

Report of the General Education Subcommittee on Communication B Assessment

October 31, 2002

During the 2001-02 academic year, the L&S General Education Committee reviewed the policy recommendations presented by the Verbal Assessment Committee in conjunction with their report on the Comm-B Assessment Study. After ample discussion by the full General Education Committee, a subcommittee was asked to synthesize and formalize the recommendations of the full committee. This document constitutes that subcommittee's final report regarding future directions for the general education program in communication, based primarily on the results of the Comm-B study.¹ To provide some context for our conclusions, we begin with a review of the policy recommendations arising from the Verbal Assessment Committee's Comm-B study. We propose three avenues for improving the general education communication program as embodied by six specific recommendations.

The Verbal Assessment Committee Recommendations

In 1999, the Verbal Assessment Committee conducted a study of the Comm-B component of the general education communication requirements. That study was designed to assess outcomes of the requirement, while being sensitive to the diversity of classes that are designated as Comm-B. To those ends, a large number of sections of Comm-B classes were sampled, and data were assembled from a variety of sources (see the 2001 Verbal Assessment Committee Report for details). Given the representative sample and the extensive data incorporated into the analyses, we are confident that the study offers insight into the functioning of the general education program in communication.

The Verbal Assessment Committee's final report on the Comm-B study identifies several policy implications based on findings from the study (see Appendix 1). Notably, the suggestions advanced by that committee do not comprise a final set of recommendations; indeed, some of the options identified are mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect that committee's efforts to highlight a variety of directions for improving the general education communication program. The Verbal Assessment Committee recommendations address (a) changes to the

¹ Because the Verbal Assessment Project encompasses other in-progress and pending studies, there will be occasion to make further refinements to the overall communication program.

general education communication program as a whole, (b) strategies for staffing the Comm-B course, and (c) recommendations related to instructional methods.

All of the recommendations advanced by the Verbal Assessment Committee were discussed by the General Education Committee; however, particular attention was given to those suggestions that focused on the general education communication program as a whole. Accordingly, we focus this report on six recommendations that address the implementation of the program in general. These recommendations are grouped into three categories: issues related to Comm-A courses; providing support for the demands inherent in Comm-B courses; and expanding resources to enhance implementation of the communication requirements. Our endorsement of these recommendations is based on considerable discussion within the L&S General Education Committee and on the strength of the study conducted by the Verbal Assessment Committee.

Issues Related to the Communication A Requirement

The first set of recommendations addresses discernable gaps between UW-Madison Comm-A courses and equivalents assumed by the English placement test or awarded by Advanced Placement or transfer credit.

Recommendation 1. Rather than increasing the scope of the Comm-A requirement, develop a placement system that identifies students in need of instruction in written and oral communication.

The first recommendation growing out of the Comm-B study was that all incoming first year students be required to complete a Comm-A course. An ancillary suggestion was that students be required to complete a two-course sequence for Comm-A, with one course emphasizing writing and one course emphasizing oral communication. Discussion of these issues within the General Education Committee was extensive and opinions were divided. Ultimately, however, the consensus of the group was that neither requiring two Comm-A courses nor Comm-A for all students was desirable at this time. Several members of the General Education Committee felt that requiring too many courses at the introductory level would delay students who would otherwise pursue more advanced work or work in the major and related fields of interest. Another objection was that limited resources should not be put into requiring all students to complete more introductory coursework.

At the same time, there was broad recognition that the current placement test does not include any elements of oral communication and does not test for “true” writing skills. Our efforts, therefore, should be on examining and improving the placement process so that students who need additional instruction in these areas receive it and those who do not can pursue study in other areas. The General Education Committee will be spending time this next year investigating the possibilities of an alternative placement system. We believe that this will meet the needs of students more effectively than the suggestions offered by the Verbal Assessment Committee.

It should be noted that many members of the Verbal Assessment Committee took exception to the General Education Committee’s reluctance to expand the Comm-A requirement when the subject was discussed at the May 14th Verbal Assessment meeting. Comm-A course directors noted that the Comm-B study results point most clearly to the benefits of a Comm-A course experience for all students, and expressed the opinion that the campus should put a high priority on providing students with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities for improvement presented by the Comm-A courses, regardless of placement test issues. In view of the concerns expressed, the General Education Committee will meet with Comm-A course directors to discuss how these issues might be addressed in the future.

Recommendation 2: Target formal information literacy instruction to Comm-B courses that enroll a high proportion of students who are exempt from Comm-A or who receive AP or other credit for Comm-A.

