# Life in a Fishbowl:
## The Evolution of the Communication Center as a Sustainable Component of Institutional Culture

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In 2015, Kathleen Turner offered several benefits of Communication Center research and mentioned areas for future study. Turner (2015) believes that communication center directors would benefit from research that crosses institutional boundaries and contexts. Further, it is important that communication center directors demonstrate what clients have gained from the center. We must continue to recognize that "clients" are multi-faceted and our communication center spaces serve students, faculty, staff, administrators and the institution. Thus, this manuscript will, as Turner (2015) pleaded, help others think through how to "enhance their communication centers with clients, colleagues, and communities" (p. 3). Ultimately, it is important for center staff, as well as affiliated faculty and administrators, to concern ourselves with how the center integrates itself as part of the institution's culture.

## Literature Review

### Organizational Culture.

Communication centers are not immune to the challenges of higher education. The systematic nature of higher education is penetrating and pervasive. This begs the question, how, then, should the communication center become a valuable institutional asset in a system ripe with challenges. In order to remain salient, communication centers must prove their institutional worth often in the midst of budgetary crises and changing expectations.

Like a group of individuals who develop a culture amongst themselves, the "typical" higher education institution also has a culture devoted to student engagement similar to a stereotypical corporation or other organization, on a college campus new initiatives, learning spaces, faculty, staff, and administrators allow the culture to evolve and grow (Schein, 1990). The communication center, as an institutional sub-culture, can help the campus evolve and grow to meet student needs and further develop a culture devoted to student learning.

As such, organizational culture is an appropriate lens to examine the center's place as a culture reflecting and culture defining learning space. Cultures are difficult to change yet change is necessary, at times, for survival. To be even more specific for our purposes, how, then, do we think about the communication center as a part of institutional culture as well as a catalyst for enhancing organizational culture?

First, it is important to define culture and, more specifically, organizational culture. Schein (1990) gives two distinctions that are helpful. Culture, for Schein (1990), is what a "group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration" (p. 111). When analyzing culture, researchers typically focus on three components. These fundamental levels include artifacts (i.e.

physical layout, smell and feel of a physical space, emotional intensity, etc.); values (i.e. norms and philosophies); and assumptions (i.e. perceptions and thought processes). These intangible phenomena (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2011) are necessary to diagnose and serve as initial distinctions for this study. In order to determine culture, Schein (1990) encourages researchers to combine insider knowledge with outsider questions to bring assumptions to the surface. In many ways, this is what we believe we have accomplished in this manuscript.

College campuses can be identified as, what Maximini (2015) called, a person-centered organization. This means the organization exists to serve the needs of its members. As such, the ability of the communication center to continually meet student needs, through artifacts, values and assumptions, becomes primary in terms of mission and vision. While we recognize that culture may not be easily researched or identified (Schein, 1990), we do believe we can understand how the communication center influences campus culture and how stakeholders view its impact on institutional value. To illustrate the cultural dynamics present in the center interviews with communication center stakeholders were conducted and cultural connections to student-use of the communication center, institutional mission and vision, and future institutional cultural integration, have been identified in the sections to come.

**The Fishbowl:**
**The "Campus" Communication Center as an Institutional Space and Cultural Icon**

Many spaces in an academic institution are "owned" by a department or school. Labs may be designed with certain classes in mind; computers in these labs often have discipline-specific software and hardware available. And these spaces are

usually located close to the offices of discipline-specific faculty and staff. The Fishbowl is an attempt to push back on discipline ownership and to be a more interdisciplinary. The result is a more inclusive space for faculty and students across campus.

The Fishbowl is a multimedia center designed to facilitate collaboration and student-led learning. While it is technically "owned" and managed by Bellarmine's School of Communication, the space is open to all students and faculty. The location of The Fishbowl is on the outskirts of the School of Communication wing of a building on campus. The glass wall looking into the space (hence the reason for the space's name) is on a public hall used by students walking to the University's main cafeteria. Furthermore, the faculty offices there are occupied by two professors who have worked with faculty development, so their names and faces are familiar to many across the campus community. While the location and faculty in the spaces provide a welcoming and open space, the design of the room also plays an important role in its inclusive nature.

