

REPORT OF THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS TASK FORCE

I believe that all of us are what we say we are--that as individuals and as a people we define through language what we have and what we will be, and that a group of people who cannot clearly and precisely speak and write will never be a genuine society.

A. Bartlett Giamatti
Yale Alumni Magazine
January 1976

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

We suppose no one seriously doubts that verbal skills are important to professionals in all fields. Certainly, ample evidence to support such a position has been gathered over the last 25 years. In 1957, a General Electric Company survey revealed that its engineering personnel ranked English communication skills courses second only to mathematics in college courses considered "Most Valuable to Career." The engineering courses of their discipline ranked third. Non-technical employees ranked English number one.

A survey reported in 1960 by Nation's Business found that 133 of 240 business leaders reported "skill in communication" as their most used skill.

In a 1977 article Richard M. Davis reported the results of a survey he conducted among persons listed in Engineers of Distinction. In summary, Davis reported the following:

- The respondents spent an average of 24.35% of their time writing.
- The respondents spent 31% of their time working with other people's written materials.
- Most of the respondents felt that the ability to write effectively is either very important or of critical importance to them.
- Almost all reported that as their responsibility increased, so did their need to write.
- Almost all felt that the ability to write well had contributed to their advancement.
- In advancing subordinates, almost all considered their writing ability.

In 1980, according to Human Resources Management, a survey of deans of business schools and personnel directors of Fortune 500 Companies found poor writing ability to be young executives' greatest weakness.

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In 1980, for a questionnaire sent to 20 industrial companies in the Twin Cities, Morrie E. Nicholson, Director of Continuing Education in Engineering and Science, asked for specific course recommendations "to assist newly-hired engineers in becoming effective more quickly in work in your organization." The response to the question, according to Professor Nicholson's report, "indicated that the primary need for the recent graduates was the improved technical communication skills."

Numerous other articles in the literature attest to the demand for good communication skills for technical and business people. Those of us who have the opportunity to consult in business and industry see at firsthand the tremendous need for such skills on the part of even low ranking executives.

As we move into what has been labelled the information age, the ability to communicate becomes even more important. More and more workers, particularly college-educated workers, produce and manipulate information rather than things.

In a recent talk, John Naisbitt, Senior Vice President of Yankelovich, Skelly and White stated that the United States was rapidly shifting "from a mass industrial society to an information society," a shift that Mr. Naisbitt called "more profound than the 19th century shift from an agricultural to an industrial society."

A few supporting facts from his talk:

In 1950, 65% of our work force were in industry. That percentage now stands at 30%.

In 1950, the number of people in information occupations was 17%; today the figure is over 55%.

Mr. Naisbitt defines information occupations as "those involved in the creating, processing, and distribution of information, including banks, stock markets, insurance companies, education, and government."

In 1979, clerks became the largest occupational group in the United States. Before that it had been laborers, and before that farmers.

To the communication demands that our graduates will face in business and industry, we must add the demands that their society will lay on them. The world our graduates will inhabit will find them seeking or called upon for leadership in religious, political, and social organizations—leadership which also demands much writing and speaking.

Despite the evident need for high verbal skills, since 1962, research in this country has verified that the verbal skills of college-bound students have declined. In 1976/77, the College Entrance Examination Board funded a blue-ribbon panel to examine the evidence and report on possible reasons for the trend. Therefore, it seems that the problem is real on a national level, and that the best evidence

supports the hypothesis that our students are less proficient in writing and other verbal skills than before. In 1951, the mean SAT verbal score for all candidates was 476. In 1962, the mean score was 478; by 1977 it was 429.

The problem is simply defined: as the need for literacy increases, the literacy of our students decreases. The outline of the solution can be seen, if somewhat dimly. To begin with, we must work for, indeed, insist upon, students being better prepared in verbal skills at the elementary and secondary levels of education. We at the University must provide constant education and reinforcement for good communication behaviors at every level of a student's university education and in every course a student takes. The real question is whether or not the University and the state have the will to provide the ways and means to carry out the solution.

FINDINGS

With this background very much in mind, the Task Force on Communication Skills examined the existing composition and speech programs on the Twin Cities Campus. Although reading is certainly a communication skill, the Task Force limited itself to the so-called productive skills of speaking and writing.

The members of the Task Force were cognizant of and in general agreement with the recent changes made in the CLA Program in Composition and Communication by the CLA Committee on Policy and Planning. Experiences gained by that committee should prove helpful to all future planning and discussions related to communication skills.

