

## ABSTRACT

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A CASE STUDY ON THE BASIC  
COMMUNICATION COURSE

Steven D. Cohen  
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Directed By: Andrew D. Wolvin, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Department of Communication

This exploratory case study examines undergraduate student perceptions of the basic communication course. Given that past studies of U.S. basic communication courses rely largely on data from faculty members and administrators, we know relatively little about how *students* perceive their course-related experiences. The present study helps address this gap in the literature by exploring what students perceive to be the strengths of the course, the shortcomings of the course, and the changes that ought to be made to the course. Through an analysis of student perspectives, this study adds a critical “voice” to the conversation about the state of the basic communication course.

This study focuses on the summer 2012 sections of “Oral Communication: Principles and Practices,” the basic communication course at the University of Maryland. As part of the study, I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with students in three different sections. I then used the constant comparison approach within grounded theory to analyze how students made meaning of their course-related experiences.

The data analysis process led to the emergence of several important themes. The data revealed five key strengths of the course: small class size; guided practice opportunities; real-world applicability; opportunities for self-reflection; and a focus on the public speaking process. Additionally, the data revealed five key shortcomings of the course: unclear link among course components; lack of differentiated section offerings; insufficient focus on public speaking; unclear assignment expectations; and the design of the interview unit. Finally, the data revealed five key changes that ought to be made to the course: allocate class time to most important topics; offer additional speaking opportunities; integrate technology into course components; enhance opportunities for presentation feedback; and expand the focus on group dynamics.

This study makes numerous scholarly and practical contributions. On a macro level, it suggests that interviewing may help administrators form a more complete understanding of students' course-related experiences. Moreover, the study discusses the potential of two alternate course formats: the blended approach and the modular approach. On a micro level, this study captures a variety of student perspectives on how best to handle specific elements of the course.

LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICES:  
A CASE STUDY ON THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

By

Steven D. Cohen

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Andrew D. Wolvin, Chair

Professor Robert N. Gaines

Professor Sahar Khamis

Professor Leah Waks

Professor Joseph McCaleb, Dean's Representative

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

The basic communication course is a fundamental part of the undergraduate curriculum at many institutions across the United States. The course is designed to introduce students to the *basics* of oral communication, that is, to the fundamentals of communication theory and praxis. As an introductory course, the basic communication course “lays the foundation for further communication training”—either within the communication department or within discipline-specific coursework (Stern & Hailer, 2007, p. 139). The course prepares students not only to design and deliver effective presentations, but also to address the communication challenges that they will face in their academic, personal, professional, and civic lives. Indeed, the basic communication course is a crucial academic offering, because “good communication skills fuel self-confidence and enable people to exert more control over their lives. Such people know how to effectively research, conceptualize, organize, and present ideas and arguments. This is critical to citizen-participation [in] a democratic society” (Emanuel, 2005, p. 153).

Given the persistent demand for communication skills, college and university administrators are turning to the basic communication course to help students develop communication competence (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Consequently, the basic communication course is increasingly becoming a required component of the general education curriculum at U.S. colleges and universities (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). In the most recent survey of U.S. basic communication courses, roughly 60% of course administrators (faculty members and/or administrators who direct or coordinate the course) reported that the basic communication course is a general education requirement (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). This number is up from



about 50% in the previous survey (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). The centrality of the basic communication course in the undergraduate curriculum has prompted further study of the role of the course in enhancing the undergraduate experience and preparing students for a variety of challenges and opportunities (Gibson & Hayes, 1980).

The quinquennial report on the basic communication course has played a major role in advancing knowledge about the nature of the course. Beginning in 1968, leading communication scholars began collecting and analyzing survey data on the basic communication course at U.S. colleges and universities. Although scholars had long discussed the basic communication course in journals and at conventions, they knew relatively little about how the course was organized and delivered across the country (Gibson et al., 1970). Consequently, Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, and Petrie, Jr. (1970) responded to the pressing need to gather and analyze data on the “methods, materials, philosophies, staffing, and trends in the basic course as it is *now* taught in American colleges and universities [emphasis in original]” (p. 13). These scholars sent a 52-item survey to the “administrative officer in charge of speech” (i.e. to the department chair) at the 887 American institutions listed in the Speech Association of America *Directory* (p. 13). After analyzing the responses, the authors produced a comprehensive report that offered insight into the “changes which the course appears to be undergoing” across a variety of different categories such as course objectives, course content, and course instruction (p. 13). Given the usefulness of this report, leading communication scholars have conducted similar studies approximately every five years.

The 2006 report on U.S. basic communication courses, however, included some musings on how best to expand the scope of these investigations. Although the surveys of U.S. basic communication courses have changed over time, the primary respondents have been the same: course administrators. Consequently, Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006) expressed a need to think “about options and possibilities to extend this study beyond mere replication” (p. 435). In particular, the authors invited readers to ponder a series of questions, including the following: “Should we, or others, more extensively [ask] students themselves about the merits or shortcomings of the basic course? Does the basic course meet their needs personally and professionally?” (p. 435). Despite the importance of these questions, few scholars have explored student perceptions of the basic communication course.

The present study helps address this gap in the communication education literature by investigating how students perceive their basic communication course experiences. Given the exploratory nature of this study, I take a qualitative approach to understanding the merits and shortcomings of the basic communication course.

Specifically, I focus on three interconnected research questions:

- What do students perceive to be the strengths of the basic communication course?
- What do students perceive to be the shortcomings of the basic communication course?
- What changes, if any, would students suggest be made to the basic communication course?

Through an analysis of student perspectives, this study adds a critical “voice” to the scholarly conversation about the state of the basic communication course.

To address these three research questions, I conducted a case study on the summer 2012 sections of COMM107 (“Oral Communication: Principles and Practices”), the long-standing, three-credit basic communication course at the University of Maryland. My unit of analysis was the population of COMM107 summer students—a total of 30 students enrolled in three different sections. This “unit” is especially well-suited to be studied as a case, given that it is a discrete system outside my realm of control that focuses on a particular set of real-world experiences. It also offers insight into the typical basic communication course experience. Like students in many other “hybrid” basic communication courses, students in COMM107 explore a wide range of topics, such as the “communication process, intrapersonal communication (including listening), interpersonal communication (including conversation, interviewing, and group interactions), and public communication (including informative briefing and persuasive speaking)” (Wolvin, n.d.). COMM107 students also examine communication theories and practices that may help them succeed in upper-division coursework, enhance their sense of personal direction, and develop emotional and social sensibilities (Worley & Worley, 2006).

I approached this case study rigorously and systematically. First, I established a date during the end of each summer term to visit the appropriate sections. During these visits, I discussed my study with the students in attendance and asked those who were interested to complete a brief sign-up form. Next, I scheduled a one-hour interview with

each interested student, so I could understand his or her perspectives in greater depth. I then used the constant comparison approach within grounded theory (the process of comparing the entries in different data categories to ensure coherence) to generate insight into what the data “mean” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I began analyzing the data soon after I collected it so that I was able to identify gaps in the data more quickly and understand which topics required further investigation. I was determined to “treat the evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions, and rule out alternative interpretations” (Yin, 2009, p. 130).

The findings revealed a number of critical insights about the basic communication course. First, the data revealed the key strengths of the course: (1) small class size; (2) guided practice opportunities; (3) real-world applicability; (4) opportunities for self-reflection; and (5) focus on the public speaking process. Additionally, the data revealed the key shortcomings of the course: (1) unclear link among course components; (2) lack of differentiated section offerings; (3) insufficient focus on public speaking; (4) unclear assignment expectations; and (5) design of the interview unit. Finally, the data revealed the key changes that ought to be made to the course: (1) allocate class time to most important topics; (2) offer additional speaking opportunities; (3) integrate technology into course components; (4) enhance opportunities for presentation feedback; and (5) expand the focus on group dynamics.

This study makes numerous scholarly and practical contributions. On a macro level, it suggests that interviewing may help administrators form a more complete understanding of students’ basic communication course-related experiences. Whereas the

standard course evaluation process yields limited data about student (dis)satisfaction levels, this study reveals that interviewing offers far more comprehensive data about *why* students are (dis)satisfied and *how* they come to be (dis)satisfied. In a sense, interviews push students to think critically about what they believe, and what factors might be influencing their points of view. Moreover, this study invites course administrators to re-examine the format of the basic communication course at their institution. Although the present study examined a group of students who were divided into three autonomous sections, many participants were not convinced that the format of the course maximized their learning experience. Consequently, the study discusses the potential of two alternative approaches: the blended approach (which combines an online, pre-class tutorial with an in-person “lab” experience) and the modular approach (which breaks the course into self-contained “modules” that students take at different points in their academic career).

On a micro level, this study captures a variety of student perspectives on how best to handle specific aspects of the basic communication course (e.g. course content, course assignments). The students’ insights both confirm and challenge commonly-held assumptions about what works and what still needs to be improved. Indeed, these insights bring another “voice” to the conversation about how the basic communication course ought to be designed and delivered—both now and in the future. Given that college and university administrators will be paying much more attention to the basic communication course than they have in the past, it is critical that departmental leaders continue to invest in the course, and work with course administrators to make appropriate administrative and curricular changes. In doing so, they will ensure that the basic

communication course continues to prepare undergraduate students for the communication challenges they will face during college and beyond.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

In this chapter, I will explore some of the key perspectives on the basic communication course. First, I will provide a brief history of the basic communication course and offer a working definition. Then I will turn to some of the central issues in the literature: the orientation and purpose of the course, the design and delivery of the course, and the implications for the future. Through a discussion of these elements, this literature review aims to help communication scholars and departmental leaders gain insight into this core component of the communication curriculum. This literature review also will help me place my findings into the proper context.

### A Brief History

The basic communication course stems from the rich public speaking tradition of the communication discipline. In approximately 1900, James A. Winans, a professor in the English department at Cornell University, began teaching students how to craft and deliver their own speeches (Medhurst, 2010). At the time, public speaking had little to do with delivering one's own ideas in public: instead, it focused on elocution, that is, on the *performance* of oral discourse in public settings. Indeed, public speaking typically referred to “a reading, a declamation, a dramatic dialogue, or a poem, often rendered from memory and given as a performance” (Medhurst, 2010, p. 23). Winans sought to reconceptualize public speaking as an “art that involved invention, disposition, style, and memory—as well as delivery” (Medhurst, 2010, p. 23). After becoming chairman of the Department of Oratory and Debate at Cornell University, Winans sought to move public speaking out of the English department and to establish oratory as its own academic discipline. Winans and his peers (who were leading similar movements at other

institutions) “were convinced that public speaking could only flourish once the ties to English had been severed” (Medhurst, 2010, p. 25).

These institutional movements led to critical changes in the public speaking (now the communication) discipline. In 1913, the members of the Eastern Public Speaking Conference (which later became the Eastern Communication Association) voted to completely remove the study of public speaking from the purview of English departments (Medhurst, 2010). Shortly thereafter, Thomas C. Trueblood (1915), a professor at the University of Michigan, proposed a series of courses that students should take once they have pursued “a thorough study of the principles of elocution” (p. 260). In the inaugural issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Trueblood (1915) outlined two concurrent lines of study that would follow the course on elocution: one focused on giving “proper expression to the best thoughts of the great authors” and the other on giving “the best expression to one’s own thoughts” (p. 260). The latter line of study (which Trueblood termed the “self-expressional” or “oratorical” line) included a proposal for a stand-alone course in public speaking—a course that would challenge students to develop their own speeches, rather than perform well-known public speeches (Trueblood, 1915, p. 262). Trueblood’s proposal for a course on self-expression formed the basis of what has become known as the basic communication course.

### **Definition of the Basic Communication Course**

Before examining the basic communication course in detail, it is critical to define it. After all, a meaningful definition provides foci and fences for academic scholarship



(Klumpp, 2010). In “College Courses in Public Speaking,” Trueblood (1915) envisioned the basic public speaking course as follows:

In this course students should be required to make at least eight speeches, each about seven or eight minutes in length. These speeches should be prepared for different occasions ... Briefs of speeches should be required: first, a trial brief to be presented for criticism, and, second, a corrected brief, which should appear on the table of the instructor at the time of the speech. Speeches should be extemporaneous as far as the words are concerned, but the outline should be very carefully memorized. (p. 262)

Although few contemporary basic communication courses require “at least eight speeches,” many courses maintain expectations that are strikingly similar to those in Trueblood’s original proposal.

**Modern Definition.** While Trueblood was among the first communication scholars to conceptualize the basic communication course, Gibson et al. are credited with conceiving its modern definition. In the present study (as in many other studies), the basic communication course is defined as

that course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates, it is that speech course which the department either has or would recommend as being required for all or most undergraduates if the college administration asked it to name a course so required. (Gibson et al., 1970, p. 13)

This definition situates the basic communication course as a key part of the undergraduate experience and as a central offering of communication departments. Additionally, the definition unites different types of basic communication courses (e.g. public speaking courses and “hybrid” courses) under a single umbrella. Although Morreale et al. (1999) replaced the word “speech” with “communication” and made a few other grammatical changes, the original definition has remained virtually unchanged through eight iterations of the survey (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010; Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Morreale et al., 1999; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1990; Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1985; Gibson et al., 1980; Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974; Gibson et al., 1970). The definition stands as a testament to the importance of the basic communication course in the undergraduate curriculum.

### **Orientation of the Basic Communication Course**

One can characterize the basic communication course in terms of its orientation. The majority of basic communication courses focus on public speaking (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010), likely because our discipline is rooted in an oral speech tradition (Medhurst, 2010). These courses primarily focus on speech design and delivery, but often cover topics such as audience analysis and public speaking anxiety. An increasing number of basic communication courses (especially at two-year institutions), however, follow a “hybrid” orientation: these courses typically cover a variety of communication topics, including interpersonal communication, small group communication, *and* public speaking. While each orientation has its merits, Emanuel (2005) contends that solely offering public speaking training deprives students of the broad theoretical and practical framework that they will need to be successful:

[W]hy should students be offered only one entrée (albeit a healthy one) from the menu of communication when they can be served a more complete and well-balanced meal? Colleges should not malnourish their students when it comes to their communication course. [The “hybrid” course] is that more complete and well-balanced meal. It should be the main course. (p. 161)

Although the “hybrid” course is growing in popularity, some communication departments continue to support other types of basic communication course orientations—such as courses focusing solely on interpersonal communication or small group communication. The percentage of departments pursuing these orientations, however, is in the low single digits (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Regardless of its orientation, the basic communication course is a foundational academic offering that serves student and departmental needs.

### **Purpose of the Basic Communication Course**

The primary purpose of the basic communication course is to help students develop knowledge and skills that they can leverage in their academic, personal, professional, and civic endeavors. Given this objective, some students enroll in the basic communication course even if they are not required to do so (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). However, the course also has another important purpose: to spur growth within communication departments. This second objective establishes the basic communication course an important economic engine for departments and colleges, and positions the course as a major contributor to “departmental welfare” (Gibson & Hayes,

1980, p. 26). Together, these two purposes position the basic communication course as an essential component of undergraduate education.

**Development of Communication Knowledge and Skills.** The basic communication course introduces students to a set of theories and skills that can help them excel in many different arenas. Worley and Worley (2006) argue that the basic communication course helps students (especially freshmen) develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed academically. While the course, for example, encourages the development of research skills and time management skills (Worley & Worley, 2006), it also significantly enhances students' perceived communication competence in the classroom environment (Ford & Wolvin, 1993). According to Ford and Wolvin (1993), this change may stem from a reduction in the "high level of communication apprehension which students tend to experience as they adjust to the new demands of college" (p. 222). Additionally, Darling and Daniels (2003) posit that the basic communication course is well-positioned to prepare students for challenges in the workplace. This finding is supported by Johnson and Long (2007), who assert that the basic communication course contributes to an increase in students' self-reported listening competence. And La Ware (2004) frames the basic communication course classroom as a public space where students can learn how to engage productively in civic discourse. Through service learning assignments, the basic communication course can provide students with opportunities to become agents of change (Harter et al., 2004).

**Development of a Critical Thinking Framework.** Moreover, the basic communication course fosters the development of a critical thinking framework—"the

ability to develop and analyze arguments based on available resources and knowledge” (Mazer, Hunt, and Kuznekoff, 2007, p. 175). Mazer, Hunt, and Kuznekoff (2007) argue that the basic communication course is “an ideal context for teaching these skills as [critical thinking] skills are intimately tied to communication” (p. 178-179). For example, the speech design and delivery process pushes students to question their beliefs and generate new ideas: this process “move[s] beyond memorization and toward [the] construction of [one’s] own understanding (Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff, 2007, p. 178). O’Keefe (1986) takes a similar view: she argues that the public speaking process “improves not only students’ facility with language but their facility in maneuvering ideas as well ... [the process] allows ideas to be picked up and examined, set on shelves in categories, and eventually added to other categories, ideas, or words” (p. 6). To be sure, there are many such processes in the basic communication course. Dance (2002) contends that the course advances “the development and refinement of conceptual structures [and] conceptual processes” such as analytical thinking, intuition, and sense making (p. 357). Indeed, the basic communication course is not just a course in speech, but a course “in speech and thought” (Dance, 2002, p. 358).

**Resource Generation.** While the basic communication course provides students with a theoretical and practical foundation, it also provides communication departments with tangible benefits. Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) explain that “[c]ommunication majors and minors are recruited in the basic course, the course entices students to enroll in more communication courses, and revenue generated from multisection basic courses is considerable” (p. 406). As the communication department’s “bread and butter course,” the basic communication course generates the resources

necessary to hire and retain full-time and part-time instructors and fund graduate teaching assistantships (Dance, 2002, p. 355). Moreover, it serves as a training ground for new instructors who are unsure how to lead a class on their own, and for international graduate teaching assistants who are unfamiliar with the American classroom culture.

Given the economic contribution of the basic communication course to departmental and college budgets, it is ironic that many course administrators cite a lack of financial support as one of their top course-related problems (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010; Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Course administrations have increasingly had to increase the size of each section to meet increasing demand and achieve cost savings (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). To keep costs down, some departmental leaders also have considered “outsourcing” instruction to other departments via a communication-across-the-curriculum program (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Darling and Daniels (2003) explain that this type of program “is not new to cross-curricular scholarship or practice, as scholars in composition have explored writing in-the-disciplines ... and practitioners in various writing across the curriculum ... programs have administered various writing and/or speaking-intensive courses specific to their disciplinary needs” (p. 3). However, not all course administrators are supportive of this proposal: some argue that instructors in other departments are not trained to teach oral communication, and consequently, should leave the basic communication course to the “communication experts.” With enrollment on the rise, course administrators need to consider these issues carefully so that they can design and deliver the basic communication course in the most effective and efficient manner.

## **Design and Delivery of the Basic Communication Course**

The question of how to administer the basic communication course is critically important, because the “typical student” enrolls in a single communication course during his or her college career (Emanuel, 2005, p. 159). While many institutions offer the basic communication course, course administrators across the U.S. have approached course design and delivery issues quite differently. One of the primary responsibilities of a course administrator is to realize the program vision—the “organizing logic that helps to establish, clarify, and nurture what matters (and minimize, or eliminate what is less important)” (Fassett & Warren, 2012, p. 17). To do so, course administrators must evaluate (and sometimes re-evaluate) many different aspects of the basic communication course, including how the course is designed and how the course is delivered.

**Course Organization.** The basic communication course is organized in two primary ways. The vast majority of basic communication courses are organized as a collection of individual, autonomous sections (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Indeed, Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) report that a plurality of basic communication courses enroll between 23 and 26 students per section. Roughly 10% of basic communication courses, however, adhere to the mass lecture/lab sections approach in which the lab sections function as smaller performance sections (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). The strong preference for the autonomous sections approach may be due, in part, to the problems commonly associated with large lecture classes such as the lack of student-teacher interaction, the lack of involvement, and the lack of personalized attention (Smith, Kopfman, & Ahyun, 1996). Yet Todd et al. (2000) found no significant difference in the perceived effectiveness between these two basic communication course

formats. In fact, students reported “across both instructional formats, comparable perceptions of student motivation, teacher nonverbal immediacy, and teacher credibility” (p. 192). This study provides some reassurance that “the cost savings realized in mass-lecture/laboratory formats of the basic communication courses is not obtained at the expense of quality” (Todd et al., 2000, p. 193).

