Illinois State University
Basic Course Division
Program of Excellence Award Recipient
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1. **Please describe your program.**
   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)?**

   The Basic Communication Course at Illinois State University is entitled, Communication as Critical Inquiry (COM 110). We use public speaking as a context for teaching communication competence and confidence, ethical communication, and critical thinking including information and media literacy. These skills are taught so that students may become better citizens in their democracy.

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

   We offer 75 plus sections each semester in small intact classes with 23 students.

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

   This course is an integral part of the general education program at ISU.
   It is one of two courses that all ISU students must take in their first-year experience.

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

   The course is taught by a combination of full and part-time instructors and graduate students. Our instructors must have a completed Master's degree in Communication; whereas, our GTAs are working on their Master's degrees.

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

   Our training is comprised of a two-week summer training workshop, a peer mentor program, and a pedagogy seminar.

   Summer Training
   Our summer training program involves a thorough orientation to the school of communication and the role of COM 110 in our general education program, instruction on various pedagogical issues including instructional strategies, grading and evaluation, and creating a positive climate in the classroom. Our pedagogy is student centered and focuses on instructional discussion and experiential learning. We provide video instruction on these pedagogical strategies as well as thorough discussion facilitation guides and numerous activities to meet a variety of instructional strategies. Perhaps our most

noteworthy and distinctive aspect of our summer training program is our systematic speech evaluation training.

Peer Mentor Program
In addition to the formal instruction presented in COM 110 training, all new teaching assistants in the department are expected to participate in the mentor program. The mentor program has been developed to help teaching assistants refine their teaching skills by working collaboratively with an experienced graduate student. Teaching assistants are afforded the unique opportunity to teach one section of Communication 110 while simultaneously attending a mentor's class to observe how he or she prepares lectures, and structures exercises, conducts class discussion, evaluates students, and deals with the array of situations and issues likely to arise in the classroom. This structure allows the teaching assistant to observe, apply, perform, and discuss instructional techniques with his or her peer mentor.

Pedagogy Seminar
This course plays a vital role in the ongoing professional development of graduate students teaching COM 110. The purpose of our weekly meetings is to assist students in becoming more effective instructors. To meet this objective, we discuss matters related to course content and instructional theory. Teaching assistants are also afforded the opportunity to practice their teaching and receive constructive feedback.

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.**

   Communication as Critical Inquiry (Com 110) seeks to improve students' abilities to express themselves and to listen to others in a variety of communication settings. In short, the course is designed to make students competent, ethical, critical, confident, and information literate communicators.
   COM 110 addresses the following General Education outcomes:

   II. intellectual and practical skills, allowing students to
   a. make informed judgments
   c. report information effectively and responsibly
   e. deliver purposeful presentations that inform attitudes or behaviors

   III. personal and social responsibility, allowing students to
   a. participate in activities that are both individually life-enriching and socially beneficial to a diverse community
   c. interact competently in a variety of cultural contexts

   IV. integrative and applied learning, allowing students to
   a. identify and solve problems

b. transfer learning to novel situations
c. work effectively in teams

Primary outcomes are indicated in plain text and secondary outcomes are indicated in italics.

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

Communication as Critical Inquiry—After taking this course:
- Students will become more competent communicators (using knowledge, skill, motivation, and judgment).
- Students will become more critical consumers and producers of ideas and information (using analytical reasoning skills in the reception, collection, and presentation of ideas).
- Students will conduct background research necessary to develop well-informed presentations.
- Students will evaluate the communication skills of others (identifying effective and ineffective aspects of oral presentations).
- Students will become more competent in communicating in small group discussions (articulating and defending their own ideas as well as listening to and considering the ideas of others).
- Students will become more effective communicators in a democracy (demonstrating ethical communication, considering multiple perspectives on controversial issues, and managing conflict).

3. How is your course assessed?
   a. Please list and briefly describe any assessment projects conducted in the last few years.

We understand that assessment involves not only demonstrating that students are meeting course goals, but also identifying areas for improving course instruction.

Portfolio Assessment. The bulk of our large-scale course assessment efforts focus on analyses of the student portfolios produced in COM 110. Student portfolios represent a combination of instruction and assessment. In essence, a portfolio is a collection of data about a student's progress over time. This portfolio includes students' speech materials (informative, group, and persuasive presentations), artifacts (i.e., short written papers that link course concepts to communication phenomenon outside of class), a videotape of all speeches, and two short papers that require students to identify their goals for the course (Communication Improvement Profile) and reflect on their progress over the semester (Synthesis).