Below we first present the findings of the Task Force regarding the four objectives set in Vice President Keller's charge to the committee in his memorandum of April 5, 1982; then we make two recommendations based upon those findings.

Objective 1. Examine the goals and functions of the various programs to establish the ways in which they are distinguishable and the ways in which they are similar.

As might be expected, the broad goals of the various programs in writing and communication have important similarities. They offer courses that improve the written and spoken literacy of students and meet students' transfer or pre-major needs. Furthermore, the various programs expand the research base in speech and written communication on the Twin Cities Campus.

However, the programs differ markedly in their ancillary goals, essential functions, and methods of operation. Most of the differences have resulted from the programs' responses to the characteristics of their students, geographic considerations, or both. We point out some of the major differences:

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General College, serving a student population with academic attainments different from those of most other university students, has pioneered in the use of the writing laboratory since the 1930's. Some of the attributes of the G.C. program included focussing on the student's writing as the primary text, emphasizing context analysis as the beginning point in the creative process, using workshops for drafting and revising writing, starting with the student's own experience and gradually moving toward analysis and report writing and reviewing grammar and punctuation on an individual needs basis. Modified and tested, this writing laboratory approach has proved an effective and efficient way of reaching the G.C. students. It has served well G.C.'s basic mission, as stated in its 1982 Program Priorities Statement, "to offer a gateway to the University for students whose backgrounds have not prepared them for admission to other colleges."

Speech Communication's mission, insofar as it relates to the purview of this committee, is to offer basic courses in speech to students in all colleges of the Twin Cities Campus with the exception of General College and the Colleges in the Institute of Agriculture, Home Economics, and Forestry.

Since 1908 **Rhetoric** has served the students of what has become the Institute of Agriculture, Home Economics, and Forestry. Responding to needs brought about by both geography and the highly technical concerns of IAFHE students, Rhetoric has developed basic and advanced courses in both writing and speech. The Department's close relationship with both the Institute's faculty and students has brought about the following in the years indicated:

- 1908 Report Writing Courses
- 1920 Basic and Advanced Courses in Speech
- 1933 Technical and Professional Writing courses
for upper class students
- 1971 The Technical Communication Major
- 1974 The Laboratory for Research in Scientific
Communication
- 1980 The Technical Communication minor
- 1980 Writing Across the Curriculum--Retreats and instruction
in writing and teaching writing to IAFHE professors and extension
specialists.
- 1981 Speakers Task Force--Retreats and instruction in
speaking to IAFHE professors and extension specialists.

Most Rhetoric full-time professors have the teaching of basic communication courses as 50% or more of their teaching load. Rhetoric has been a leader for many years in the growing realization that inculcating basic communication skills is a highly complex task worthy of full-time professionals.

Since the early 1970's the **Program in English as a Second Language (ESL)** has offered special sections of freshman English composition for non-native speakers at the request of the English Department. Instructors of freshman composition had been frustrated in dealing with foreign students in the regular sections because of the students' linguistic and cultural problems. The decision was made at that time, therefore, to institute special sections of ESL freshman composition. The content of these sections parallels that of the regular sections. There are two ways in which the sections differ: (1) there is a slightly lower enrollment limit (20), and (2) these sections are taught by staff trained in ESL who are better able to cope with the grammatical explanations required and who have an awareness of different cultural and rhetorical backgrounds.

The **Program in Composition and Communication** provides required basic and upper-level writing instruction for all students in CLA, IT, and the smaller undergraduate units of the Minneapolis campus. In addition it conducts research to provide an understanding of what our students do, or ought to do. Such research provides the basis for courses, training programs and support services, and contributes to basic scholarly knowledge. Although this two-part mission is the center of the program, it also provides the following related services:

- training for teachers in the program
- demographic research and record keeping in cooperation with Admissions and Records for course planning
- remedial courses in writing
- tutorial support in writing
- outreach to community and public schools

Since the student clientele served in all these programs is mixed yet definite, and the classes run at capacity without failing to meet students' needs for required courses, we assume that the teaching function is fulfilled well and economically. Similarly, the research effort is specifically focussed, nationally recognized, effective in securing support, and administered without direct cost. Greater integration, coordination, and sharing of resources in providing related services might result in higher quality.

The three main objectives in Vice President Keller's memorandum are as follows:

Objective 2. Recommend, as appropriate, reassignment of functions and organizational changes that would achieve better delivery of instruction, better integration of instructional and research activities and/or more effective achievement of overall institutional goals.

