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Oral Communication Competency Across the Virginia Community College System: A Faculty-Designed Assessment

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In today's increasingly competitive market, colleges are constantly striving to ensure that graduates are proficient in the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. Of these competencies, the ability to communicate effectively is often cited as the most critical skill for college graduates to acquire. Communication is frequently named as a top skill by future employers and appears on a variety of "must-have" lists from both inside and outside academe. A recent *Forbes* article, "The 10 Skills Employers Most Want," (Adams, 2013), specifically cited verbal communication skills as essential, along with team building and influencing others which are skills also rooted in a graduate's ability to communicate. In a survey of former students from southern Land Grant Universities, Zekeri (2004) found that respondents identified skills in oral communications as the top competency of the 13 skills most needed for career success. Further, with the recognition that a global economy is now a critical reality, Billing (2003) finds that international stakeholders (employers, business councils, and the like) from the United Kingdom, other European countries, New Zealand, and the United States all rank communication skills, "as the most important skill valued by stakeholders in most countries surveyed" (p. 343).

At times, mandated assessments are viewed as the responsibility of assessment personnel with little faculty input. The assessment plan discussed here demonstrates that assessment can be a shared endeavor in which results can be understood and used to inform curricular planning by all major stakeholders.

While few would argue against the need for communication skill acquisition, the assessment of our community college graduates for their level of competency is a topic of discussion, research and debate. This article will describe a full-scale oral communication assessment conducted by the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) during the 2013-14 academic year. Key components of this assessment were faculty involvement at all stages of planning and implementation, as well as collaboration with assessment coordinators and lead staff personnel throughout the process. At times, mandated assessments are viewed as the responsibility of assessment personnel with little faculty input. The assessment plan discussed here demonstrates that assessment can be a shared endeavor in which results can be understood and used to inform curricular planning by all major stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

State-Mandated Core Competency Assessment Requirements

The Code of Virginia (§23-9.6:1.10) requires the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) to develop, in cooperation with the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), a program for the assessment of student achievement. Each year, the VCCS assesses general education outcomes for its students and has developed a schedule for assessing the competency of graduates in each of the six areas specified in the *Virginia Public Higher Education Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning* (Virginia Community College System, 2014). The areas being assessed over the six-year cycle roughly correspond to the general education goals and student learning outcomes as set forth in section 5.0.2.2 of the *VCCS Policy Manual*. The six-year assessment schedule is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
VCCS ASSESSMENT CYCLE (2010-11 TO 2015-16)

Area of Competency	Reporting Year
Scientific Reasoning	2010-11
Information technology literacy	2011-12
Oral communication	2012-13
Critical thinking	2013-14
Quantitative reasoning	2014-15
Written communication	2015-16

At the conclusion of the cycle in 2015-2016, the VCCS will provide a description of actions taken by the community colleges in response to the results of the assessments in order to improve student learning. Such actions may include curricular changes, improvements to assessment methodologies, or other actions.

Assessment of Oral Communication

According to the VCCS Policy Manual (section 5.0.2.2.4), "A competent communicator can interact with others using all forms of communication, resulting in understanding and being understood." The Policy Manual further identifies six components of information literacy in which degree graduates should be able to demonstrate competency. Specifically, degree graduates should be able to:

A. Understand and interpret complex materials;

B. Assimilate, organize, develop, and present an idea formally and informally;

C. Use standard English;

D. Use appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses in interpersonal relations and group discussions;

E. Use listening skills;

F. Recognize the role of culture in communication.

METHODOLOGY

Assessment Selection and Buy-In

In the previous Oral Communication Competency (OCC) assessment conducted in 2007, VCCS graduates' oral communication skills were assessed using the Test of Oral Communication Skills (TOCS), a computerized, multiple-choice test developed collaboratively by the James Madison University (JMU) School of Communication Studies (SCOM) and the JMU Center for Assessment and Research Studies (CARS). Even before the 2012 assessment selection process got underway, faculty and administrators across the VCCS voiced concern about using a multiple-choice instrument to assess oral communication competency. Faculty who teach Communication Studies and Theatre (CST) within the VCCS were among the most active in seeking alternatives to a computer-generated test.

