

COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

A UNC Charlotte Initiative to Promote Critical Thinking and Learning

Taskforce Report
2 April 2009

In Fall 2008, the Provost and Faculty President appointed a taskforce to explore the need for a program on campus that would provide support and professional development for faculty and to propose the form that such a program would take. The following document outlines the conclusions that the taskforce has reached.

VISION:

The Taskforce takes as a starting point an expansive view of its charge, defining communication as a complex social process in which material, discourse, medium, audience, and purpose are all at play. This being the case, the responsibility of a university faculty is to extend and refine students' ability to communicate by enabling an approach to communication that is built around a critical enquiry of the communication process. A university faculty should thus develop students' ability to identify, negotiate, and construct the ideas, information, emotions, and arguments, to marshal appropriate discourses, genres, and media, and to understand how composing processes are shaped by audience and purpose in ways that do not artificially distinguish between content and form. This responsibility necessarily entails, in any given instance, developing students' mastery of some standardized communications forms—a lab report, an oral presentation, a design critique, a web page, or an analytic essay. However, the fullest development of students' ability to communicate also requires that faculty transcend such set pieces by enabling students to reflexively recognize and adapt their communication to a variety of different discourse communities including the academic, professional, civic, and political. Seen in this light communication is integral to the processes of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving that make learning possible.

These obligations involve both a rethinking of many of the assumptions faculty bring to their teaching and an engagement with broader philosophical questions. In order to support faculty in achieving this responsibility the development of a robust Communications Across the Curriculum (CAC) program at UNC Charlotte is essential. The goals of this CAC program can be articulated in terms of its impact on students, faculty, and departments.

In a University that embraced the CAC vision, STUDENTS would:

- Be actively engaged in communication in many (if not most) of their courses by means of assignments and activities which reflectively and intentionally developed their ability to communicate as an integral part of learning.
- Encounter programs of instruction, extending beyond the limits of an individual course, which shape students' developing ability to successfully navigate communication as a complex intellectual and social process.

- Have access to and learn to make use of multiple resources—faculty, central and localized writing centers, other students—that can help them develop a more sophisticated grasp of communications processes.
- Encounter a recognizably familiar set of tools, processes, vocabulary, and expectations used in the teaching of communication.

In a University that embraced the CAC vision, FACULTY would:

- Be intentional about the ways in which specific assignments and activities would engage students in thinking critically about the communication needed to achieve a specific purpose.
- Design courses, assignments, and activities to foster students' ability to communicate within the context of shared understandings (at the departmental, college, and even university level) about that learning process.
- Have access to a network of professional development support—collegial and professional—to help them effectively develop students' abilities as communicators. This support should include practical strategies ('how to workshops'), explorations of innovative approaches to communication in the curriculum, and a philosophical engagement with and inquiry into the communication process.

In a University that embraced the CAC vision, DEPARTMENTS would:

- Develop and implement expectations about faculty and student responsibilities with regard to communication in the curriculum and ways to determine if those expectations are being met.
- Recognize the importance of instruction that engages with the communication process as part of the assessment of and rewards for teaching and recognize research on communication and pedagogy as part of the assessment of and rewards for scholarship.

Uniting these goals is a faculty-centered approach to the CAC program and the vision it pursues. The assumption is that faculty are engaged and committed to the improvement of their students' ability to communicate but that they encounter challenges, and sometimes frustration, in achieving that end. Far from increasing workload demands on faculty, therefore, these goals and the proposed activities are intended to provide guidance that will allow faculty to better distribute the effort they currently invest to achieve more satisfying outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Phase One (tentatively the 2009-2010 academic year)

1-a Spring 2009

- Circulate Draft Plan for administrative and faculty review and comment
- Begin a search process for two coordinators (one in writing and one in speaking). These would be long-term (3-5 years) appointees who are motivated to start this program from the ground up. They would need significant released time, minimum of one course per semester. [NOTE: The question has been raised about why we should formally separate written and oral communication in this fashion.]

- Develop an Institute in May 2009: invite faculty (including taskforce members). As part of the condition of attending participants would sign on to become advocates for the 2009-10 academic year.
- Reauthorize the CAC Task Force as an Advisory Committee for the 2009-10 year and beyond; redefine its roles. Include those interested from the May Institute who would be willing to work in their departments.

