Additional resources (staff or NCA members) might be needed to identify additional materials for the webpage, secure permissions for copyrighted material, create and implement assessment projects, and provide expert consultation on developing courses that align with general education goals. In general, the level of resource needed should be minimal and some support could come from the Educational Policies Board.

References

AAC&U. (nd) Liberal education and America's promise (LEAP). <http://www.aacu.org/leap/>
Retrieved from http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/Introduction_to_LEAP.pdf.

Association of American Colleges & Universities. (nd). An introduction to LEAP: Liberal education & American's promise excellence for everyone as a nation goes to college.

AASCU. (nd) The leadership association of public colleges and universities delivering America's promise. Retrieved from http://www.aascu.org/Red_Balloons_Project.aspx.

Beyer, L. E., & Liston, D. P. (1996). *Curriculum in conflict: Social visions, educational agendas, and progressive school reform*. New York: Teachers College Press. (p. 88).

Gaston, P. L. (2010). *General education & liberal learning: Principles of effective practice*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges & Universities.

Hart Research Associates (2009). Trends and emerging practices in general education. Washington, D.C. Hart Research Associates. Retrieved from http://www.aacu.org/membership/documents/2009MemberSurvey_Part2.pdf.

Humphreys, D. (2006). *Making the case for liberal education: Responding to challenges*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Hunt, S. K., Simonds, C. J., & Simonds, B. K. (2009). Uniquely qualified, distinctively competent: Delivering 21st century skills in the basic course. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, 21, 1-29.

Job Outlook Survey 2011 (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.naceweb.org>.

Mazer, J. P., Hunt, S. K. & Kuznekoff, J. H. (2007) Revising General Education: Assessing a critical thinking instructional model in the basic communication course, *The Journal of General Education*, 56:3-4, pp. 173-199.

Milner, H. (2002). *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Morreale, S. P., & Pearson, J. C. (2008). Why communication education is important: The centrality of the discipline in the 21st century. *Communication Education, 57*, 224-240. doi:10.1080/03634520701861713

National Communication Association. (2003). *Communication in the General Education Curriculum: A Critical Necessity for the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C., NCA.