The Library & Information Literacy Instruction Program conducts over 2,000 instructional sessions a year for more than 25,000 library users annually. Although a number of these sessions are individual instructional consultations or drop-in workshops open to all students and faculty, the bulk of the sessions are held at the request of faculty for courses in which students are working on research assignments. The underlying goal of all of these sessions is to work with faculty to help students develop information literacy competencies (i.e., the strategies and skills needed to find, evaluate and use information related to a specific assignment).

One of the program's major endeavors in terms of course-related instruction involves the Comm-A requirement. All students who enroll in Comm-A classes (about 4,000 students/year) complete a mandated two-part library module that consists of a Web-based, interactive tutorial (CLUE), followed by a library session. Because the majority of undergraduates who are required to take a Comm-A class do so in their first year, it means that the

majority of our incoming freshmen have the opportunity to learn some of the basics of doing library research early on in their academic careers. The results of the 1999 Comm-B study indicate that students with such a foundation feel more confident about their library skills and less anxious about using the library.

We recommend that undergraduates who do not take Comm-A at UW-Madison complete CLUE, the Web-based, interactive module that is used as part of the library module in Comm-A. The campus Library & Information Literacy Instruction Program will continue to send out periodic reminders to campus advisors asking them to encourage Comm-A- exempt students to do CLUE. The program also will continue to provide advisors with a handout about CLUE to distribute to these students. In addition, at the beginning of each semester, the General Education Program will send a letter to all Comm-B faculty and instructional staff requesting that, if their Comm-B course includes a research component and if there are students in the course who have not taken Comm-A at UW Madison, these students be required to complete CLUE.

Revisions to Communication B Course Delivery

The second group of recommendations suggests strategies to provide more support for competing demands inherent in Comm-B courses, in terms of adequately addressing the oral communication component and in providing conditions to enhance instruction in certain Comm-B courses.

Recommendation 3. While recognizing that all Comm-B courses will continue to convey substantial instruction in both written and oral communication, revise the criteria for Comm-B courses to allow greater flexibility in emphasis on each type of communication.

There is a strong sense reported by Comm-B instructors that the communication component "competes" with content instruction, that the two types of communication folded into the communication requirement compete with each other, and that in many cases, the oral component simply takes a back seat to written instruction. These reports may help explain the Verbal Assessment Project's finding that 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." Although not a recommendation proffered by the Verbal Assessment Project, the

General Education Committee recommends that the criteria for Comm-B courses be revised. At a minimum, Comm-B criteria relating to the oral component should be made more specific and some courses should be allowed to de-emphasize the amount of written work in order to provide more space for oral communication instruction. All Comm-B courses will continue to be expected to offer instruction in both oral and written elements; however, some of these courses should be allowed greater flexibility to shift the balance between the two, as appropriate to the course content and the needs of the students.

This modification of the criteria may serve a dual purpose: courses that lend themselves naturally to an emphasis on oral communication by teaching presentation skills or oral argument might come into the Comm-B course array (or, in some cases, return to their original formulation), and students who consider themselves to be in greater need of instruction in oral communication skills — or who may have already taken a Comm-B course emphasizing written communication — might seek out courses that best serve their needs or interests. Ideally, these students' choices would be guided by an appropriate communication placement test and they and their instructors would have the ongoing support of an Oral Communication Laboratory (see below); however, neither of these gaps should be considered a barrier to revisiting the criteria at this time.

In the coming year, the General Education Committee will work with the campus Communication Liaison, Professor Sherry Reames, to explore revising the current Comm-B course requirements for new Comm-B courses and to consider processes for allowing revision of existing Comm-B courses.

Recommendation 4. In cases where Comm-B classes were created as subsections of large lecture courses in which content instruction parallels that of other, non-Comm-B sections, work to ensure (by any means appropriate to the course and its content) that Comm-B instructors can deliver the best possible communication instruction.

The Verbal Assessment Committee made a number of recommendations intended to optimize conditions for successful communication instruction in Comm B courses. And, while the General Education Committee did not agree with every recommendation in this area, the committee carefully considered the *Communication-B Study* (2001) findings regarding the relationship between class size, course credits, and Comm-B outcomes:

In particular, smaller classes and more course credit coincided with better writing performance. Moreover, the number of hours per week spent in low-enrollment classes tended to correspond with increased confidence in academic skills, decreased library anxiety, and heightened satisfaction with the course. In a similar vein, the number of students per section tended to be negatively associated with course satisfaction.

(42)

The General Education Committee also discussed the finding that “better writing performance and more positive self-perceptions of ability coincided with faculty-taught Comm-B sections,” and that similar effects corresponded with instructors who had taught the course for multiple semesters. The Verbal Assessment Committee’s recommendations included exploring incentives to encourage more faculty to teach Comm-B classes; encouraging and capitalizing on instructor experience in Comm-B classes; decreasing Comm-B class size; and increasing the contact hours and credits awarded for Comm-B classes.