**Online Courses.** This may not be the case for basic communication courses offered entirely online. To be sure, many instructors oppose offering the basic communication course in an online learning environment. Allen (2006), for instance, contends that “on-line instruction is often not compatible with student success [which is] why on-line communication basic skills courses may undermine important elements of student success, retention, and degree completion” (p. 122). Additionally, online instruction often presents a variety of administrative challenges, such as accessibility and connectivity problems (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007). Despite opposition from some faculty members, communication departments are increasingly launching online basic communication courses to generate additional support for their programs:

Administrators, sensitive to the importance of immediacy in the classroom as it relates to retention and tuition dollars, are also committed to their belief, whether true or not, that online instruction reduces costs and maximizes faculty/student ratios. University administrators frequently view online instruction as the panacea needed to reduce cost and increase revenue. (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007, p. 21)



While online basic communication courses certainly face an uphill climb, they can still help students achieve a variety of learning objectives. The key is to design interactive online platforms that “combine technological expertise, isolated skill development opportunities, and faculty knowledge” (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007, p. 26). After all, “[t]hese courses are and will be online, and faculty members have to exercise every effort to maintain the quality of the learning experiences for all students” (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007, p. 26).

**Course Instruction.** Another important consideration for course administrators focuses on who teaches the basic communication course. At most institutions, the basic communication course is taught primarily by part-time, adjunct faculty members with communication degrees (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Given the large number of students who enroll in the basic communication course, many institutions also have turned to graduate teaching assistants to lead individual sections (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). The use of graduate teaching assistants, however, differs by institution type: two-year institutions are more likely to hire full-time instructors to supplement the adjunct faculty members, while four-year institutions are more likely to hire graduate teaching assistants to supplement the adjunct faculty members (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Some tenure-track/tenured professors do teach the basic communication course, but they are far less likely to do so (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010).

**Topical Coverage.** Beyond instructor type, it is important to examine what the basic communication course covers. Given the history of our discipline, it is not

surprising that public speaking is the most prominent topic across basic communication courses. In particular, course administrators rank extemporaneous, informative, and persuasive speaking most highly (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Course administrators who run “hybrid” courses also report a strong focus on interpersonal relationships and group communication (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Besides content-related topics, many basic communication courses emphasize broader academic topics such as academic integrity, critical thinking, and research skills (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). It is worth noting, however, that “plagiarism/academic integrity” is the most highly ranked academic topic at two-year institutions, while it is the fourth-ranked academic topic at four-year institutions (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Nevertheless, many basic communication courses at both two-year and four-year institutions cover similar material.

**Course Readings.** The course readings in the basic communication course, however, differ across communication departments. Although some basic communication courses use departmentally-produced workbooks, roughly 80% of course administrators indicated that their course uses a commercially-published textbook (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). According to the latest survey of U.S. basic communication courses, more than 80 textbooks are currently in use; however the following four textbooks are the most frequently cited (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010):

- *The Art of Public Speaking* (Lucas)
- *The Speaker's Guidebook* (O' Hair, Stewart, & Rubenstein)

- *Communication: Principles for a Lifetime* (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy)
- *Communicate!* (Verderber)

Course administrators at both two-year and four-year institutions consider “coverage of material” and “breath of content” to be the two most important factors in determining which textbook to adopt; other top factors that influence textbook selection include “readability” and “faculty preference” (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010, p. 420). Despite the increased focus on textbook costs, the price of the textbook is not one of the top three factors influencing textbook choice at either two-year or four-year institutions (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). This may be the case because instructors “are rather wedded to their choice of textbooks” (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006, p. 428).

**Course Assignments.** In addition to choosing course readings, course administrators must determine the number and type of graded assignments. Most basic communication courses require students to complete 4-6 graded assignments over the course of the semester (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Although the types of assignments differ across public speaking and “hybrid” courses, the presentation assignments continue to be mainstays of the basic communication course. Two of the most common presentation assignments are the informative briefing assignment and the persuasive speech assignment (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). The informative briefing assignment challenges students to explain what something is and/or how it works. A focus on the *what* and/or the *how* helps students “create awareness of new information” and “enhance [their audience members’] understanding” of a particular

topic (Berko, Wolvin, & Wolvin, 2010, p. 400). The persuasive speech assignment, on the other hand, challenges students to generate support for a particular perspective or point of view. In other words, the assignment invites students to explore *why* their audience members should buy into a particular idea or point of view. Although Berko, Wolvin, and Wolvin (2010) recognize that “all communication contains elements of persuasion,” they argue that informative briefings and persuasive speeches have “different communication goals,” and thus should be treated as distinct presentation assignments (p. 400).

### **Course Assessment**

The design and delivery of the basic communication course has a great deal in common with the design and delivery of a presentation: it is impossible to tell if an approach is “working” until we see how the audience members respond to it. In other words, the only way to know whether the basic communication course is “working” (e.g. whether students’ communication skills are improving over time) is to engage in meaningful assessment activities that help us “understand what our students are and are not learning and how to better improve the learning process” (Fassett & Warren, 2012, p. 35). For many years, communication departments conceptualized “assessment” as a course-related process—a process used by individual course instructors to assess student performance (e.g. on particular presentation assignments). More recently, however, departmental leaders have realized the importance of creating a comprehensive assessment plan that helps them gather credible data about student learning (Hess, 2012). This shift in thinking explains the dramatic increase in the number of individual

instructors and departmental leaders who have created general assessment plans for the basic communication course (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010).

**Assessment Types.** Many course administrators report that instructor-designed or department-designed assessments are helpful tools for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the basic communication course. These assessments play a key role in “evaluating course content, improving instruction, measuring student learning, and enhancing students’ communication skills” (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006, p. 434). The majority of these assessments, however, do not assess student learning beyond the basic communication course itself. Pensoneau-Conway, Maguire, and Paal (2007) assert that

[t]he word “assessment” often gets thrown around in discussions ranging from assessing student learning, to assessing instructor’s teaching, to assessing the usefulness of a public speaking versus a hybrid basic course, to a plethora of other categories. More than just a buzz word, though, assessment is something that should be taken seriously because it affects what happens both in and out of the classroom, just as it affects both those who are in classrooms and those who are out of classrooms. (p. 1)

According to the latest survey of U.S. basic communication courses, more than 90% of communication departments do not track their students’ “oral communication skill development” after these students complete the basic communication course (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010, p. 417). This statistic highlights a major hurdle for departmental leaders who attempt to determine whether the basic communication course

is “working.” The small number of departments that do collect post-course information often turn to “multimethod, multitool and longitudinal” approaches such as exit interviews, surveys, and/or portfolios to determine the level of change in their students’ oral communication skills (Jones, Simonds, & Hunt, 2005, p. 168; Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010).

Longer-term assessments are particularly useful in understanding the impact of the basic communication course over time. While semester-long assessment studies (such as “pre/post” studies) help course administrators evaluate individual course components, longitudinal assessment studies are more apt to capture the long-term effects of the course on student learning (Jenkins, Jones, & Ward, 2001). As time passes, students are better able to reflect on their overall course experiences and gain deeper insights into how, if at all, they have used and/or applied what they learned in the basic communication course classroom. For this reason, some communication departments have reached out to basic communication course alumni to determine what impact, if any, the course has had on their academic, personal, and professional lives (Wolvin, Fontana, & Cohen, 2012). Armed with this information, these departments are often “better equipped to join in the pedagogical conversation about basic communication course programs” (Pensoneau-Conway, Maguire, & Paal, 2007, p. 21). Despite differences in assessment approaches, communication departments face similar issues as they shape the future of the basic communication course.

## **Implications for the Future**

Although change is often challenging, course administrators are committed to improving the basic communication course. After all, “[t]he effectiveness of the basic course, whatever its orientation, is of utmost importance to those who direct and teach it” (Hiemstra & Staton-Spicer, 1983). Given that the basic communication course is “the most fertile recruiting ground” for new communication students, Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006) urge course administrators to examine the latest survey trends and make any necessary changes to the design and delivery of the course (p. 416). While recent surveys of U.S. basic communication courses identify many areas for consideration, three topics especially warrant attention: quality control across different sections, support for part-time instructors, and technology-based pedagogy.

**Quality Control Across Different Sections.** Course administrators must ensure that students enjoy a high-quality experience across different sections of the basic communication course. Despite focused efforts to clarify expectations and deliver basic instructor training, course administrators still identify quality control (often called “consistency” in the literature) as the top problem in administering the basic communication course (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). This issue arises due to several factors, including the lack of a lead course administrator, the use of adjunct faculty members (who likely do not interact with one another on a regular basis), and a commitment to instructor autonomy (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2009). Having an active lead course administrator does not solve the problem, however, since he or she often has insufficient time to coach and supervise a large number of instructors. Given

that the basic communication course is becoming a general education requirement at many institutions, it is critical that quality issues be addressed.

**Common Learning Objectives.** Researchers have turned to common learning objectives as a potential strategy to enhance the quality level across multiple sections of the basic communication course. As Nitko and Brookhart (2007) explain, learning objectives (also called learning outcomes) clearly state what instructors expect students to know or be able to do by the end of the course. Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2009) advocate the use of common learning objectives across different sections to shape pedagogical decisions and “help achieve [the] desired consistency” (p. 98). The authors argue that learning objectives “help instructors determine the effectiveness of their teaching and whether or not the instructional program is accomplishing the goals articulated in the objectives” (p. 102). For this reason, course administrators should ensure that all basic communication course instructors adhere to similar objectives. After all, the use of learning objectives helps define “effective” instruction:

Preparing and teaching the basic course in communication ... is similar to cooking an elaborate meal for the first time. The cook must have a vision of the outcome he/she wishes to achieve ... As instructors, well before we step into the classroom, we must have a [similar] vision of what will occur by the time each class session ends, as well as once the entire course is completed. (Docan-Morgan, 2007, p. 25)

It is important to note that the level of adherence to these objectives depends on instructor buy-in. Consequently, Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2009) urge course



administrators and course instructors to “collaborate to develop, honor, and implement” the learning objectives at their institution (p. 130).

**Part-Time Faculty.** Another challenge for course administrators is to support the needs of part-time faculty members. This challenge is especially salient given that the basic communication course is taught primarily by part-time, adjunct instructors (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Course administrators often struggle to manage large numbers of part-time faculty members who, for the most part, are detached from the everyday interactions of campus-based faculty. Adjunct instructors typically teach one or more class sessions (in-person or online) and leave campus (whether physically or virtually) to attend to other responsibilities. It is not surprising, therefore, that course administrators grapple with many different adjunct-related issues, including “adjunct attendance, sufficient time, mutually agreeable schedules, money, and administrative support” (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). These issues are compounded by the fact that part-time faculty members (like most other course instructors) receive little or no additional training beyond the initial orientation to the basic communication course (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Indeed, course administrators continue to cite the use of part-time faculty members as a top administrative problem (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Morreale et al., 1999).

**Faculty Mentoring Programs.** Given the importance of this issue, some communication departments have instituted mentoring programs to support the professional development needs of adjunct faculty members. A well-structured program pairs an experienced mentor with a small group of adjunct instructors for a period of one

year (Rogers, McIntyre, & Jazzar, 2010). Researchers recommend a variety of online mentoring formats, including threaded discussions (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002), webinars, podcasts, and web conferences (Lyons, 2007). However, Rogers, McIntyre, and Jazzar (2010) argue that online mentoring tools should supplement rather than replace traditional, “individual-to-individual” mentoring sessions (p. 55). When in-person meetings are not practical, the authors recommend that mentors and adjunct faculty members meet via Skype or telephone conference. After all, these platforms

add life and value to the work of adjunct faculty. The feeling of *caring* that is gained from reciprocal communication is particularly important as the work of an adjunct professor is often carried out in isolation ... Spontaneous feedback that is honest, direct, caring and understanding serves the purpose of unifying distant members of one’s team [emphasis in original]. (Rogers, McIntyre, & Jazzar, 2010, p. 55)

With support from experienced mentors, adjunct faculty members are more apt to feel “an active and valued part of the system” (Rogers, McIntyre, & Jazzar, 2010, p. 54). In other words, they are likely to feel much more included in the basic communication course “community.”

**Technology-Based Pedagogy.** An additional area that warrants attention is the use of technology-based pedagogy in the basic communication course. Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) report a substantial increase in the use of media and technology in basic communication course classrooms over the last few years. To be sure, many instructors record and post student speeches, show YouTube clips and DVDs,

and leverage a variety of online platforms (such as ELMS). But today's students "have grown up with new ways of interacting with one another and with the world": they are creating, consuming, and sharing content in new and exciting ways (Cohen, Briones, & Narvaez, 2011). Consequently, course administrators must rethink how and to what extent they use technology to connect with their students. After all, students

need to know much more than simply how to craft and deliver effective speeches. They also need to understand how they can leverage technology to communicate their ideas and sell their perspectives. With the increasing prevalence of digital technologies, it is imperative that students fully understand these tools ... This familiarity will ensure that students are able to communicate effectively with diverse audiences and capitalize on exciting opportunities, in the workplace and beyond. (Cohen, Briones, & Narvaez, 2011)

Indeed, the rise of technologically-mediated communication requires that course administrators experiment with innovative technology-based approaches to (re)engage students in the content of the basic communication course, and prepare them for new types of communicational challenges (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010).

Course administrators should consider a number of technology-based approaches to make the basic communication course more applicable and relevant to students' lives. Cohen, Briones, and Narvaez (2011) discuss a variety of innovative possibilities, including a classroom blog where students can respond to written prompts and video segments, and a take-home final exam where students can submit responses via an audio or video podcast. Moreover, Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) raise the

possibility of using social media tools and text messaging to teach interpersonal communication, and teleconference technology to teach group communication. But the use of technology need not be entirely class-related. Procopio (2011) proposes a YouTube-based assignment that challenges students to leverage their persuasive skills to create an advertisement for one of the courses in the communication department. Procopio (2011) notes that this “assignment challenges students to apply communication techniques beyond the classroom walls ... Giving students the opportunity to develop persuasive messages aimed at a more diverse audience and with more real-world relevance is an important goal of instruction” (p. 25-26). Simply put, the possibilities are limited only by instructors’ imaginations. By shifting its pedagogical approach, the basic communication course will recognize “the emergence of the digitized age” and ultimately “meet students where they are at in the digital world” (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010, p. 426).

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

Given the role of the basic communication course in the undergraduate curriculum, it is vital that we continually assess the merits and shortcomings of the course. The literature indicates that past studies of U.S. basic communication courses have relied largely on data from faculty members and administrators. As a result, this study captures a missing, yet important, voice: that of the students. The present study focuses on three critical *what* questions that offer insight into students’ basic communication course experiences:

- What do students perceive to be the strengths of the basic communication course?

- What do students perceive to be the shortcomings of the basic communication course?
- What changes, if any, would students suggest be made to the basic communication course?

The nature of these questions suggested that a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this particular study. A qualitative approach provided a useful framework to examine and appreciate the different elements of the basic communication course “in all their complexity” (Staton-Spicer, 1982, p. 44).

### Chapter 3 – Method

This study takes a qualitative approach to understanding student perceptions of the basic communication course. In this chapter, I will define my approach to qualitative research and examine the use of qualitative studies in communication education scholarship. I will then explore the relationships among the “building blocks” of my study: my ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Grix, 2002, p. 175). Given the “directional relationship” among these components (that is, the sense that each component affects the subsequent component), I present these topics in a specific order (Hay, 2002, p. 63). I will conclude by discussing how I approached questions around validity.

#### Qualitative Research

Most scholars would agree that qualitative research is a particular orientation that promotes specific ways of asking and answering research questions. Beyond this initial description, however, there is widespread disagreement about how, if at all, to define qualitative research. After all, scholars who conduct qualitative research use a variety of overlapping and contradictory labels to characterize it—perhaps because they view their craft through a variety of different lenses. Indeed, they probably had a unique “conception and view in mind when they opted for the label they employed to characterize their endeavors” (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 5).

**Definition of Qualitative Research.** Although definitions are critical to “identifying the province and unique features” of a particular field of study, many scholars are hesitant to define the term “qualitative research” because the scholarly

community has yet to agree on a specific set of approaches or standards (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 5; Potter, 1996). Marshall and Rossman (1989), for example, wrote *Designing Qualitative Research* without ever explicitly defining qualitative research. In their text, the authors acknowledge that they “refer to *qualitative research* and *qualitative methods* as if these were one agreed-upon set that everyone understands [emphasis in original],” but they quickly add that they “intend no such implication” (p. 9). Likewise, Lincoln and Guba (1985) eschew a clear definition of qualitative research. In their view, “[i]t is not possible to provide a simple definition ... [A] proper impression of what we mean ... can be gleaned only as an overall perspective” (p. 8). It appears that this view is shared by many scholars who have published articles in *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*. Ironically, a number of articles that appear in the journal, including theoretical pieces about the state of the field, do not formally define qualitative research. Without clear guidance on this matter, readers are left wondering how different scholars conceptualize qualitative research.

In this study, I define qualitative research in a more formal manner. I view qualitative research as an umbrella term for many different types of qualitative approaches that consider the *what*, the *how*, and the *why*. Like Denzin and Lincoln (2008), I argue that qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 4). In using qualitative methods, I aimed to capture students’ “richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences” by generating vivid descriptions of their basic communication course experiences (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007, p. 22). I was willing to sacrifice “the objectivity that results from rigid statistical research designs for a combination of flexibility, depth, and detail” (Bodner,

2004, p. 619). Through a qualitative approach, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of how students characterize the strengths and shortcomings of (and opportunities to improve) the basic communication course.

**Qualitative Studies in Communication Education.** Qualitative research plays an important role in communication education scholarship. Some scholars have used qualitative approaches to address instruction-related topics, such as instructor behaviors, student attitudes, and instructor-student interaction (Witt, 2012). Other scholars have leveraged qualitative approaches to study the development of communication skills in many different contexts, including the basic communication course, communication across the curriculum programs, and service learning initiatives (Witt, 2012). Regardless of their specific research questions, scholars who study communication education often turn to qualitative methods to understand the meaning that educators and students assign to their lived experiences.

Many excellent communication education studies leverage qualitative methods. In each of these studies, the researchers use qualitative research to “produce full, rich descriptions of the teacher interacting within the complex instructional environment” (Staton-Spicer, 1982, p. 43). In doing so, the researchers admire rather than shy away from the complexity of the communication education process. I have chosen five examples to underscore the richness of qualitatively-oriented communication education scholarship.

In “‘Cool’ Communication in the Classroom: A Preliminary Examination of Student Perceptions of Instructor Use of Positive Slang,” Mazer and Hunt (2008) share



the results of an exploratory investigation of how students perceive instructor use of slang terms such as “awesome” and “cool.” The authors take an inductive, grounded theory approach to investigating how and why instructors exhibit downward convergence (e.g. by adopting their students’ communication patterns) in classroom contexts (Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001). To prepare for the study, Mazer and Hunt conducted a pilot focus group with undergraduate students to generate a list of common positive slang terms. Then, the authors recorded a video of a thirty-six-year-old “male confederate” who was asked to use a variety of these slang terms during a four-minute lecture on group conflict (p. 23). After these preliminary steps, Mazer and Hunt asked undergraduate participants to watch the video and respond to an open-ended questionnaire about the instructor’s use of slang. As a “stimulus check,” Mazer and Hunt (2008) asked participants to evaluate the presence of slang terms in the video segment (p. 23). Finally, the authors used the constant comparison method (the process of comparing the entries in different data categories to ensure coherence) to make meaning of the students’ reactions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Based on their analysis, Mazer and Hunt conclude that instructors are able to use downward convergence strategies (such as using positive slang terms) to create a positive classroom climate and “gain the social approval of their students” (p. 25).

Myers and Bryant (2004) also take an inductive, grounded theory approach to understanding instructor behavior. In “College Students’ Perceptions of How Instructors Convey Credibility,” Myers and Bryant use open-ended questionnaires to determine the types of communication behaviors that instructors can use to convey credibility. The authors gave participants a questionnaire that included a description of one of three

characteristics of instructor credibility (caring, character, or competence). After reading the description, students were asked to provide three examples of how their instructors demonstrated the specific characteristic. As in the previous study, Myers and Bryant used the constant comparison approach to compare each example “to prior data for its similarity or difference” (p. 24). This iterative process illuminated students’ perspectives on the impact of caring, character, and competence on instructor credibility. According to Myers and Bryant, caring is conveyed through accessibility and responsiveness, character is conveyed through flexibility and trustworthiness, and competence is conveyed through content expertise and verbal fluency.