The open, walk-through, visible spaces The Fishbowl provides have contributed to an atmosphere of collaboration and spontaneous peer-review. For example, a student finishing up a video project asks the professor walking to his office to watch the video with her and provide feedback. In another case, a group working on the student newspaper discuss story ideas while other students waiting to enter the public speaking classroom sit nearby. Students listen to the newspaper staff discuss ideas and one waiting student offers the newspaper a contact on a particular story. And finally, an alum works on a communication project for his new employer. As he works, current students talk to him and show him a new function on the

software he is using. All of these examples were spontaneous in nature; they are a direct result of the open spaces provided to the students.

While students who major in communication are familiar with The Fishbowl early in their tenure, students with other majors tend to find out about the space when they take Public Speaking--since all those courses are taught in The Fishbowl Classroom located at the rear of the space. Faculty discover the space when they are referred to "The One Button Studio" after they talk with IT or Faculty Development about recording lectures to flip a classroom. The One Button Studio is used by faculty across the disciplines, and many use the Macs in The Fishbowl to utilize green screen technology, placing their slides behind them as they talk to the camera.

The Fishbowl has also served as a source of inspiration to other spaces on campus. The Business School used the space to rethink their classrooms. Library personnel toured the space for inspiration during their remodeling. Donors are brought to the space to see what their gift can do for students. And campus tours, which once stopped at a poster display to talk about the School of Communication, now stop in front of the glass wall. As the tour guide talks about all the opportunities a student has to participate on campus, potential students see their peers discussing topics in a meeting, working on the Macs, and getting feedback from a professor. This flexible and open space is a place many students can imagine themselves working; and that's the point.

## Methods

Organizations need an adaptive culture in order to respond effectively to changing environments. In order to determine how a culture functions, short-term qualitative studies, surveys, and

interviews are appropriate methodologies (Maximini, 2015). Our study participants, or interview informants, were chosen because of their experience, lucidity, and willingness to speak openly with the interviewer (Maximini, 2015).

The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Respondents answered preset open-ended questions regarding the institutional connection of the communication center to the university as well as perceptions of use, challenges, future vision, etc. The interviews were conducted with one interviewer and one respondent and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The institution's IRB did approve this study and each participant provided written consent.

Respondents for this study included one faculty member, who also serves as an advisor of sorts for the communication center, one administrator, and three students. The researchers strategically chose the faculty member and administrator because of their involvement in the development and evolution of the Fishbowl however, student respondents volunteered to participate in the study. Herein, the faculty member will be distinguished as *Faculty Member*. The administrator will be referred to as *Administrator* and each student will be described as either *Student One (S1), Student Two (S2)* or *Student Three (S3)*. An interview guide was used to keep the interactions focused.

## Results

Semi-structured interview responses were reviewed for insights and patterns or, to put in another way, themes. Researchers read the transcripts carefully and provided notes in the margins. Utterances were noted and general observations were developed into preliminary categories (McCracken, 1988). Once preliminary patterns were

developed, responses were further analyzed to determine patterns and basic themes. Finally, predominant themes were delineated. Respondent validation was used to further solidify the accuracy of themes. Interview data in this study produced three main focus areas, or themes. These themes were not a priori, rather they emerged through data analysis. First, respondents highlighted the *Fishbowl Story*. Specifically, how the cultural ethos of the Fishbowl developed over time. Second, respondents identified *Fishbowl Use*. Primarily, how student-use has continued to establish an organic center culture. Third, respondents discussed *Fishbowl Future*. Or, how the communication center can continue to function as a valuable cultural center on campus. The quotes below represent poignant and representative comments by the interviewees.

**Fishbowl Story**

   **Vision.** The Fishbowl started as an idea. The physical space was at first a dank, dark, unused classroom became a vibrant collaborative learning space associated with the School of Communication. While collaborative learning spaces have become more common in university settings, some institutions still struggle to provide new and innovative design to old physical space. When asked about the initial vision for the Fishbowl, the *Administrator* said this:

>   *Over the course of time I've had this vision that the university should have open spaces that can be collaborative spot for students to participate, and we did not have that at [our small, private liberal arts university]. I was able to convince the university to give up a large classroom in order to create what really has become the Fishbowl-an interactive opportunity for students to work but also for them to be able to play. I have this perspective that when I was in college there were not places where we wanted students to gather, our whole idea was to get rid of them every day...this is a place for students to participate.* - Administrator

The opportunity for students to engage in structured learning, like university provided classes, as well as informal learning, was central to the initial design. The same administrator, when reflecting further on the Fishbowl, praised the overall emotional intensity of the space by saying

>   *It is fantastic whenever you come in here and see a group gathered around a table, or sitting in a corner with just a little reading light on...or a classroom here being used for public, and sports broadcasting being taught over here, and a group sitting around at the table. When you can have five different things going on in one open space without anybody being interrupted you're basically in a business environment and that's when the collaborative process comes into education.* - Administrator