The General Education Committee’s lengthy discussion of these findings and the proposals to extend their impact was energetic. Several issues were discussed, ranging from the recommendations’ impact on resources to the competing needs of students at the introductory and advanced levels. Among the most significant were:

- Concerns raised about the potential impact of various recommendations on already-limited financial, physical, human, and temporal resources of instructors, departments, and the University as a whole.
- Questions raised as to whether implementing certain recommendations as “blanket” policy would suit the broad array of Comm-B courses, since many Comm-B classes seem to be performing well.
- The Verbal Assessment Committee’s recommendation to examine credit loads associated with Comm-B classes, since increased credit loads for some Comm-B classes might “not only facilitate writing performance directly as suggested by the data, but it may also enhance writing outcomes indirectly by heightening students’ motivation to perform well in the class” (45).
- A further recommendation to ensure that Comm-B instructors — in particular, teaching assistants teaching in lecture-discussion format Comm-B courses — have adequate class time to teach course content and written and oral communication. As mentioned above, students and instructors were unsatisfied with the oral communication component of Comm-B courses; increasing the amount of contact time would provide time for instruction and practice in oral communication without sacrificing time needed to teach content and writing skills.
- Finally, both the *Comm-B Study* (2001) and the *Senior Survey* (2002) found that teaching methods students associated with positive writing outcomes in Comm-B classes are linked to class size. Two of the most helpful and effective teaching methods — comments on drafts subject to revision and individual conferences with the instructor (*Comm-B Study*, 32; *Senior Survey*, 23) — are especially time-consuming, but essential, to effective teaching of communication. Small classes and more time for teaching them create the conditions for such effective teaching.

As can be seen by the list of issues cited above, discussion was extensive and the opinions of committee members were divided.

On the whole, however, the General Education Committee is aware of the strong contrast between ideal instructional conditions and the need to provide a strong, general education to all of the students we serve. The need to balance the desire to provide the very best instruction in written and oral communication and the acknowledgement that resources are limited (and that these limited resources have been stretched in recent years) has been at the core of these most difficult General Education Committee discussions. Fortunately, some of the study's findings suggest that certain types of Comm-B classes may benefit most from changes based on the findings cited above. While mindful of the need to continually work toward fostering ideal conditions for all Comm-B instruction, the General Education Committee recommends that certain types of Comm-B classes be revisited and, if necessary, the format for the Comm-B portion of these classes themselves be revised. Such a review would likely include the following steps:

1. Identify classes in which Comm-B instruction is restricted to a single contact hour per week, particularly those lecture/discussion courses that simply converted some sections of existing, large lecture courses to add Comm-B instruction to existing content;
2. Conduct a careful review of instructor assignments and duties in these classes;
3. If needed, modify these classes to ensure effective instruction in written and oral communication;
4. Evaluate future Comm-B courses employing the lecture/section model to ensure that sufficient time can be devoted to effective communication instruction.

Modifications to these existing Comm-B classes might take any form. Departments and instructors should be encouraged to seek the advice of the Verbal Assessment Committee and the Writing Across the Curriculum Program to make choices that will best serve the students, whether that means increasing contact and credit hours, decreasing class size, restricting Comm-B sections to faculty or other experienced instructors, or some other means of improving the quality of communication instruction in these classes.

Enhancements to the Campus Infrastructure

The final group of recommendations suggests enhancements to the campus infrastructure to facilitate better implementation of the communication requirements.

Recommendation 5. Establish an oral communication laboratory to support campus-wide instruction in oral communication.

We support the establishment of an oral communication laboratory on campus. Such labs are already in place at many of our peer institutions (Schneider, 1999), and they have been successful in facilitating oral communication education (Morreale, 1994, 1998). We envision that a lab similar to the university's Writing Center would pursue a two-pronged mission: (a) serving as a campus clearinghouse for instructional resources, and (b) providing individualized instruction to those who wish to hone their speaking skills.

On a pedagogical level, this campus would benefit from an oral communication lab that functions as a centralized resource for instruction. In particular, the laboratory would provide instructors with a venue for developing sound pedagogical techniques, instructional strategies, and class assignments. In addition to being equipped with a variety of educational resources, it would offer instructors the opportunity to engage in one-on-one consultations with trained staff members about syllabi, assignments, and teaching strategies. Thus, the lab would offer support to instructors who are faced with the often-overwhelming task of teaching oral communication skills. The lab may prove particularly useful to instructors who have not previously received training along those lines.