Objective 3. Recommend, as appropriate, reduction or elimination of activities that are unnecessarily duplicative of other activities in the University.

Objective 4. Recommend, as appropriate, organizational alterations and resource allocation methods that would preserve quality, provide a reasonable range of instructional offerings, and allot costs equitably while improving the cost effectiveness of our communication program.

In the Recommendations section of this report we make specific recommendations that speak to the concerns outlined in Task Force Objectives 2, 3, and 4. In this section we present Task Force Findings that lead into and support our recommendations.

(a) The Task Force considers the diversity found in the various programs to be a strength rather than a weakness. The varied approaches of the programs have resulted not only in better satisfaction of student needs but also in the development of new approaches of value to all the programs. To help disseminate these new approaches, greater coordination should be maintained among the programs. However, while greater coordination of efforts in writing and speech is needed, centralization is not desirable. A degree of decentralization facilitates meeting the specific needs of certain groups of students and increases the likelihood of diversified approaches to the teaching of writing and speech. Given the fact that current research makes it quite clear that no one pedagogical method is as yet clearly superior, such diversification is to be encouraged, not discouraged. Furthermore, programs must determine what constitutes adequate language skill for their students, at various points in their development. We assume that students with different language backgrounds will need different teaching methods. It is absolutely necessary, therefore, for each program to know its students--their demographics, cultural backgrounds, developmental patterns, and practical needs--and to design and continually redesign instruction to fit them.

(b) The Task Force found no unnecessary duplication in the courses offered by any of the programs. There is no evidence to indicate that students are taking communication courses in which they discover that "they've had this already."

(c) The Task Force has found that more specialization in some areas might be a suitable goal. Specifically, the current arrangement whereby the Program in English as a Second Language (ESL) has primary responsibility for helping foreign

students reach proficiency in English seems to be working well. The University should take steps to assure that students anywhere on the Twin Cities Campus who need such help should have ready access to ESL programs. It seems likely that a similar specialization in remedial help for all Twin Cities Campus native-speaker students who need such help could be centered in General College where considerable expertise in this area has been developed.

(d) Writing and speaking instruction is an integral part of a university education. Theory and research show that students' experiences in all college courses contribute to their language abilities, and that writing and speaking skills cannot be taught in isolation.

Departments and programs devoted to the teaching of speech and writing cannot alone, even if they were expanded several times over, do the necessary job of teaching writing and speaking. All departments in the University must face the challenge by incorporating more speech and writing into their own courses. People on the job speak and write about their professional knowledge and opinions. They do not transmit what they know through multiple-choice quizzes. In turn, writing and speaking professors must coordinate their instruction with disciplinary departments and share their special knowledge of language skills with faculty interested in incorporating more speaking and writing into their classrooms.

In keeping with this finding, we enthusiastically support recommendations 1-6, of the "Report of the CLA Committee on Composition and Communication Skills," dated 10 May 1982. We believe that these six recommendations of the "Downing Committee" should be adopted throughout the Twin City Campus with responsibility for their implementation delegated appropriately within the various units. We incorporate the six recommendations here as part of our findings:

1. One or more substantial writing assignments, including a term paper where feasible, should be included in the course requirements of all undergraduate courses enrolling thirty or fewer students and in larger classes where graduate student readers are available.
2. Faculty throughout the college should make it clear that good writing is expected and that in evaluation of student work a high value is placed on the ability of the student to communicate clearly and effectively. The committee is convinced that one important means toward improving the quality of assigned writing is to improve the quality of writing assignments. Instructors should be encouraged in their efforts not only to require more writing from their students but also to help students improve their writing by giving assignments that more clearly state compositional objectives and by doing a more thorough job of evaluating and reacting to student writing.

3. CLA guidelines on grading procedures should make it clear that students should not be awarded passing grades for coursework that evidences serious deficiencies in writing ability. It should be the responsibility of instructors to counsel weak students to seek help from the Composition Program's Writing Service.
4. The Composition Program should be given the resources to provide workshops and a consulting service for faculty interested in improving the effectiveness of writing assignments in their courses, and the newsletter Spectrum should be continued and supported as a means toward improving the teaching of writing throughout the curriculum.
5. Departments should be encouraged to develop undergraduate courses with an emphasis on writing to serve both majors and non-majors, not as a substitute for either of the two required courses offered by the Composition Program but as an additional opportunity to focus on the improvement of writing.
6. Faculty should be encouraged to report their efforts toward the improvement of student writing in their annual activity reports, and such efforts should be rewarded in faculty merit evaluations.

