

## Building Campus Partnerships through Advocacy and Collaboration

Pamela Conners  
Gustavus Adolphus College

Leila Brammer  
University of Chicago

Building partnerships with academic programs and campus divisions can advance a communication center's goal of enhancing students' communication competencies while also expanding the reach and visibility of the center. This paper explicates a process for establishing and executing such collaboration effectively--from advocating for the center's integration in student life to developing and executing pilot projects that address recognized communication needs on campus. Central to this process were undergraduate students who conducted research, designed communication modules, and facilitated difficult conversations. New student orientation proved to be a fruitful campus site for communication center student consultants to support and enhance their peers' public speaking, interpersonal, and small group communication skills.

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### Introduction

Building partnerships with academic programs and campus divisions can advance a communication center's goal of enhancing students' communication competencies while also expanding the reach and visibility of the center. Our center's pilot collaborations with the student life division evidences the value of integrating communication theory and practice in other realms of student campus experience. In this paper, we detail our pilot projects and discuss the process for building a student life partnership at a private, liberal arts college. The collaboration entailed a summer of researching and developing pilot communication modules for student life that were deployed in the fall of 2017. Central to this process were undergraduate students: they conducted the research, participated in design of the plan, and trained their student peers to support implementation. The paper discusses our process of developing projects, the benefits of co-curricular collaboration for engaging the campus community, and

strategies for building fruitful campus partnerships.

Turner and Sheckels (2015) have articulated the value of collaboration and cross-disciplinarity in advancing the pedagogical mission of a communication center as well as publicizing its value to the wider campus community. Common and effective strategies for advancing a center's objectives include peer tutoring and supporting faculty in their development and evaluation of oral communication assignments. In addition, some centers facilitate direct integration into courses by embedding center staff who provide individual project consultation or conduct oral communication workshops (McCall, Ellis, & Murphy, 2017; Fairchild & Carpenter, 2015).

Establishing a center as a campus resource is not without challenges. Communication support via a single assignment or a specific course often lacks the breadth or depth of curricular intervention to which many centers aspire.

As Corey Lieberman (2012) notes, a fundamental challenge for communication centers is how they can reach across disciplines and campuses to ensure that all students access and value a rhetorically and theoretically grounded communication experience--one that views oral communication as process, not product. Further, centers often face misconceptions about the relevance and importance of communication, which may prevent students and faculty from seeking the resources that centers have to offer. These include: students viewing oral communication as irrelevant; students viewing communication as outside the purview of their own major; and/or the campus community viewing communication only as a skill, not a liberal art. Attending to these attitudes may require communication centers to more proactively demonstrate the centrality of communication to students' lives and future work, particularly for students outside the fine arts and humanities (Lieberman, 2012).

Thus, in launching our center, we asked: how can we meet our audience where they are, especially if they do not realize that they are our audience? In developing pilot projects in collaboration with student life, we sought to integrate oral communication pedagogies into co-curricular activities in which nearly all students participated. As Turner and Sheckels explain, "a communication center that touches on oral communication outside the classroom is more fully serving the college or university community" (2015, p. 174). Further, building partnerships with co-curricular divisions can facilitate greater visibility for the center and demonstrate the value of oral communication competency for all students (Turner & Sheckels, 2015).

As we prepared to launch a new communication center, we wanted to ensure that we would reach the greatest number of students. We were conscious that to survive

and thrive would require institutionalizing our presence across campus. Both of these considerations led us to think about areas in which students' communication would benefit from enhanced support and training.

Our process of engaging student life and other areas of campus involved four elements: advocacy; needs assessment; capitalizing on existing campus-wide programming; and evaluation.

### **Advocating for Center**

In order to build partnerships with student life and other departments on campus, we recognized the need to make a compelling argument to staff that a collaboration would be beneficial. While communication scholars and teachers are conversant with the pedagogical merits of embedding communication studies across the curriculum and campus, persuading other faculty, student life staff, and administrators to integrate new communication modules into their already busy program schedule required us to demonstrate feasibility and offer evidence of the pedagogical benefits. We needed to prove what we could do before we could get the opportunity to actually do it. To do this, we researched models for wider communication collaborations at other liberal arts institutions with centers similar to ours. Drawn to Wabash College's dynamic Democracy and Public Discourse program, we spoke with its director Sara Drury about three strategic initiatives she had developed: a deliberative process integrated into the science curriculum (funded by the National Science Foundation), a dialogue for student discussions on mental health, and a student consultant program. The breadth of these cross-curricular efforts led us to invite her to campus to be an external advocate for the development of our new programming.