Simpson, Causey, and Williams (2007) explore another factor that influences instructor credibility: his or her commitment to discussing race. In “‘I Would Want You to Understand It:’ Students’ Perspectives on Addressing Race in the Classroom,” Simpson, Causey, and Williams take a critical approach to uncovering why race-related topics are infrequently discussed in classroom environments. Given that previous scholarship has not given voice to students’ perspectives on this issue, Simpson, Causey, and Williams ask students to reflect on their instructors’ attempts to examine “power, privilege, and discrimination as related to race issues and course content” in the context of classroom discourse (p. 46). First, the authors led five, ninety-minute focus groups to generate collaborative dialogue about “classroom dynamics and how students interpreted and responded to instructors’ choices” around race-based classroom talk (p. 37). Interestingly, Simpson, Causey, and Williams (2007) varied the racial compositions of each focus group to “offer the most varied settings for discussion, and likewise, the broadest possibility of responses within the research project itself” (p. 38). Next, the

authors conducted a total of 15 interviews with white and minority students to gather in-depth perspectives on that these students may not have felt comfortable sharing in a group setting. Simpson, Causey, and Williams analyzed the data independently and jointly on multiple occasions in an effort to identify important themes and consider data that did not fit existing themes. This rigorous analysis process enabled the authors to identify “connective threads” among the themes: the need for instructors to (1) demonstrate openness toward students’ opinions about diversity and (2) create a safe classroom environment where students can discuss diversity comfortably and candidly (Seidman, 1998, p. 110).

Like Simpson, Causey, and Williams, Black (2005) explores the role of the instructor in facilitating classroom dialogue. Black, however, uses the case study method in “Dialogue in the Lecture Hall: Teacher-Student Communication and Students’ Perceptions of Their Learning,” to examine how one faculty member leverages dialog to enhance students’ learning experiences within a large lecture hall environment. She takes an inductive, grounded theory approach to studying an extreme case – a specific course taught by an award-winning faculty member who actively studies and advocates dialog-based instructional methods. Black gathered data from a variety of sources to enhance the credibility of her findings. First, she engaged in non-participant observation over the course of a semester to investigate the instructor’s “verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors” (p. 34). During the semester, Black also interviewed the instructor for approximately 90 minutes to understand how the instructor perceived her own dialog-focused teaching methods. Black then compared the instructor’s “explicit interview statements about her strategies” with her [Black’s] own “observations of classroom

interaction to describe what communication behaviors [the instructor] used to manifest elements of dialogue” (p. 34). Finally, Black distributed and analyzed a set of open-ended questionnaires to improve her understanding of how the students interpreted class-related talk. By triangulating the data, Black was able to develop “converging lines of inquiry” that pointed to two critical elements of classroom dialogue: the opportunity for students to “be present” during class discussions and “be listened to” by their peers and the instructor (Yin, 2009, p. 115).

The power of triangulation also is evident in Campbell’s study on student interaction in an online communication course. In “Listening to the Voices in an Online Class,” Campbell (2003) uses a mix of qualitative methods to explore how online learning environments “can be just as personal as face-to-face interaction if users are given time to adjust their linguistic and textual behaviors to the medium” (p. 10). He takes an inductive, naturalistic approach to studying an online course on communication technology and organizational change. Given that the course was not explicitly created for research purposes, Campbell attempts to observe students’ “natural” online interactions by classifying (but not commenting on) their daily posts and threaded discussions in “seven content modules, each offering online lectures, notes, asynchronous discussions, and activities” (p. 10). He supplemented this “digital,” non-participant observation with nine in-depth interviews – four with undergraduate students, four with graduate students, and one with the course instructor. Finally, Campbell read (and often re-read) the postings themselves to identify similarities and patterns. In doing so, he was able to separate the students’ “talking voice” from their “writing voice” and recognize the presence of both oral and written communication characteristics in an online course

environment (p. 12). Campbell's study, like the other examples, accentuates the richness of qualitative research and highlights some of the ways that qualitative scholars have advanced the field of communication education.

**Rationale for Using a Qualitative Approach.** Despite the increasing number of qualitatively-focused articles, much of the research on the basic communication course thus far has been quantitative. Through numerical analysis, scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of the latest trends and changes to the basic communication course. However, quantitative methods are not appropriate for every study. As a consequence, many qualitatively-oriented questions have been left unanswered, and many quantitatively-oriented questions have yet to be examined qualitatively.

The present study investigates an area that has not received sufficient attention in the literature: undergraduate student perceptions of the basic communication course. Given that this study is largely exploratory, a qualitative approach helped yield "preliminary insights into the key issues to help shape future research" in this important area (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 10). By interacting directly with students, I was able to "get at" their experiences and their ideas about how the course could be improved (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 11). Moreover, I was able to examine these elements at a level of detail that would not be possible using a quantitative approach. After all,

[In qualitative research,] it is the descriptive details that add the richness and variation and lift the findings out of the realm of the ordinary. It is depth of substance that makes the difference between thin, uninteresting findings and

findings that have the potential to make a difference in policy and practice.  
(Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 306)

This level of substance is only possible, however, if the researcher examines the “building blocks” of his or her research approach (Grix, 2002, p. 175). As such, I will explore my ontological, epistemological, and methodological viewpoints and then proceed to discuss the method that I used in this study.

### **Ontology**

A researcher’s ontology focuses on what he or she can know. One’s ontology is foundational to his or her choice of epistemology, methodology, and methods (Grix, 2002). According to Blaikie (2000), ontological claims are “claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other” (p. 8). In other words, one’s ontological viewpoint is concerned with whether reality exists in the world, and if it does, what type of reality exists in the world.

I characterize my ontological viewpoint as constructivist. Unlike objectivist scholars who contend that there is some kind of objective reality out there in the world, I argue that “[reality] emerges and does not exist in some external and readily discovered form” (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 11). Reality is not static: rather, it is constructed and re-constructed through social interaction (Bryman, 2001). Indeed, there is no “one” social reality—in my view, it is based on and depends on the actions, reactions, and interactions of social actors.

## Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how one comes to know reality. One's epistemology focuses on "the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). In a sense, epistemology has to do with the knowledge-gathering process, and the extent to which this process leads to "new models or theories that are better than competing models and theories" (Grix, 2002, p. 177).

On one side of the epistemological debate are post-positivists who follow a more deductive approach to qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994), for example, suggest a three-step process for conducting qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing/verification. Although these authors do not adhere to the "logic of classical positivism," they believe that individual or group processes "can be captured to provide a *causal description* of the forces at work [emphasis in original] (p. 4). Like Miles and Huberman, post-positivist scholars approach problems deductively and systematically, looking for evidence to support particular hypotheses. They observe and study human interactions and reactions with an eye toward discovering the "truth" about reality.

On the other side of the debate are qualitative scholars who maintain a more interpretative view of reality. These scholars are less likely to follow a specific research structure—instead, they gather data upfront and see where it leads. Wolcott (1994) critiques his post-positivist colleagues for treating "everything at the same level of detail ... [for getting] fixed (or perhaps transfixed) behind a wide-angle lens ... rather than

zooming in to particular details” (p. 16). He urges researchers to take a more inductive approach to qualitative research by “not gather[ing] only data that support[s] a preconceived framework” but rather by collecting a variety of data that helps them interpret what they “*think* is going on [emphasis in original]” (p. 21). Through a “bottom-ups” approach, interpretative scholars strive to “identify the meaning people construct as they interact” with other members of a culture-sharing group (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 11).

Although I identify myself as an interpretative scholar, I am not a pure interpretivist. I recognize the value of interacting with participants early in the process and maintaining a flexible, iterative research structure. At the same time, however, I worry that the lack of a clear research framework may make it more difficult to determine what to look for and where to focus. Consequently, I embrace the notion of conducting the literature review up front and formulating a set of initial research questions. While post-positivist scholars may argue that this approach clouds the researcher’s judgment, it is important to remember that researchers approach every research problem with *some* type of preconceived framework. After all, researchers have conducted other studies in the past and have some sense of the literature in their field. Given that “all is data,” I tend to approach my fieldwork with an initial research framework in mind (Glaser, 2001, p. 145).

## **Methodology**

One reason for the myriad of viewpoints on qualitative research is that different researchers subscribe to different methodologies. A researcher’s methodology is his or



her “choice of approach” for acquiring knowledge (Grix, 2002, p. 179). While scholars frequently use the terms “methodology” and “method” interchangeably, this study draws a distinction between one’s methodology, or theoretical approach (e.g. phenomenology or grounded theory), and one’s method, or means of collecting data (e.g. interviews or focus groups). The methodological approach is linked to the choice of methods, but these two elements maintain distinct roles in the research process.

In this study, I take an inductive, grounded theory approach to exploring student perceptions of the basic communication course. The grounded theory approach is concerned with identifying a theory (or general explanation) “grounded” in the data, that is, in the experiences of a particular group of people (in this case, undergraduate students). The “theory-development [process from a grounded theory perspective] does not come ‘off the shelf,’ but rather is generated or ‘grounded’ in data” from the researcher’s fieldwork (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). Through a process of coding data and grouping the codes into higher-order categories, the researcher is able to identify emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Whereas other approaches employ “the standard order of data collection then data analysis, in grounded theory data collection and analysis is dynamic and multi-layered” (Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009, p. 356). In a sense the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and data analysis (a process commonly called constant comparison) until he or she reaches the point of theoretical saturation—the point at which “there is no new emergent conceptual information” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009, p. 356).

## Method

While methodology is a more general, knowledge-gathering process, the method is linked to the research questions in a particular study. Although it seems fairly straightforward, method selection requires careful consideration of one's research topic and overall research strategy. Silverman and Marvasti (2008) acknowledge the importance of choosing methods early in the project, but they emphasize the need to align the methods with the research questions. Quite simply, [k]nowing what you want to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get that information" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 42). Consequently, one must evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and choose the methods that will yield the most *useful* data.

**Case Study Method.** In this study, I use the case study method to address my three research questions. The case study method investigates a research problem using one or more illustrative cases, or "bounded systems" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). As Yin (2009) explains, case studies enable "investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" for a variety of purposes: to explore, describe, and explain (p. 4). An advantage of using the case study method is that it enables researchers to address *how* and *why* questions about a contemporary situation that is outside their realm of control as a researcher (Yin, 2009). Case study research relies on multiple sources of evidence to make sense of complex situations "in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). By triangulating different sources of data, this method provides a useful framework through which to develop a

“big picture” view of how students perceive the strengths and shortcomings of (as well as potential changes to) the basic communication course.

Despite these advantages, several scholars have critiqued the utility of the case study method. Even though the case study method often draws on data from various sources, some scholars argue that case study research is not as rigorous as experimental research and that researchers end up biasing their own results (Yin, 2009). Moreover, these scholars point out that many conclusions (especially those drawn from a single case) are not generalizable to a specific population. Yin (2009), however, points out that these problems plague *all* types of research studies, including scientific experiments. The key, then, is to conduct *quality* research that minimizes sloppiness and bias, and offers compelling analytic (theoretical) generalizations (Yin, 2009). While the conclusions may not be generalizable to an entire population, they may be transferable (applicable) to similar cases or contexts (e.g. other similar basic communication courses).

**Case Selection.** I conducted a case study on the summer 2012 sections of COMM107 (“Oral Communication: Principles and Practices”), the basic communication course at the University of Maryland. My unit of analysis was the population of COMM107 summer students—a total of 30 students enrolled in three different sections. COMM107 is a long-standing, “hybrid” basic communication course that fulfills the oral communication general education requirement. As of fall 2012, the course is expected to enroll approximately 3,400 students in 140 sections per year. Like most other “hybrid” basic communication courses, COMM107 covers a wide range of topics, including the “communication process, intrapersonal communication (including listening),

interpersonal communication (including conversation, interviewing, and group interactions), and public communication (including informative briefing and persuasive speaking)” (Wolvin, n.d.). (See Appendix F to review the COMM107 Master Syllabus for summer 2012.) The course also prepares students to successfully complete the following assignments:

- Informational Interview Assignment (a face-to-face interview with a professional in a field of interest, and a career field profile that discusses the potential communication issues in that field)
- Group Presentation (a 20-25 minute group presentation on a communication-related topic)
- Informative Briefing (a 4-5 minute briefing on what something is and/or how it works)
- Persuasive Speech (a 6-7 minute speech on why the audience should support a particular idea or point of view)
- Reflection Activities (written assignments about the major course components: the interview experience, the group presentation experience, and the two individual presentation experiences)

These assignments are designed to help students achieve six interconnected learning outcomes. The learning outcomes emphasize what students in the course ought to know or be able to do by the end of the semester:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the role of oral communication in academic, social, and professional endeavors

- Demonstrate effectiveness in using verbal and nonverbal language appropriate to the goal and the context of the communication
- Demonstrate an ability to listen carefully
- Demonstrate an ability to communicate interpersonally and interculturally with others in conversation, interview, and group discussion contexts
- Demonstrate competency in planning, preparing, and presenting effective oral presentations
- Use effective presentation techniques including presentation graphics

By focusing on these learning outcomes, COMM107 provides students with a foundation in communication theory and practice. In doing so, the course strives to position students to succeed in their academic, personal, professional, and civic lives.

I have chosen to study COMM107, because the course is fairly typical of many basic communication courses around the country. According to Yin (2009), the objective of a typical case “is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an [average or] commonplace situation” (p. 48). Given that COMM107 follows the content and structure of many other “hybrid” basic communication courses across the country, students who are about to complete or have recently completed COMM107 may be able to provide insight into the “circumstances and conditions” surrounding the basic communication course experience. Although I cannot assert that COMM107 students are representative of the larger population of basic communication course students, this study yields important insights that may be transferable to similar types of courses (including those

that are not offered during the summer). After all, the summer sections of COMM107 are quite similar to the fall/spring sections of COMM107.

Moreover, this case builds on data from two COMM107 focus groups that took place during spring 2010 (Khakimova, 2010) and spring 2007 (Lamm, 2007). During these focus groups, the researchers posed questions such as “What did you find that was particularly effective about COMM107?” and “What didn’t you like? What didn’t work?” in an attempt to capture student perceptions of COMM107. The results of these focus groups suggest that conducting an interview-based study would help yield greater insight into how students perceive their COMM107 experiences.

**Interviews.** I used semi-structured interviews to capture the students’ perceptions about their experiences in COMM107. Semi-structured interviews are one-on-one discussions between a researcher and a participant that focus on a specific set of questions. There are a variety of interview mediums (e.g. face-to-face, telephonic, and computer-mediated) from which to choose, but the researcher’s primary focus should be to “generate in-depth descriptions of people’s [own] perceptions and experiences” (Roulston, 2010, p. 12). By posing carefully worded questions and listening carefully to participants’ responses, researchers can gain a more complete picture of something that they did not necessarily observe themselves. Although interviewing is used in all sorts of studies, it may be especially well-suited for situations where the researcher is investigating a sensitive topic, or trying to meet with very busy people (such as students).

Despite the popularity of interviewing, some researchers question whether interview data are actually useful. They argue that participants may not necessarily

provide truthful or complete accounts and that participants' talk may not accurately reflect their "true" beliefs or feelings (Roulston, 2010). For instance, participants may not remember what actually happened in some situations, or they may be telling the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear. As a result, it is important that interviewers ask broad, open questions so that the participant can address the most comfortable or interesting aspects (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). It also is useful for interviewers to use a variety of probes (follow-up questions) to "encourage the [participant] to discuss his or her point with more direction and depth" (Berko, Wolvin, & Wolvin, 2010, p. 222). Although the interview process allows participants to answer questions on their own terms, it also offers a rich opportunity to gather in-depth data about participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

For this reason, interviewing has the potential to generate meaningful data about students' COMM107 experiences. Interviews provide an opportunity to push students to reveal the particular factors that may be influencing their points of view. Indeed, these one-on-one conversations are designed to elicit comprehensive data about *why* students are (dis)satisfied and *how* they come to be (dis)satisfied. Simply put, interviewing is a useful method to understand the key drivers that underlie students' course-related experiences and perspectives.

**Participant Recruitment.** I attempted to gather data from every student who enrolled in COMM107 during summer 2012. The student population consisted of 30 students across three different sections (each with a different instructor). I was specifically interested in collecting data from currently enrolled students, since these

students were likely to have the clearest memories of their COMM107 experiences. After discussing the study with the instructors, I established a date during the last two weeks of the summer term to visit each section. During each visit, I spoke briefly about my study and asked those students who were interested to complete a brief sign-up form. I then followed up with the students via e-mail using the interview recruitment script. (See Appendix C to review the interview recruitment script.) The instructors discussed the study with the students who were absent from class on the day of my visit.

I was able to recruit a total of 21 students (70% of the summer COMM107 student population) to participate in this study. The group of participants included 11 men and 10 women who ranged in age from 18 to 28 (mean = 20.9, standard deviation = 2.3). One was a freshman (4.8%), four were sophomores (19.0%), seven were juniors (33.3%), six were seniors (28.6%), and three were recent graduates (14.3%). (The “recent graduates” had earned their undergraduate degree about a month-and-a-half prior to the interview, so I considered their perspectives to be relevant to this study.) The participants were extremely diverse in terms of their racial backgrounds—only six participants (28.6%) characterized themselves as “white.” Moreover, the participants represented a wide variety of majors: the most popular majors were economics and finance. (See Appendix E to review the full range of participant characteristics.)

**Data Collection Process.** I took a number of steps to prepare for the interview process. I prepared an interview guide to maintain a specific line of inquiry during the interview (Yin, 2009). (See Appendix D to review the interview guide.) I linked the interview questions to specific research questions to ensure that I was gathering data



“consistent with [my] communication goal[s]” (Berko, Wolvin, & Wolvin, 2010, p. 223).

I also pre-tested the interview guide with a group of COMM107 students and made appropriate changes to the guide based on the students’ questions and reactions. While I felt confident in my preparation process, I made further adjustments to the interview guide (as needed) once I began interviewing participants. (For instance, I changed the order of a few questions and included additional probes to uncover detailed information about certain topics.)

During the data collection period, I asked each student to meet me in an available faculty office or conference room in the Department of Communication for a one-hour interview. Due to inclement weather, I conducted one interview via Skype and two interviews via telephone. (I observed no significant differences between the quality of the interviews conducted in person and the quality of the interviews conducted via Skype/telephone.) Once the participant arrived, I provided a brief overview of the study and asked him or her to review and complete the consent form. (See Appendices A and B to review the IRB Initial Application and the Consent Form.) I asked participants who were not able to attend the interview in person to e-mail their completed consent form prior to our Skype/telephone call. Potential participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before deciding whether or not to participate. After the participant consented, I asked for permission to record the interview and then proceeded to ask a series of questions about his or her COMM107 experiences. Participating students received three extra credit points.

The interview questions were roughly aligned with the administrative-interest items on the University of Maryland online course evaluation form. For example, the interview guide included the following questions:

- Did you find this course to be intellectually challenging? Why or why not?
- Did you learn a lot from this course? What makes you say that?
- What did you think about the standards your instructor set for everyone in the class?

The University of Maryland course evaluation form includes the following administrative-interest items (each of which is linked to a set of fixed-choice responses):

- The course was intellectually challenging.
- I learned a lot from this course.
- The standards the instructor set for the students were...

Although I referred to the interview guide throughout the interview, I maintained some flexibility in determining “whether the research topics have been addressed by the [participant], and when and how it is appropriate to follow up on the accounts given” (Roulston, 2010, p. 15). Throughout the interview process, I wrote up memos to extensively document my interactions and reactions. The memoing process helped me “flesh out emergent concepts” and “take stock of ... how [my] data do or do not fit together” (Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009, p. 359; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 123).

I began analyzing the data soon after I collected it (instead of waiting until the end of the data collection period to begin the data analysis process). I took this approach since “qualitative analysis is an *iterative process* of data collection along with data analysis ... the two processes should inform each other [emphasis in original]” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 123). As a result, I was able to identify gaps in the data more quickly, and understand which topics required further investigation. I used this information not only to shape subsequent interviews, but also to follow up with participants whom I had already interviewed.

**Data Analysis Process.** I approached the data analysis process with the rigor of a skilled analyst. First, I asked student assistants to transcribe the audio recordings of each interview, and worked with these individuals to prepare a one-page interview summary that captured the key ideas from each interview. As I reviewed the transcriptions, I added observer comments about specific interview questions or potential themes, and underlined revealing quotations that I wanted to analyze in further depth. I completed these initial steps soon after each interview so that I did not forget my immediate insights, since “repressing analytical insights may mean losing them forever, for there’s no guarantee they’ll return” (Patton, 2002, p. 406).

