

**Question 10:**  
***How do you help students recognize the importance of  
communication as an area of study?***

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“Students often come to communication courses thinking they already know it all; after all, they can talk, and that must be all there is to communication. So, the challenge is to demonstrate that there is more to it and to illustrate the relevance to their daily lives. In order to reach this goal, I do several things. First, I use myriad examples to explain the concepts, but use examples with which they can relate. I teach at a community college, so examples are not based on age as they may be in four year institutions, but are driven by the components of their lives: most work 40+ hours per week, many are parents, many are first generation college students, they come from diverse backgrounds, and many are far removed from the traditional college age. Second, students want to know how this material impacts their lives and what meaning it has for them, so it is necessary to demonstrate practical application of the concepts being discussed. I bring in members of the community to share their experiences and to illustrate the role of communication in their jobs and daily interactions. Finally, I use many exercises designed to further explain concepts in real-life scenarios. Role playing with real-life issues is a practical way to show the importance communication plays in their daily lives.”

Thomas Bovino, Suffolk County Community College  
2010 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

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“Near the end of a one-semester introductory course to all aspects of speech communication I asked my high school students to interview someone they knew on a professional basis, not another teacher, about the many ways that person used communication to perform his/her job. Students developed a list of questions covering all areas of communication we studied during the semester. They interviewed sales people, scientists, medical professionals, service people from auto mechanics to hair stylists—a wide range! They then shared their experiences and what they learned about others communication skills in a group discussion. The assignment reinforced their own knowledge of the field and clearly confirmed its importance throughout their community.”

Diane Ritzdorf, Arapahoe High School (Centennial, CO)  
2001 Marcella E. Oberle Award for Outstanding Teaching in Grades K-12

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“I constantly remind students that when the Greeks invented higher education in the West that they began with the study of communication (although that was limited almost totally to rhetoric in that era). They began with the study of communication because the two most important skills that a citizen needs in a democratic society are the capacity to state an ethical, sensible, and persuasive case and the ability to listen to someone else presenting a position and be able to respond. I point out that what was true in a society that drastically and unjustly limited who counted as a citizen and in which almost all communication was oral is vastly true more in a diverse modern democracy in which the

views of all people matter and in which there are multiple potential means of presenting a message.”

Robert C. Rowland, University of Kansas

2005 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

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“Helping students recognize the importance of communication as an area of study is a challenge I face every time I teach the basic course at my institution. I usually have the opportunity to teach our basic course two to three times a semester and almost every summer so this is a challenge I face often. When you are teaching a General Education course that is required for all undergraduate students, you naturally meet quite a few skeptical students who do not understand why they have to take your course because they believe that communication is common sense and that everyone already understands it so no formal coursework is needed. Some students also believe that communication has no relevancy to their major, their degree, or their future career. To combat these misconceptions, I work to facilitate connections between theory and practice, college and career, and campus and community through the assignments each student completes in the basic course. By connecting theory and practice, students synthesize and apply their knowledge of communication to other contexts. By connecting college and career, students learn how communication skills can benefit them as they begin their professional careers. By connecting classroom and community, students use what they have learned in class to help others in their community. Hopefully, at the end of each semester, students are able to see how communication benefits them in their personal, educational, and professional lives, even if they never set foot in a communication classroom again during their time in college.”

Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo

2017 CSCA Outstanding New Teacher Award

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“I tackle this head-on in the second day of my communication theory class. Comm theory is a required introductory course in our curriculum, so students often have only a slim grasp (at best) on the nature of the major they’re seeking. First, I write the words ‘psychology’ and ‘sociology’ on the whiteboard. I ask students to summarize these fields. Typically with some back-and-forth, they can tell me that psychology has a lot to do with the brain, and sociology has to do with some kind of broader social forces. Then, I tell them that although communication scholars sometimes look at those things too, what sets up apart is our focus on *symbols*, *messages*, and *meanings*. To drive the point home, I pick an example, such as a political election. A psychologist might focus on personality shapes voting patterns (‘do agreeable people prefer candidates who seem agreeable too?’); a sociologist would be interested in how demographic categories (‘who will capture the white suburban women vote?’). In contrast, a communication scholar would be most interested in the words and rhetoric politicians use to persuade voters. Dating works as an example too (psychologist: ‘are similar personalities attracted to each other?’; sociologist: ‘are members of similar demographic groups attracted to each other?’; communication: ‘how do people communicate to

develop and maintain their relationship?’) My hope is that contrasting our discipline with others that they’re more familiar with (and then using a concrete example or two) begins to sharpen their understanding of the communication discipline.”

Andrew M. Ledbetter, Texas Christian University  
2011 CSCA Outstanding New Teacher Award

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“We are so lucky to be teaching in a discipline that has always been and always be a significant part of their lives both personally and professionally! While some students may think, ‘I have been communicating all of my life, why do I need this course?’ Most students recognize the importance of communication in their lives. I love when students have that ‘A-ha’ moment when they connect something they are learning in a communication course with something they have experienced. In fact, I often have them write analytical papers where they directly tie an experience they have had or one they have closely observed with what we are studying at the time. This strategy helps them see the connection between course content and their own lives and strengthens their recognition of the importance of communication as an area of study.”

Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, Regis College  
2014 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

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“I don’t. They chose communication so I assume they recognize its value. When non-majors are in a course (as often happens in required courses), I still don’t address the importance of communication. The course should do that. If they don’t see the value by the end of the course there’s not much my talking about the importance of communication would do to change that perception.”

Joe Ayres, Washington State University  
2005 Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award

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“Because I teach classes in rhetoric, I want students to see that the persuasive use of symbols affects every area of their life. Students are eager to explore the ways in which people and institutions target them with persuasive appeals. Being able to understand and critique these messages effectively is a practice that will enhance students’ civic, professional, and personal lives. While I want students to enhance their skills in analyzing discursive messages, I also want students to appreciate the inventional power of rhetoric. Being able to build effective arguments requires communicators to make thoughtful choices about ethos, pathos, and logos appeals, as well as language use and organizational principles. These choices enable students to craft effective messages. These choices also invite students to examine and refine their own presumptions and worldviews. The more informed students are about the rhetorical means available to them, the more options they have in their self-understanding and self-expression.”

Ann E. Burnette, Texas State University  
2016 SSCA John I. Sisco Excellence in Teaching Award

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