



Basic Proficiencies in Oral Communication

November, 2005

AS APPROVED by Faculty Senate February 1, 2006

This recommendation is submitted in response to the guidelines of the Undergraduate Education Initiative, a campus-wide review of FSU's undergraduate curriculum, as approved by the Faculty Senate in February, 2005.

Membership

The following FSU faculty members served on the planning group for the establishment of criteria for basic proficiencies in oral communication:

Dr. Frank Ammer, Biology;

Dr. Stephanie Pack, Educational Professions;

Dr. Marc Routhier, Communication Studies;

Dr. Michael Wallinger, Communication Studies.

Dr. Jim Limbaugh, Assistant to the Provost, served as convener and facilitator.

BASIC PROFICIENCIES IN ORAL COMMUNICATION

The Case for Basic Skills in Oral Communication

The recommendation of the Undergraduate Education Initiative steering committee to create, at Frostburg State University, additional opportunities for students to engage in public speaking is derived from two distinct sources: FSU's own faculty and the writings of peer faculty at other post-secondary institutions.

In collecting opinions regarding FSU's educational program prior to the submittal of the report of the Undergraduate Education Initiative, faculty focus groups expressed the concern that students should have specific, clearly-defined opportunities to engage in developing and exhibiting speaking and presentation skills. Faculty linked speaking and writing as two fundamental skills that needed as much practice whenever and wherever possible.

Additionally, peer faculty from other post-secondary institutions have expressed specific opinions about the need for additional experiences in speaking in college courses. Gary Wright (1997), writing as a professor of economics at Pomona College (CA), notes that establishing a specific requirement for skills in oral communication "not only develop the ability to speak

coherently and persuasively, but also helps students learn course content” (p. 49). He adds that including speaking assignments in a content course engages students in a form of active learning that leads to an improvement in students’ abilities to understand and retain basic concepts (p. 49). Shaw (1999) echoes Smith’s sentiments: “Letting students speak on academic topics not only raises their presentation consciousness and skills, but also reinforces their mastery of material” (p. 155).

However, Frostburg State University must also realize the limitations of courses with oral communication emphases in terms of attaining broad-based skills in oral communication. In order to fully learn the complexities of communication, students should also enroll in courses in the Communication Studies program in which communication theory and process serves as the primary content, focusing on personal perception, listening, verbal and non-verbal communication, audience analysis and adaptation, message types, message expression, and communication ethics (Maryland Intersegmental Chief Academic Officers, 1999). For this reason, the definition as presented elsewhere in this report recognizes that courses with oral communication emphases focus primarily on building presentation skills, as a sub-set of oral communication, within the context of a content course.

External Mandates

The Maryland Higher Education Commission has mandated that all Maryland institutions of higher education establish specific definitions and benchmarks regarding college-level skills in seven basic skills. In addition to oral communication, these skills include written communication, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, quantitative reasoning, technological literacy, and information literacy. Said benchmarks are to be assessed on a regular basis and reported to MHEC every three years, beginning in 2007.

The University’s accrediting agency, in its revised standards, also specifically mentions the need to assess students’ skills in oral communication. The accreditation standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education state that an institution’s program of general education must be designed “so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills” including those cited above (*Characteristics of Excellence*, 2002, -p. 37).

However, external mandates are not the only reason that basic proficiencies in oral communication are being established. Because our General Education Goals specifically cite a focus on students’ attainment of core skills—specifically, to “become proficient in ...speaking” and to “communicate information and ideas effectively”—the University will use the definition of

oral communication, as outlined in a following section, to help students develop skills in oral communication and to guide assessments of student learning outcomes..

Definition

The following definition has been formulated by members of the faculty planning group and represents the collaborative opinions of faculty from three different disciplines coupled with theoretical constructs related to oral communication.

“Oral communication refers to the process of people using verbal and nonverbal messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. It promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication.

“At Frostburg State University, students deemed proficient in basic skills of presentation, a subset of oral communication, will be able to

1. Choose and narrow a topic appropriately for the audience and occasion;
2. Communicate the thesis/specific purpose in a manner appropriate for audience and occasion;
3. Provide appropriate supporting material based on the audience and occasion;
4. Use an introduction, a conclusion, and an organizational pattern appropriate to topic, audience, occasion, and purpose;
5. Research, select, and cite appropriate supporting material.
6. Present the speech extemporaneously, i.e., spontaneous improvisation prompted by developed key-word outline. The speech is neither read nor recited.
 - Use language style appropriate to audience understanding and to oral presentation, and a level of formality appropriate to subject matter and situation.
 - Visual and vocal elements of delivery are expressive, natural and conversational in effect, reinforce message content, and are appropriate to subject matter, audience and situation.”