Second, an oral communication laboratory would furnish an arena for members of the campus community to cultivate their speaking skills. Lab users would receive individualized instruction from graduate students (and perhaps advanced undergraduate students) under the superintendence of a full-time director. This instruction would address issues such as delivery (speaking rate, eye contact, hand gestures, voice inflections, etc.), organization and content of ideas, the use of visual aids (including computer programs such as PowerPoint), and listening. The lab would also provide tips on managing speaking anxiety for those who experience communication apprehension.

We anticipate that many groups within the campus community would make use of the performance feedback provided by an oral communication laboratory. Of course, the lab would assist students enrolled in general education communication courses; such instruction would facilitate students' learning in the course without depleting precious classroom time. In addition to aiding participants in the general education communication program, the lab would help undergraduate and graduate students prepare for class presentations, employment interviews, and job talks. Moreover, it would aid faculty members in sharpening their classroom lecturing skills. Further, it would help administrators, faculty, and staff polish conference presentations and other professional

performances. In this way, the lab would serve a variety of constituencies beyond those instructors and students affiliated with the general education communication program during a given semester. We think it likely, too, that non-native English speakers and those with diverse backgrounds may especially benefit from the personalized instruction offered by the lab.

A myriad of institutions across the country provide models for the construction of an oral communication lab, including Butler University, the College of William and Mary, San Jose State University, Southwest Texas State University, Texas A&M University, the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, the University of Iowa, the University of Richmond, and the University of Utah (see Morreale, 1994, 1998). In the coming year, the General Education Committee will convene a planning committee to consider priorities and develop a sequenced plan to create such a proposal. Planning issues such as staffing, location, equipment, and budget would be discussed as part of a preliminary proposal regarding developing an oral communication lab.

Recommendation 6. Develop an Information-Literacy-Across-the-Curriculum Initiative.²

While the Comm-A requirement provides a mechanism for ensuring that the majority of incoming freshmen are prepared to do basic research assignments early on in their course work, no such mechanism exists to ensure that undergraduates, once they become majors, develop a similar foundation for finding and evaluating information resources within the context of the discipline in which they are majoring. Ideally, all students as majors should learn how information is generated and distributed in their particular discipline. They also should develop, through repeated research opportunities in several courses in their major, the skills and strategies needed to search core resources and to select and evaluate retrieved information in that discipline. In its original design, the Comm-B requirement seemed to be a mechanism for ensuring that undergraduate majors developed such skills. Its mandated library component originally was intended to introduce students to "the productive use of core library resources specific to disciplinary inquiry." But students enrolled in Comm-B courses are often non-majors whose background and level have made it necessary to modify these objectives. Thus, the development of discipline-

² This effort is described here as an "initiative" to distinguish it from the General Library System's existing Library and Information Literacy Instruction Program, which would participate in (but not be solely responsible for) the campus-wide initiative.

specific information literacy skills as an undergraduate learning outcome is not built into the undergraduate curriculum in any systematic way but depends entirely on the instructional goals of individual faculty.

We recommend that the campus Library & Information Literacy Instruction Program work with campus administrators (particularly deans and department chairs), faculty and instructional staff to develop an information-literacy-across-the-curriculum initiative. Participation by these groups would help develop an institutional environment supporting information literacy throughout the undergraduate curriculum. The Information-Literacy-Across-the-Curriculum-Initiative would promote and provide support for information literacy instruction across the undergraduate curriculum at both the lower- and upper-division level by:

1. Encouraging departments to integrate information literacy competencies into the learning outcomes required for their majors;
2. Encouraging faculty to integrate information literacy competencies into their courses;
3. Providing instructional resources and support to faculty who wish to integrate information literacy competencies into their courses; and
4. Supporting the campus Library & Information Literacy Instruction Program's current efforts to promote information literacy as an important part of the undergraduate educational experience.

This initiative would work collaboratively with existing programs, such as the Writing Across the Curriculum program.

Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study: First, that Comm-B is working but could be improved; and second, that while enacting these recommendations may not be immediately possible, they can be turned to as suggestions for future program improvement. Yet it must be acknowledged that several points raised by the Verbal Assessment Committee have not been addressed by the six recommendations forwarded here. Issues such as the desirability of increasing the participation of faculty in communication courses are likely to arise in future assessments. And we may find that other issues not addressed directly by the recommendations above, such as the call to supplement traditional instruction with more one-on-one contact, may nonetheless have been remedied by implementation of one or more of these recommendations. Finally, we are reminded that assessment is an ongoing strategy for continued improvement and refinement: as assessment of the efficacy of our Communication requirements continues, more recommendations may be forthcoming.

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