While we could have given a similar presentation ourselves, it is a heftier persuasive lift to present others' data and then argue that you have similar expertise and capacity.

Bringing an external advocate to campus served two key goals. First, it helped us develop a strategic plan for starting the center. Drury's consultation facilitated our choice-making about short-term and long-term goals. She offered guidance on the resources required to develop our center's programs and services. Just as an external review for a department or center helps guide directions for change and growth, an outside consultation at this formative stage for our center shaped our view of what would and would not be viable to pursue in the center's first years.

Second, Drury liaised with numerous stakeholders on campus to provide evidence of the value of cross-campus initiatives generated by a communication center. In a day and half on campus, Drury met with faculty, administrators and co-curricular staff, including those in the offices of Dean of Students, Student Life, Residential Life, Health Service, Title IX, Community-Based Service & Learning, and the Chaplain. Beyond raising awareness for our work and situating us in campus conversations, her presentations demonstrated the potential of our center for supporting student growth and specific student life efforts. Her testimony provided others with concrete examples for both how communication could be integrated and why it mattered. And, as an outsider with no vested interest in our center's mission, she spoke with authority and credibility greater than our own.

Capitalizing on outside expertise is a valuable strategy that can be adopted, regardless of whether one has the resources for a campus visit. We began by identifying a center with similar goals and expertise using a combination of disciplinary

networks and internet searches. We held multiple phone conversations with other centers' directors to consider what approaches they use that we could adapt or adopt. Alternative to a campus visit, we could have hosted a teleconference presentation and conversation between her and our target audiences. We found that external experts -- from multiple centers -- were willing to share their assessments, advocacy documents they used on their campuses, and/or examples of their work and its impact on students. Importantly, to build credibility with different administrative offices, the argument for the center requires evidence not just that you have the expertise and ability to do the work, but that the work will lead to valuable student learning outcomes. A nascent center rarely has sufficient evidence on its own, so drawing on the experience of other centers helps assuage campus partners' hesitancy about whether the work and innovation is worth the effort.

Our first goal for piloting new programming was letting others know about what our center could offer. As a new center, bringing someone in who had a similar model and could present what we could do to advance the college proved helpful. Inviting staff into a discussion and doing so in a way that was mindful of their time (letting them set the schedule and providing breakfast) proved beneficial for opening avenues of discussion. When we later approached (or were approached by) student life staff and faculty, the examples presented by the external advocate we had brought to campus provided a foundation for our collaboration. As we pursued new partnerships, we focused on identifying areas in which faculty and student life staff were not satisfied and that involved communication issues. Finding overlapping places of need where our expertise could be

useful opened conversations about working together.

### **Identifying Co-curricular Needs**

The external advocate's visit in March 2017 energized staff in the student life division and opened their doors to productive conversations with our center about collaborating on shared goals for improving student learning and engagement. In figuring out how to integrate strong communication pedagogy into new student orientation, we focused on the places where communication training or interventions would be the most helpful and welcome. We coordinated with our partners to identify places where existing strategies for student communication and engagement fell short of student life's goals. This led us to target two areas for our work: new student orientation and the first term student experience. For each area, we used similar processes for determining, approaching, and piloting opportunities.

1. *New Student Orientation.* New student orientation is primarily led by upper class student orientation leaders who provide sessions and mentorship during the process. A traditional centerpiece of new student orientation at our college is a social justice theatre presentation focused on diversity and inclusion. The post-theatre small group discussions led by student orientation leaders has long been identified as a site of concern and difficulty. Our center's first intervention focused on improving the difficult discussions that incoming students had around diversity and inclusion. Drawing upon our expertise in deliberation, we proposed designing a discussion framework and preparing student orientation leaders to facilitate the conversation; orientation staff eagerly welcomed this intervention.