1-b Fall 2009

- Coordinators begin their terms and
- Develop a select number of CAC workshops/ programs based on faculty needs; these programs should include both practical strategies ('how to workshops'), explorations of new technologies and methodologies, and inquiry into the communication process. Offer in both open session and for departments/colleges.
- Identify several departments and/or colleges interested in a pilot program in which the coordinator(s) would work with the department/college to explore communication processes in that discipline and identify the problems faculty would most like to address. The goal would be to generate a common framework for the unit's approach to the varied communication situations students will encounter in its courses so as to facilitate students' development of an inquiry-based approach to communication. These department frameworks could be used as benchmarks for assessment in each discipline and as a model for other disciplines.

1-c Spring 2010

- Continue to offer a select number of CAC workshops/ programs as above
- Meet with every department in the university to identify specific departmental/college goals; coordinate these meetings with members of the Task Force/Advisory Committee
- Develop relationships and partnerships with units in the University: CTL; WRC, and the Rhetoric and Writing Program.
- Create a web presence, with information and resources, and begin to provide faculty resources for reading, writing, and speaking (a CAC library of books and articles, grading rubrics, and other handouts), some of which could be online.
- Plan a second summer institute for May 2010 using information gleaned about faculty and departmental needs to develop the program. Target attendance at faculty teams from a department.
- Write a report at the end of Phase One with recommendations on how to proceed based on departmental and other feedback.

Phase Two (Fall 2010 onwards?)

Although consultation with faculty and departments from Phase One may change these priorities, the following goals are envisaged for Phase Two:

- Continue to build an administrative structure for the CAC program that combines centralized support and administration with localized expertise and advocacy. The CAC coordinator(s) provide the former, organizing workshops and making connections between faculty and departments, but they work closely with representatives from departments and colleges who

will be instrumental in recruiting faculty and adapting CAC initiatives and messages to local needs.

- Create an online Newsletter with open submission opportunities from faculty across the university.
- Continue CAC workshops and presentations for faculty and departments. These will provide development and support on a 'need to know' or drop-in basis and are intended to be flexible and accessible and require relatively low time investment.
- Develop more systematic forms of faculty development (day long mini retreats for departments and colleges, training the trainer workshops for individual faculty etc.) Some of these may require resources to incentivize faculty to attend. These more systematized development opportunities should build relationships between the CAC program and their departments. The ongoing summer institute would be one such opportunity.
- Explore and propose other ways, in addition to workshops, to provide effective professional development opportunities for faculty seeking to engage critically with the teaching and learning of communication practices in their courses.
- Help departments design courses that would incorporate a more sophisticated approach to communication practices in their disciplines.
- Help departments develop assessment plans covering communication.
- Work with the WRC to design a program to recruit and train undergraduates/graduates as departmental consultants in writing. Set up satellite disciplinary Writing Centers to offer one-on-one peer writing support in the majors. Consider the needs and possible solutions for support for oral communication.
- Work with Faculty Employment Status Committee (FESC) to encourage colleges and departments to redesign annual, reappointment, and tenure and promotion documents to recognize CAC achievements and faculty participation.

Phase Three

The following are possible opportunities to be considered as the CAC program matures.

- Consider the long term administrative structure for the CAC program, including the possibility of permanent hires for the coordinator positions and the roles and rewards for departmental agents.
- Continue the Summer Institute to create a cadre of faculty to work within their departments on CAC issues and/or revive the Wildacres Retreat for UNC Charlotte faculty.
- Consider opportunities to interact and provide support outside of the university, including options such as a regional (NC/SC) CAC Conference that invites community college and K-12 teachers or consulting with other campuses.
- Conduct assessment of the CAC program. Then, based upon the data collected in that assessment, propose ways to revise and develop CAC offerings going forward. Consult with the CAC Taskforce to draft and implement that plan.
- Facilitate campus-wide writing/speaking policy and curricular reform.

Administration:

In the near term, the CAC program will be administered by University College as part of its responsibilities for overseeing the General Education program.