Please note that this definition is subject to continual review and refinement as assessment results are analyzed in light of institutional learning goals.

Connection to Undergraduate Institutional Learning Goals

This definition of oral communication supports Goal #2, “Students will become proficient in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They will also develop quantitative literacy and technological fluency.” This definition also supports two action items:

- “Students will comprehend and critically interpret information in written and oral forms.”

- “Students will communicate information and ideas effectively.”

Assessment Strategies

Assessment of basic proficiencies in oral communication initially will be administered in selected courses using oral presentations as a substantive portion of their grading criteria. A stated learning goal of these courses will be the student’s ability to demonstrate basic competencies in oral communication; specifically, in the subset of presentation skills. Information learned from the pilot assessments will contribute to further review and refinement of the internal definition of oral communication.

Internal Benchmarks

Frostburg State University will report to its various constituencies (both internal and external) that its students are considered proficient in oral communication if 70% of students being evaluated using the aforementioned rubric achieve a “meets standards” rating on the first five criteria identified in the definition. The sixth criterion regarding language and delivery is considered situational (i.e., environmental factors may affect the student’s performance in this area).

Ideally, the assessment of these skills on a graded project will occur no earlier than ten weeks after the beginning of any regular semester.

Supplemental Learning Activities

Supplemental activities, as appropriate for the course and discipline, may be considered to provide students opportunities for practice of and reinforcement of the six basic competencies of oral communication. The following list provides examples of such activities.

1. Use oral exams.
2. Create an in-class “summit conference,” in which students are required to take on roles of participants and then research and argue a particular viewpoint.
3. “Pre-discuss” important topics or themes, engaging students in a discussion by exploring their guesses on impact/outcome/influence.
4. Organize classroom debates.
5. Help students understand how to hold productive discussions (e.g., introducing them to effective listening skills).
6. Conduct a symposium (especially valuable in upper-level courses for majors).
7. Constrain discussion to help students see multiple viewpoints (e.g., divide the class into “for” or “against” a particular controversy and allow discussion only from the assigned positions).

Assessment of Basic Competencies

1. Assessment of each student's proficiency in presentation skills will be performed using, as an embedded course assessment, an established rubric for grading student presentations in a speaking-intensive course (see Attachment A).
2. Faculty members can adjust the scoring rubric as necessary to align with his/her course points/values, as long as a clear "meets standards/below standards" delineation is maintained for assessment purposes.
3. The student will be given a copy of the scoring rubric in advance.
4. To be considered proficient in exhibiting basic skills in oral communication (specifically, presentation skills), the student must achieve a "meets standard" rating or above (or a comparable rating on the rubric as developed from the template as noted in V.A. above) on the first five competencies. The sixth competency may be impacted as a result of particular, unique issues; i.e., a student's performance may be inadvertently affected by situational or environmental factors (e.g., coughing, equipment malfunction, etc.).
5. The student's graded presentation will be on a topic mutually established and agreed upon by the instructor and the student.
6. The student may be required to use visual aids as appropriate for the course, audience, and purpose.
7. The presentation will count for a significant portion of the student's course grade (i.e., on a level similar to a major exam).
8. The University's assessment liaison will periodically collect the scoring rubrics in order to determine what percentage of students have attained the "meets standards" level of basic proficiency.
9. Reports on student performance in the aggregate (not by individual class) will be shared with appropriate University constituencies.

Submitted by Jim Limbaugh, Assistant to the Provost

October 2006: Basic Skills section extracted from original guidelines since speaking-intensive criteria will be re-written during the 2006-2007 academic year as per directions from the Provost.

References

- Maryland Intersegmental Chief Academic Officers Group (1999). Standards for general education speech communication courses. Retrieved February 1, 2005, from <http://mhec.stac.usmd.edu/app-spc.html>.
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2002). *Characteristics of excellence in higher education: Eligibility requirements and standards for accreditation*. Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.
- Smith, G. (1997). Learning to speak and speaking to learn. *College Teaching* 48(2), 49-51.
- Shaw, V. (1999). Reading, presentation, and writing skills in content courses. *College Teaching* 47(4) 153-158.