Summer undergraduate research students researched and developed an effective and easily deployable conversational framework for the post-performance diversity and inclusion discussion. As students, they had perspective about why the past discussions engendered reticence, skepticism, and indifference among many students and fear and inadequacy among orientation leaders. Our first step was to determine goals--what are the intended student learning outcomes from this event and the post-performance discussion? After identifying a primary goal of using the post-theatre discussion as a place to build students' capacity to better understand and communicate about the interpersonal and intercultural challenges of living together in community, the summer research students structured a conversation in which students would discuss how to respond to the performed scenarios as well as elucidate why appropriate communication was a critical component of any response.

Orientation leaders undergo a week-long training based on student support and other issues (mental health, well being, diversity, and Title IX). The orientation staff enthusiastically received the suggestion of adding communication training to the session. We were allotted a brief 90 minutes to underscore principles of good facilitation and provide practice in the diversity discussion framework. The session was well received by the orientation staff as well as the student orientation leaders. The students were concerned about their preparation to lead a discussion on diversity and were thrilled to be able to have some training, a discussion framework, and some practice. They also reported that this training was extremely useful in preparing them to facilitate other orientation workshops, conversations, and activities with their student groups.

2. *Reading in Common.* Another area of concern with first-year orientation is the common reading book discussion. At our institution, student orientation leaders are teamed with faculty members to prepare and facilitate the discussion. Despite the experience of many of the faculty members and the earnest approach of student leaders, discussions often suffered from fairly typical problems: not all students had finished (or started) reading the book, discussants had not yet established rapport with the faculty or their peers, and most students had never participated in a collegiate-level discussion. Students and faculty were being asked to engage in a meaningful discussion without structure or preparation to address these obstacles.

At the request of the First Term Seminar Program, we offered student orientation leaders and the first term seminar faculty discussion frameworks for the common reading. Summer research students explored different themes, lesson plans, and discussion frameworks for successfully engaging with the chosen book:

*Frankenstein.* They focused on two major themes that reflected the college and first year experience--reproductive technologies and difference and inclusion. We built two conversation frameworks--one for each theme--with the ability to be adapted to a third integrated framework. The frameworks included discussion questions, small group exercises, and relevant quotations with page number references. We also presented the frameworks in a workshop for faculty and student orientation leaders.

Faculty busy preparing for courses in the days prior to the semester appreciated having a quick and easy framework to guide discussion. The frameworks also helped faculty and student orientation leaders quickly and efficiently create their own plan for discussion. This also made others more

aware of the work of our center and our ability to be responsive to campus needs.

In the process of developing these pilot projects, we discovered how readily student orientation leaders, residential life staff, and faculty welcomed oral communication training to help them execute their responsibilities. Orientation leaders facilitate group conversations among virtual strangers, and both the facilitators and the participants often have significant apprehension about discussing sensitive topics with their new peers. Guiding such conversations in student orientation can be challenging for even experienced faculty members. The student leaders greeted the discussion frameworks and facilitation training with enthusiasm and relief. This is a place where a communication center can provide training to support the responsibilities that colleges and universities often expect students' leaders to perform with minimal training. Student Orientation and other student life programming are rich sites for communication centers' student consultants to support and prepare other students for public speaking, interpersonal, and small group communication.

The success of these pilot projects furthered our center's credibility and widened our visibility to different constituencies on campus. Student life staff have asked for the center's support in preparing students to engage in dialogues following guest speakers. Based in positive reports on new student orientation, the Title IX coordinator asked our center to design a discussion for sophomore year bystander training. Following a bystander training video, students' orientation leaders and resident assistants led small group discussions to help students process the examples in the video and equip the students to be effective bystanders. As bystander intervention is discursive, we were able again to focus on communication skills and

practicing them within contexts. The framework led participants through examining experiences that they had witnessed and how best to respond to those situations.

### **Enhancing Existing Programming**

The pilot interventions in first-year student orientation and first-term seminar had the distinct advantage of ensuring that all first-year students had discursive experience, regardless of their major or their chosen coursework for the next four years. Advancing this pilot in future years would embed a theoretically-grounded communicative practice for all students. Still, our center wanted to think more broadly about how we could connect with constituencies on campus beyond students' first year. To do this, we talked with campus organizers of a signature college event--the Nobel Conference--about ways we could enhance or complement its pedagogical goals for students and the broader community.