In 2010, CST colleagues from across the VCCS gathered for a one day workshop to explore alternative strategies for the next OCC assessment (Tirpak, 2010). In 2011 with funding from a VCCS faculty development grant, three faculty representing small, medium, and large size VCCS colleges designed and tested a pilot method for conducting oral communication competency using a nationally recognized rubric for evaluating a public speech (De Riemer, 2011). (Other communication scholars and faculty had successfully used a similar method for assessing students at the course level. For instance, see Dunbar, Brooks, & Kubicka-Miller, 2006.) The findings from the 2011 pilot were presented at the biannual CST Peer Group Meeting (De Riemer, 2011), which resulted in peer group support for revising the next OCC assessment. CST faculty again presented findings of their pilot project and information on peer group support at the 2012 New Horizons Conference (De Riemer & Palomino, 2012).

In response to these efforts and concerns, the VCCS Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness partnered with CST faculty experts experienced in using the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form, a standardized and tested instrument used to assess public speaking competency in higher education. The instrument was designed by the National Communication Association for several purposes, including classroom evaluation, placement, instruction and advisement of students, and the generation of assessment data (Morreale, Moore, Taylor, Surges-Tatum & Hulbert-Johnson, 1993). The rubric classifies eight competencies; for each of these areas, scorers must identify a student's level of performance: unsatisfactory (0), satisfactory (1), or excellent (2). Table 2 identifies each of the eight competencies on the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation form, as well as the corresponding VCCS General Education Competency mapped by the faculty experts. One competency, "Using listening skills" was not included in this assessment.

Table 2
COMPETENT SPEAKER SPEECH EVALUATION FORM AND
CORRESPONDING VCCS GENERAL EDUCATION COMPETENCIES

	Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form Competencies	**Corresponding VCCS General Education Competency**	**Coverage**
1	Chooses and narrows a topic appropriately for the audience and occasion	A. Understand and interpret complex materials	25%
2	Communicates the thesis/specific purpose in a manner appropriate for the audience and occasion		
3	Provides supporting material (including electronic and non-electronic presentational aids) appropriate for the audience and occasion	B. Assimilate, organize, develop, and present an idea formally and informally;	25%
4	Uses an organizational pattern appropriate to the topic, audience, occasion and purpose		
5	Uses language appropriate to the audience and occasion	C. Use standard English	12.5%
6	Uses vocal variety in rate, pitch and intensity (volume) to heighten and maintain interest appropriate to the audience and occasion	D. Use appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses in interpersonal relations and group discussions;	25%
7	Uses physical behaviors that support the verbal message		
8	Recognized the role of culture and communication. overall performance in audience/speaker analysis	F. Recognize the role of culture in communication.	12.5%

Pilot Implementation

In October 2012, the decision to test efficacy of this assessment instrument within the VCCS was made. While the NCA rubric was widely accepted within the communication academic community, this method for assessment had never been attempted at the scale of a system-wide assessment. Thus three VCCS colleges elected to participate in an Oral Communication Assessment Pilot using the proposed assessment method: Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC), Eastern Shore Community College (ESCC), and Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC). Students graduating in Fall 2012 with an associate degree were eligible to participate and were asked to record a three- to five-minute speech based on the following prompt:

> The general purpose of this assessment is to demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively. Prepare and deliver a 3-5 minute speech to inform an audience about your personal career or educational goals. Provide basic information about your topic and describe the duties, requirements, activities, and unique features of your career or educational goals. Help your audience understand more about how you personally came to choose this career path or educational goal.

Students had the option of recording their speech on campus (with staff assistance) or completing the assessment remotely using web conferencing technologies. A total of 21 videos were collected during the pilot, and nearly all of them were completed in-person. Of the assessment submissions, only 15 were deemed "scorable," meaning that the student could be both seen and heard effectively in the recording.

Overall, the pilot implementation was a success, and the decision was made to continue with a system-wide implementation of the oral communication assessment. System office staff worked with the faculty experts and college personnel to streamline the development of the assessment process, investigate best practices, finalize a coding manual, and create video recording guidelines.

Full Implementation

The full implementation of the oral communication assessment was administered to selected students at all 23 colleges during the Spring 2013 semester. Students who applied for graduation with an associate degree in 2012-13 were eligible to participate in the assessment, and colleges were instructed to administer the test to at least 25 graduation applicants. VCCS guidelines suggest that the test could be administered to the following:

a) students enrolled in capstone courses

b) students participating in single-setting test administrations

c) students assessed in a proctored testing center environment.

