

2002-03 VERBAL ASSESSMENT REPORT  
April 21, 2003

Prepared by

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Abstract

The Verbal Assessment Project is designed to provide feedback on the two courses that comprise the general education communication requirements. In 2002-03, assessment activities focused primarily on analyzing and disseminating the results of a study of information literacy skills developed within the Comm-A courses. Another main component of the Verbal Assessment Project this year involved the continuing discussions of recommendations stemming from the 1999 Comm-B study. Finally, the report of the results of the survey of graduating seniors was completed during this year. In the coming year, the Verbal Assessment Project will focus on finalizing the Comm-A Information Literacy report, disseminating the results of the Senior Survey, and continuing efforts to provide insights and tools related to verbal assessment to constituencies at the University of Wisconsin.

This document provides a description of verbal assessment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Following a brief overview of the Verbal Assessment Project, assessment activities in the 2002-03 academic year are summarized. The concluding sections highlight the agenda for the Verbal Assessment Project in 2003-04 and directions for future verbal assessment efforts.

## THE VERBAL ASSESSMENT PROJECT: AN OVERVIEW

Since the fall of 1997, the Verbal Assessment Project has focused on evaluating the general education communication program. Broadly speaking, the objectives of general education instruction in communication address two types of student outcomes. First, students should manifest improved *skills* in writing, oral communication, and information literacy. In addition, students should develop *attitudes* about the process of writing, speaking, and accessing information resources that promote the implementation of those skills. Thus, the mission of the Verbal Assessment Project is to provide insight into the impact of general education communication courses on the associated abilities, knowledge, and attitudes of University of Wisconsin students. (An elaborated discussion of the mission of the Verbal Assessment Project was included in the 1997-98 Verbal Assessment Report and is available upon request.)

## VERBAL ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES: 2002-03

In 2002-03, assessment activities focused primarily on analyzing and disseminating the results of a study of information literacy skills developed within the Comm-A courses. Another main component of the Verbal Assessment Project this year involved the continuing discussions of recommendations stemming from the 1999 Comm-B study. Finally, the report of the results of the survey of graduating seniors was completed during this year. The following sections summarize the specific assessment activities undertaken in the past twelve months.

### *Comm-A Information Literacy Study*

An evaluation of information literacy skills developed within the Comm-A course was originally designed as part of a larger study of Comm-A outcomes. When that larger study was cancelled due to low survey response rates, the Verbal Assessment Committee focused its efforts on developing tools for assessing Comm-A students' information literacy skills.

In spring semester of 2002, one section from each of Communication Arts 100, Engineering Professional Development 155, English 100, and English 118 participated in the study. In each class, instructors identified one writing or speaking assignment that required students to use periodical publications as resources. Instructors then assigned students to complete a library research log book in conjunction with conducting research for that paper or speech. The research log solicited step-by-step information from students about their research strategies and reasoning as they located sources for the class assignment. Completed research logs were collected by the course instructor and forwarded along with a final bibliography to the Verbal Assessment Committee.

In the period covered by this report, our efforts focused on processing the data collected by the library research logs. In the summer of 2002, Leanne Knobloch (then the Verbal Assessment Research

Associate) met with a team of seven librarians to generate performance evaluations for each step of students' research efforts. This process involved first generating a set of evaluation criteria for both students' strategies and their explanations for their decisions. The librarians then applied these criteria to rate the extent to which students employed appropriate research strategies and demonstrated an understanding of the issues involved in their decisions. The team met on four occasions to evaluate interrater reliability and to hone their decision rules.

The ratings provided by the librarians were used in conjunction with the data collected from students via the research logs to provide a profile of the research strategies employed by students. The information gleaned includes both a summary of the process of research employed and an assessment of students' decision-making. Results were presented at the annual meeting of the Wisconsin Association for Academic Librarians, and are scheduled to be presented to relevant personnel in the UW-Madison Libraries. A final report of the results of the study will be prepared for the General Education Committee in the summer of 2003.

#### *Communication-B Study Follow-up*

The last Verbal Assessment Report (available upon request) detailed recommendations arising from the 1999 Comm-B study results. In 2001-02, those recommendations given substantial attention by the L&S General Education Committee, and those conversations have continued into the 2002-03 academic year. As chair of the Verbal Assessment Committee, Professor Solomon has devoted a significant amount of time to participating in these discussions. In the summer of 2002, Solomon and Knobloch participated in an L&S General Education sub-committee charged with writing the final report of the committee's recommendations. Solomon also participated on the sub-committee responsible for revising the Comm-B requirements, as per one of those recommendations. Solomon is also responsible for contributing to the presentation of these recommendations at the May 2003 University Academic Planning Council meeting. In sum, Solomon's committee responsibilities that correspond with her role of Verbal Assessment Committee chair continue to be substantial.