One of the challenges for the conference has been how to best support students in discussing the ideas emerging from the conference's plenary sessions. We designed a deliberative framework which could be used in courses related to the conference theme. Here we were able to adapt a deliberative framework designed and utilized at Wabash College. We trained our center's student consultants to facilitate the deliberation, which they did in six courses in our pilot year. Providing the peer-to-peer delivery highlighted the student-centered skill building work of our center while the framework demonstrated our ability to work with professors and others to design frameworks to meet specific goals.

Our connection to course content helped deliver a robust deliberation about options. It moved class discussion beyond

readings and knowledge to actually engaging students with each other in discussing what influence that knowledge has on potential individual and policy decisions related to reproductive technologies. Faculty reported that they appreciated this purposeful move in their class and how it intentionally engaged multiple perspectives, critical thinking, and weighed tradeoffs. The success of this programming led the conference director to invite us to develop a deliberation for the 2018 Nobel Conference and expand its reach to additional audiences on and off-campus, including community members, visiting high school students, and summer camp participants.

### **Assessing**

A critical aspect of pilot programming is assessing it. We used surveys to assess our pilots, which helped us both track participation and think about refinements and improvements. While we primarily used online post-event surveys, we also distributed surveys immediately following experiences that our student consultants led. The assessment helped us think about what modifications we need to make as well as to consider which pilots were worth it for us to continue pursuing, which pilots should be cut or taken in a different direction, and what additional pilots we should pursue.

Key to assessment is understanding what evidence college administration and other external groups (such as grantors) may require for proof that the center's work meets students' needs and institutional goals. For our institution, dollars follow students. In other words, quantifying participation in our pilots was as important as understanding the quality of the experience. As we continue to build and modify programming, we continue to build

and modify assessments to ensure we have data that helps to tell our center's story. The advocacy that launched the initiatives in this report is only a first step; continuous assessment is essential to the advocacy needed to maintain and grow the center's resources.

## **Conclusions**

The content of our pilot programming enacted our center's deliberative identity and affirmed its centrality to the liberal arts. As Kenneth Bruffee argued, "The first steps to learning to think better are to learn to converse better and to learn to create and maintain the sort of social contexts, the sorts of community life, that foster the kinds of conversations we value (Bruffee, 2001, p. 90)." Invoking this principle in our center's activities, we supported our student consultants in designing and facilitating structured discussions among students. By having our center's students provide communication and facilitation training to their peers, we improved student discussions about difficult issues. Integrating structured peer conversations into the first year student experience fosters critical thinking by embedding an intentional and reflexive process in which students must consider their discursive choices in relation to their audience (Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

Moreover, the process we used to create the programs enacted the rhetorical principles on which our center was founded. We first analyzed our potential partners in order to craft a persuasive case for changing their communication practices. We then researched the problem to better understand what interventions we could offer and explored different models for adaptation on our campus. The frameworks and trainings we developed will require continued adaptation and refinement, but we have

learned much by testing theories of dialogic and deliberative pedagogies to learn more about how they function in practice. As Leah Schweitzer demonstrated in her decentralization of High Point University's communication center, adapting to contemporary challenges requires us to think creatively and "go to where the students are" to support their communication education and our own (Schweitzer, 2017).

While the specific partnerships we have detailed in this paper may be unique to our college and we continue to modify our programming as we further develop our center, we have identified several overall strategies communication centers could adopt and adapt to collaborate more widely across campus.

1. **Explore how an external advocate can help explain and demonstrate the value of embedding communication practices in other departments and co-curricular activities.** This may be best accomplished by bringing someone from another center to campus as a speaker, but if budget constraints prevent this, at the very least, draw upon the evidence from other centers' successful practices in supporting your advocacy.
2. **Attend to your targeted partner's communication need by exploring areas they want to improve.**
3. **Think expansively and creatively about the communication content and skills that trained students can deliver.** Drawing upon the particular expertise of your center's communication studies faculty and what students are learning in their coursework, your center could potentially develop and support a wider range of programming.
4. **Prepare a clear assessment plan for each project you pilot, including**

**both quantitative and qualitative measures.** In our experience, administrators appreciate statistics, but testimony and examples that illustrate the impact of a program create a more robust and persuasive narrative.

The first year of these student life and student-supported pilot experiences positioned our center to grow and refine programming. We were able to be part of the conversation of development and improvement at our college and prove how what we do advances the work of other departments. As we continue to refine and develop our work with student orientation, bystander training, and the Nobel Conference, we hope to continue to infuse our work across the student experience.

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