Differences in Implementation and Challenges

Given the challenges of remote recording during the pilot implementation, colleges were asked to administer all assessments on campus. Beyond this requirement, however, each institution's implementation of the oral communication assessment varied greatly. Some VCCS institutions require completion of core competency assessment as a graduation requirement, and this requirement spurred participation within these colleges. Other colleges used varying incentives to increase student participation. Strategies to recruit students to participate in the assessment varied significantly across the system.

Another major variation in this assessment involved the technology used to record students' speeches. The System Office provided all colleges with the opportunity to record speeches using Blackboard Collaborate; however, several institutions opted to use other technologies for the assessment. The pros and cons of each technology are detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3
TECHNOLOGIES USED TO RECORD STUDENT SPEECHES

Technology	Advantages	Challenges
Blackboard	• Available to all colleges	• Difficult for first-time users
Collaborate	• Content pre-load of prompt and instructions • Student could complete remotely	• Limited "view" of student presenting speech • Long load times at scoring retreat
Panopto	• Strong video quality • Students able to add electronic presentation materials	• Not available or licensed at all colleges in VCCS
YouTube	• Easy for users • Compatible with Flip Cams distributed to colleges	• Privacy concerns

Change to the Original Assignment Prompt

After the pilot implementation, faculty experts chose to add a sentence to the prompt, in order to provide students with context about the audience:

> The general purpose of this assessment is to demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively. Prepare and deliver a 3-5 minute speech to inform an audience about your personal career or educational goals. Provide basic information about your topic and describe the duties, requirements, activities, and unique features of your career or educational goals. Help your audience understand more about how you personally came to choose this career path or educational goal. **Assume a general audience who potentially has influence over an employment or academic decision that could affect your life.**

Collaboration and Videos Collected

System office staff and the faculty experts leading the assessment worked closely with colleges throughout the Spring semester to facilitate the recording of students' speeches. At the conclusion of the assessment period, a total of 598 videos were submitted for scoring.

SCORING RETREAT

To score the assessment, the System Office hosted a scoring retreat in April 2013. Each college was asked to identify at least one faculty member willing to assist with the scoring of submitted videos. The faculty experts experienced in using the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form were instrumental in training scorers on the rubric.

Format of the Retreat

The retreat was split into four rounds of scoring over the course of two days. The 24 participating faculty members were paired in teams of two and rotated to a new partner each round. Scorers evaluated approximately 10-15 videos per round, plus a control video. To evaluate the inter-rater reliability of each pair, the faculty experts scored four "control" videos prior to the retreat, and scorers were shown one of these videos in each round. Faculty did not evaluate submissions from their own college and were unable to see identifying information about the student other than the submitted video. Scorers were trained to agree on scores for each of the eight competencies on the rubric and to self-mediate in the event of a disagreement. Faculty scorers participating in the Scoring Event were trained not to factor in differences in video and sound quality while scoring students' speeches, and videos with compromised quality were deemed *unscorable* in an effort not to bias the assessment.

DETERMINATION OF PROFICIENCY CUT SCORE

A Standard Setting meeting was held shortly after the Scoring retreat so that faculty scorers and system office staff could unpack what it means for students to be proficient in oral communication. Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted to examine score distribution, and faculty engaged in debate around how many unsatisfactory scores students could receive on rubric items and still be considered proficient in oral communication.

Faculty participants agreed that a proficient student should earn no more than three unsatisfactory (0) scores on rubric items, which generally translated to a mean competency score of 0.625 or better. Table 4 below shows students' mean competency scores by number of unsatisfactory ratings for all students participating in the assessment.

Faculty participants in the Standard Setting strongly advocated for a goal mean competency score of 0.75 or above for future implementations of the assessment, with the goal that students achieve satisfactory (1) scores in at least six of the eight competency areas.

