GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
MASON CORE ASSESSMENT REPORT:
ORAL COMMUNICATION
Spring 2014

The Mason Core (formerly General Education) program at George Mason University organizes courses of study into three main areas. *Foundation* courses build knowledge and skills to promote success in the major and in future pursuits; *core* courses introduce students to a breadth of subject matter and intellectual traditions; and *synthesis* courses encourage the integration of past learning and experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and prepare students for lifelong learning. Student learning outcomes for the Mason Core areas are created and assessed by faculty representatives of the University Mason Core Committee. Results of assessment activities are reported to the faculty, the Mason community, and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) by the Office of Institutional Assessment.

The Oral Communication (OC) competency is a foundation-level requirement for Mason undergraduates. Students are required to take one 3-credit course from the approved list.

Learning Outcomes

The Oral Communication learning outcomes are:

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of and proficiency in constructing and delivering multiple message types.
2. Students will understand and practice effective elements of ethical verbal and nonverbal communication.
3. Students will develop analytical skills and critical listening skills.
4. Students will understand the influence of culture in communication and will know how to cope with cultural differences when presenting information to an audience. Students develop the ability to use oral communication as a way of thinking and learning, as well as sharing ideas.

Courses Approved for the Oral Communication Requirement, 2013-14 Catalog

COMM 100 (Public Speaking); COMM 101 (Interpersonal and Group Interaction)

Previous Assessment

Assessments were conducted in both COMM 100 and 101 in fall 2005 and spring 2007. A team of faculty raters used two course-specific rubrics to rate student presentations during weeks 10-12 of each term. Based on competency levels established by faculty committee, results of the assessment showed that a very high proportion of students demonstrated competent or highly competent oral communication skills. In fall 2010, two revised rubrics were used to measure student achievement of learning outcomes for COMM 100. A team of five faculty raters reviewed two video-recorded presentations each from 105 students. Results showed that the majority of students met or exceeded expectations on both the first speech (87%) and the second (90%); however, the assessment did not show significant improvement between the speeches.

In 2008-09, Mason adopted a course portfolio assessment process for all of the General Education categories. Courses in the respective categories are assessed on a six-year cycle, with adjustments in this schedule made as needed. Fall 2013 was the first time that Oral Communication has participated in the course portfolio assessment

Data Collection and Assessment Process

The assessment of the Mason Core OC category was conducted in fall 2013 semester. A random sample of all sections was drawn, and 22 course sections (one-third of all sections offered) were selected to participate in the assessment. See Appendix for course information.

An information session was conducted for course instructors as part of their pre-semester faculty training in August 2013, followed by individual consultations upon request. Each instructor was asked to create a course portfolio that consisted of a summary sheet, course syllabus, course map of activities and assessments, selected course assignments, samples of student work, and a brief narrative. The portfolios were due two weeks after the end of the semester, and were submitted via Blackboard. All 22 instructors submitted portfolios as requested.

Portfolio reviews were conducted in spring 2014. Reviewers were members of the University Mason Core Committee and subject-matter faculty who participated in a training session that covered the review process and criteria. Reviewers entered ratings and text into an online review form. Each portfolio was reviewed twice by independent reviewers.

- Total number of Mason Core OC courses offered in review period: **2** courses (**66** sections)
- Total number of students enrolled: **1,485**
- Total number of courses/sections selected for assessment: **2** courses/**22** sections
- Total portfolios collected: **22** portfolios representing **2** courses. The course instructors who created the portfolios taught a total number of **501** students (**34%** of the total OC course enrollment)
- Total reviewers: **7**
- Total student work samples reviewed: **86**

Results

The course portfolio review focused on how well each course addressed the Mason Core student learning outcomes through instruction, assignments/activities, and samples of student work. Portfolios were assessed on how well the instructors articulated the learning outcomes, the congruence of the OC learning outcomes with the course content, the appropriateness of the course material for the Mason Core curriculum, and the appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment in relation to the OC learning outcomes. The Results section presents the aggregated results of the reviews in terms of the learning outcomes, the student work samples, and overall ratings.