(e) Writing and speaking instruction must be coordinated with community needs. Public schools cannot prepare our students if they don't know what skills we need, and their teaching will not be effective if they lack knowledge of the best current theory. We cannot prepare students for writing and speaking outside the University unless we stay in constant touch with business, industrial, and societal needs. We need systematic outreach in both directions.

(f) The rhetorical and research underpinnings of both speech and writing are similar. Greater cooperation than at present between departments and programs devoted to the teaching of speech and writing will further learning in both areas. A closer linking of speech and writing will also relate the teaching of both to the world of work our graduates will enter. On the job, speech and writing are used together and not segregated into the separate disciplines that their segregation into different academic departments would suggest. This is not to argue that writing and speaking necessarily should be taught in the same course, but rather that faculty should be mindful of this continuity and work it into their teaching where appropriate.

(g) It is clear that the improved teaching of communication skills at this University would likely be costly and could have far reaching effects in many classrooms. In cost, we point out that this committee's research shows that the cost of present speaking and writing courses average out at slightly over 20 dollars per student credit hour in direct instruction cost. (See Table 1) This compares with an average University cost for all courses of 69 dollars per student credit hour.

The disparity is striking even after allowing for the cost of expensive graduate-level teaching in the all-University figure. The low cost instruction (in comparison with other types of instruction) involved in basic courses in writing and speaking may be viewed as an asset. However, thought should be given as to whether more of a balance between instruction by faculty and graduate students might not be a more desirable way of improving the quality of what is being done, as well as allowing for the development of research interests in rhetoric on the part of faculty interested in pursuing what is clearly a legitimate discipline in its own right. A growing group of teachers are beginning to view themselves as professional writing teachers in the same way that for some time some members of speech-communication departments have viewed themselves as professional speech teachers. This trend will produce more competent teaching, better research, and greater continuity of experience than the traditional practice of relying heavily upon graduate students who tend to leave the field shortly after they gain high proficiency. The University should welcome and support this trend. It may be more costly, but it promises to be more cost-effective.

(h) In sum, we conclude that elimination of activities or sweeping organizational alterations are not warranted. However, means of achieving better cooperation and coordination among the programs are highly desirable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To pursue the solution of the problem in speaking and writing that we perceive, we recommend the following:

Recommendation 1

The Vice President for Academic Affairs shall appoint a standing committee to coordinate all basic courses in writing and speaking on the Twin Cities Campus.*

Name of the Committee

Coordinating Committee for Basic Courses in Writing and Speaking.

Composition of Committee

- o The chairs, directors, and heads (or their designates) of the following departments or programs:

Arts, Communication, and Philosophy (General College)

* We mean to include only those courses normally used to satisfy general education requirements in writing and speaking and those courses preparatory to such courses.

Composition (CLA)
English as a Second Language (CLA)
Rhetoric (College of Agriculture)
Speech Communication (CLA)

- o Members, as follows, to serve for one-year renewable terms:

Representative from the Department of English, College of
Liberal Arts

Representative from the Student Counseling Bureau

Representative from the College of Education

A member-at-large from the faculty

A teaching associate in one of the basic writing or speaking programs

Chair of Committee

—The chair of the committee shall rotate yearly among the chairs, directors, and heads (or their designates) of the departments or programs represented on the committee. The Vice President for Academic Affairs shall establish the order of rotation. The term of the chair shall run from 16 September of one year to 15 September of the following year.

The chair shall convene the committee at least once per quarter and preside at all meetings.

Duties of Committee

The committee shall serve in an advisory capacity to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and to the departments and programs concerned with basic courses in writing and speaking on the Twin Cities Campus and will be the chief vehicle for continued communication among these departments and programs. The committee shall elicit annual reports from the concerned departments and programs, and coordinate these reports into a report distributed to the concerned departments and programs and to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. We suggest that the committee concern itself with the following:

Training programs for staff. Collaboration among units offering communication skills courses could result in general training sessions for staff members that would permit sharing of expertise in broad areas of overlapping concern. Specialized training for the various programs would thereby be enhanced and strengthened.

Proposals concerning course needs and recommendations as to how such needs can be met. A review of course proposals could ensure against redundancy and help to maintain overall goals and level of excellence set for all basic courses in writing and speaking.

Enrollment levels. A review of enrollment levels could assess and note among other things demographic changes and subject matter interest so that recommendations could be made regarding cost effective operation of the basic courses.

