The Case for Core Competencies in Introductory Communication Courses 2014
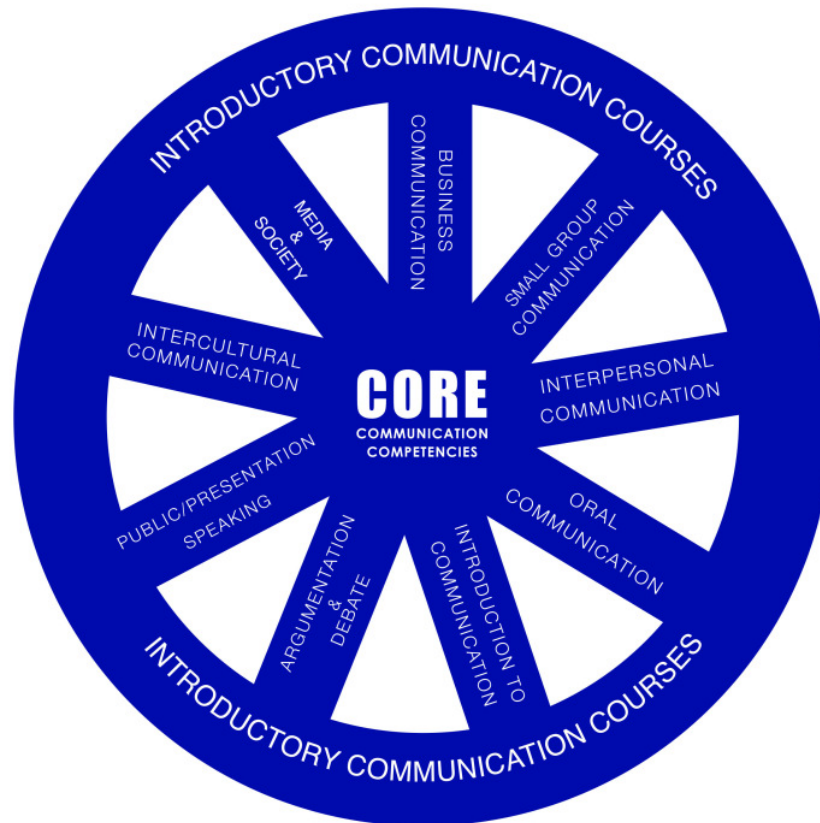

Core Communication Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses
1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self 2. Practicing Communication Ethics 3. Adapting to Others 4. Practicing Effective Listening 5. Expressing Messages 6. Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes 7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

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Before becoming an NCA Task Force, the Core Competencies Group (CCG) copyrighted its core competencies and templates to ensure that (a) CCG members are acknowledged and credited with their original work, (b) the methodology is included as an integral component of the project and disseminated documents, and (c) the CCG may advance the project and seek dissemination to professional associations and educators within and across academic disciplines and educational institutions.

In early 2014, the NCA Executive Committee accepted and approved the core competencies and templates in The Task Force Report. Since then and as part of its ongoing mission, the CCG has updated and made appropriate editorial changes to the core competencies and templates documents. The CCG documents are now available for dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the 2011 National Communication Association (NCA) Convention, five colleagues from different institutions in different states created the Core Competencies Group (CCG). We sought to investigate and answer the following question: *Is there a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts?*

For three years and with the addition of a sixth member, the CCG has worked diligently to answer the above question using a carefully planned, reproducible methodology that sought the input from communication educators and scholars. Moreover and ideally, the competencies should be understood and embraced by educators *within* the communication studies discipline and ultimately by constituencies *outside* our discipline (other faculty, administrators, students, media, and the public).

In 2013, NCA President Steve Beebe invited the CCG to become the NCA Core Competencies Task Force. With a slight difference in wording, President Beebe charged the Task Force with the following goal: To investigate and identify, if possible, a set of core competencies applicable to introductory communication courses within and across a variety of communication contexts.

The Core Competencies Group framed a definition of core communication competencies based on a wide-ranging review of educational literature. The CCG also developed a set of criteria needed to distinguish the relevance of these competencies to introductory communication courses:

> Definition: *A core communication competency is an expected level of performance that integrates appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, is stated in general terms, and broadly applies to the majority of introductory communication courses in higher education.*

> Criteria: A core competency for an introductory communication course
> - *focuses on the performance of a educational goals,*
> - *reflects the expectations articulated in valid communication scholarship for introductory courses,*
> - *is expressed clearly in terms of measurable behavior,*
> - *uses understandable standards for judging competencies that are not dependent on the performance of other learners,*
> - *informs learners as well as academic professionals and publics about what is expected in a basic communication course,*
> - *apply within and across a variety of communication contexts, and*
> - *may include performance elements that cut across other core competencies.*

RATIONALE FOR COMPETENCY-BASED INTRODUCTORY COURSES

In most academic disciplines there is *one* introductory course. That course presents an overview of the discipline and introduces fundamental, discipline-specific principles and competencies (e.g., Introduction to or Fundamentals of: Accounting, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, Economics, Management, Marketing, Nursing, Physical Education).