The Faculty Member said this about the transition of the Fishbowl to a functional space and an artifact worthy of engaging student needs:

>   *[Before the room was renovated] you would never find student in here. Now they are always in here, they are working, they are hanging out, they are reading, they are sitting around, they are talking to each other, they are preparing for class, they are doing projects, and once people saw that, oh wow it is being used, people like this space. You started seeing people from the library come through and look at this*

*space, and say we can do something like this too. I have had to business school come in and see how we use the lab, and when they are renovating a space that is what they are thinking about. I have also professors from other rooms, they teach in a room that is very awkwardly shaped and it doesn't do what they need, and they will do a very low-key renovation that makes the space much more useable.* - Faculty Member

The vision, then, became a reality and the Fishbowl story became a foundational campus narrative.

**Funding.** In order for the vision to become reality, as the *Administrator* shared with us, funding was necessary to accomplish the goal.

*More important too, the funding was not coming from the university to get it accomplished.* - Administrator

The developers of the Fishbowl recognized that funding was needed to design a space that enhanced campus culture and that this particular funding may not come from within the university. Outside donors were solicited and the Fishbowl became a staple of campus culture.

**Campus Culture.** When exploring the space as a fixture of campus culture, the *Administrator* said this:

*We didn't have a facility like this on campus. [Fellow administrators] were very supportive of trying something different and we built this out...[there was then an opportunity] for the enhancement of the library... much of [the new library design], what they ended up with was patterned after [the Fishbowl] furnishing, the openness, and the attitude.* – Administrator

The library renovation was developed, in part, as an ode to the Fishbowl. The communication center space was so successful other campus departments designed their physical learning space in a similar model to that of the Fishbowl. But certain dimensions were necessary to achieve this influence, as the Administrator reminds us:

*Do you have support? Do you have space? Do you have attitude? If you don't have attitude, but have space, it won't be the same.* - Administrator

When further explaining connections, the faculty member said this about the Fishbowl and broader campus association:

*If you go into the library now, it used to feel very sectioned. There were walls and visual obstacles and now it's just wide open. Now you can see just across the room. Um, I think that was something we might have inspired.* - Faculty Member

For the vision to become a reality, there had to be a dream, funding, administrative support, and an intentional connection to campus culture. Table 1 summarizes the categories present under the Fishbowl Story theme.

**Table 1.**

*Fishbowl Story*

| Theme |
| --- |
| Vision |
| Funding |
| Campus Culture |

**Fishbowl Use.** For this section, *Administrator*, and student responses will be provided to determine how the Fishbowl has been used. To clarify in-depth interview responses, students will be identified as *Student 1 (S1)*, *Student 2 (S2)*, and *Student 3 (S3)*.

**Space.** The actual physical space design has been a key ingredient in the Fishbowl's identity on campus. *S1* said they

> like the setup there. I really like this space more than anything else, kind of how the furniture is setup rather than the technology (Student).

*S3* said the space

> is called the fishbowl because it is a big open area and I think that is important to keep as far as the personality of the room goes. Its open space, it just ends up being a really comfortable environment (Student).

Additionally, *S1* commented on the open environment by specifically saying they

> think the open environment, like the open plan of it is what is really valuable. I think [the space is] really conducive to a learning atmosphere and a group dynamic, I really like that component. I like the open dynamic and the philosophy that underscores it. This is a place to be creative and be nontraditional and kind of work collaboratively with other people with new technology (Student).

The open space, furniture and technology, have contributed to an environment that is beloved and appreciated by students and this space has, in essence, developed its own cultural ethos. The design nature of the space presents an open dynamic and, as the student above discussed, creates an underlying philosophy that reinforces creativity and collaboration.

**Class Space.** The Fishbowl is routinely used as a space for classes that go beyond solely communication curriculum. However, communication classes obviously populate the communication center on a regular basis.

When reflecting on class use of the Fishbowl, the *Administrator* said this:

> to see [removed] teach sports broadcasting and kids standing around hovering over a screen that to me is the way education is supposed to be taught instead of sitting in lined up classrooms. - Administrator

Further, public speaking courses are often held in the Fishbowl. When discussing the Fishbowl influence on public speaking, the *Administrator* said

> Public speaking became a very important part of the Bellarmine curriculum, interestingly there was no campus environment that was conducive to just public speaking…it only took camera, it took desks, and it took a smart board for that to, to create an environment. As many as 200 students are taking public speaking every term, and that's a big number that is floating through here. - Administrator

The ability of the center to also serve as a flexible class-based learning space is invaluable, as *S2* indicates below:

> Then in class too, whenever I have classes in this room, they will have us come [into the communication center] and do some work or some group work. - Student

As a catalyst of campus culture, the communication center ability to house actual classes, and supplemental class activities, is important in enhancing student learning.