Table 4
MEAN COMPETENCY SCORE BY NUMBER OF UNSATISFACTORY ITEMS ON RUBRIC

Mean Competency Score	Number of Unsatisfactory Items on Competent Speaker Form Items								
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	100%
0.125	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	100%	—
0.25	—	—	—	—	—	—	100%	—	—
0.375	—	—	—	—	—	100%	—	—	—
0.5	—	—	—	—	98%	2%	—	—	—
0.625	—	—	—	96%	4%	—	—	—	—
0.75	—	—	89%	11%	—	—	—	—	—
0.875	—	90%	8%	2%	—	—	—	—	—
1	81%	14%	3%	2%	—	—	—	—	—
1.125	86%	—	14%	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.25	68%	26%	5%	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.375	88%	13%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.5	100%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.625	100%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.75	79%	21%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1.875	100%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2	100%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Results of the Oral Communication Assessment were submitted to the VCCS system office for system-wide analysis. Test-takers were matched with the 2012-2013 degree file to ensure that only students who graduated by Summer 2013 would be counted in the analysis. Additionally, only those students whose video submissions were deemed *scorable* at the retreat were included in the analysis. For those colleges that administered the assessment to more than 25 students, a random sample of 25 graduates was taken when calculating system-wide averages. A total of 459 scorable videos were evaluated at the Scoring Retreat; 436 students were included in the random sample.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to the data collected for this assessment of oral communication. The oral communication assessment was a low-stakes test for most respondents. Students were not graded on their speeches, and although several institutions mandate that students complete an assessment as a part of their graduation requirements, performance on the assessment had no impact on a student's ability to graduate.

DEMOGRAPHICS

To help determine how well the population of VCCS associate degree graduates is represented by students who completed the Oral Communication Assessment, comparisons were made between the gender, race/ethnicity, age, and degree type composition of the two groups. Comparisons of the demographic groups for test takers and the general population are shown in Table 5. As the data suggest, graduates completing this assessment did not significantly differ in demographic categories when compared to the characteristics of all graduating students during this year.

Table 5
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSESSMENT PARTICIPANTS AND POPULATION

	All Test Takers		Students Who Did Not Participate In Assessment		All Graduating Students	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	170	34.3	6,865	39.6	7,035	39.5
Female	325	65.7	10,456	60.4	10,781	60.5
Race/Ethnicity						
White	370	74.7	10,947	63.2	11,317	63.5
Black	81	16.4	2,832	16.4	2,913	16.4
Other	44	8.9	3,542	20.4	3,586	20.1
Age						
24 or younger	290	58.6	9,219	53.2	9,509	53.4
Older than 24	205	41.4	8,102	46.8	8,307	46.6
Degree Type						
College Transfer	288	58.2	11,531	66.6	11,819	66.3
Career Technical	207	41.8	5,790	33.4	5,997	33.7
Cohort						
All Graduating Students	495	100	17,321	100	17,816	100

SYSTEM-WIDE RESULTS

Independent *t*-tests were conducted on both the mean competency score and mean scores by competency for the Oral Communication Assessment. Table 6 provides the mean and standard deviation for overall score and for item on the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form, as well as results of the *t*-tests. Table 6 shows the percentage of students who scored at or above the 0.625 threshold on the assessment overall.

The average score on oral communication assessments for VCCS degree graduates is estimated to be .8015 (Table 4), which is above the minimum proficiency score of 0.625. Based on this cut score, over 70% of VCCS graduates' oral communication skills were at least minimally proficient (see Table 7).

Table 6
MEAN SCORES OVERALL AND BY STANDARD

Graduates in Random Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	90% Confidence Interval (N=436)		*t*-Value	Probability
			Upper	Lower		
Mean Competency Score	0.8015	0.4355	0.7671	0.8359	8.46	<.0001
Competency 1	0.7333	0.6387	0.6829	0.7838	3.54	0.0004
Competency 2	0.7982	0.6543	0.7465	0.8498	5.53	<.0001
Competency 3	0.7701	0.6386	0.7196	0.8206	4.74	<.0001
Competency 4	0.6216	0.6549	0.5699	0.6733	-0.11	0.9127
Competency 5	1.0276	0.4064	0.9955	1.0597	20.66	<.0001
Competency 6	0.7362	0.6115	0.688	0.7845	3.8	0.0002
Competency 7	1.03	0.4625	0.9934	1.0665	18.24	<.0001
Competency 8	0.6972	0.6215	0.6482	0.7463	2.43	0.0156

Table 7
PERCENT OF STUDENTS SCORING ABOVE MINIMUM PROFICIENCY LEVEL

Graduates in OCA Random Sample	Passed*	Failed	Passing Rate
436	307	129	70.41

* To pass, students had to earn a mean score on the assessment of 0.625 or greater.