While few dispute the centrality of an introductory communication course in the communication curriculum and its importance as a general education requirement, the nomenclature and content of

introductory communication courses lack consistency. Rather than one course, the communication discipline offers a menu of courses (e.g., Introduction to Human Communication, Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, Group Communication, Argumentation and Debate, Business and Professional Communication, Survey of Communication) that purportedly introduce students to the core principles and practices of effective and ethical communication.

According to the latest national survey of U.S. Basic Courses (208 respondents) published in *Communication Education*, about 50% of our Basic Course students take public speaking; a growing number (36%) take a "hybrid" course that typically includes units in interpersonal communication, small group communication and public speaking; and the remaining 14% take a course that focuses on communication theory, or on a single communication context such as interpersonal or group communication.[1]

In a "Message from the President" in *Spectra,* Rich West wrote that the consistencies found in the introductory courses of other disciplines "does not exist in communication. . . . I'm left wondering about the value of our content diversity, especially as we try to articulate the foundation of our field to the uninitiated."[2]

This multiple approach to the introductory communication course raises two significant questions, the answers to which often provoke heated debate:

- Are communication courses that qualify as "basic" or "introductory" mutually exclusive? In other words, would a student taking public speaking be prepared to communicate effectively in interpersonal, group, presentational, intercultural, and social media contexts?

- Why hasn't the communication discipline been able to develop and agree upon a set of core competencies for introductory courses?

In reviewing the literature, we discovered that most of the supposed basic/introductory course competencies literature primarily focuses on only two curricular domains. The first is the overall communication curriculum and academic standards for that curriculum as a whole. The second domain focuses on individual courses by type: specific competencies within a single unit or course, the assessment of competencies within such units, and pedagogy for teaching the unit or course. Metaphorically, East is East (the overall curriculum domain), and West is West (the course-specific domain), and never the twain have met as a set of core communication competencies.

A set of core communication competencies can strengthen the integrity of the communication curriculum and enhance the rigor, relevance, and validity of the discipline's introductory courses as well as the discipline as a whole. Recognized core communication competencies can also clarify and enhance the domain of communication studies within the academy.

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[1] Sherwyn P. Morreale, David W. Worley & Barbara Hugenberg, "The Basic Communication Course at Two- and Four-Year U.S. Colleges and Universities: Study VIII—The 40th Anniversary," *Communication Education*, 59 (2010): 405-430.

[2] Rich West, "Message from the President," *Spectra*, 48 (May 2012), p. 1.

BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE

As the Core Competencies project developed, Task Force members thought it important to explain how Core Communication Competencies for introductory communication courses can benefit the NCA, its members, and the communication discipline. To that end, we offer five benefits that accrue from identifying a set of core communication competencies and competency-specific instructional templates as the foundation for introductory communication courses:

1. **Identify a clear set of objectives for communication studies in introductory courses within and across a variety of contexts.**

   Rather than perceiving introductory communication courses as a narrow and seemingly simplistic (e.g., just public speaking, only interpersonal communication) or a bewildering hodgepodge of unrelated subjects, core communication competencies demonstrate the "core that holds" the discipline communication studies.

   Rather than being perceived as amorphous, undemanding, and solely skill-based, core competencies represent a sophisticated, highly structured system for introducing students to the study of human communication.

2. **Demonstrate the need for as well as the rigor, depth, and breadth of communication studies as the basis of disciplinary advocacy, targeting decision makers in educational, professional, corporate, and community agencies.**

   Rather than confining the basis for curriculum development arguments to the political exigencies of campus politics, core communication competencies also encompass the expressed needs of educators, employers, civic groups, and community members.

3. **Provide a more integrated, understandable, and persuasive rationale for developing, supporting, defending, and enhancing introductory/basic communication courses as general education and graduation requirements**

   Rather than struggling to defend the integrity of introductory courses, well-developed core competencies will match or surpass other general education and graduation requirement courses in terms of academic rigor and the ability to meet empirically-identified student needs.

4. **Strengthen the rationales and justifications for diverse approaches to introductory communication courses.**

   Rather than having to justify the diversity of introductory communication courses on a case-by-case basis, core competencies provide a cohesive framework for communication studies within and across a variety of contexts.