Learning Outcomes

Using course materials, reviewers were asked to identify the level that each learning outcome was addressed in each course. "Introduces" indicates that students are introduced to the concept; "reinforces" indicates that students have had some experience with the concept and have opportunities to practice; "emphasizes" indicates that students have had sufficient practice and can now demonstrate mastery. Reviewers evaluated Outcomes 1 (demonstrate understanding of and proficiency in constructing and delivering multiple message types) and 2 (understand and practice effective elements of ethical verbal and nonverbal communication) as being either emphasized (78.6% and 50%, respectively) or reinforced (57.1% and 64.3%, respectively) most frequently. Outcome 3 (develop analytical skills and critical listening skills) was evaluated as emphasizing, reinforcing, or introducing the identified concepts more evenly across the courses. Reviewers most frequently rated Outcome 4 (understand the influence of culture in communication and will know how to cope with cultural differences when presenting information to an audience) as introducing the concept (50%) and reinforcing the concept (42.7%). Table 1 provides the results.

When examining the outcomes separately by course (COMM 100 and COMM 101), there are some differences in evaluations. For example, reviewers more frequently rated COMM 101 as emphasizing Outcome 1 (57.1%) compared to COMM 100 (0%). In addition, reviewers were more likely to rate COMM 100 as reinforcing Outcome 4 (85.1%) compared to COMM 101 (28.6%). The results separated by course are provided in Table 2.

The identification of levels in course content is important because it provides information about student preparation to instructors who use these courses as prerequisites. It also helps instructors gauge the appropriate level for constructing their course activities.

Table 1. To what extent are the learning outcomes addressed in the course? (N=14)

	Introduces	Reinforces	Emphasizes	Does not address/Not apparent	Not enough information
Outcome 1	64.3%	57.1%	78.6%	0%	0%
Outcome 2	50%	64.3%	50%	0%	1%
Outcome 3	35.7%	42.9%	35.7%	0%	0%
Outcome 4	50%	42.9%	7.1%	14.3%	14.3%

Table 2. To what extent are the learning outcomes addressed in the course? By course (N = 7 for each course)

	Introduces		Reinforces		Emphasizes		Does not address/Not apparent		Not enough information	
Course	**100**	**101**	**100**	**101**	**100**	**101**	**100**	**101**	**100**	**101**
Outcome 1	71.4%	57.1%	71.4%	42.9%	0%	57.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Outcome 2	57.1%	42.9%	57.1%	71.4%	57.1%	42.9%	0%	0%	14.3%	0%
Outcome 3	85.7%	42.9%	57.1%	57.1%	57.1%	71.4%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Outcome 4	57.1%	42.9%	85.1%	28.6%	0%	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%	28.6%	0%

Student Work Samples

Course instructors were asked to submit the instructions for three course assignments, projects, or exams. From the three assignments, instructors selected one and provided samples of student work. The Office of Institutional Assessment chose 3 students for each section by random selection, and instructors submitted one work sample for each student. Many instructors chose to submit an additional exemplar. A total of 86 work samples were collected. The work samples represented exams, homework assignments, and analysis projects.

Table 3 displays the frequency for which the learning outcomes were targeted in the selected assignments. Instructors were most likely to select assignments that emphasized Outcome 3, but most submitted final exams or projects that covered several, if not all of the learning outcomes.