I used a grounded theory approach to carefully and systematically analyze the participants’ responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, I used open coding to break down the data “line-by-line” and assign codes to specific words or phrases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). As part of this process, I conceptualized and differentiated among the terms “strengths,” “shortcomings,” and “suggested changes”:

- Strengths: positive/beneficial course characteristics (e.g. something about the course that students appreciate, enjoy, or like; something about the course that meets or exceeds their expectations; something about the course that facilitates achievement or progress toward a particular goal or learning outcome)
- Shortcomings: negative/detrimental course characteristics (e.g. something about the course that students do not appreciate, enjoy, or like; something about the course that does not meet their expectations; something about the course that hinders achievement or progress toward a particular goal or learning outcome)
- Suggested Changes: proposed course characteristics (e.g. an alteration to the course that may impact student satisfaction levels; an alteration to the course that may impact student expectation levels; an alteration to the course that may impact student achievement levels)

Next, I used axial coding to connect the concepts with one another and identify potential categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, I used selective coding to refine the list of categories and identify higher-order themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout the data analysis process, I aimed to “sort, resort, collate, classify and reclassify pieces of data to facilitate constant comparison and to refine schemas of classification” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 488). I worked diligently to “treat the evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions, and rule out alternative interpretations” (Yin, 2009, p. 130).

## **Self-Reflexivity**

Self-reflexivity helps researchers understand how their own identity affects the data collection and analysis process. Through a process of introspection, researchers prepare themselves to “sort through biases and think about how they affect various aspects of the research, especially interpretation of meanings” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 122).

This process

adds to the trustworthiness of qualitative research by making known the researcher’s social and cultural position in relationship to the participants and contexts under study. In this way, the researcher can demonstrate metacognitive awareness that heightens the intellectual rigor of the project. (Alsup, 2004, p. 222)

In other words, self-reflexivity enables researchers to develop a stronger sense of how their assumptions and subjectivities might influence their interpretive “lens.”

In preparation for this study, I reflected on my role as a COMM107 instructor and administrator. (I currently serve as Managing Director of the Oral Communication Program at the University of Maryland.) In particular, I asked myself the following question: “How might your positionality as a COMM107 ‘insider’ shape your view of the findings?” After revisiting this question several times, I realized that my involvement with COMM107 has influenced my perceptions about the course—both in terms of what seems to be working well and what still needs to be improved. My objective, however, was not to reinforce my own views, but rather to capture the students’ views. As a result, I attempted to bracket my own preconceived notions about COMM107 and focus solely

on the “concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor” of the participants’ responses (Lichtman, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). I used memos and observer comments to document my feelings, and engaged in frequent questioning about whether my findings accurately reflect the data. In short, I made every effort to separate my own lived experiences from the participants’ lived experiences.

### **Validity**

Validity commonly refers to how well a study is measuring what it intends to measure (Kvale, 1995). In qualitative circles, however, there is considerable debate about whether validity ought to be considered in qualitative research, and if so, how it ought to be assessed. Wolcott (1994) argues that a quantitative construct of validity has been forced upon qualitative research, thereby obscuring the meaning of validity in qualitative studies. He notes that validity has become “a desirable but ambiguously defined criterion” that may not be applicable to “the language of the dialogue” (p. 345-346). Wolcott contends that the need to focus on validity may stem, in part, from a desire to steer the conversation away from reliability—the ability to repeat a particular research study with the same results. After all, reliability poses a “herculean problem for researchers concerned with naturalistic behavior or unique phenomena” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 35).

One potential solution to this problem is to reconceptualize a valid study as a *quality* study. According to Tracy (2010), a high-quality qualitative study satisfies eight criteria:

- (1) worthy topic (the topic is relevant, significant, and worthwhile)

- (2) rich rigor (the study uses appropriately complex theoretical and methodological constructs)
- (3) sincerity (the study reflects a commitment to self-reflexivity and transparency)
- (4) credibility (the study provides a trustworthy account of a particular phenomenon)
- (5) resonance (the study makes a meaningful impact on the audience)
- (6) significant contribution (the study promotes interest in or understanding of particular theories and/or practices)
- (7) ethical (the study candidly explores a variety of ethical considerations)
- (8) meaningful coherence (the study achieves its stated goals)

These criteria provide an opportunity for qualitative researchers to use a common language when talking about quality, and garner “respect for qualitative methods from power holders who know little about our work” (Tracy, 2010, p. 837). Indeed, this framework “delineates eight *universal* hallmarks [emphasis in original]” of excellent research across many different disciplines (Tracy, 2010, p. 837).

For purposes of this study, I conceptualized my interest in validity as an interest in quality. My goal was not only to produce a high-quality final product, but also to enhance the internal validity of my findings. In particular, I wanted to ensure a high level of craftsmanship throughout the research process:

In a craftsmanship approach to validation, the emphasis is moved from inspection at the end of the production line to quality control throughout the stages of knowledge production. The understanding of validity as quality of craftsmanship is not limited to a postmodern approach, but it becomes pivotal with a dismissal

of an objective reality against which knowledge is to be measured. (Kvale, 1995, p. 27)

In this sense, quality craftsmanship is an ongoing process that focuses on checking, questioning, and theorizing every phase of the study (Kvale, 1995). A high level of craftsmanship also “involves going out of your way to provide alternative theoretical explanations for your given findings and attempting to critically examine the relative strengths and weaknesses of your argument” (Kvale, 1996, p. 242). To achieve this degree of craftsmanship and internal validity, I incorporated various techniques into my data collection and analysis process: triangulation, member checking, and data sessions.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is the use of multiple types of evidence to address a particular set of research questions. The purpose of triangulation is to enhance the credibility of one’s findings through “the development of *converging lines of inquiry* ... events or facts of the case study [that] have been supported by more than a single source of evidence [emphasis in original]” (Yin, 2009, p. 115-116). Some common types of triangulation include the use of different methods, sources of data, evaluators, theories, or case studies. In this study, I leveraged data triangulation by collecting data from a diverse group of students who took COMM107 with different instructors. In doing so, I was able to corroborate the perspectives of students in different sections of the course, and validate that these perspectives were not solely based on a particular instructor’s style. This approach allowed me to explore my research questions from multiple angles and compare the themes that emerged from different sources of evidence.



**Member Checking.** Besides triangulation, I used member checking to enhance the validity of my study. Member checking is a process whereby the researcher shares his or her interpretation of the participants' remarks with the participants themselves. Essentially, member checking takes place at two levels: the level of the interview and the level of the findings (Roulston, 2010). Member checking at the level of the interview ensures that the researcher accurately captures the participants' viewpoints, while member checking at the level of the findings ensures that the findings seem appropriate and credible. In this study, I integrated both levels of member checking. First, I gave each interview participant the opportunity to review the one-page summary of his or her interview. I shared these summaries with the participants via e-mail and asked them to confirm that I captured their viewpoints accurately. Additionally, I invited the interview participants to verify the final abstract of the study. I re-contacted the interview participants via e-mail and asked them to confirm that my findings and conclusions were in line with their perspectives. In both cases, the interview participants did not identify any gaps, misrepresentations, or omissions. Indeed, the use of member checking in the present study helped substantiate the internal validity of the findings and the accuracy of my interpretations.

**Data Sessions.** I also conducted data sessions to verify the trustworthiness of my findings. Data sessions are meetings in which other researchers "compare their [perspectives] with those of the principal researcher(s)" (Roulston, 2010, p. 85). The purpose of these sessions is to confirm that the primary researcher's findings appropriately reflect the participants' perspectives. I held two types of data sessions as part of this study: sessions with my advisor and sessions with my student assistants (who

helped me transcribe the interviews). During the study, I met with my advisor on a regular basis to discuss my impressions and interpretations and update him on my progress. My advisor often reminded me to “listen to the data,” and focus on what the data were telling me. At the end of the study, I asked my student assistants to generate a list of potential themes based solely on a subset of the interview transcripts. I then conversed with the student assistants about their analysis, and asked them to compare what they had found with what I had found. The student assistants confirmed that my analysis seemed reasonable based on their review of the selected interview transcripts.

### **Summary**

In summary, this qualitative case study attempts to capture undergraduate student perceptions of the basic communication course. Through in-depth interviews, this study provides an opportunity for students to reflect on the strengths of the course, the shortcomings of the course, and the changes that ought to be made to the course. In other words, this study makes meaning of students’ lived experiences, and contributes to our understanding of how best to approach specific aspects of the basic communication course.

In an early article in *The Communicator*, Staton-Spicer (1982) noted that research in communication education “is still in its infancy. There is much to be investigated and much to be learned” (p. 44). Staton-Spicer’s statement still holds true today—indeed, there are seemingly endless opportunities for qualitative scholars to explore research questions in communication education. By investigating student perspectives, this study

adds a vital dimension to the conversation about the state of the basic communication course.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

In this chapter, I will detail how the participants made meaning of their basic communication course experiences. I will delineate a set of specific themes in response to each of my three research questions:

- What do students perceive to be the strengths of the basic communication course?
- What do students perceive to be the shortcomings of the basic communication course?
- What changes, if any, would students suggest be made to the basic communication course?

To support each theme, I will include direct quotations that reflect the participants' ideas, feedback, and thoughts. In doing so, I aim to give voice to the students who took the basic communication course. (Note: The participants' names were changed to protect their identities.)

### **Perceived Strengths of the Basic Communication Course**

The participants generally spoke highly about their basic communication course experiences. In particular, the data revealed five themes that characterize the key strengths of the course: (1) small class size; (2) guided practice opportunities; (3) real-world applicability; (4) opportunities for self-reflection; and (5) focus on the public speaking process.

**Small Class Size.** The participants identified small class size as one of the central strengths of the basic communication course. They felt that the size of the class made it

easier for them to build relationships in the classroom. Michael, a 23-year-old senior majoring in public health, noted that the class was “much smaller and much more intimate. You actually get to hear people’s point of view and actually see them and sit next to them and actually be close [to them] to some extent.” He added that the smaller class size enabled students to build a relationship with the instructor, given that “[the instructor] didn’t have to divide her attention amongst that many students.” Derek, a 19-year-old junior majoring in computer science, explained that he would see classmates from other classes around campus and say “what’s up ... but we didn’t really hang out”; in this class, however, “[my classmates and I] started doing group projects together so I definitely think [that helped me] make at least a couple friends.” Tamara, a 23-year-old senior majoring in sociology, also spoke about the friendships she formed over the course of the semester: “It was kind of nice actually talking to people in my class and developing some kind of friendship ... Having that aspect [to] it also made [the class] feel laid back and relationship-oriented.” Another benefit, she said, was that “when it came [time] to do the reviews of the [individual] presentations, it was more genuine because we had gotten to know each other over a long period of time.”

The small class size also created a comfortable learning environment. Michael noted that, due to the size of the class, the instructor “had the time to talk to you about class work, and even career stuff like why to [major in] communication, what she’s doing, how she got to this point in her career.” Marcus, a 21-year-old senior majoring in philosophy and history, emphasized that the course seemed “very open [and] very friendly,” which made it easy for him to learn. “At any point in the lecture, you could interrupt [the instructor] and ask her a question. It’s very comfortable ... I wish more of

my classes were this small and friendly.” Tamara underscored that the class was “extremely comfortable”: she never worried about “making a mistake” in class, because the instructor “made [the class] feel very laid back.” Likewise, Paula, a 22-year-old recent graduate who majored in ecology, emphasized that the small class size “relieved some of the pressure” of the course. She explained that “you didn’t feel the pressure like you normally would [in other classes] ... the class was very loose but informative at the same time.”

Additionally, the small class size fostered a high level of interaction. Michael appreciated the fact that the class provided the opportunity “to get a feel of [everybody’s] ideas,” and engage in frequent debate about various communication topics. He was pleased that “everybody ... interacted with each other, ... everybody’s views and opinions were heard, [and] everybody was able to ask questions [and get] feedback.” Karen, an 18-year-old freshman majoring in broadcast journalism, agreed that the level of interaction made the course stand out:

I don’t think I’ll have any courses like this where it can be so interactive and I actually get to know the people in my class, and get to know the instructor more personally and be able to talk to her a lot ... It’s really interactive, and that’s probably the best part about the class. It’s awesome just being able to talk, not only to your teacher, but [to] everyone around you.

Similarly, Carl, a 22-year-old senior majoring in chemistry and family science, enjoyed the level of interactivity build into every class session. Although lecturing was part of the

class, “there was never a class where it was purely look at the slides, write this down, leave. There was always another [interactive] aspect to it.”

Finally, the small class size facilitated a discussion-based classroom culture. Megan, a 21-year-old recent graduate who majored in communication, noticed that “[the instructor] made sure we had a lot of small group interaction. This was important [because] you have to be able to work in a group and deal with different people.” These small group interactions prepared students to participate actively in general class discussions. “After we would go over a concept with one or two other people,” said Paula, “[the instructor] would give examples, whether ... through articles, discussion, or video clips. Then we got to the fun part: [the point when] she would open the class up for discussion. That’s when I learned the most.” Fang, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in math and business, explained the value of these class discussions: “Discussing ideas as a class made every [class session] engaging ... I didn’t always understand every idea up front, but when we discussed and debated it, I began to see what the instructor meant, and why [the idea] mattered.”

**Guided Practice Opportunities.** Many participants identified guided practice opportunities as another key strength of their basic communication course experience. In particular, the participants noted the usefulness of the in-class presentation assignments. Michael explained that these assignments helped him become much more comfortable in front of an audience:

Having that exposure in [an oral communication] class like this can only make you better. A lot of the time when people don’t like public speaking, I feel like

it's because they've never really been in front of the public. So, just being in front of the class and having the support from the instructor ... helps you advance to an advanced or at least intermediate level ... You're no longer a beginner *per se*.

Likewise, Tony, a 21-year-old senior majoring in Spanish, explained that the in-class speaking assignments helped keep his attention: "In certain classes, when we had to [give] an impromptu speech ... we weren't sitting there listening to [the instructor] lecture the whole time ... The instructor gave us the confidence to get up and talk to the class." Deena, an 18-year-old sophomore majoring in economics, acknowledged that these assignments had a direct impact on her communication skills: "The speaking was really good because [it] made you think less about the content and more about what you were doing ... [The instructor] is there to help you become a quicker thinker and speaker." According to Tamara, the in-class presentation assignments also yielded other benefits such as learning how to "think of a topic and organize your thoughts," how to "stay focused," and how to "[improve] your nonverbals."

The participants also discussed the benefits of other guided activities and exercises. Peter, an 18-year-old sophomore majoring in international business, pointed out that the use of in-class activities was "very effective ... since you're pretty much learning about [communication] as you're putting ideas into action and getting [the instructor's] reactions." But what made the instructor so helpful, according to Tony, was that "she would help us through... a bunch of different activities ... she'd be like 'doing that was bad ... and doing this was good,' so we knew right away what to change." Like



Tony, Derek enjoyed the opportunity to participate in a specific exercise and then receive immediate coaching from his instructor. He recalled that “sometimes we’d have exercises where we’d practice, like working on something in a group. But we’d run into problems and not know what to do ... so it helped to have the instructor there to help us out.”

**Real-World Applicability.** The participants lauded the real-world applicability of the basic communication course. They saw a clear link between the course content and the challenges that they face in their academic, personal, and professional lives. Carl emphasized that “this class isn’t just about giving presentations for the sake of giving presentations”; he felt confident that the course would help him succeed academically. “I’m going to deliver [a presentation] in [my] family science [course],” he said. “So I’m pretty sure I will be using a lot of what I learned.” Whereas some participants connected the course content to their academic lives, others connected it to their personal lives. Tony, for example, explained that

when we were talking about relationship termination, ... everyone in the class was sort of like “oh my goodness, that’s how my last break up went” ... we all had these weird moments when we were like “oh this totally makes sense now. I wish I knew that before.”

Finally, some participants linked the course content to their professional lives. Jack, a 20-year-old junior majoring in economics, contended that the course “really drove home the point that we need to use this at work ... I need to know how to communicate with people above me, below me, and on the same level [as me].” Simply put, “so many of

the discussions in class are related to everyday life,” said Karen. It’s all really applicable ... not abstract.”

The course also reinforced real-world communication concepts through contemporary examples. Tony pointed out that “when we were talking about persuasive speeches, we looked at a lot of political ads that showed different tactics for persuasion.” According to Paula, these video examples clarified ideas that were introduced in the textbook: “When you listen to recent speeches, especially political speeches from a presidential candidate, you understand how these [concepts] work. It makes you think critically [about] the information you are taking in.” However, not all of the video segments were politically-focused. Megan explained that “watching *Shark Tank* [a reality show where entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to potential investors] in class [helped us understand] the persuasive techniques we read about. We saw people flop, and from that ... we learned what [works] and what doesn’t.” Marcus agreed that the video examples were helpful, but he found his instructor’s verbal examples especially insightful. “My [instructor] talked about what she knew about the current political situation [or] ... something that was happening in the real world,” he said. “It made her point much more relevant ... [and] helped me figure things out.”

**Opportunities for Self-Reflection.** A variety of participants felt that the opportunities for self-reflection were among the most important elements of the basic communication course. Specifically, the participants believed that the course helped them develop a greater understanding of how they communicate. Fang, for example, explained that the course taught her “how to talk to people ... how to use specific

messages in different situations”—a skill, she said, that helped her understand “a bit about human nature [and] a bit about myself.” Like Fang, Paula contended that the course emphasized the impact of verbal language: “This class not only showed me the impact of words, but also [helped me think about] the power of *my own* words ... both [in terms of] what I say and how I interact with others.” Derek, however, asserted that the course did much more than simply help him “get his message across”; the course also played a key role in making him more aware of his “body language, eye contact, and [other] nonverbals.” He pointed out that “in high school, we didn’t think about [nonverbal communication] ... it wasn’t a big issue. In this class, though, it’s huge. It opened my eyes to what I am doing when I am talking or listening.” Karen offered a similar perspective; for her, the course was about “how to listen and engage ... It got me thinking [about] how I need to listen more before I start talking. I will definitely watch how much I am listening when I am hanging around other people.”

The course also offered a variety of opportunities for students to reflect on their presentation-related strengths and weaknesses. Karen found the video recordings of her presentations to be quite useful. She acknowledged that she learned “a lot of concepts” in the course, but “more so about myself as a public speaker.” Indeed, this was the first time that she had seen herself on video: “I was able to evaluate myself and see [the] things that I could do better.” Similarly, Peter appreciated the opportunity to watch himself on video, but he also thought it was important to react to the videos in writing:

I think the most effective part of the course was looking at myself giving a speech and having to analyze it in a journal entry. I could see what I did well or what I

had to [improve], and then write about it. The [videos] made it much easier to do the journal entries ... and think about how to become a [better] speaker.

Megan noted that the videos were “sometimes hard to watch ... seeing ourselves was way different than being told what you did wrong ... Seeing [yourself] helps you pick up on things but sometimes [this process] can be very uncomfortable.” Nevertheless, she called the opportunities for self-reflection “extremely enlightening.”

**Focus on the Public Speaking Process.** Several participants reported that the basic communication course helped demystify the public speaking process. In particular, the course helped them improve the structure of their presentations. Kim, a 21-year-old senior majoring in finance and economics, noted that public speaking is all about the “process of putting it together.” She was pleased that the course taught her “how to do the presentation, and how specific [organizational patterns] would [ensure] that others understand my [message] more clearly.” Like Kim, Paula learned that there are multiple ways to structure an effective presentation:

Before the course, I would always do it in order [work on the introduction, then the body, and then the conclusion], ... I thought that was the only way to do it ... but now I find it more effective to start with the body, and then do an introduction ... and a conclusion after the body is completed.

Lee, a 23-year-old junior who is finalizing his choice of major, pointed out that he and his classmates “seemed to get better in terms of organizing [our presentations]” over the course of the semester. Prior to enrolling in the course, he “would just kind of mix

everything up,” but now he has “a much better idea of how to [properly] organize a presentation.”

The course also helped students learn about another key aspect of the public speaking process: effective delivery. Megan described how the course taught her to “have a presence when I stand up” and to “express my passion for the topic.” She explained that it is not enough to “arrive on [presentation] day with an awesome [presentation] structure ... you have to be able to sell it, and show [the audience] that you mean what you are saying.” Samantha, a 19-year-old junior majoring in international business, explained that the course had a substantial impact on her delivery skills: “I used to have everything written down on notecards,” she said. “Now I am able to act like an expert on whatever I am talking about. Ya, I know my stuff ... but it’s more important how I am able to share [my message].” Similarly, Paula discussed the impact of the course on her delivery approach: “[The course] made me more aware of how to get through to the audience, how to behave up there [in front of the audience] ... it changed [what I do to] make a presentation more listenable and enjoyable.”