   Rather than refuting challenges and criticism for not offering a single introductory/basic course, core competencies demonstrates the plasticity of communication studies in meeting the diverse needs of communities, institutions, programs, faculty, and students.

5. **Specify an essential knowledge base for those who teach introductory communication courses as well as those who study communication instruction.**

   Rather than tolerating the misperception that "anyone can teach speech," the competencies and templates substantiate the academic and pedagogical knowledge base required of qualified instructors in introductory communication courses. The competencies and evolving templates also create new avenues for research in communication education and instructional communication scholars. Equally important, the scope and significance of the competencies are comparable to and even surpass those claimed by other academic disciplines.

DEFINITIONAL CONSISTENCY

The Task Force discovered and relishes the fact that, when put in sentence form, the seven core competencies are consistent with the NCA Definition of the Communication Discipline which follows:

> **NCA Definition of the Communication Discipline:** The discipline of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.

See the Competency Key below to understand how the following definition aligns the Core Communication Competencies with the NCA definition.

> **Core Communication Competencies:** The introductory communication course focuses on how we[1] create,[7] adapt,[3&7] and respond[4&7] to verbal[5] and nonverbal[5] messages[6] that effectively and ethically[2] generate meaning[6] within and across a variety of contexts.

> **Competency Key:**
> 1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self
> 2. Practicing Communication Ethics
> 3. Adapting to Others
> 4. Practicing Effective Listening
> 5. Expressing Messages
> 6. Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes
> 7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

During the course of the CCG project, we as well as participants in focused-group sessions posed questions and expressed concerns about using of core communication competencies for introductory communication courses with and across various contexts. These concerns were discussed at length. What follows are responses to several frequently asked questions:

Frequently Asked Questions	Responses
FAQ: Will a set of Core Communication Competencies (CCCs) compel departments to offer exactly the same introductory/basic courses that may not meet institutional, program, faculty, and student needs?	**Response:** No. The CCCs are not course requirements. They define expected levels of performance that integrate appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes that broadly apply to the majority of college-level introductory communication courses. Moreover, the competencies are highly flexible. They are applicable within and across a variety of contexts. For example, the Self competency applies to self-concept, group roles, leadership, speaker credibility, persuasion, and more.
FAQ: Will faculty members see the CCCs as threatening or compromising their academic freedom?	**Response:** We hope not. The CCCs are *not* requirements. They can be combined, modified, and adapted to meet institutional, program, faculty, and student needs. The competencies are designed to encourage new ideas and expand faculty options.
FAQ: Will the CCCs erode or cause the demise of context-focused introductory/ basic courses such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, group communication, etc. in favor of survey courses that encompass all contexts?	**Response:** No. The CCCs are applicable within and across a variety of contexts that *include* public speaking, interpersonal communication, among others. The competencies areas (self, ethics, others, listening, listening, expression, communication processes, and message strategies) operate in all communication contexts.
FAQ: Will faculty members be obligated or require to change their introductory/ basic courses significantly to encompass the CCCs?	**Response:** Not necessarily. Many introductory/basic courses *already* encompass the CCCs, but may not make these underlying competencies evident. Faculty members may consider CCCs that are not represented and decide whether to include them.
FAQ: Will the CCCs be manipulated and applied beyond the purview of introductory/basic courses to identify the scope of communication programs and the entirety of the communication discipline?	**Response:** No. The Task Force charge *only* focuses on introductory/basic communication courses. The original Core Competencies Group clearly specified introductory communication courses as the focus of its investigation.

FAQ: Will the CCCs address introductory/basic course pedagogy, that is, how to teach a course using the CCCs?	**Response:** Not at this time. The Task Force charge, "to identify a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts" did not directly include pedagogy. The Templates, however, provide examples of teaching units, assessment instruments, and references to support pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

The communication discipline has neither sought nor identified an agreed upon set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts. While few of us dispute the need for or centrality of introductory communication courses in the communication curriculum, the nomenclature and diversity of contemporary introductory courses imply that communication studies is context-based rather than competency-based.

A set of context-free core communication competencies can strengthen the integrity of the communication curriculum and enhance the rigor, relevance, and validity of the discipline's introductory courses as well as the discipline as a whole. Moreover a set of core communication competencies can provide a common understanding and basis for advocating communication studies for those of us *in* the communication studies discipline as well as by those *outside* our discipline. Members of the Core Communication Competencies Task Force have enjoyed the challenge of this project and are proud of recommending a process that can benefit and serve the institutions, faculty members, and students that offer, teach, and learn in our introductory communication courses.