**Technology.** While the Fishbowl does not "rely" on technology, tech is vital to the success of the center space. All of the in-depth interviews revealed perspectives on the Fishbowl's use of certain hardware and software platforms. Two primary tools are housed in the Fishbowl, the green screen and the one-button studio.

The primary green screen is located in the main center space. *S1*'s description of the green screen is as follows:

> *The green screen is…really valuable for, I've done sort of some videos and stuff like that.* - Student

Similar to the green screen, the one-button studio is a powerful recording tool. *S2* gave a wonderful description of exactly what the one-button studio can accomplish:

> *The one button studio basically has a giant green screen and you go in there and you just hook up [the thumb drive]…  and you basically just push one button and you can start recording and you can record, you know, anything for any class in there and you can make use of the green screen stuff, and whenever you are done you push the button, and you are good to go, and you have it all on your little thumb drive. So, um, it's pretty cool, it's a cool idea.* - Student

According to the *Administrator*, the one-button studio has become a fixture in the communication center.

> *One of the more unique things that the Fishbowl did was, [we] spent a lot of time talking about this one button studio idea. I always thought it would be neat if we had a place where you could go in and be uninterrupted and kind of control your own environment. So [we] found a lot of information and were able to put together a program, and I think we spent probably about 40,000-50,000 dollars to put it together. The one button studio in the back has its advantages as it is separate, it is part of the process, but when you are there you really private and that's another way for you to do one person things without*

> *being interrupting by other people.* - Administrator

Other technology, like the computers, have been used by students. For instance, *S1* has *used the computers a little bit, [for] assignments in [a] course (Student)*.

**Miscellaneous.** One of the best features of the Fishbowl is its ability to adapt as a transformative and useful student space. Students, and student groups, have used the communication center for several purposes. As the *Administrator* points out, *Students who work on the student newspaper come in here and likewise have the same opportunity [to use the space] (Administrator).* Further, *S1* has used the space for social reasons, homework and projects, as well as for the computer software:

> *Mainly I use it for social reasons and also meeting with people. It's a nice central location to meet people at, so if I'm working on a project or something like that I can say, "Hey, let's meet in the fishbowl." Then we kind of go from there.*
> *I use it as a place, I really like doing my work here over…I think it is kind of convenient to be kind of close to all the professors in the communication building, so, mainly for that, and also, I have worked on some projects with people in the fishbowl before.*
> *I don't have any of the adobe software…so that's nice to have access to that.* - Student

One student interviewee, *S3*, also appreciates the functionality of the space as a location for meetings:

> *It ends up being a really good meeting space for the people in the school of communication at least. I have met with instructor to go over*

*something real fast, to go over
projects; also just in general it is just
a good meeting place, or a place to
hang back before class starts.* –
Student

**Feedback.** The collaborative nature
of the Fishbowl, more specifically the ability
to give and receive feedback, was a common
theme amongst the student interviewees. *S2*
made the comments below about receiving
feedback in the Fishbowl:

> *I try to get feedback on all the digital
> projects that I do. I think it is really
> important having that peer review on
> any academic digital project you do.
> I know for my multimedia
> communications class we would meet
> in here a lot before class and I would
> show people video or websites that I
> have made. I made a Prezi one time
> that I kind of showed different
> people, um, and generally that's all
> over the fishbowl.*
> *Basically I will sit down with the
> student and show them my work and
> then you know sometimes we will,
> they'll pause and tell me what areas
> can be improved or give me
> suggestions. It's more like, it's kind
> of like a casual relaxed thing. It's
> sort of you know, "Hey, let me show
> you this new video I made." Then we
> kind of look at it and they give
> feedback.* - Student

While feedback is given in a student-to-
student, or peer, capacity, the Fishbowl also
presents opportunities for instructors to
collaborate with students and offer
comments on their work, as *S3* states below:

> *An instructor and I were working on
> a video project, interviewing
> students essentially, and it was really
> the first time I had been operating a
> camera so he was in here showing
> me everything I was doing right and*

> *everything I was doing wrong. I was
> talking about the rules of three or
> whatever on the cameras, and what I
> could be doing in the future to make
> sure I am doing the videography
> correctly, or at least more efficiently,
> and then when the time comes we
> will be doing a little more editing as
> well. I have used the computers, the
> Mac's here in the past to do some
> quick videography work for separate
> projects. [This same instructor]
> came and met with me about the
> videography work I was doing and
> they were just kind of showing me
> what I need to be doing to edit it and
> what I need to be doing to shoot
> better footage, so it has come in
> handy.* - Student

Table 2, below, represents an overview of
the themes and categories interviewees
identified when reflecting on
communication center use.