Finally, the course helped students gain an appreciation for the role of practice in the public speaking “process.” Kim pointed out that she “never thought practice was important until this class ... For my last [presentation], I practiced [for] two days. I really learned by practicing in the mirror. You learn something different when you’re talking out loud to a wall.” Priyesh, a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in finance, explained that he never realized that practice was such an important part of the preparation process: “I usually practiced right before I had to deliver a talk, but now I know that practice has to

be more than a one day thing. I would stumble a lot more if I didn't practice as much." Marcus explained that practicing before every presentation ought to be a priority: "In this course, I figured out that we have to make time for practice every time. It's not optional. It's an important part of what we need to do."

In sum, the participants identified several notable strengths of the basic communication course. They spoke highly about the small class size; the guided practice opportunities; the real-world applicability; the opportunities for self-reflection; and the focus on the public speaking process. Overall, the participants felt that these elements helped make their basic communication course experiences extremely worthwhile.

### **Perceived Shortcomings of the Basic Communication Course**

Although the participants generally were satisfied with their basic communication course experiences, they highlighted a number of course-related shortcomings. The data revealed five themes that characterize the key shortcomings of the course: (1) unclear link among course components; (2) lack of differentiated section offerings; (3) insufficient focus on public speaking; (4) unclear assignment expectations; and (5) design of the interview unit.

**Unclear Link Among Course Components.** Several participants indicated that there was an unclear link among the various course components. Indeed, the participants felt that the structure of the course often appeared to lack cohesiveness. Paula explained that "when we got to the public speaking [unit], I had to go back and review all the theories ... [The course structure] just didn't make sense. [The course] would have been easier if the material was more integrated." Deena expressed a similar point of view: "I

just didn't like the randomness. It was kind of like 'why are we learning about this?' I didn't like how some information was thrown in there." The participants also noted that some course topics seemed out of place. According to Emily, "[The course] wasn't that organized. It was all over the place. [For example,] we could've learned about presentations before the interview [unit]. [The course] didn't seem well put together."

Moreover, the participants felt that there was a lack of integration between the two halves of the course. In their view, the course appeared to be divided into two distinct segments: one focused on communication theory, and another focused on public speaking. Paula asserted that "the public speaking [unit] almost seemed like a cutoff point. You go through the theories and then you get to the actual speaking. They pretty much relate to each other if you think about it, but you're separating them." Priyesh contended that the two "halves" seemed to "make this [course] two separate courses. It was all theory and then public speaking at the end. It would've been better if it was all mixed in, if public speaking was in the middle of the course as well." In addition, Lee noted that the theoretical concepts were not directly applicable to the presentation assignments. "[The theories] were something additional [that] didn't really apply to all of the public speaking. I feel like it was completely separate material."

**Lack of Differentiated Section Offerings.** The participants cited the lack of differentiated section offerings as another shortcoming of the basic communication course. In particular, several participants suggested that the course did not directly apply to their particular interests or major. Peter explained that "it would have been nice to take a class just for business majors. This stuff seems super applicable, but we didn't talk

about how this all relates to the business world.” Robert, a 20-year-old junior majoring in finance and neurobiology, seemed dissatisfied with the applicability of the course content:

It would be great if [this course] related to my interest in business or science. The material was interesting, but it was pretty basic. I was hoping for something I could use in my major ... I want to see how I could put this [material] into action.

Likewise, Priyesh expressed disappointment that the course did not examine business applications more directly: “I feel like there could’ve been more business-related [ideas] in the course ... because that’s the most important part of the course to me. Everything was pretty general.”

Additionally, the participants with prior presentation experience did not find the course to be sufficiently challenging. Carl underscored that this course “is intended for freshman. If this was a senior-level course, I don’t think it would be this easy. It is perfect for [first-year] students with no presentation experience, but not for seniors.” Robert felt that the course emphasized material he had already learned: “As a junior, I have [already] given a lot of presentations in college. I think if I took this course two years ago, it would have been better suited to my needs.” Moreover, Jack explained that this course “made him work backwards” academically. “It didn’t make sense that I took this course after taking harder classes,” he said. “It was a basic speaking course. If I had taken this [course] freshman year, then maybe it would have been at my level.” Some participants, like Peter, noted that the course did not seem to take one’s experience level into account: “Everyone is at a different point in college, but that really wasn’t



considered. It's hard when [the instructor is] using the same [presentation] standards for everyone."

**Insufficient Focus on Public Speaking.** Most participants cited an insufficient focus on public speaking as a primary shortcoming of the basic communication course. The participants wondered why an oral communication course included so few speaking opportunities. Fang contended that "this course should be more about speaking. This is a 100-level course, and most of us will not go to a higher level. It would be better to teach us what we need to know and ... let us speak much more often." Similarly, Carter explained that there "needs to be more of an emphasis on public speaking. It's something you have to practice over and over again. Two [presentations] isn't enough. [The speaking component] needs to be much more in depth." Like the other participants, Lee suggested that it would "be better if we did more speaking." For him, the key is to "give us a chance to be up in front of the class and present more often. It doesn't matter what type of speaking ... we just need a lot more of it."

The participants also felt that there was insufficient time to prepare for the individual presentations. Although the schedule was condensed for the summer session, a few participants noted that the public speaking unit seemed a bit rushed. Karen made clear that she "didn't have enough time to prepare for the presentations. I get that this is summer, but everything went by too quickly. We needed more time to learn from the first [presentation] before moving on to the next one." Peter explained that "we need rest time" between the two presentations. "I thought about it, and I could've given a much more interesting and effective presentation if [the] public speaking [unit] had been

longer. The pressure is on for preparing because you have to condense all that preparation into a short amount of time.” Michael noted that the “summer class was [generally] a bit rushed”; the problem, however was that “there was still not enough time devoted to ... public speaking. It made it harder to focus on our presentations when they were so close together, and we didn’t spend [a lot of time] talking about them.”

**Unclear Assignment Expectations.** A number of participants found the assignment expectations to be unclear. More specifically, the participants suggested that the assignment instructions were overly broad and confusing. “I didn’t know what the instructor wanted,” said Karen. “We needed a little more structure ... like I had to go with what I thought [the instructor] would want me to do, because there wasn’t much explanation.” Emily, a 21-year-old junior majoring in nutrition, explained that it would have helped if the instructor discussed the assignments in class: “Like on the assignment [instructions], it doesn’t say you need to use PowerPoint. And I actually followed the instructions. [But] then on the comments, [my instructor] said, ‘it would be better if you included PowerPoint slides.’” Additionally, Jack noted that his instructor tended to rush through the assignment guidelines at the end of class. While Jack’s instructor “went over expectations very clearly at the beginning of the semester,” she did not do the same for the individual course assignments. “The lack of communication was what got me,” he said.

Whereas some participants found the assignment instructions to be unclear, others found the scoring system to be unclear. Robert, for example, lamented that his instructor spent little time discussing the rubrics in depth. “I know we were going to be given a

grade [for each assignment],” he said. “But I wasn’t told on the rubric where I could lose points. She showed us the rubric in class, but didn’t really go over it.” Priyesh made a similar point: “[My instructor] told us she would give us comments on how we did [on each assignment], but she didn’t go through each category [on the rubric] ... one by one. It was just hard to do well without this information.” A few participants, like Jack, suggested that they were unsure why they lost points in certain categories. He pointed out that his instructor did not “let us know what we might do wrong” by discussing the rubric in class. As a result, he was left wondering “why I got a 26 out of 30 instead of a 27 [out of 30] on the last presentation ... I wasn’t clear on the differences between [the two scores].” Moreover, Carter emphasized that he had to visit his instructor during office hours to “figure out” what she wanted: “Ultimately, I think giving us the rubric was one thing, but going over it and letting us ask questions is what I needed. It’s not enough to be like ... ‘read it,’ and that’s it.”

**Design of the Interview Unit.** Many participants cited the design of the interview unit as another shortcoming of the basic communication course. In particular, the participants suggested that there was little opportunity to practice both interview roles (i.e. interviewer and interviewee). Emily discussed this problem in the context of the informational interview assignment:

For the interview [unit], we just had this interview that we went out and did. It was about collecting information and networking ... I mean, ya, that was cool ... [but] I would have liked to have experience as [both] an interviewer and an

interviewee. It's really important in your life and in your future to [understand] both roles.

Like Emily, Anu, a 22-year-old recent graduate who majored in biology, explained that she needs to know “what to do as an interviewer and what to do as an interviewee. I learned how to interview someone else, but what about when I'm in that person's shoes? I need to know that aspect as well.”

Some participants also pointed out that there was little focus in the course on actual interviewing skills. Given the skills orientation of the course, the participants were surprised that the instructor spent little time discussing how to answer specific types of interview questions. Megan admitted that she is still “pretty clueless [about] how to answer interview questions ... I tend to ramble a lot, so I need help figuring out what to say in a real-world interview.” Anu questioned why the instructor “glossed over the different ways” to construct interview responses. She noted that the instructor discussed the various types of interview questions, but “didn't explain how [to] respond to each one. We never got tips about how to communicate with one person [in an interview] like we did when we were talking about group communication.” As Karen noted, “all of this theory is great, but without knowing how to get the job, it's not that helpful.” Despite her hard work over the course of the semester, she still felt unprepared to answer actual interview questions. “Reading about employment interviews won't be of help when it comes time to try to get a job,” she said.

In short, the participants identified several significant shortcomings of the basic communication course. They expressed concern about the unclear link among course

components; the lack of differentiated section offerings; the insufficient focus on public speaking; the unclear assignment expectations; and the design of the interview unit. The participants advocated that these shortcomings be discussed and addressed in a timely manner.

### **Suggested Changes to Be Made to the Basic Communication Course**

The participants spoke candidly about potential ways to improve the basic communication course. The data revealed five themes that characterize the key changes that ought to be made to the course: (1) allocate class time to most important topics; (2) offer additional speaking opportunities; (3) integrate technology into course components; (4) enhance opportunities for presentation feedback; and (5) expand the focus on group dynamics.

**Allocate Class Time to Most Important Topics.** A number of participants recommended that the basic communication course allocate class time only to the most important topics. To be sure, the participants felt that several topics were straightforward, but overemphasized in the course. Priyesh, for instance, pointed out that “a lot of time was wasted on learning [vocabulary] terms ... I understand that terms are important, but we didn’t need to spend so much time going over them in class.” Likewise, Samantha felt that the instructor spent a lot of time discussing the different categories of verbal and nonverbal communication. “We probably could have cut [down] the time we spent on that,” she noted. “What’s more important is how verbal and nonverbal communication work, [rather than] all the different categories that we’re not going to remember anyway after the class is over.” Although the participants cited a

variety of topics that were overemphasized in the course, Robert approached this issue more holistically: “There is a lot of stuff in this course, but much of it we could’ve figured out on our own.” He felt strongly that “we should spend less time reviewing what’s in the book, and basically get to the practice. That’s what will help students learn [how to] communicate effectively.”

The participants also cited a number of topics that are critical, yet underemphasized, in the course. Anu underscored that the intrapersonal communication unit did not receive the attention it deserves: “I think it’s very important to understand yourself ... so I was surprised about how short [the unit on intrapersonal communication] was compared to [the unit on] interpersonal communication.” Jack noted that listening was another topic that was “really rushed.” He lamented that he “did not get the chance to learn more about listening. It’s the other half of communication, and we only talked about the [listening] model, but didn’t really get into how important it is every day.” Additionally, many participants were frustrated that the interview unit was so short. Fang pointed out that interviewing “could be [made into] a whole course.” “In my mind,” she said, “you should expand it or just never cover it, and allow to be in a 200-level [course]. Either way, we need to learn about it somewhere.”

**Offer Additional Speaking Opportunities.** All of the participants suggested that the course expand the number of speaking opportunities. One of the most common suggestions was to require students to deliver informal, impromptu speeches on a regular basis. Carl expressed disappointment that there were only two formal presentation assignments in the course. “How can we only present a couple times during the

semester?” he said. “I thought there was way too little [speaking] for an oral communication course. We need much more impromptu speaking ... [in] every class [session].” Tony made clear that he, too, would have benefitted from additional impromptu speaking exercises:

[Impromptu speaking] is a good [type of exercise] because we don’t get a lot of time to prepare for it ... it was more authentic and closer to our real-world [interactions]. Having more [impromptu speaking] would give us the opportunity to improve what we were doing wrong ... Plus, the more opportunities we have to keep refreshing and applying the speaking [skills] we’re learning, the more [these skills] will stick.

Marcus expressed a similar sentiment about the usefulness of impromptu speaking exercises: “I would want more self-involved exercises in the midst of class, like impromptu speaking. These participatory [exercises] could [include] a discussion about how to handle similar questions ... [so] we could all improve.”

Some participants also recommended adding an introductory presentation assignment. Through this assignment, students would have the opportunity to introduce themselves to the class and get to know their classmates. Deena suggested that this type of assignment would “help everyone learn about each other, but also make you more aware of your nonverbals.” According to Derek, this assignment would not only help establish rapport among the students in the class; it also would serve “as a warm-up”: “It’s the first time [we would be] speaking [in front of the class],” said Derek. “So it [would] help us be ourselves, and get comfortable with how we speak in front of people

we don't know." Samantha recommended that this initial assignment be non-graded. She noted that "we need to get comfortable before we [move on] to the graded presentations. Maybe a couple non-graded [presentations] like this one would do just that."

Other participants recommended adding chapter presentations to the course requirements. Derek explained how this type of assignment would work: "Everyone [would] read a certain thing in the book before class, and then they'd get up at some point during the [semester] and teach it to the rest of the class." The advantage to this approach, he said, is that "when you teach information, ... you can truly know it." Anu also felt that chapter presentations would help "everyone digest the most important ideas" in the course. However, she thought that the greatest benefit to adding this requirement was "that it would make the class a little more interactive. I mean, the chapters were a little dry." In her view, chapter presentations would make the material more engaging and more memorable.

Finally, a couple of the participants suggested that the course offer more opportunities to present in real-life situations. For Derek, the informative briefing and the persuasive speech "didn't seem real." He envisioned a more civic-oriented basic communication course that offers students the chance to use their communication skills to make an impact:

If you really want to make the course about public speaking, you'd organize an event outside of class where [students would] have to speak. You could set it up



in Hornbake Plaza, and have a microphone ... and see how many people stop by.

That would be the real test of what we learned about speaking in public.

Like Derek, Peter pointed out that presenting in “real situations” offers a better assessment of one’s public speaking ability. “It’s way more important than classroom speeches,” he said.

**Integrate Technology into Course Components.** Several participants recommended that the basic communication course experiment with technology-based learning approaches. The participants suggested, for example, that instructors post online summaries of the basic concepts instead of discussing these concepts during class. Anu pressed for instructors to “put the lectures online for students to review on their own time. It would be more helpful, because that way people can review the information when they’re ready, and there will be more time for interactive activities [in class].” However, the participants made clear that they are not interested in simply reading long Word documents. Karen suggested “putting the lecture material on some kind of podcast. That would be kind of different, but it would be something that people can listen to in the gym or wherever they are.” Robert also lobbied for instructors to post the basic course material online; for him, though, a YouTube-based lecture format would be ideal: “Instructors could give [their] presentation with their voice over it, post it on YouTube ... and there could be a discussion board requirement where students could talk about the lecture online” or on the course website.

Many participants also recommended that the course make better use of social media tools. Michael explained that social media tools would “help [instructors] figure

out if students are [learning] the material. Like think of an online chapter review on Facebook, or a quick quiz ... it would be a good way to reinforce what [students] read.” Samantha emphasized that instructors need to adjust to “how students learn.” In her view,

nowadays everyone is in something or on something, so there is no harm in talking about it [in class] ... maybe how to use it, or more ways to use it. Maybe talking a picture of something related to communication and posting it on a [class] Twitter [feed] or sending out tweets to remind everyone about assignments or due dates. Students would look at that.

Some participants, like Robert, noted that students are already using social media tools in their class presentations. “I saw a group put their whole presentation on a Facebook page. And someone used Prezi for their [informative briefing]. These are definitely ways students can express themselves ... The course needs to catch up with what’s out there.”

**Enhance Opportunities for Presentation Feedback.** Some participants suggested that the basic communication course expand opportunities for presentation feedback. In particular, the participants explained that peer feedback should be a core component of the presentation process. Karen felt that instructors should “make time for students to give feedback after [someone] gives a [presentation] ... It has to be something beyond writing comments on notecards, or the instructor giving us a grade, like on a paper.” Tamara noted that the feedback she received from her peers was extremely useful. “It was very helpful to get the notecards after each [presentation] to know how I

did. But it would have been useful to hear more feedback from the class right afterwards in some other structured way.” Although there are many ways to structure peer feedback exercises, Megan recommended one particular format:

Maybe you could make it an assignment [where] you pair up beforehand, and someone gives you constructive criticism. Your partner would take notes during your presentation and have a couple days to look at the video online ... and then write something out, and have a discussion with you on what you should work on.

The participants seemed to value their instructor’s feedback, but they wanted additional feedback as well. “[Peer feedback] would have given everyone a chance to get reactions that are more detail-oriented,” said Tamara.

The participants also suggested that outside communication experts be invited to critique student presentations. Carter noted that feedback from outside professionals “would absolutely help ... they are a little more seasoned and have a lot to offer. They have expert power, so I certainly would be receptive to their critiques.” Jack discussed how these professionals could play a role in the class: “It would be cool if ... someone from the university or a business came in and ... observed one of our presentations. People in the workforce could give you [feedback], and tell you if you convinced them.” Indeed, the participants felt strongly that the outside experts’ feedback would complement their instructor’s feedback. As Peter explained, “our instructor doesn’t have time to sit down and make detailed comments on every [presentation], but someone with training [from the outside] could share thoughts [verbally]. We want to know what they think too.”

**Expand Focus on Group Dynamics.** A variety of participants recommended that the basic communication course expand its focus on the group process. Given the importance of group work in the real world, the participants lobbied for more in-class group activities and exercises. Megan emphasized that so much of one's performance in college is based on "the individual and what [he or she] can do," but one's ability to work in a group is far more important:

I can do a lot by myself, but I can do more in a group ... sometimes I just need to get help from other people. The thing is, in a group, you're going to learn how [other people] are reacting to what you just said to them. Actually speaking and watching yourself in a group teaches you a lot about yourself, ... and what to do to get more people on board with [your idea].

Similarly, Derek noted that there "should be more group activities to make everyone comfortable because communication is not just about public speaking, it's about the interpersonal ... so if you could practice more in groups, you would be better prepared for the [challenges] ahead." For this reason, Michael suggested that instructors "take out one of the lectures and have students work on some questions in a group. The students will need to [determine] the answer ... and also will need to figure out the dynamics of a group situation."

Some participants also recommended that the course set aside more time for students to work on their group presentations in class. Michael noted that the "class would be better off if there was some way to get [in-class] work time [because] ... it was

pretty difficult” for everyone to find time to meet between class sessions. “Once we did meet,” he said, “it wasn’t [for] too long because people had to go to work. We ended up doing the majority of our work four hours before class started, and that was because of all the scheduling problems.” He explained that a side benefit to working on the group presentation in class is the availability of the instructor: “While we’re in class, we can talk about our ideas, and know what [the instructor] thinks about everything before we go up there and present.” Deena pointed out that instructors can play a key role in helping students effectively navigate the group process. “The group presentation is the first [major] assignment of the semester, and it is definitely pretty hard,” she said. “Like in the real world, when a boss tells you how to do something ... our instructor can guide us along. This would help us work toward a goal, and learn how to be better group members.”

Overall, the participants offered a number of suggestions to improve the basic communication course. They discussed the importance of allocating class time to the most important topics; offering additional speaking opportunities; integrating technology into course components; enhancing opportunities for presentation feedback; and expanding the focus on group dynamics. The participants felt strongly that implementing these changes would substantially improve other students’ basic communication course experiences.

## **Summary**

The participants shared many important insights about their basic communication course experiences. In particular, they explored the strengths of the course, the

shortcomings of the course, and the changes that ought to be made to the course.

Although the participants generally were satisfied with their basic communication course experiences, they discussed a number of shortcomings and recommendations that warrant further consideration.

On a broader level, the findings point to several questions about administrative and curricular issues. What are the shortcomings of the standard course evaluation process? How might interviews help us gain a more holistic understanding of instructor performance and student learning? What are some other ways to format the basic communication course? What types of studies would provide deeper insight into students' course-related experiences? These issues are examined in depth in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5 – Discussion

In this chapter, I will examine the significance of my findings. I will focus on how these findings impact the standard course evaluation process and the format of the basic communication course. In doing so, I aim to show that the findings inform broader curricular and administrative issues, rather than simply capture students' feelings about their basic communication course experiences. I then will explore the limitations of this study and conclude with potential directions of future research.