Table 3. Intended outcome(s) addressed in the selected assignment

	Frequency as identified by the instructor
Outcome 1: Demonstrate understanding of and proficiency in constructing and delivering multiple message types	21
Outcome 2: Understand and practice effective elements of ethical verbal and nonverbal communication	20
Outcome 3: Develop analytical skills and critical listening skills	30
Outcome 4: Understand the influence of culture in communication and will know how to cope with cultural differences when presenting information to an audience	23

The majority of reviewers judged that the assignments gave students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcomes "to a great extent" (32%) or "somewhat" (34%) (see Figure 1). In comparing the student work samples with the assignment instructions, reviewers determined that the work samples demonstrated the intended learning outcomes "completely" (23%) or "mostly" (39%), with another 31% performing "somewhat adequately" (see Figure 2). Only two percent of work samples showed the outcomes "inadequately." Overall, student work samples effectively demonstrated achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Figure 1. To what extent does the assignment give students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcome(s)?
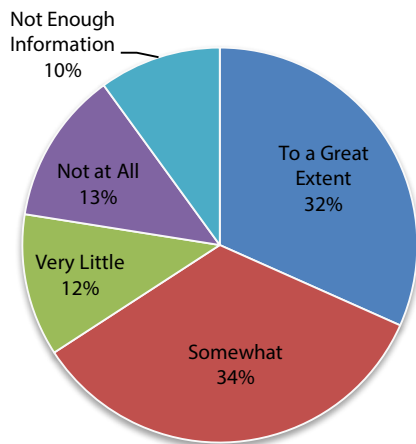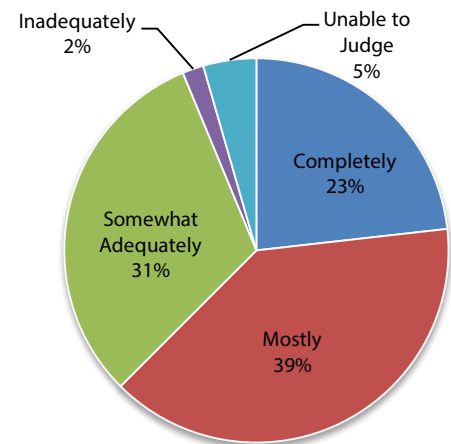

Figure 2. How fully do the student work samples manifest the intended outcomes?

Overall Ratings

Course portfolios were rated holistically in five categories in relation to the Mason Core OC learning outcomes (see Figure 3). Courses were most likely to rate "outstanding" (71%) or "good" (29%) in terms of appropriateness of course material for the Mason Core curriculum, and articulation of the learning outcomes and appropriateness of the assignments and assessments in related to the Core curriculum (36% "outstanding" and 50% "good" for both). Courses seemed to face the most challenges in congruence of the Mason Core learning outcomes with the course content and goals (29% rated as "fair"), although the majority (71%) were rated as "outstanding" or "good." In terms of the overall effectiveness of the course in addressing the OC learning outcomes, 21% were rated "outstanding," 64% "good", and only 14% were rated "fair" (see Figure 4). The OC courses rated highly overall.

Figure 3. Given the mission of the Mason Core program, please rate the course in the following categories:
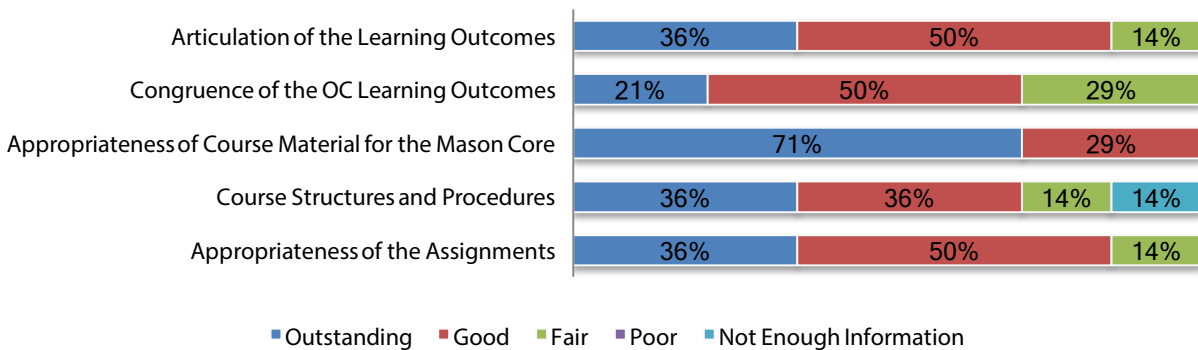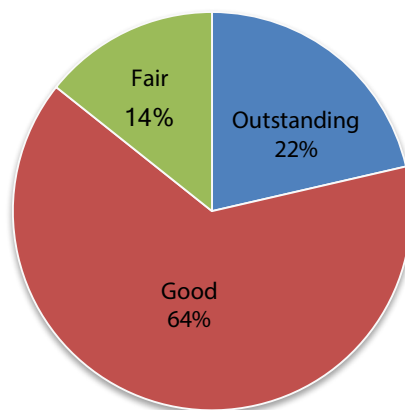
Figure 4. Overall effectiveness of the course in addressing OC learning outcomes