Instructor Training. It is interesting to note that portfolios not only provided information with regard to student learning, but also a clear sense of instruction as well. While examining the portfolios (Portfolio Assessment Study), the course directors noted that the portfolios highlighted the interaction between student

progress and instructor feedback. While often times this evidence was positive, there were other times that this data provided some much needed remedial evidence that could later be used to improve program quality. Inconsistencies in course assignments and grading practices indicated some unexpected areas of instructor training that needed to be addressed. Some instructors seemed to lack a clear understanding of the purpose of the artifact assignments. Some instructors also seemed to need training in providing constructive criticism with respect to student performance and speech outlines. This information served as a needs assessment for training of instructors. For example, the course directors developed a clear set of criteria for each of the assignments and provided training on how the criteria should be used in conjunction with instructor evaluation forms (Hunt, Simonds, & Hinchliffe, 2000). More specific details on the changes we made to the program are provided below.

Criterion-Based Assessment. Based on assessment data suggesting that COM 110 instructors were providing too few constructive comments on students' speech evaluation forms, the course directors developed grading rubrics (see Simonds & Hunt, 2005) for all three major speeches as well as a training program on how to utilize these rubrics for new instructors (for a more detailed overview of this assessment project, see Reynolds, Hunt, Simonds, & Cutbirth, 2004). The course directors have taken a number of steps to improve our instructors' and students' abilities to better understand and utilize effective criteria for evaluating speeches. The following activities represent a few of our efforts:

- Developed criteria for evaluating speeches for use in all COM 110 graded presentations (fall 1999).
- Developed a training program to prepare GTAs to use standardized criteria to evaluate student speeches. As a part of a graduate student thesis, this training program was tested empirically and shown to reduce grade inflation as well as increase grade fidelity across instructors and sections (fall 2000) (see Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003).
- Produced a video-tape of example speeches (Tornadoes) based on course criteria (fall 2001). This was the original video produced to facilitate training.
- Produced a video-tape of example speeches (Roman Coliseum) based on course criteria (fall 2002). This video is now used to train students and instructors (See Appendix A)
- Assessed the nature of instructor comments to student improvement over time (Simonds, Meyer, Hunt, & Simonds, 2009).

Speech Laboratory. The School of Communication speech lab was developed to provide an opportunity for students enrolled in COM 110 to practice their speeches and receive constructive feedback from trained instructors. The lab is staffed by GTAs who teach at least one self-contained section of the course. All of the speech lab monitors receive extensive training before they begin their assignment in the lab. For our speech lab assessment, we surveyed 527 students enrolled in a basic communication course to evaluate the efficacy of the speech

lab in relation to speech requirements stipulated by their instructors (see Hunt & Simonds, 2002). In addition, we examined the scores of 435 student speeches to determine if students who visited the lab earned higher grades compared to students that did not visit the lab. Results showed that (a) most instructors require their students to visit the lab before at least one speech, (b) the vast majority of students perceive the help they receive in the lab to be very useful, and (c) students who visit the lab prior to their speeches earn significantly higher grades on speeches than those who do not visit the lab.

Another study examined the effects speech laboratories have on students enrolled in COM 110 (see Jones, Hunt, Simonds, Comadena, & Baldwin, 2004). Specifically, we attempted to gain a student perspective about visiting a speech laboratory through qualitative methods. Ten semi-structured student interviews were conducted and the collected data were transcribed verbatim before being analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The results provide additional support that the ISU speech lab does, to some degree, assist students with their public speaking skills and help them manage their public speaking anxiety. For example, several of the students we interviewed commented on how helpful it was to listen to verbal feedback from the speech lab attendee immediately after the speech presentation, but then also have the opportunity to take the written and video feedback home to use as a reference for the needed improvements. Additionally, the feedback issue seemed the most salient for students as they prepared for their final speech presentation. The participants indicated that the feedback they received specifically helped to improve their grades on the final speech and in some cases this was an improvement of at least one letter grade.

Implementation and Assessment of New General Education Requirements

Our current assessment efforts in COM 110 come as a result of revisions to Illinois State University's general education program. As such, we have analyzed student portfolios (including an analysis of instructor feedback on speech evaluation forms), as well as critical thinking and information literacy assessment (a large study that pilot tested multiple sections of COM 110 containing enhanced instruction in critical thinking and information literacy).

Analysis of Student Portfolios. A student portfolio is a means of reflection for not only students, but for instructors as well. Student portfolios were collected from classes of first-year GTAs to assess the GTA training program, and to improve training of criterion based assessment. Under the direction of the basic course co-director, Dr. Cheri Simonds, students in COM 492 (a graduate seminar in communication theory) analyzed and assessed specific components of the data using content analysis to conduct authentic portfolio assessment. More specifically, the instructor feedback on informative and persuasive speeches was

categorized into four types of feedback (positive non-descriptive, positive descriptive, negative, and constructive). Data were also analyzed to find any evidence of rater fatigue reflected in speech grades. Findings suggest that student grades reflect the types of instructor feedback, and rater fatigue was not detected (Simonds, Meyer, Hunt, & Simonds, 2009).