**Table 2.**

*Fishbowl Use*

| Theme | |
|---|---|
| Space | |
| Class Space | |
| Technology | Green Screen |
| | One Button Studio |
| | Computers |
| Miscellaneous | Social |
| | Homework and |
| | Projects |
| | Computer |
| Feedback | Software |
| | Meeting Place |

**Fishbowl Future**

For the communication center to
continue to evolve with the campus at large,
and for the Fishbowl to remain a campus
staple, it is important that the space
functions in connection with the broader

campus ethos. To garner perspective on what the "Fishbowl Future" holds, interviewees were asked to comment on what they believe is next.

The *Administrator* said this about the future of the Fishbowl:

*I think as technology continues to change I would hope that our perspective will be, not just for the fishbowl, [but as a whole] an attitude toward improving digital communication...[if we could redesign the space we could have included an] animation studio, and bring in different kinds of technology.* - Administrator

Student respondents focused more on the space of the Fishbowl and the general student-connection and mentioned few suggestions for future evolution and improvement. For instance, *S1* said:

*What I like about it is there is a lot of different technology and a lot of different resources it offers, and I like that it allows for a lot for adoptive projects and sort of different places for people to work. So, maybe like a Smart board or something like that could be handy, or a board for people to do more group projects, or stuff like that, but I don't really have like a clear thing you have to put in for it be way more functional.* - Student

It is also important, as *S3* indicates, that the Fishbowl remain technologically relevant. *S3* mentions, *I heard somebody allude to earlier I think technology is ever changing, and evolving...so as long as the fishbowl keeps up with those trends, I think it would be a good place to be (Student).*

When reflecting on the future, the Faculty Member believes the students are crucial when considering the future evolution of a communication center:

*I think listening to students [is important]. What do they need? What are they interested in? That's why we are thinking about a podcasting area. A place you can record a podcast. The key is flexibility, once you start bolting things down and making regulations it's really tough to move. I think the micro changes every year, what are students needing? What are they looking for? What can we provide them?* - Faculty Member

**Discussion and Practical Suggestions**

The interviewee responses above have direct connections to the Fishbowl and campus culture, especially as it relates to artifacts (i.e. physical layout, smell and feel of a physical space, emotional intensity, etc.); values (i.e. norms and philosophies); and assumptions (i.e. perceptions and thought processes).

The information presented above should help communication center staff think about the cultural identity of the center space. The themes found establish a foundation for at least three best practice recommendations:

First, build the narrative of your center. Think about the vision of the communication center space and how, specifically, it enables campus culture to thrive. Leaders of the communication center, do you have a vision for how your space will encourage teaching and learning? Have you established a narrative that will help you find additional funding? Have you designed your space in such a way that other campus initiatives will take note (and potentially even replicate)? Think about what values resonate throughout your center.

Second, design the space with great intentionality (and design the space to reinforce the narrative). Before designing a communication center, or even 20 years after the center first established itself as a campus fixture, think about how you want students to utilize the space. Will this be a hub for socializing, a tutoring bonanza, or a space for collaborative and shared learning? The design of your center can, and should reinforce the center's narrative and vision. Be aligned in mission and vision and, thus, be aligned in application. Think about how you intentionally use artifacts and physical dimension to guide student perception of the space.

Third, never forget the future, but don't forsake the present. Communication centers should be designed to evolve. This means the space, and the technology in the space, should be designed to adapt to ever-changing student needs. Be intentional in what you purchase, be careful in how you prepare, and think strategically about center resources that will transcend the classroom of "today". In terms of assumptions, the communication center should be a campus space that holds the present, and future, in high regard.

The center can, and should, function as a cultural center on campus. By establishing a clear vision, understanding how the center is used, and thinking intentionally about the future, center directors, faculty, staff and administrators can establish the center as a vital catalyst of campus culture and innovative student-space.

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