Summary of Faculty Narratives

A key component of the course portfolio is the narrative, in which faculty are asked to discuss their experiences in the course in regard to the student learning outcomes, student learning in the course, unexpected findings, and assessment of learning outcomes. The narrative also addressed the course context, challenges or issues, experimentation or changes that faculty implemented, and the results of those changes.

Most instructors believed that it was beneficial to work with the Mason Core learning outcomes while teaching their courses. Many instructors reported that they used the outcomes to plan their learning activities, structure their course, and determine the topics covered in each class. Instructors reported that they continually referred to the learning outcomes as both a "reminder and a goal" when preparing assignments, lectures, discussions, and activities. Further, several instructors noted that tying grading criteria closely to the objectives helped to align assignments with the outcomes. Other instructors said that the outcomes reminded them that most students are beginners in the subject area and that they need to focus on teaching students basic fundamental concepts to fulfill these outcomes.

Instructors employed various activities and strategies to help students learn. The courses required students to prepare and present several speeches, and instructors also incorporated other methods of learning into their courses. For example, one instructor encouraged experience with interpersonal interactions in both formal and informal ways (e.g., by requiring students to work together to answer questions and by requiring that students sit next to and talk with someone new during each class). Another instructor attempted to engage students who were not presenting by asking them to take an active role in listening (timing the speech, counting verbal tics and use of rhetorical devices, writing comments to speakers). Other instructors reported using a "speech" that students were already familiar with (the "Shamwow" commercial) to help them learn about persuasive strategies. Several instructors said that they created group activities (e.g., performing skits) to allow groups to "compete" against one another. The instructors reported that the group activities resulted in students working together and learning from teammates because they were motivated to win.

The narratives also described the importance of instructors' engagement and personal attention to students since feedback is essential to development of communication skills. The majority of instructors also wrote that students' self-critiques and ratings from peers in the class were useful tools to stimulate student growth and self-awareness. Several instructors worked to help students realize the relevance of communication skills by having guest presenters discuss various careers and how these relate to effective communication skills. Instructors aimed to give interactive lectures asking students to draw from personal and professional experiences and share with the class. Some instructors noted that varying cultural communication norms within the class led to differences but also resulted in

interesting discussions. Overall, instructors noted that many students displayed measurable growth over the course of the semester (e.g., some students reading their speeches directly from notes during their first speech but talking without notes and using appropriate gestures by the end of the semester).

There were a few common challenges that instructors faced in teaching introductory communication courses. The first was that some students were more introverted and were less comfortable than others in speaking in front of a group. Instructors reported engaging in various strategies to improve students' comfort level in speaking in front of their peers (e.g., providing a few minutes for students to talk to their neighbors before starting the class). However, instructors reported that they wanted to create an environment in which students could feel comfortable and open to participate but had to be careful that they were not so comfortable that they did not take the course seriously (i.e., one instructor considered instituting pop quizzes to increase the students' focus). A second common challenge was with an online video system that was used to record students' speeches. Instructors reported that this system was often not allowing students to access or view their videos which made it impossible for students to view their speeches and write their self-assessments.