### Course Evaluation Process

The course evaluation is a widely-used tool to assess students' course experiences. Typically, academic institutions encourage (or require) students to complete a paper or online course evaluation that includes student-interest and/or administrative-interest items. At the University of Maryland, for example, the online course evaluation includes 15 items: seven student-interest items (which can be accessed only by students and the course instructor) and eight administrative-interest items (which can be accessed only by certain administrators and the course instructor) (Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment, n.d.). Thirteen of the 15 items include fixed-choice responses; the other two items provide students with the opportunity to share written comments.

**Course Evaluation Data.** Many different constituencies rely on the data collected through the course evaluation process. Departmental leaders and course administrators use these data to make personnel and salary decisions, to determine teaching award recipients, and to conduct teaching-related research (Hostetler, Sawyer, &

Prichard, 2001; Marsh, 1987). Instructors use these data as a source of feedback to help them improve their teaching in subsequent semesters (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010). And students use these data to make decisions about which courses and/or instructors to choose (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010). Indeed, course evaluations “provide a defined and practical process to ensure that actions are taken to improve courses and teaching” (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010, p. 339).

The problem, however, is that course evaluation data are often biased. Although the quality of instruction and the level of instructor support have the strongest correlation with student satisfaction, there are a number of external factors that may affect students’ course evaluation responses. Denson, Loveday, and Dalton (2010) organize these factors into three primary categories:

- Student-related factors (the student’s gender, academic/maturity level, and desire to “punish” an instructor for giving him or her a low grade);
- Teacher-related factors (the teacher’s gender, instructor rank/experience, grading practices, and personality traits); and
- Course-related factors (the degree to which students’ actual grades align with their expected grades, class size, difficulty of course content, and course day/time)

Given the myriad of factors unrelated to teaching and learning that influence course evaluation results, the reliability of course evaluation data ought to be questioned (Morley, 2012).



Some scholars are particularly concerned about how grading influences course evaluation scores. Previous studies have shown that there is a strong positive correlation between students' expected grades in a particular course and the students' evaluation of their course instructor (Johnson, 2003). This issue falls under the purview of the "principal-agent-client" problem whereby "the department [the principal] would prefer that the instructors [the agents] improve [course evaluation] scores by improving their teaching, but instructors may find it less costly to increase [course evaluation scores of their students—the clients] by grading leniently" (Klitgaard, 1988; Ewing, 2012, p. 142). In other words, there may be an incentive for instructors to "buy" higher evaluation scores by inflating grades" (Ewing, 2012, p. 141).

One additional problem that frequently is discussed in the literature is the impact of the instructor's likeability on course evaluation scores. In an ideal world, students would assess instructor quality based on the instructor's teaching-related strengths and weaknesses. However,

it appears that liking, even though irrelevant to the performance rating task [i.e. teaching], is a dimension that interferes with raters' evaluations of performance. Additionally, ... liking can adversely affect performance rating accuracy regardless of the self-reported degree of influence of liking. (Cardy & Dobbins, 1986, p. 676)

The implication is that liking is a critical component of the course evaluation process that is difficult to separate from performance-related factors. As a result, "the majority of variance in [course evaluation] item responses could be explained by the students'

personal view of the lecturer rather than their lecturing ability or course attributes” (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010, p. 341).

In sum, a wide variety of exogenous factors may lead students to assign ratings that do not accurately reflect their perceptions of the teaching and learning process. For instance, a student who is dissatisfied with his expected course grade may choose to assign the lowest rating to every evaluation item despite the fact that his overall learning experience was quite positive. This issue is compounded when it comes time for instructors and course administrators to determine what the data mean. These individuals may want to understand why one particular student assigned extraordinary low ratings (especially in a situation where the other students in the class, on average, assigned relatively high ratings). Unfortunately, the standard course evaluation process would leave the instructors and course administrators with more questions than answers.

Most scholars would agree that much work is needed to reform the course evaluation process. Although course evaluations are far from perfect, it is important to avoid making “general claims about the reliability, or unreliability of [course evaluations] as a class of instruments; ... [instead, we ought to] begin routinely assessing [course evaluation] reliability and agreement with every application of a [course evaluation]” (Morley, 2012, p. 20). As such, college and university administrators have an ongoing responsibility to improve the course evaluation process so that they are able to garner a more complete understanding of teaching and learning across different academic programs.

**The Role of Interviewing.** This study suggests that interviewing may help administrators form a more complete picture of students' course-related experiences. Whereas the standard course evaluation process yields data about student (dis)satisfaction levels, this study reveals that interviewing offers far more comprehensive data about *why* they are (dis)satisfied and *how* they come to be (dis)satisfied. In a sense, interviews push students to think critically about what they believe, and what factors may be influencing their points of view.

Interviews have the potential to change the way students perceive the course evaluation process. Unlike standard course evaluations, interviews are designed to engage students in a focused conversation about their basic communication course experiences. Peter, an 18-year-old sophomore majoring in international business, linked his interview experience to the course evaluation process (even though I did not explicitly make this connection):

I think this style of course evaluation is a lot more effective than [an] online questionnaire ... people don't want to sit down and take those. They'll do it while they're on Facebook, and they'll answer a couple questions ... You don't get effective feedback ... I knew this time was allotted for this reason, so I came into the interview with ideas in my head, and I was able to form new ideas as you asked me questions. It's much more comprehensive ... I felt like this was a very effective [way of collecting data] ... and I could tell you things that an online questionnaire couldn't tell you.

I *expect* to give you useful information. Putting a face to it, having an interviewer—I feel like I’m actually informing someone. When I fill out an online course evaluation, I hit submit, and I don’t know where it goes. I don’t know who’s looking at it, and quite frankly, I don’t care. I see that you’re prepared, you have a list of questions, and I want to give you information that will actually help you ... I want anyone who takes [this course] after me to get a better experience.

Peter’s comments highlight the power of the interviewer-student connection. While Peter characterizes the standard course evaluation process as impersonal and unimportant, he seems to enjoy the opportunity to speak with someone about his basic communication course experiences. In fact, he continued talking about his experiences long after I completed the standard set of interview questions.

A major benefit of interviewing students is the opportunity to clarify students’ viewpoints in real time. When I asked students if they learned a lot from this course, most of them responded with a one-word answer (“definitely”) or a short phrase (“somewhat, ya”). (These types of responses mirror the fixed-choice nature of the responses to this item on the standard course evaluation.) However, when I followed up with “Tell me why you feel that way” or rephrased the question (“What will you take away from this course?”), the students shared in-depth data about why they enjoyed (or did not enjoy) specific course elements, how they understood/applied certain ideas, and why/how the course will (or will not) continue to impact their lives. In some cases, the students even contradicted their initial answer in the process of explaining their position

(e.g. after saying, “Well, not really,” one student listed a variety of reasons that she felt the course was applicable to her personal and professional endeavors). Interviewing, then, offers a unique opportunity to gather more meaningful (and often different) data about students’ course-related experiences.

**Potential Ways to Incorporate Interviews.** Given the time and cost associated with interviewing students, departmental leaders must be strategic about how they incorporate interviews into the course evaluation process. Changing the course evaluation process will require faculty buy-in and administrative resources. Although “some faculty may see this as additional bureaucratic waste and an unnecessary use of limited funds... they [should be reminded of the] need to balance the rewards and costs of additional, follow-up feedback regarding instructional quality” (Kozey & Feeley, 2009, p. 164). Indeed, the objective is not to change the *entire* course evaluation process, but rather to supplement the process in select cases with additional qualitative data. These data have the potential to help faculty and administrators put the standard course evaluation scores into context, and to improve understanding about why students are reacting in a certain manner.

One possibility is for departmental leaders to assemble a faculty-student committee (made up of course instructors and other interested students) to evaluate a particular course and/or selected sections of a multi-section course. For example, committee members could interview students in one or two sections of the basic communication course during the last 2-3 weeks of the semester (or at the beginning of the following semester), and then work together to prepare a detailed report on their

findings. To support this initiative, departmental leaders could showcase the committee's work at departmental events and in departmental publications, and/or award a small honorarium to committee members for their service to the department. Committee members also may reap side benefits such as a greater awareness of student needs and increased attention from various stakeholders (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2010).

Alternatively, departmental leaders could offer an upper-division "Scholarship in Practice" experience built around the educational assessment process. The course would provide a small group of undergraduate students with the opportunity to learn about course assessment in a particular discipline and work on a "real" research study (e.g. an interview-based course assessment study). Each week, a faculty member could lead an interactive seminar that prepares students to collect/analyze interview data and identify emerging themes. At the end of the semester, the faculty member would work with the students to produce a final report that details specific findings and recommendations. Through this unique experience, students would gain practical, hands-on research experience, and deepen their understanding of "how to assess and apply a body of knowledge to a creative, scholarly, or practical purpose" (The Office of Undergraduate Studies, University of Maryland, 2010).

This study suggests that interviewing provides useful information that is not captured in the standard course evaluation process. While most course evaluations are focused on teaching, this study emphasizes the need to increase our attention on *learning*. The standard course evaluation focuses on the "teacher and the teaching process": it seldom requires students "to assess their own learning or to consider their own work—

despite the fact that such information could be used to improve the curriculum in order to better support the desired learning outcomes” (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010, p. 340). As a result, departmental leaders should consider including interview questions such as “What will you take away from this course?” and “How did this course impact your life?” to supplement the data in the standard course evaluations. The result would be a more holistic understanding of instructor performance and student learning.

### **Course Delivery Formats**

The basic communication course, like other performance-based courses, is typically offered in one of two formats. The vast majority of colleges and universities divide students into individual, autonomous sections (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). A small number of institutions, however, subscribe to the mass lecture/performance lab approach, where students attend a mass lecture once or twice a week, and then hone their skills in smaller “lab” sections (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). Although the present study examined a group of students who were divided into three autonomous sections, many participants were not convinced that the format of the course maximized their learning experience. Simply put, the findings revealed a need to re-examine the standard course format and explore the possibility of moving toward a different approach.

The findings emphasized a variety of opportunities to improve the format of the basic communication course. Many participants reported that their instructors spent a substantial amount of time lecturing about concepts in the course textbook—many of which were “overly simplistic” or “easy to understand.” Although some participants

enjoyed the lecture orientation of the course, a majority of the participants felt that class time could and should have been allocated to more practical, hands-on activities. Based on these findings, it may be worthwhile to consider other potential course formats.

**Blended Courses.** One possibility is to blend the in-person learning experience with a standardized, online “mass lecture.” Indeed, blended courses (which sometimes are called hybrid courses) combine an online, pre-class tutorial with an in-person “lab” experience. The tutorial would allow students to explore the basic concepts at their own pace, while the lab component would enable students to put these concepts into practice. In a sense, blended courses move the lecture component online, thereby allowing instructors to create an activity-based classroom culture. As a consequence, this approach would enable instructors to spend less time lecturing about specific concepts, and more time *engaging* students in the learning process. The goal would be to ensure “the Web-based and face-to-face components of the course ... interact pedagogically to take advantage of the best features of each” (Learning Technology Center, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2012).

The blended approach introduces students to a unique course format. First, students would complete a weekly Web-based tutorial that explores a particular topic (e.g. listening) or set of assigned readings (e.g. chapters 1 & 2). The tutorial could feature an interactive mini-lecture that includes audio and video clips, hyperlink-rich graphics and readings, and online animations or exercises that emphasize particular concepts. The tutorial could even include a pre-test and a post-test that would help instructors monitor student progress, and identify the most challenging course concepts.



Next, students would participate in an in-person, autonomous “lab” section that meets once or twice a week. At the beginning of these class sessions, instructors could engage students in a focused discussion about the most difficult concepts in the tutorial (rather than lecturing on the readings more generally). The instructors could then spend the rest of the class session guiding students through discussion-based exercises and/or hands-on activities that emphasize why the concepts are important, and how the concepts address real-world communication challenges.

This approach would help address the recommendations outlined in the findings. Specifically, the addition of the pre-class tutorial would enable instructors to allocate class time to the most important topics, rather than feel the need to cover a large number of topics quickly and superficially. Given that instructors would no longer need to devote substantial class time to teaching (or re-teaching) a wide array of concepts discussed in the course textbook, they could spend more time emphasizing the concepts that really matter. In the process, the basic communication course would become less about learning ideas for the sake of learning them (and then regurgitating them on a midterm or final exam), and more about helping students connect the key concepts to real-world situations. In other words, the lab component would become an experiential space where students could connect the course topics to their academic, personal, professional, and civic lives.

Another benefit to the blended approach is that it would enable instructors to offer more in-class public speaking opportunities. Almost every participant noted that the opportunity to speak publicly was one of the key strengths of the basic communication

course. At the same time, however, many participants expressed a desire for more guided practice. If the lecture component were to be moved online, instructors would have the time to guide students through additional in-class public speaking assignments such as introductory speeches (where students introduce themselves to the class), impromptu speeches (where students speak on a randomly selected topic with little advance preparation), and role play exercises (where students address a public speaking “problem” from a particular point of view). The idea would be to move beyond formal presentations (e.g. informative briefings and persuasive speeches), and engage students in a wider range of public speaking challenges. In doing so, students would be able to achieve a greater level of public speaking proficiency within a safe, supportive environment.

A third benefit to adopting a blended approach is to support the integration of technology into course components. With the increasing prevalence of digital technologies, it is imperative that students fully understand these tools, so they are able to communicate professionally with diverse audiences and capitalize on exciting opportunities, in the workplace and beyond. As such, blended courses offer an outlet to heighten students’ awareness of communication technology, and challenge students to examine (or re-examine) the ways in which they use technology to communicate with others. The communication literature highlights a variety of exciting possibilities, including the use of a classroom blog to facilitate dialogue about a recent speech (Cohen, Briones, & Narvaez, 2011), text messaging to teach digital communication skills, and teleconference technology to highlight group communication challenges in a professional setting (Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg, 2010). This study, however, reveals the

importance of integrating social media tools (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) into course assignments to “meet students where they are at in the digital world” (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010, p. 426). For instance, instructors could invite students to create a professional profile on LinkedIn, record a group podcast in lieu of delivering an in-class group presentation, or design a Facebook page to promote a particular cause. The key is not to discourage the use of technology in the classroom, but rather to use technology-based approaches to make the basic communication course more applicable and relevant to students’ lives.

A fourth benefit of adopting a blended approach is that instructors could devote more class time to presentation feedback. Most participants appreciated the chance to receive written presentation feedback from their instructor and, in some cases, from their peers (usually via comments on notecards). However, the participants expressed interest in receiving additional, *in-depth* feedback from their instructor, their peers, and even from outside professionals (e.g. public speaking experts). Indeed, the issue seems to be the quality of the feedback, rather than the quantity of feedback. Consequently, shifting the module on presentation basics to an online format would allow instructors to teach students about the role of feedback in the workplace, and the proper way to deliver constructive criticism (both orally and in writing)—a topic, frankly, that is rarely covered in the basic communication course. Instructors could then put aside more class time for students to react to their peers’ individual presentations (i.e. discuss each presenter’s strengths and shortcomings). With proper instruction, students would feel prepared to offer useful presentation feedback, and help one another strengthen their presentation skills.

Finally, a blended approach would give instructors more time to explore the intricacies of the group process. Although many participants admitted that they do not enjoy working in groups, they recognized the importance of improving their group communication skills (especially since so many professional tasks are completed in groups). The participants observed, though, that the basic communication course spends little time exploring the group process beyond the group presentation assignment itself. For this reason, instructors could use the additional class time to engage students in a variety of group exercises that force students out of their comfort zone and challenge them to complete a series of complex group tasks. For instance, instructors might assign each group a particular problem and give students a set amount of time to decide on the most appropriate course of action. If possible, instructors should record these group discussions (e.g. at the Department's oral communication center) so that students have the opportunity to view themselves from what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) refer to as the "balcony." From the balcony, students will be able to see themselves clearly and understand how other group members are responding to them. Once the students "more firmly understand what [their] audience ... experience[s] while [they] are speaking, [they] will know exactly what actions to take" in future group situations (Cohen, 2011, p. 22).

It is worth noting, however, that moving toward a blended approach is not an elixir. Some students may not complete the pre-class tutorials at all, while others may struggle to digest course concepts in an online learning environment. Although instructors face similar issues in the standard course format (since not all students

complete the assigned readings before class), the problem may be especially noticeable in courses with an online component where instructors spend far less time reviewing the key concepts in class. It makes sense, then, that there is ongoing debate about the impact of blended courses on student learning and student satisfaction (Noble, 2003). As such, it is critical that course administrators pilot the use of the blended approach at their institution before adopting this approach course-wide.

Course administrators may want to conduct the pilot in two separate phases. First, course administrators could select a small number of basic communication course “pilot sections” and work with the instructors to integrate the online tutorial platform. At the end of the semester, a group of researchers within the communication department could conduct a study to examine whether the changes were successful. (The research questions could focus, for instance, on how students perceived the use of the pre-class tutorial, and how the blended approach impacted student learning.) Course administrators also could meet with the pilot section instructors to get a sense of what worked well and what needed to be changed. In the second phase, course administrators could hold a series of meetings with all of the basic communication course instructors to discuss the findings in more depth. The instructors could then work together to identify the most appropriate curricular changes and discuss how these changes might affect course instruction more broadly. The goal would be to understand how best to implement the blended approach across some or all sections of the basic communication course.

**Modular Courses.** Another potential way to deliver the basic communication course is to break the course into self-contained “modules” that focus on one or more topics (e.g. the interview process). At first glance, this approach may seem impractical and unwise; after all, the prevailing theory is that students should take the basic communication course early in their academic career and then build on their communication knowledge and skills through upper-division coursework. Yoder (1999), however, proposes a different approach “in which students take different units of the [basic] communication course when it has the most meaning to their education and their personal/professional development” (p. 178-179). Unlike upper-division students,

many first-year students [the primary audience for the basic communication course] do not have the experience or maturity to appreciate or apply the material to relevant contexts. For example, it is difficult to teach employment interviewing when students have no meaningful material to put on a resume and have no conception of the career that may await them. Similarly, public speaking skills and group communication skills become more meaningful when [students] can apply them directly to the assignments in their major courses. (Yoder, 1999, p. 178)

As a result, it makes sense to offer students the appropriate communication training when they need it most (i.e. at different points in their undergraduate academic career).

The modular approach provides an opportunity to reconceptualize the standard basic communication course format. One possibility is to divide the course into three one-credit units that each cover roughly one-third of the course content: these five-week-

long units would cover public speaking, group decision-making, and interviewing and interpersonal communication (Yoder, 1999). To maximize the applicability of these courses, students would take the first course during their sophomore year, the second course during their junior year, and the third course during their senior year (Yoder, 1999). Another possibility is to divide the basic communication course into two half-semester courses (each worth one or two credits): public speaking (which would focus on presentation design and delivery) and communication processes (which would focus on interviewing, interpersonal communication, and group communication). Students could take the first course during their freshman or sophomore year and the second course during their junior or senior year. In both of these scenarios, students would explore the communication topics that are most relevant to their academic career stage: lower-division students would focus on developing the presentation skills that they will use in their major courses, while upper-division students would focus on polishing the interviewing and interpersonal skills that they will use during their internship or job search (Yoder, 1999).

The present study provides support for this “just-in-time” approach. The findings indicate that students are apt to use certain segments of what they learned in the basic communication course at specific points in their academic career. Indeed, none of the participants referred to the basic communication course as an “introductory” or “survey” course; instead, participants characterized the course as a segmented sequence of communication topics that relate to specific communication challenges. For instance, Kim, a 21-year-old senior majoring in finance and economics, noted that the basic communication course “gets you ready for certain situations like dealing with interviews

and such. You learn a topic, then apply it, then move on. It's one separate topic after another, but [the course] is all about communication." Given the participants' perspectives, it may be worthwhile to consider separating the course content into distinct modules with clearer foci.

