

SPRING 1999 COMMUNICATION-B ASSESSMENT STUDY

Executive Summary

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The Communication-B requirement is designed to cultivate student literacy in writing, speaking, and library use at an advanced level. In collaboration with the members of the Verbal Assessment Committee, we conducted a study to address research questions concerning (a) the achievement of Comm-B objectives in terms of students' writing performance, beliefs and self-perceptions of ability, and satisfaction with the course, and (b) the degree to which those outcomes correspond with characteristics of students, courses, instruction, and enrollment patterns.

The Comm-B study was designed to assess outcomes of the requirement, while being sensitive to the diversity of classes that are designated as Comm-B. We randomly sampled 70 sections of Comm-B classes offered during the spring of 1999. We then surveyed both students ($n = 369$) and instructors ($n = 58$) involved in the classes, assembled information from campus databases, and collected final papers that students submitted as part of the workload in the class ($n = 384$). A team of trained raters evaluated those papers with respect to 15 writing performance criteria.

To evaluate the achievement of Comm-B objectives, we used t -tests to compare measures of writing performance, self-perceptions of ability, and satisfaction to the neutral scale midpoint. We conducted analysis of variance or regression analysis to examine factors associated with Comm-B outcomes. For these analyses, we covaried the dependence present in the data because students were nested within classes and controlled for individual differences in students' academic ability. We interpreted statistically significant findings ($p < .05$) for analyses focused on the student as the unit of analysis ($N \geq 369$), and we interpreted consistent trends for analyses focused on the class as the unit of analysis ($N = 70$).

Examined as a set, the results of this study suggest that the Comm-B course is generally effective with respect to writing performance, self-perceptions of ability, and student satisfaction. Notably, though, students are comparably less satisfied with the oral communication component of the course than the writing and information literacy components of the course. In addition, results identified seven factors that coincided with beneficial Comm-B outcomes: (a) completion of a Comm-A course, (b) more student effort, (c) use of a variety of instructional methods, (d) greater instructor expertise, (e) smaller class size, (f) more hours spent in low-enrollment sections, and (g) more course credit.

We see a variety of policy recommendations that emerge from the findings of this study. Our suggestions link the results with improvements to the general education communication program, strategies for staffing the Comm-B course, and instructional methods. We ordered our recommendations within each level to reflect our priorities.

Findings and Recommendations Regarding the General Education Communication Program

- Students who had completed Comm-A tended to write more effectively than students who were exempted via English Placement Test scores (controlling for individual differences in academic ability). Thus, we recommend requiring all students to complete the Comm-A requirement.
- Students were relatively unsatisfied with the oral communication component of the Comm-B course because they did not feel their public speaking skills had improved as a result of the class. Thus, we recommend exploring the following strategies to provide more support for the oral communication requirement: (a) develop a two-course sequence to fulfill Comm-A such that one course focuses on speaking and the other focuses on writing; (b) create an oral communication laboratory on campus to assist instructors in the teaching of speaking skills; (c) increase the contact hours (and credit load) of the Comm-B course to allow more time for oral communication instruction; and (d) provide workshops to instructors on the teaching of oral communication.
- Older students and those students who had completed more semesters at the university were more confident in their library research skills. Thus, we recommend cultivating the development of this confidence earlier in students' academic careers by creating a program in "Information Literacy Across the Curriculum." The mission of this program would be to encourage and facilitate library instruction in classes beyond the general education communication requirements.
- More course credit corresponded with better writing performance. Thus, we recommend examining the feasibility of increasing the credit load associated with the Comm-B course.
- Smaller class sizes coincided with better writing performance, increased confidence in academic skills, and greater course satisfaction. Thus, we recommend working to decrease Comm-B class sizes.
- Students who were exempted from Comm-A via English Placement test scores, and who consequently missed the course's formal instruction in information literacy, found that component of the Comm-B course to be particularly valuable. Thus, we recommend targeting formal information literacy instruction to Comm-B classes that enroll a high proportion of students who do not complete a Comm-A course on this campus.

Findings and Recommendations Regarding Staffing the Comm-B Course

- Better writing performance and more positive self-perceptions of ability coincided with faculty-taught Comm-B sections. Thus, we recommend exploring incentive systems for encouraging more faculty to teach Comm-B classes.
- Better writing performance and more positive self-perceptions of ability corresponded with instructors who had taught the course for multiple semesters. Thus, we recommend investigating ways to encourage and capitalize on instructor experience in Comm-B classes.

Findings and Recommendations Regarding Instructional Methods

- Teacher-student conferences corresponded with beneficial outcomes. Thus, we recommend evaluating strategies that would allow traditional instruction to be supplemented by increased one-on-one contact either in or outside of Comm-B classes.
- The use of a variety of instructional strategies (e.g., peer review, teacher-student conferences, feedback on completed papers, feedback on drafts later revised, etc.) was beneficial. Thus, we recommend disseminating information on a diversity of methods for teaching the Comm-B course.