Instructors had several ideas for improving their courses in future semesters including:
- Include more self-evaluation/self-critique assignments
- Include more peer-reviews to engage audience members
- Increase the amount of one-on-one time the instructor spends with each student
- Include a comprehensive, detail-orientated pop quiz or essay halfway through the semester
- Allowing flexibility for impromptu/improvisational discussions because they can result in some of the best learning experiences
- Adjust the syllabus to allow for more opportunities to challenge "advanced" students
- Focus more on developing students' listening skills and ethical communication ("the students will have group discussion with given scenarios to explore appropriate communication and how unethical communication cause damage to relationships")
- Include more scenarios "such as 'Law and Order' or trial scenario" to find the culprit and judge a conviction in order to engage students in the topic

Summary of Reviewers' Comments

Reviewers were given an opportunity to comment on features of the courses and provide recommendations. This section displays summaries of the reviewers' comments.

What elements/features from the course would you recommend to other faculty who teach OC courses?

- Reviewers praised the use of self-assessment and peer-review to encourage reflection and self-awareness.
- Reviewers considered the conflict analysis assignment to be excellent and helps meet goals of improving listening, conflict management, and group problem solving.
- Many instructors included additional innovative content to improve the quality of the course (e.g., small group problem solving assignment).
- The sequence of assignments and scaffolding is useful to ensure student understanding.

In terms of addressing the intended OC learning outcomes, what suggestions would you give to the faculty member?

- Learning outcome 4 does not appear to be sufficiently addressed and learning outcome 3 needs more scaffolding. Faculty should try to make assignment requirements associated with outcome 4 more explicit. For example, an essay prompt could require analyses of racial, class, or gendered differences.
- Include more attention in teaching students to evaluate credible reliable sources and choosing the best, rather than the more obvious in supporting arguments.

Changes to Oral Communication Courses

In fall 2013, a new Basic Course Director began service at the university, and subsequently began a process to substantially revise the basic course curriculum. Oral Communication courses underwent a major transition right after this assessment was conducted. Several changes in the curriculum and infrastructure were implemented beginning in spring 2014, so the way the courses are currently taught is different from the way in which they were taught when they were submitted for this report. These changes were made in order to better meet the needs of GMU students (whose characteristics had changed since the initial design of the courses around ten years ago). In addition, two additional offerings were added to the Basic Communication Course in Fall 2014: 1) several sections of COMM 100 were taught at the Mason Korea campus; and 2) several sections of COMM 100 were taught as part of the INTO Mason program (which effectively replaced the CISA ACCESS program). The curriculum and infrastructure changes are briefly summarized below.

Curriculum changes:

- Before implementing curriculum changes, the faculty in the Communication department worked through a pilot study process. The pilot study involved a rigorous textbook selection and piloting process.
- The textbook selection process began with a "call for basic course textbook proposals" to all of the publishers that have public speaking offerings and they received proposals from nine publishers. Four textbooks were selected and tested in their spring 2014 pilot study.
- Instructors taught eight different versions of COMM 100 using different combinations of textbook and assignments. All of the sections used a similar course schedule and assignments.
- They collected substantial survey and performance data to determine which assignments, textbooks, technologies, preparation assignments, and teaching practices were most effective.
- At the same time, they outlined the curriculum that would serve as the foundation of the course.
- In Fall 2014, this piloting process was performed for COMM 101 as well.

Infrastructure changes identified:

- Recording technology for COMM 100: There is a need to stabilize the recording system, identify a more reliable system, have classrooms dedicated to COMM 100 courses, or identify and purchase a portable recording technology.
- Classroom technology for COMM 101: There is need to have lecture capture systems and classroom computers and projectors.
- Full time staffing: The department previously relied on a large pool of adjuncts to teach COMM 100 and 101 but it was hard to compete with other local schools in terms of pay and benefits, and it will be hard to meet teaching needs as program continues to grow. There is a need to hire full time instructors who are dedicated to teaching entirely and accountable to the department and the department would also benefit from adding more GTA's.
- Speech Lab: Currently, a speech lab exists that offers free tutoring and coaching for students who are working on presentations. However, it had been staffed entirely by student volunteers so it has limited capacity and the need for this resource continues to grow. The department would like to establish a Campus Communication Center that would offer tutoring and coaching. This center would have a dedicated space, a full-time faculty member and paid tutors who will have greater availability (e.g., MA students).