The modular approach also would impact one of the key shortcomings discussed in the findings: the design of the interview unit. The basic communication course devotes little time (usually only one or two class sessions) to the interview process—not because the topic lacks importance, but rather because there are so many other topics that must be covered. As a consequence, students receive only a brief introduction to the topic that perhaps will have the greatest impact on their ability to secure full-time employment after they graduate. By adopting a five-week-long module on interviewing and interpersonal skills, instructors would have the opportunity to explore a wider range of employment-related topics, including impression management, interview strategies, and resume writing (Yoder, 1999). Instructors also would have the time to lead students through cover letter workshops, mock interviews, and workplace-focused role-play exercises. Most importantly, instructors would be able to devote more time to the employment interview itself. During the five-week module, instructors could teach students how to conduct an informational interview as well as how to make a strong impression on an interviewer.

Despite these benefits, there are several disadvantages to adopting the modular approach. First, the modular approach would introduce a series of administrative complexities such as the need to redesign the course syllabus, offer additional instructor



training, and reconfigure the course readings for each module (Yoder, 1999).

Additionally, this approach would require a candid conversation among departmental leaders about which topics to include and exclude across the various modules. After all, it is unlikely that instructors would have enough time to cover all of the academic material in the standard basic communication course (Yoder, 1999). The most pressing disadvantage, of course, is that this approach would require a substantial investment of time and energy to gain buy-in from the appropriate leaders at the department, college, and university-level. This may be especially difficult at institutions that require students to complete specific courses (e.g. a three-credit basic communication course) as part of the general education curriculum.

Although adopting the modular approach would take time, it is worth exploring whether this approach would better equip students to succeed academically, personally, professionally, and civically. The communication department could partner with the Office of Undergraduate Studies to run a pilot study on a select group of incoming undergraduate students. These students still would have to complete three credits of oral communication (usually fulfilled by the three-credit basic communication course), but they would do so by taking communication-focused modular courses at certain times (e.g. the interviewing and interpersonal skills course during their junior or senior year). A group of researchers could collect data from students taking the modular courses and compare it with data from students taking the three-credit basic communication course. The results would help college and university administrators understand the impact of the modular approach on student development, and assess whether this approach might be appropriate for their institution.

### **Summary of Implications**

This study highlights several administrative and curricular implications. First, it suggests that interviewing may help college and university administrators form a more complete picture of students' experiences in particular courses. Whereas the standard course evaluation process tends to focus solely on the instructor and the quality of the instruction, interviewing offers far more comprehensive data about *why* students are (dis)satisfied and *how* they come to be (dis)satisfied. As such, interviews have the potential to help faculty and administrators put the standard course evaluation results into context, and gain a more holistic understanding of instructor performance and student learning.

Moreover, this study underscores the importance of exploring other potential basic communication course formats. In particular, the study suggests a need to examine the blended approach (which moves the lecture component online, thereby allowing instructors to devote more class time to hands-on, experiential activities) and the modular approach (which divides the course into self-contained "modules" that students take at the most appropriate points in their undergraduate academic career). Given the ongoing debate about the feasibility and effectiveness of these approaches, it is critical that departmental leaders consider running pilot studies to determine how adopting the blended approach and/or the modular approach would impact the basic communication course at their institution.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although I worked diligently to execute a high-quality research study, it is important to acknowledge that this study has some limitations. First, the findings in this study are not generalizable to all basic communication courses. This study did not employ a random sample of basic communication course students, nor did it include robust statistical measures. Whereas the aim of quantitative research is to achieve statistical generalizability, this study is more concerned with understanding “the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). It may have been possible to strengthen the generalizability of the findings by using a mixed method approach or substantially increasing the sample size, but doing so was not the primary purpose of this study.

Despite the qualitative nature of the present study, it is worth noting that the findings may not be transferable to all basic communication courses. Given that COMM107 is a “hybrid” course, the findings may not be applicable to basic communication courses with different orientations (such as a public speaking orientation or a small group orientation). The findings also may not be applicable to other “hybrid” courses with different learning outcomes, different assignments, and/or different teaching methods, or to basic communication courses with homogenous student populations (e.g. courses made up only of freshmen or business majors). Finally, the findings may not apply to blended or online courses, or to courses that subscribe to the mass lecture/lab sections approach.

Additionally, the students in the sample may not be representative of all COMM107 students. While the present study focuses on the population of students who took COMM107 during summer 2012, it is possible that the experiences of students who took the course during this time period differ from the experiences of students who took the course during the fall or spring. Indeed, the summer offerings of COMM107 tend to move much more quickly (given that each summer session is only six weeks long) than do the fall/spring offerings. Despite these limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to an area that has not received sufficient attention in the literature: the undergraduate student experience in the basic communication course.

### **Future Research**

The present study offers insight into students' basic communication course experiences. Through in-depth interviews, this study gives voice to student perceptions of the merits and shortcomings of (and potential changes to) the basic communication course. Given that this study is largely exploratory, it provides "preliminary insights into the key issues to help shape future research" in this area (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 10). However, there are several related lines of research that ought to be pursued.

Further research could explore students' basic communication course experiences quantitatively. For example, scholars might create a student-focused survey instrument that mirrors the instrument used in the most recent survey of U.S. basic communication courses. This survey could include questions about students' "current needs and interests in the basic [communication] course" as well as "matters related to evaluation of student performance and the assessment of student learning outcomes" (Morreale, Hugenberg, &

Worley, 2006, p. 418). While this survey may yield significant results on its own, it also would be worthwhile to compare the student-based findings with the course administrator-based findings. This comparison may generate important insights into how, if at all, students' perspectives differ significantly from course administrators' perspectives.

Future research also might explore alumni perspectives of the basic communication course. Although past studies have surveyed students who are currently enrolled in the basic communication course, few studies explicitly have focused on course alumni. Studies on course alumni have the potential to assess the long-term impact of the course on participants' lives, given that the participants have had more time to reflect on their course experiences (Jenkins, Jones, & Ward, 2001). A recent survey of 348 COMM107 alumni found that a majority of participants perceived the course to have had a strong impact on their academic, personal, and professional lives (Wolvin, Fontana, & Cohen, 2012). However, further research is needed to explore how and why the basic communication course had a strong impact on these different life dimensions. This line of research could examine the specific ideas or lessons that have made the greatest impact on course alumni and/or the ways in which the basic communication course has met these graduates' "academic, theoretical, and skills needs" (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006, p. 435).

## Conclusion

The basic communication course continues to play a central role in preparing undergraduate students for the communication challenges they will face during college and beyond. It is designed not only to teach students how to communicate effectively, but also to help them develop the analytical framework that they will need to tackle complex communication challenges. Although the basic communication course cannot teach students how to handle every communication situation they will encounter, it can help them develop a “communication compass” that will guide them throughout their lives. This compass can help them make the right decisions when it really counts—whether at school, on the job, in their personal life, or in their community.

Without further study, however, the basic communication course may not continue to achieve its objectives. The need to examine (and re-examine) the basic communication course is becoming increasingly important as more and more institutions add an oral communication component to their general education requirements. Indeed, “the time is ripe ... to start this challenging conversation about how best to conceptualize and structure the [basic communication course]” (West, 2012, p. 1). Since college and university administrators will be paying much more attention to the basic communication course than they have in the past, it is critical that departmental leaders emphasize the “points of connection between the basic [communication] course and the other components of the general education program,” and work with course administrators to make the appropriate administrative and curricular changes (Valenzano, 2012, p. 17). In doing so, departmental leaders will ensure that the basic communication course is well-

positioned to “[stand] at the forefront of communication education” at institutions throughout the country (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006, p. 416).

## Appendix A: Initial IRB Application

### 1. Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore student perceptions of the basic communication course. Given that past studies of U.S. basic communication courses rely largely on data from faculty members and administrators, we know relatively little about how students perceive their overall course experience. The present study will help address this gap in the literature by examining what students perceive to be the strengths of the course, the shortcomings of the course, and the changes that should be made to the course. Through an analysis of student perspectives, this study will add a critical “voice” to the conversation about the state of the basic communication course.

This study will focus on a particularly illustrative “case”: COMM107 (“Oral Communication: Principles and Practices”), the basic communication course at the University of Maryland. I plan to invite all of the students in selected sections of COMM107 to participate in a one-hour interview during the last three weeks of the course. This study does not involve any type of deception.

To minimize any potential loss of confidentiality, I will assign pseudonyms to each participant after the interview process. Moreover, I will keep audio recordings and documents in a locked file cabinet, and use passwords to protect data files. If I write an article about this research project, I will not use participants’ real names.

### 2. Subject Selection:

- a. I will visit selected sections of COMM107 to discuss the study, and then follow up with interested participants via e-mail using the interview recruitment script. My goal is to enroll a diverse group of participants who would like to share their COMM107 experiences.
- b. All COMM107 students are eligible to participate as long as they are over 18 years old.
- c. I want to examine undergraduate student perceptions of the basic communication course.
- d. I plan to enroll up to 72 participants.



**3. Procedures:**

I plan to invite all of the students in selected sections of COMM107 to participate in a one-hour interview during the last three weeks of the course. The interviews will take place in a quiet, private location such as an office or the Department of Communication library. Current students who participate in the interview may receive extra credit. As an alternative to participating in the interview, current students may write a 500-word essay about the strengths and shortcomings of COMM107.

**4. Risks:**

There are no known risks.

**5. Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to participants. However, possible benefits include a greater self-awareness of the participants' course-related experiences. I hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how best to design and deliver the basic communication course.

**6. Confidentiality:**

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by assigning pseudonyms to each participant after the interview process. Moreover, I will keep audio recordings and documents in a locked file cabinet, and use passwords to protect data files. If I write an article about this research project, I will not use participants' real names.

Only the principal investigator and his student assistants will have access to the data. The principal investigator will teach the student assistants about the role of the IRB and the importance of confidentiality before they are authorized to transcribe the recordings. The student assistants will not be permitted to e-mail or make copies of the recordings. They also will be instructed to use passwords to protect data files.

**7. Consent Process:**

Potential participants will receive an informed consent form with detailed information about the study. They also will be given the opportunity to ask questions before deciding whether or not to participate. All participants will receive a copy of the consent form for their records. This study does not involve any type of deception.

**8. Conflict of Interest:**

There is no conflict of interest, since I will not be gathering data from students in the section that I am teaching.

**9. HIPAA Compliance:**

Not applicable.

**10. Research Outside of the United States:**

Not applicable.

**11. Research Involving Prisoners:**

Not applicable.

**12. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**

Your Initial Application must include a **completed Initial Application Part 1 (On-Line Document)**, the information required in items 1-11 above, and all relevant supporting documents including: consent forms, letters sent to recruit participants, questionnaires completed by participants, and any other material that will be presented, viewed or read to human subject participants.

For funded research, a copy of the Awarded Grant Application (minus the budgetary information) must be uploaded. If the Grant has not been awarded at the time of submission of this Initial Application, a statement must be added to the Abstract Section stating that an Addendum will be submitted to include the Grant Application once it has been awarded.

### Appendix B: Consent Form

<b>Project Title</b>	Listening to Student Voices: A Case Study on the Basic Communication Course
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by Steven D. Cohen at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you are enrolled in COMM107 (“Oral Communication: Principles and Practices”). The purpose of this research project is to explore student perceptions of the basic communication course.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<i>You will be invited to participate in a one-hour interview that focuses on the strengths and shortcomings of COMM107. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions such as, “What are your impressions of the course as a whole?” Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are selected for an interview and decide to participate, you may receive extra credit.</i>  <i>Please circle one: I <u>do</u> / do not consent to be audiotaped.</i>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<i>There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any time during your participation, you can decline to answer specific questions or discontinue your participation completely.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits to participants. However, possible benefits include a greater self-awareness of your course-related experiences. I hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how best to design and deliver the basic communication course.</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by assigning pseudonyms to each participant after the interview process. Moreover, I will keep audio recordings and documents in a locked file cabinet, and use passwords to protect data files. If I write an article about this research project, I will not use participants’ real names. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if I am required to do so by law.</i>
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which</i>

	<p><i>you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you are an employee or student, your employment status or academic standing at UMD will not be affected by your participation or non-participation in this study. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact Steven D. Cohen, 2100 Skinner Building, Department of Communication, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; 301-405-0302; sdcohen@umd.edu.</i></p>	
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a> Telephone: 301-405-0678</b></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>PARTICIPANT NAME</b> <b>[Please Print]</b>	
	<b>PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

### **Appendix C: Interview Recruitment Script**

Dear [Name]:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication with a keen interest in finding out what students think of COMM107. Given that you are about to complete COMM107, you probably have a unique perspective on the strengths and shortcomings of the course.

I would appreciate the opportunity to interview you for one hour in the Department of Communication library or at another mutually convenient location. I would like to discuss your overall course experience, and your ideas about how the course could be improved.

Can you send me your schedule, so we can find a day/time that works for both of us?

Thanks in advance for your time. I look forward to meeting with you.

Best Regards,

Steven D. Cohen

## Appendix D: Interview Guide

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we begin, may I have your permission to record our conversation, so I can review it at a later time?*

*(If no): I understand. Let's get started.*

*(If yes): Thanks! Let's get started.*

*As you know, I am interested in finding out what students think of COMM107. Given that you are about to complete COMM107, you probably have a unique perspective on the strengths and shortcomings of the course.*

*Let me start with some initial questions.*

1. What is your age?
2. What is your year in school?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your major (or anticipated major)?
5. Why did you decide to take COMM107? (RQ1, RQ2)

*Now that I know a bit more about you, let's talk about your view of COMM107.*

6. What are your impressions of the course as a whole? (RQ1, RQ2)
  - What did you think about the course structure?
  - What did you think about the course content?
  - What did you think about the course materials?
  - What did you think about the teaching methods?
  - What did you think about the course assignments?

7. Did you find this course to be intellectually challenging? Why or why not? (RQ1, RQ2)
8. Did you learn a lot from this course? What makes you say that? (RQ1, RQ2)
  - What will you take away from this course?
  - How did this course impact your life?
9. What did you think about the standards your instructor set for everyone in the class? (RQ1, RQ2)
10. What did you enjoy the most about this course? (RQ1)
11. What did you enjoy the least about this course? (RQ2)

*I am interested in finding out what you would change about COMM107.*

12. What would you change about the course as a whole? What makes you say that? (RQ3)
  - What would you change about the course structure?
  - What would you change about the course content?
  - What would you change about the course materials?
  - What would you change about the teaching methods?
  - What would you change about the course assignments?
13. If you could change only one thing about this course, what would it be? What makes you say that? (RQ3)

*Let me ask a question about your COMM107 experience as a whole.*

14. Are you glad that you enrolled in this course? Why or why not? (RQ1, RQ2)

*Would you like to add anything else?*



*Thank you very much for participating today. May I contact you in the event that I need to clarify something you said during our discussion? Have a great day.*

### Appendix E: Participant Characteristics

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major</b>
Michael	Male	23	Senior	African American	Public Health
Karen	Female	18	Freshman	White/African American	Broadcast Journalism
Derek	Male	19	Junior	White	Computer Science
Peter	Male	18	Sophomore	White	International Business
Tony	Male	21	Senior	African American	Spanish
Fang	Female	19	Sophomore	Chinese	Math/Business
Deena	Female	18	Sophomore	Indian	Economics
Marcus	Male	21	Senior	White/African American	Philosophy/History
Carl	Male	22	Senior	White	Chemistry/Family Science
Megan	Female	21	Recent Graduate	White	Communication
Tamara	Female	23	Senior	Hispanic	Sociology
Kim	Female	21	Senior	Chinese	Finance/Economics
Paula	Female	22	Recent Graduate	African American	Ecology
Robert	Male	20	Junior	White/Hispanic	Finance/Neurobiology
Jack	Male	20	Junior	White	Economics
Carter	Male	28	Junior	White	Economics
Priyesh	Male	19	Sophomore	Indian	Finance
Emily	Female	21	Junior	African American	Nutrition
Lee	Male	23	Junior	Korean	Undecided
Anu	Female	22	Recent Graduate	Indian	Biology
Samantha	Female	19	Junior	White/Hispanic	International Business

\* The participants' names were changed to protect their identities.

## Appendix F: COMM107 Master Syllabus

### COMM107 – Oral Communication: Principles and Practices Summer 2012

Section Number: M/W/F or Tu/Th, Class Day/Time, Class Location

**Instructor:** Your Name  
**Office Location:** Skinner Building, Room Number  
**Office Hours:** Day/Time or by Appointment (At least two hours per week)  
**E-Mail:** yourname@umd.edu

#### About Your Instructor

Insert a 75-100 word biography here.

#### Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate an understanding of the role of oral communication in academic, social, and professional endeavors
- Demonstrate effectiveness in using verbal and nonverbal language appropriate to the goal and the context of the communication
- Demonstrate an ability to listen carefully
- Demonstrate an ability to communicate interpersonally and interculturally with others in conversation, interview, and group discussion contexts
- Demonstrate competency in planning, preparing, and presenting effective oral presentations
- Use effective presentation techniques including presentation graphics

#### Course Materials

- Berko, R. M., Wolvin, A. D., & Wolvin, D. R. (2010). *Communicating: A social and career focus*. (11th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pack of 50 3" x 5" ruled index cards

#### Classroom Policies

- Please wear professional attire to class when you are scheduled to present. Your presentations will be recorded.
- Remember to turn off your cell phones and PDAs before entering the classroom. (Feel free to add policies about cell phone use and/or laptop use in class.)

- You may not eat or chew gum in class.
- Given the topic and interactive nature of this course, on-time attendance at all class meetings is especially important. You are allowed one “free” absence for any reason. After your first absence, you will lose five points off your Participation and Effort grade for each class meeting that you miss (unless your absence is excused).
- Please notify me before class if you need to leave early for any reason.
- There are no makeups for presentations or exams unless you were absent due to a religious holiday, illness, or university-sponsored activity. In the case of religious holidays or university-sponsored activities, you must provide written notification no later than one week prior to the absence. In the case of illnesses, you must provide appropriate documentation on the day that you return to class if you want your absence to be excused.
- For a medically necessitated absence from a single class, you may submit a self-signed note that attests to the date of the illness. The note must contain an acknowledgement that the information is true and correct and that providing false information is prohibited under the Code of Student Conduct. This option is only available one time during the semester. (Note: You may not submit a self-signed note if you are absent on a day when a Major Scheduled Grading Event is scheduled.)
- If you experience additional medically necessitated absences (or if you are absent on a day when a Major Scheduled Grading Event is scheduled), you are required to provide written documentation of the illness from the Health Center or from an outside health care provider.
- Kindly enter the classroom quietly if you arrive late. Note that if you arrive more than five minutes late to class, you will be marked “late.” If you are marked late two different times, you will accrue an unexcused absence.
- In the event the university closes due to inclement weather, I will announce changes to the class or assignment schedule via e-mail.
- Feel free to meet with me during office hours if you have questions about a grade or an assignment. I am happy to discuss your questions or concerns in person.

### **Assignment Guidelines**

- You must submit written assignments in class on the day that they are due. Assignments will be penalized 10% if they are submitted late and an additional 10% each calendar day that they are missing.
- If you plan to miss class the day that an assignment is due, you must leave the assignment in my mailbox before the start time of the class. E-mailed assignments will not be accepted. If you miss class due to an illness and cannot submit the assignment on time, please contact me as soon as possible.
- You must type and double space your assignments, number each page, set the margins to one inch, and use Times New Roman 12 point font. Please staple the pages together. (Do not use paper clips, folders, or cover pages.)
- Remember to proofread your assignment before submitting it!
- You must cite your sources using APA format. If you neglect to cite your sources, you will receive a zero on the assignment.

### **Academic Integrity**

Forms of dishonesty in this course include, but are not limited to: (1) cheating or helping someone else cheat on an assignment or exam; (2) delivering part or all of a speech that you did not author; (3) plagiarizing part or all of someone else's written or oral work; (4) failing to cite your sources properly; and (5) falsifying information about any topic, such as why you were absent or whom you interviewed for an assignment.

You should carefully review the Code of Academic Integrity:

<http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/docs/III-100A.pdf>

Note that all honor code violations will be referred to the Student Honor Council.

Please keep the University of Maryland Honor Pledge in mind at all times:

*I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination.*

### **Students with Disabilities**

The Disability Support Service (DSS) is ready to assist eligible students in determining and implementing appropriate academic recommendations. If you have a disability, please visit <http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS> to learn how to request accommodations or special testing arrangements. You must notify me of the situation prior to the end of the second week of class. It is your responsibility to work with DSS to make the appropriate arrangements.

### **University Classroom Climate**

The University of Maryland strives to foster classroom environments in which students feel valued and comfortable. In this course, we will touch on stereotypes of culture, gender, and sexuality. Please be prepared to discuss these subjects in a manner that does not discourage or devalue your classmates.