To achieve the cut off for the pass rate, the speech provided by each graduate completing this assessment had to receive at least a satisfactory rating in any five of the eight competencies. The eight competencies were weighted equally. Analysis of the mean scores on each of the Competent Speaker Evaluation Form items shows that VCCS graduates performed highest on Competency 5 (uses language appropriate to the audience and occasion) and Competency 7 (uses physical behaviors that support the verbal message). Relating this finding to Table 2, Competency 5 corresponds to the VCCS General Education Competency of using standard English; Competency 7 corresponds to using appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses in interpersonal relations and group discussions. Given that this assessment was based on a recorded speech focused on the graduates' personal academic goals with the target audience identified as individuals who could potentially have influence over employment or academic decisions, the two competencies with highest scores appear appropriate.

However, graduates scored lowest on Competency 4 (uses an organizational pattern appropriate to the topic, audience, occasion and purpose). This competency relates to the VCCS General Education Competency of being able to assimilate,

organize, develop, and present an idea formally and informally. The assessment results suggest that VCCS students could benefit from additional attention and curricular development directly addressing the ability to organize and to present ideas in a verbal setting. Specific instructional objectives relating to the structure and design of different kinds of presentations could address this deficiency.

Moreover, while the 70% pass rate on this assessment is acceptable, further thought must be given to the 30% of participants whose speech did not merit satisfactory scores on at least five competencies. A system-wide assessment such as this one may not have the ability to focus attention on this smaller subset. Individual campus assessment activities could fruitfully focus on course-imbedded oral communication competency assessments to identify specific student needs regarding all of the competencies, including Competency 4.

Faculty experts who led the assessment's development also presented the results of this assessment to the CST Peer Group in 2013 (Palomino, Tirpak & Interlante) and solicited feedback to guide future OCC assessments. Specifically, peer group faculty recommended testing the assessment with a prompt that is more structured to guide students' ability to organize their speeches. For instance, one suggestion was to ask students to describe a specific number of goals, thus limiting the broader content of the original prompt. Others suggested that future OCC assessment be designed to be course-imbedded thus eliminating the somewhat artificial environment of a recorded speech not connected to an actual classroom learning activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The best way to conduct oral communication competency assessment within the VCCS became the subject of discussion, debate and collaboration among Communication Studies and Theatre faculty who advocated for a more performance-based method that addressed actual speaking competencies. CST faculty were able to use multiple resources such as faculty development grants to conduct research and sponsor workshops, peer group meetings, and a presentation at the annual VCCS-sponsored New Horizons conference to build faculty consensus across the 23 colleges within the system. Implementing these multiple methods to communicate and discuss faculty concerns and suggested alternative assessment methods increased both awareness and cooperation.

Consequently, an assessment methodology, developed and tested by VCCS CST faculty using the nationally accepted NCA Competent Speaker Evaluation Form, was ultimately adopted by the majority of VCCS Assessment Coordinators. Faculty experts emphasized the need to use a live speech in real time to create a meaningful assessment of oral communication competency. The VCCS Office of Institutional Effectiveness coordinated the assessment implementation by sponsoring a faculty training retreat; addressing the practical details associated with recording and submitting live speeches; and by conducting the final scoring retreat and analyzing the data collected. This assessment technique had

not been used for OCC assessment within the VCCS before, and the efficacy of the technique was thoroughly vetted.

The results of this assessment indicate that over 70% of students who graduate with an associate degree from a Virginia community college have proficient oral communication skills. Although a majority of students in the sample scored above the minimum proficiency level, further analysis needs to be conducted to determine why 30% of students still scored below the minimum proficiency level. Particular emphasis should be placed on investigation of students' performance on Standard 4 (uses an organizational pattern appropriate to the topic, audience, occasion and purpose).

Ultimately, this OCC method allowed faculty, assessment professionals, and administrators to work together in new ways and facilitated increased levels of collaboration throughout the system. Because the assessment instrument was well understood by faculty, plans for improving instruction and addressing student weaknesses can now go forward with focus and appropriate strategy.

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