Evaluation of courses. Systematic course evaluation could help assess whether courses are meeting needs of students and fulfilling the overall goals of the communication programs.

Examination of remedial efforts and recommendations concerning the efficient use of funding in such efforts. The Committee could coordinate remedial efforts in the communication skills areas with remedial efforts in other areas of the University to avoid redundancy and to assess whether funds are being appropriately and effectively used for such efforts. The current ESL Program may serve as a model for administering remedial work for non-native English speakers and General College serving as a focal point for such work with native speakers of English.

Coordination of research and research proposals. The Committee could provide a conduit through which proposals for University research money would be channeled, providing a check against undue overlap. Furthermore, cooperating in research design could make available to researchers a broader spectrum of students and methods.

Initiation and coordination of grant proposals. Unified proposals that promise to have campus-wide impact and which draw on the full range of writing abilities will have more credibility outside the University. The Committee will be a source of information and, when appropriate, joint sponsorship for proposals.

Course design. The Committee should provide stimulus for and help in designing courses for specific needs in the area of basic skills in writing and speaking.

Outreach within the University. The Committee should assess ways in which the needs may be met for communication skills in the various areas within the University as well as ways in which the University may contribute to fulfilling these needs. Programs in writing and speaking across the curriculum should be a major concern of the Committee.

Outreach to elementary and secondary composition programs. The Committee may suggest ways in which the university may help public school programs in composition and speech, and ways in which such help may be coordinated.

Outreach to the community outside the University. The Committee should study ways in which the University can help meet special needs for basic instruction in speaking and writing outside the University. Furthermore, through contact with the community, the Committee should assess the writing and speaking needs of our graduates in the world of work.

Any other matters that the committee feels will better the state of education in writing and speaking on the Twin Cities Campus.

Recommendation 2

In addition to the above concerns, which will be a constant part of the committee's duties, we further recommend that the committee move rapidly toward the preparation of a request for a legislative special in a sufficient amount to ensure the commitment of the University to necessary and proper instruction in speaking and writing.

Task Force Members

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Materials Science
Professor Robert L. Brown, Director, Composition Program,
Department of English
Professor Donald R. Browne, Speech-Communication
Professor Julie Carson, Director, Undergraduate Studies,
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Professor Terence G. Collins, General College
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Darryl Hattenhauer, Teaching Associate, General College
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Professor Thomas E. Pearsall, Head, Rhetoric
Professor Gene Piche, Assistant Dean, College of Education
Professor Betty W. Robinett, Assistant Vice President,
Academic Affairs--Chair
Inga Velde, Teaching Associate, Department of English
Professor Don Wells, Head, Agricultural Journalism

1981-82 ACADEMIC YEAR COURSE INFORMATION:
Cost/Student Credit Hour, Course Control and Student Enrollment*

Course	Cost/SCH	Course Control	Enrollment by Quarter			Total Enrollment
			Fall '81	Winter '82	Spring '82	
<u>General College</u>						
1421 Writing Lab: Personal Writing	\$16.79	30	700	528	333	1,561
1422 Writing Lab: Com- municating in Soc.	16.79	30	217	446	437	1,300
1461 Oral Communication: Basic Principles	17.52	27	70	89	93	252
<u>Rhetoric</u>						
1101 Communication I	21.12	25	201	105	---	306
1102 Communication II	19.71	25	1	94	214	309
1222 Public Speaking	27.31	18	198	207	196	601
3254 Advanced Public Speaking	40.46	18	16	18	18	52
3551 Professional Writing	35.81	23	218	190	167	575
3562 Scientific and Tech- nical Writing	30.67	23	103	107	68	278
<u>English Composition</u>						
0001 Preparatory Composition	24.00	22	172	20	---	192
1001 Introductory Composition	17.68	27	2,293	1,320	303	3,916
1002 Introductory Composition	19.53	27	818	1,550	1,012	3,380
<u>English as a Second Language</u>						
0001 Preparatory Composition	19.91	22	23	---	---	23
1001 Introductory Composition	21.23	27	63	45	43	151
1002 Introductory Composition	21.80	27	39	63	66	168
<u>Speech-Communication</u>						
1101 Fundamentals of Speech Communication: Oral Communication	13.41	24	438	423	612	1,473
3605 Public Speaking	14.41	7/13	55	44	63	162
3641 Discussion and Con- ference Methods	13.41	9/16	107	159	126	392

*Source: Course Inventory--Course Description Information by Unit, Department, Course and Section. End of Second Week of Fall '81, Winter '82 and Spring '82.