You can read the full Statement on Classroom Climate here:

<http://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/classclimate.html>

### **Evaluation**

Each course component will be weighted as follows:

Instructor Points

10 points

(These discretionary points may be used for quizzes and other assignments. Please specify any additional point “categories” below.)

Participation and Effort	20 points
Interview Assignment	20 points
Group Presentation*	30 points
Informative Briefing*	24 points
Persuasive Speech*	30 points
Communication Journal	16 points
Final Exam*	50 points
<hr/>	
Total	200 points

\*Major Scheduled Grading Event

I will compute your final course grade using the following scale:

A+	200.0 – 198.0
A	197.5 – 183.0
A-	182.5 – 180.0
B+	179.5 – 177.0
B	176.5 – 163.0
B-	162.5 – 160.0
C+	159.5 – 157.0
C	156.5 – 143.0
C-	142.5 – 140.0
D+	139.5 – 137.0
D	136.5 – 123.0
D-	122.5 – 120.0
F	119.5 – 0.0

Note: COMM107 instructors frequently report a high correlation between a student’s effort level and his/her final course grade.

**COMM 107 Sample Summer Schedule**

Please replace the information in the left-hand column with class dates. You are encouraged to rearrange the schedule and assignment deadlines as you see fit.

Week 1	Course Overview, The Human Communication Process, & Foundations of Verbal Language	Berko et al. – Chapters 1 & 2
	Nonverbal Communication & Listening	Berko et al. – Chapters 3 & 4 <b>Group Member Selection &amp; Group Presentation Topic Due</b>
Week 2	Intrapersonal Communication & The Interview	Berko et al. – Chapters 5 & 8
	The Concepts of Interpersonal Communication & Interpersonal Skills	Berko et al. – Chapters 6 & 7 <b>Interview Assignment Due</b>
Week 3	The Concepts of Groups & Participating in Groups	Berko et al. – Chapters 9 & 10
	Group Presentations	<b>Group Presentation/Outline &amp; Peer Reviews Due</b>
Week 4	Developing the Message & Informative Public Speaking	Berko et al. – Chapters 11, 12, & 15
	Structuring the Message & Presenting the Message	Berko et al. – Chapters 13 & 14
Week 5	Briefing Workshop & Informative Briefings	<b>Informative Briefing/Outline Due</b>
	Persuasive Public Speaking & Persuasion in Action	Berko et al. – Chapter 16
Week 6	Persuasive Speeches & Final Exam Review	<b>Persuasive Speech/Outline Due</b>
	Final Exam & Course Wrap-Up	<b>Communication Journal Due</b>

**Participation and Effort Rubric**

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Engagement	The student is actively involved in class activities, small groups, and peer discussions. (5 points)	The student is somewhat or inconsistently involved in class activities, small groups, and peer discussions. (2.5 points)	The student is not involved in class activities, small groups, and peer discussions. (0 points)
Attentiveness	The student is consistently attentive in class and on task during class sessions. (5 points)	The student is usually attentive in class and on task during class sessions. (2.5 points)	The student is not attentive in class or on task during class sessions. (0 points)
Contribution Quality	The student makes insightful comments during class discussions. The student provides ample evidence that he/she completed the readings before class. (5 points)	The student makes comments during class discussions that are occasionally off-topic, inappropriate, or surface level. The student provides some evidence that he/she completed the readings before class. (2.5 points)	The student makes comments during class discussions that are frequently off-topic, inappropriate, or surface level. The student provides little evidence that he/she completed the readings before class. (0 points)
Respect for Others	The student consistently demonstrates respect towards his/her classmates and instructor during class sessions and presentations. The student does not distract other students or the instructor. (5 points)	The student usually demonstrates respect towards his/her classmates and instructor during class sessions and presentations. The student occasionally distracts other students or the instructor. (2.5 points)	The student does not demonstrate respect towards his/her classmates and instructor during class sessions and presentations. The student distracts other students or the instructor. (0 points)



### Interview Assignment

This assignment prepares you to conduct an interview with a professional in the field.

Complete the following tasks:

- Set up a **face-to-face interview** with a professional who can help you learn more about a career you may be interested in pursuing. (Use online sources or your personal network to identify potential interviewees.) **You must interview someone whom you do not know.** Think about how you plan to ask the person to participate in an interview.
- Conduct research about the company/organization where the professional works and the topics you wish you discuss. Then **submit a two-page career field profile** that discusses your interest in the interviewee's career field and the potential communication issues in that field. Make sure to use **at least three credible sources, and include a bibliography in APA format.** ([Due Date](#))
- Along with the paper, you should **create a two-page interview outline** that includes your name, the name of the interviewee, his/her contact information, the purpose of the interview, and the questions that you plan to ask. This should be a formal outline rather than a list of disconnected questions. (You should review the sample outline on pages 223-224 of the textbook before you begin. Notice that the questions are organized by topic and that there are clear transitions between topics.) Remember that the questions should focus on the career field *and* the communication issues in that field. ([Due Date](#))
- Conduct the interview. During the interview, take notes about what the interviewee is saying, but remember to be fully attentive.
- After the interview, remember to post a journal entry about your interview experience. (Last day to submit interview entry: [Date](#))

I will use the following rubric to evaluate your performance:

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Purpose	The purpose of the interview is clear. The questions are strongly related to the purpose. (4 points)	The purpose of the interview is somewhat clear. The questions are not always related to the purpose. (2 points)	The purpose of the interview is unclear. Many questions are unrelated to the purpose. (0 points)

Research	The profile and interview outline reflect comprehensive knowledge of the interviewee, his/her career field, and the relevant communication issues. (4 points)	The profile and interview outline reflect some knowledge of the interviewee, his/her career field, and the relevant communication issues. (2 points)	The profile and interview outline reflect limited knowledge of the interviewee, his/her career field, and the relevant communication issues. (0 points)
Structure & Style	The profile and interview outline are clear, engaging, and well-structured. (4 points)	The profile and interview outline are clear, but not engaging or well-structured. (2 points)	The profile and interview outline are not clear, engaging, or well-structured. (0 points)
Components	The profile and interview outline contain all of the components specified in the assignment description. (4 points)	The profile and interview outline lack a few of the components specified in the assignment description. (2 points)	The profile and interview outline lack many of the components specified in the assignment description. (0 points)
Proofreading	The profile and interview outline contain no spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (4 points)	The paper and interview outline contain some spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (2 points)	The profile and interview outline contain numerous spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (0 points)

### Group Presentation Assignment

At the beginning of the course, you will form a group of four students. You should work with your group members to choose a communication topic that you would like to research. (Some examples include gender communication, interpersonal conflict, and communication anxiety.) Submit a brief discussion of your topic, so I can review and approve it. ([Due Date](#))

Work with your group members to prepare a 20-25 minute presentation on your communication topic. **You should not simply report your findings. Instead, you should create a dynamic presentation that includes discussion-based and interactive activities.**

Keep the following requirements in mind:

- **Be creative** as you design your presentation. Avoid lecturing and using questions like “how many of you...” Consider using exercises, surveys, handouts, and visual aids.
- You must **submit an outline** on the day of your presentation. Make sure to use **at least five credible sources, and submit a bibliography in APA format.** ([Due Date](#))
- After the presentation, you will evaluate the performance of your group members. Please use the peer review rubric that is posted on ELMS. You will need a separate rubric for each group member. ([Due Date](#))
- After your group presentation, remember to post a journal entry about your group work experience. (Last day to submit group work experience entry: [Date](#))

#### Group Component

(Note: These scores will be the same for all group members.)

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Topic Proposal	The topic proposal is clear and comprehensive. (3 points)	The topic proposal is unclear or vague. (1.5 points)	The topic proposal is not submitted. (0 points)

Organization	The session is well-organized. It includes a strong introduction, effective transitions, and a memorable conclusion. (3 points)	The session is somewhat organized. It includes an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion. (1.5 points)	The session is poorly organized. It is missing an introduction, transitions, and/or a conclusion. (0 points)
Support	The session makes effective and frequent use of sources. Group members support all claims with oral citations. (3 points)	The session makes use of sources with inconsistent frequency or effectiveness. Group members support most claims with oral citations. (1.5 points)	The session makes little use of sources. Group members rarely support claims with oral citations. (0 points)
Interaction and Engagement	The session includes a variety of interactive activities that consistently engage the audience. (3 points)	The session includes some activities, but it fails to consistently engage the audience. (1.5 points)	The session includes few activities, and does little to engage the audience. (0 points)
Presentation	Group members frequently make eye contact with the audience, use appropriate nonverbal behaviors, and speak clearly. (3 points)	Group members sometimes make eye contact with the audience, use appropriate nonverbal behaviors, and speak clearly. (1.5 points)	Group members rarely make eye contact with the audience, use appropriate nonverbal behaviors, or speak clearly. (0 points)
Preparation and Participation	Group members are clearly prepared for the session. They share the facilitation responsibilities equally. (3 points)	Group members are somewhat prepared for the session. Some group members facilitate more than others. (1.5 points)	Group members are unprepared for the session. At least one group member fails to make substantive contributions. (0 points)

Outline and Bibliography	The outline and bibliography are well-structured and comprehensive. They contain no mistakes or citation errors. (3 points)	The outline and bibliography are structured, but are not comprehensive. They contain some mistakes or citation errors. (1.5 points)	The outline and bibliography lack structure. They contain many mistakes or citation errors. (0 points)
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Subtotal: \_\_\_\_\_

Individual Component

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Peer Reviews	The student submits thoughtful and comprehensive reviews for all group members. (3 points)	The student submits adequate reviews for all group members. (1.5 points)	The student does not submit adequate reviews for all group members. (0 points)
Review Scores	The student receives at least 90% of the available peer review points. (6 points)	The student receives between 75% and 89% of the available peer review points. (3 points)	The student receives fewer than 75% of the available peer review points. (0 points)

Subtotal: \_\_\_\_\_

Total: \_\_\_\_\_

### Group Presentation Peer Review Form

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Member's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	Excellent	Average	Poor	
Preparation	The group member is well prepared for group meetings and tasks. (2 points)	The group member is somewhat or inconsistently prepared for group meetings and tasks. (1 point)	The group member is often unprepared for group meetings and tasks. (0 points)	
Communication Skills	The group member communicates promptly and substantively with his/her group members. (2 points)	The group member sometimes or inconsistently communicates promptly and substantively with his/her group members. (1 point)	The group member rarely communicates promptly and substantively with his/her group members. (0 points)	
Cooperation	The group member consistently listens to and encourages the contributions of his/her group members. The group member is consistently respectful towards other group members. (2 points)	The group member sometimes or inconsistently listens to and encourages the contributions of his/her group members. The group member is often respectful towards other group members. (1 point)	The group member rarely listens to or encourages the contributions of his/her group members. The group member is disrespectful towards other group members. (0 points)	

Participation	The group member actively participates in group activities. (2 points)	The group member sometimes or inconsistently participates in group activities. (1 point)	The group member rarely participates in group activities. (0 points)	
Leadership	The group member consistently participates in setting group goals and making group decisions. (2 points)	The group member sometimes or inconsistently participates in setting group goals and making group decisions. (1 point)	The group member rarely participates in setting group goals and making group decisions. (0 points)	

Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_

Group Member's Strengths

Group Member's Improvement Opportunities



### Informative Briefing Assignment

This assignment challenges you to design and deliver a 4-5 minute informative briefing on a topic of your choice. (You can review sample topics on pages 441-443 of the textbook.) The briefing must feature a PowerPoint presentation or another type of digital presentation.

Remember that the purpose of your briefing is to inform, not to persuade. In other words, you should strive to explain *what* something is and/or *how* it works, rather than *why* your listeners should take a particular action.

You must **submit an outline** on the day of your briefing. Make sure to use **at least five credible sources, and submit a bibliography in APA format**.

You also are required to provide feedback on each of your peers' briefings. After each briefing, list three of the presenter's "strengths" on the front of an index card and three of the presenter's "improvement opportunities" on the back of the card.

After your briefing, remember to post a journal entry about your presentation experience. (Due three days after your briefing)

I will use the following rubric to evaluate your performance:

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Topic & Purpose	The speaker is clearly interested in the topic. The topic is appropriate for the intended audience, and the purpose is consistently clear. (3 points)	The speaker seems interested in the topic. The topic is somewhat appropriate for the intended audience and/or the purpose is somewhat clear. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not seem interested in the topic. The topic is not appropriate for the intended audience and/or the purpose is not clear. (0 points)
Organization	The briefing is well-organized. It includes a strong introduction, effective transitions, and a memorable conclusion. (3 points)	The briefing is somewhat organized. It includes an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion. (1.5 points)	The briefing is poorly organized. It is missing an introduction, transitions, and/or a conclusion. (0 points)

Content	The material in the briefing is relevant and engaging. It strongly supports the central idea. (3 points)	The material in the briefing is somewhat relevant and/or engaging. It supports the central idea. (1.5 points)	The material in the briefing is not relevant or engaging. It does not support the central idea. (0 points)
Credibility & Leadership	The speaker projects authority and demonstrates strong knowledge of the topic. The speaker frequently includes oral footnotes and stays within the time limit. (3 points)	The speaker demonstrates knowledge of the topic. The speaker includes some oral footnotes and/or exceeds the time limit by fewer than 20 seconds. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not demonstrate knowledge of the topic. The speaker does not include oral footnotes and/or exceeds the time limit by more than 20 seconds. (0 points)
Visuals	The visual aids are attractive, appropriate, and engaging. The speaker is dressed professionally for the audience and occasion. (3 points)	The visual aids are somewhat attractive and/or appropriate. The speaker is dressed appropriately for the audience and occasion. (1.5 points)	The visual aids are not attractive and/or appropriate. The speaker is not dressed appropriately for the audience and occasion. (0 points)
Voice	The speaker demonstrates strong vocal delivery techniques. He/she speaks clearly throughout the briefing, avoids using inarticulates, and employs a conversational tone. (3 points)	The speaker demonstrates adequate vocal delivery techniques. He/she speaks clearly for the majority of the briefing, uses few inarticulates, and employs a somewhat conversational tone. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not demonstrate adequate vocal delivery techniques. He/she does not speak clearly for the majority of the briefing. The speaker uses many inarticulates and does not employ a conversational tone. (0 points)

Nonverbal Delivery	The speaker's eye contact and body language communicate confidence, seem natural, and complement his/her content. (3 points)	The speaker's eye contact and body language occasionally seem unnatural or distracting to the audience. (1.5 points)	The speaker's eye contact and body language frequently seem unnatural or distracting to the audience. (0 points)
Outline & Bibliography	The outline and bibliography are well-structured and comprehensive. They contain no mistakes or citation errors. (3 points)	The outline and bibliography are structured, but are not comprehensive. They contain some mistakes or citation errors. (1.5 points)	The outline and bibliography lack structure. They contain many mistakes or citation errors. (0 points)

### Persuasive Speech Assignment

This assignment challenges you to design and deliver a 6-7 minute persuasive speech on a topic of your choice. (You can review sample topics on pages 443-444 of the textbook.)

Remember that the purpose of your speech is to convince your audience to support a particular idea or point of view. In other words, you should explain *why* your listeners should agree with you and/or take action.

You must **submit an outline** on the day of your speech. Make sure to use **at least five credible sources, and submit a bibliography in APA format**.

You also are required to provide feedback on each of your peers' speeches. After each speech, list three of the presenter's "strengths" on the front of an index card and three of the presenter's "improvement opportunities" on the back of the card.

After your speech, remember to post a journal entry about your presentation experience. (Due three days after your speech)

I will use the following rubric to evaluate your performance:

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Topic & Purpose	The speaker is clearly interested in the topic. The topic is appropriate for the intended audience, and the purpose is consistently clear. (3 points)	The speaker seems interested in the topic. The topic is somewhat appropriate for the intended audience and/or the purpose is somewhat clear. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not seem interested in the topic. The topic is not appropriate for the intended audience and/or the purpose is not clear. (0 points)
Organization	The speech is well-organized. It includes a strong introduction, effective transitions, and a memorable conclusion. (3 points)	The speech is somewhat organized. It includes an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion. (1.5 points)	The speech is poorly organized. It is missing an introduction, transitions, and/or a conclusion. (0 points)

Content & Persuasive Appeals	The arguments are easy to follow, and the appeals are convincing. The content strongly supports the main idea. (3 points)	The arguments are somewhat easy to follow and/or the appeals are somewhat convincing. The content supports the main idea. (1.5 points)	The arguments are not easy to follow and/or the appeals are not convincing. The content does not support the main idea. (0 points)
Credibility & Leadership	The speaker projects authority and demonstrates strong knowledge of the topic. The speaker frequently includes oral footnotes and stays within the time limit. (3 points)	The speaker demonstrates knowledge of the topic. The speaker includes some oral footnotes and/or exceeds the time limit by fewer than 20 seconds. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not demonstrate knowledge of the topic. The speaker does not include oral footnotes and/or exceeds the time limit by more than 20 seconds. (0 points)
Visuals	The visual aids are attractive, appropriate, and engaging. The speaker is dressed professionally for the audience and occasion. (3 points)	The visual aids are somewhat attractive and/or appropriate. The speaker is dressed appropriately for the audience and occasion. (1.5 points)	The visual aids are not attractive and/or appropriate. The speaker is not dressed appropriately for the audience and occasion. (0 points)
Creativity	The speaker approaches the topic from a new and interesting angle, or presents the material in an especially creative fashion. (3 points)	The speaker attempts to approach the topic creatively. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not approach the topic creatively. (0 points)

Engagement	The speaker's delivery is energetic and engaging. The speaker keeps the audience fully engaged throughout the speech. (3 points)	The speaker's delivery is somewhat energetic and engaging. The speaker keeps the audience engaged for most of the speech. (1.5 points)	The speaker's delivery is not energetic or engaging. The speaker is unable to keep the audience engaged during the speech. (0 points)
Voice	The speaker demonstrates strong vocal delivery techniques. He/she speaks clearly throughout the speech, avoids using inarticulates, and employs a conversational tone. (3 points)	The speaker demonstrates adequate vocal delivery techniques. He/she speaks clearly for the majority of the speech, uses few inarticulates, and employs a somewhat conversational tone. (1.5 points)	The speaker does not demonstrate adequate vocal delivery techniques. He/she does not speak clearly for the majority of the speech. The speaker uses many inarticulates and does not employ a conversational tone. (0 points)
Nonverbal Delivery	The speaker's eye contact and body language communicate confidence, seem natural, and complement his/her content. (3 points)	The speaker's eye contact and body language occasionally seem unnatural or distracting to the audience. (1.5 points)	The speaker's eye contact and body language frequently seem unnatural or distracting to the audience. (0 points)
Outline & Bibliography	The outline and bibliography are well-structured and comprehensive. They contain no mistakes or citation errors. (3 points)	The outline and bibliography are structured, but are not comprehensive. They contain some mistakes or citation errors. (1.5 points)	The outline and bibliography lack structure. They contain many mistakes or citation errors. (0 points)

### Communication Journal Assignment

The major components of COMM107 include an interview assignment, a group work experience, and two presentations (the informative briefing and persuasive speech). You are expected to post a 500 word journal entry on the Discussion Board after you complete each of these components (for a total of four journal entries).

The *interview entry* should explore your interview experience. You should analyze your own communication behaviors and the interviewee's communication behaviors and discuss what you have learned about the interview process. (Last day to submit interview entry: [Date](#))

The *group work experience entry* should explore your interactions with your group members. You should analyze the effectiveness of the group and the effectiveness of your participation in the group process. (Last day to submit group work experience entry: [Date](#))

Each *presentation entry* should explore your in-class *and* out-of-class experiences. You should discuss what you did well, what you would have changed, and how you plan to approach future presentations. (Due three days after the presentation)

I will use the following rubric to evaluate each journal entry:

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Relevance	The submission is highly relevant to the course content. (1 point)	The submission is somewhat relevant to the course content. (0.5 points)	The submission is not relevant to the course content. (0 points)
Organization	The submission is well-organized. It includes a strong introduction, effective transitions, and a memorable conclusion. (1 points)	The submission is somewhat organized. It includes an introduction, transitions, and a conclusion. (0.5 points)	The submission is poorly organized. It is missing an introduction, transitions, and/or a conclusion. (0 points)
Content	The submission makes effective and frequent use of examples, quotations, or observations. (1 points)	The submission makes limited use of examples, quotations, or observations. (0.5 points)	The submission does not make use of examples, quotations, or observations. (0 points)

Proofreading	The submission contains no spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (1 point)	The submission contains some spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (0.5 points)	The submission contains numerous spelling, grammatical, or formatting errors. (0 points)
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