Additionally, we analyzed student's ability to use preemptive arguments in their persuasive speech outlines (Meyer, Kurtz, Hines, Simonds, & Hunt, 2010). The results indicated that approximately two-thirds of the student outlines employed preemptive argumentation. However, the findings also indicated that the majority of students who were able to incorporate preemptive arguments were not able to do so at a high-level of competency. These findings allowed us to make our instruction and criteria of preemptive argumentation more focused and directed. We are also planning to create models of expected performance in this area and plan to collect new data in the Spring of 2013.

Individual student assessment projects included analysis of:

- Instructor feedback and student improvement from informative to persuasive outlines for constructive comments.
- Instructor feedback on students' Communication Improvement Profile and Synthesis papers.
- The use of critical thinking in artifact assignments.
- The use of popular culture as artifact topics.
- Types of student feedback on self-evaluation forms.

Critical Thinking and Information Literacy Assessment. The general education curriculum has been modified revising COM 110 and ENG 101 as a year-long sequence incorporating more instruction in critical thinking and information literacy. During the spring 2005 semester, under the direction of the basic course co-director, Dr. Stephen Hunt, students in COM 481 (a graduate seminar in Communication Education) pilot tested eight sections of COM 110 containing enhanced instruction in critical thinking and information literacy. These experimental sections were compared to a group of eight control sections.

Pretest scores were similar for both groups; however, data analyses revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups for the critical thinking and information literacy posttests. Statistical analyses indicated that both groups demonstrated a significant improvement over time on the CTSA (i.e., a tool that measures their *perception* of their critical thinking abilities). However, the control group did not improve their performance on either the critical thinking test or information literacy measures. In contrast, the experimental group improved significantly over time on both the critical thinking and information literacy measures.

The manipulations administered to the experimental sections now comprise the bulk of current COM 110 pedagogy. These manipulations include substantially revised library instruction, intensified instruction in the three tests of evidence to evaluate sources, and increased attention to argumentation.

Critical Thinking and Information Literacy Assessment. As a follow-up to the spring 2005 assessment of COM 110, we collected data in the fall 2005 semester to explore the development of students' critical thinking and information literacy skills. We analyzed data collected from six sections of COM 110 and found a statistically significant improvement in students' critical thinking and information literacy skills (Mazer, Hunt, Kuznekoff, 2007).

Political Engagement Project (Fall 2006) COM 110 Course Directors began pilot testing the newly developed civic and political pedagogy in the fall of 2006 with four sections of the Communication as Critical Inquiry course. Approximately 100 students were involved in the initial pilot. 3,200 students are enrolled annually in COM 110. Initial data assessment indicated that students in enhanced sections had a significant improvement in civic health when compared to students enrolled in regular sections. Specifically, students in the enhanced sections experienced greater gains in political skill, knowledge, and a sense of being able to "make a difference" in civic processes compared to students enrolled in regular sections of the course. These students also reported greater interest in the content of the course, the instructor, and the civic engagement behaviors recommended in the course more than peers in the regular COM 110 sections. Importantly, they were also significantly more motivated to engage in civic and political life than their counterparts.

Our analyses also revealed no significant pre- to post-test differences on measures of political ideology (a measure of conservatism and liberalism). This finding supports previous research that reports instructors can successfully implement pedagogy for political engagement without altering students' political ideology. In short, results confirm the claim that our efforts have developed pedagogical strategies which effectively motivate students' civic and political engagement.

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

References

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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 rational of your full application for this answer.**

    We as basic communication course directors believe that our program is distinctive in its' efforts to provide intensive training for our instructors, enhanced critical thinking and information literacy skills, and additional opportunities for political and civic engagement. These efforts are consistent with NCA's Mission in that we promote effective and ethical communication. More specifically, we develop, support, and advance communication education, instruction, and pedagogy. Additionally, our assessment efforts, and resulting publications, have highlighted our commitment to advancing the basic course within the discipline.

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

    We are continuing our assessment of the basic course with new projects on the effectiveness of our speech lab, our speech evaluation training, ethical communication, and civic and political engagement.

    Dr. Simonds served as lead writer for the NCA Revised Resolution on the Role of Communication in General Education, served as chair of Steven Beebe's Presidential Task Force on Strengthening the Basic Course, and led several national and regional workshops for basic course directors and administrators.

    Illinois State University now offers a doctoral program (in partnership with the School of Teaching and Learning) in Communication Education Administration. This program is specifically designed to nurture a pipeline of future basic course directors.

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

    We would encourage future applicants to ask previous recipients if they can review a successful application. We are certainly happy to provide anyone with our packet. That said, future applicants should truly reflect on what makes their program unique and how they provide models of best practice for the field. Future applicants should be able to demonstrate a commitment to training their instructors to deliver a quality basic course to their students. Finally, for those administrators developing their programs, we suggest ongoing assessment of their course and program, which should result in publications so others can learn from their efforts.