APPENDIX

Mason Core Oral Communication Courses Offered in Fall 2013

Course	Title	Enrollment	% of Total Enrollment	# Portfolios
College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Communication Department				
COMM 100	Public Speaking (30 sections)	660	44%	11
COMM 101	Interpersonal and Group Interaction (36 sections)	825	56%	11

GENERAL EDUCATION: ORAL COMMUNICATION

Oral communication competency at George Mason University is defined as the ability to use oral communication as a way of thinking and learning as well as sharing ideas with others.

Upon completion of these courses, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate understanding of and proficiency in constructing and delivering multiple message types.
2. Understand and practice effective elements of ethical verbal and nonverbal communication.
3. Develop analytical skills and critical listening skills.
4. Understand the influence of culture in communication and will know how to cope with cultural differences when presenting information to an audience.

Course:_____   **Reviewer:**_____

The review worksheet is broken into two parts: the individual course portfolio and the overall course review. Please complete the individual course portfolio worksheet for each portfolio that you review. Then, rate the course as a whole using the individual portfolios as evidence for the overall rating.

Section I: Individual Course Portfolio

1. **Evaluate the following based on the selected assignments and student work samples. Evidence may also be found in the syllabus, course map, and reflective statement. Do not re-grade student work.**

Use the table below to answer the following questions:
a) Intended outcome(s) addressed in the selected assignment (Check all outcomes that apply under "Instructor Intent".)
b) To what extent does the assignment give students the opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the intended outcome(s)?

	Instructor Intent	To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Very Little	Not at All	Not Enough Information
Outcome 1		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 2		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 3		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 4		3	2	1	0	IN

c) How fully do the student work samples manifest the intended outcomes? (Ignore the instructor's grade and related comments.)

Student Name or Work Sample #	Completely	Mostly	Somewhat Adequately	Inadequately	Unable to Judge
Self-Selected Exemplar (optional)	4	3	2	1	☐
#1	4	3	2	1	☐
#2	4	3	2	1	☐
#3	4	3	2	1	☐
#4	4	3	2	1	☐

2. **In terms of addressing the general education learning outcomes, what suggestions would you give to the instructor?**

Section II: The Course Overall

1. **To what extent are the above learning outcomes addressed in the course?**

	Instructor Intent (I, R, E)	Emphasizes Outcome	Reinforces Outcome	Introduces Outcome	Does not Address/ Not Apparent	Not Enough Information
Outcome 1		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 2		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 3		3	2	1	0	IN
Outcome 4		3	2	1	0	IN

"Introduces" (I) indicates that students are introduced to the concept.
"Reinforces" (R) indicates that students have some experience with the concept and have opportunities to practice.
"Emphasizes" (E) indicates that students have had sufficient practice and can now demonstrate mastery.

2. **Given all available evidence, rate the course overall in the following categories:**

	Outstanding	Good	Fair	Poor	Not enough info
Articulation of the general education learning outcomes for students	4	3	2	1	IN
Congruence of the general education learning outcomes with the course content and goals	4	3	2	1	IN
Appropriateness of course material for the general education curriculum	4	3	2	1	IN
Course structures and procedures that contribute to the likely achievement of the general education outcomes by students	4	3	2	1	IN
Appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment, in relation to the general education learning outcomes	4	3	2	1	IN
Overall effectiveness of the course in addressing general education learning outcomes	4	3	2	1	IN

3. **What elements/features of the course would you recommend to other instructors?**

4. **To what extent does the course portfolio demonstrate an exemplary general education course?**

   ○ Definitely Yes   ○ Probably Yes   ○ Probably Not   ○ Definitely Not

5. **Other comments about the course or the review process:**