#### *Senior Survey Report*

In 1998, the Verbal Assessment Project included a survey of graduating seniors to measure attitudes and beliefs relevant to public speaking, writing, and library use among students who matriculated prior to the implementation of the general education communication requirements. To assess these same attitudes and beliefs among seniors who were subject to the requirements, we repeated the Senior Survey in the spring of 2001. Our study was designed to assess research questions targeting (a) changes in students' attitudes as a function of the implementation of the general education communication program, and (b) students' degree of satisfaction with various components of Comm-A and Comm-B.

We drew a random sample of students who matriculated before ( $N = 523$ ) and after ( $N = 625$ ) the implementation of the general education communication program; then, interviewers employed by the Wisconsin Survey Center surveyed those students by telephone. We included questions in the survey that measured (a) students' attitudes about writing, public speaking, and library research, (b) their curricular experiences, (c) the effort they devoted to their college coursework, and (d) their experience of impediments to learning. We also gathered information about students' demographic characteristics and scholastic aptitude from a database maintained by the Office of the Registrar.

We evaluated the implementation of the general education communication program by conducting *t*-tests to compare attitudes about academic anxiety, confidence in skills, importance of communication skills, and frequency of library use held by the two cohorts of students. We also conducted regression analyses to determine the extent to which differences between the two cohorts could be explained by students' scholastic aptitude, academic effort, impediments to learning, and curricular experiences.

We evaluated students' satisfaction with Comm-A and Comm-B by conducting *t*-tests to compare measures of course satisfaction and the usefulness of various methods of education to the neutral midpoint of the 5-point Likert scale. We also conducted correlation analyses to determine how course satisfaction corresponded with scholastic aptitude, academic effort, impediments to learning, academic anxiety, confidence in skills, importance of skills, and frequency of library use.

#### *Findings Regarding the Implementation of the General Education Communication Program*

- *Academic anxiety.* Students who completed the general education communication program reported less library anxiety than students who were not bound by the requirements. This difference was attributable to students' academic qualities and curricular experiences.
- *Confidence in skills.* Students who completed the general education communication program reported more confidence in their writing, public speaking, and library research skills than students who were not bound by the requirements. The results for confidence in writing and public speaking skills were evident even after covarying students' academic qualities and curricular experiences; the finding for confidence in library research skills was subsumed by students' academic qualities and curricular experiences.
- *Importance of communication skills.* The two cohorts of students did not differ in their perceptions of the importance of communication skills.
- *Library use.* Differences between students who matriculated before and after the implementation of the general education communication program were apparent in both directions. In the years spanning the two surveys the availability of networked library resources grew significantly. Moreover, part of the goal of general education information literacy instruction is to encourage use of online databases. Accordingly, the results indicated a shift in the way students access library resources that corresponds with the goal of the general education communication program. After covarying the effects of academic qualities and curricular experiences, students who completed the general education communication program reported more frequently accessing library resources from outside the library and using the library to meet friends. On the other hand, students who were not bound by the requirements reported more frequently using the reference collections, the general book collection, reserve materials, and photocopying facilities.

#### *Findings Regarding the Evaluation of the General Education Communication Program*

- *Satisfaction with Comm-A.* Students were relatively satisfied with writing, public speaking, and library research components of the requirement, as well as the course in general. In addition, students who placed more importance on communication skills tended to be more satisfied with Comm-A.

- *Satisfaction with Comm-B.* Students were relatively satisfied with the writing and library research components of the requirement, as well as the course in general. Conversely, they were relatively dissatisfied with the public speaking component of the course.
- *Satisfaction with methods of education.* Students perceived the instructor's written comments on drafts subject to revision, class lectures about writing, peer review of writing, and individual conferences with the instructor about writing to be particularly useful methods of education in both Comm-A and Comm-B. Conversely, students indicated that reading assignments about writing was not an especially useful method of education in either Comm-A or Comm-B.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that most aspects of the general education communication program are cultivating beneficial attitudes. The largest gains were evident for the information literacy component of the program, and favorable results were also apparent for the writing component of the program. The public speaking component, however, did not fare as well. Most notably, students were relatively dissatisfied with the public speaking aspect of the Comm-B course. These findings suggest that the public speaking component of the general education communication program is functioning less effectively than the writing and information literacy components. (A copy of the full report is provided in Appendix A.)

#### MECHANISMS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The mission of the Verbal Assessment Project includes serving as a source of tools and information related to communication instruction and verbal assessment. Accordingly, verbal assessment activities have included providing information about the Verbal Assessment Project to the university community. These efforts are summarized in the following sections.

##### *The Verbal Assessment Bulletin*

The *Verbal Assessment Bulletin* is a newsletter produced by the Verbal Assessment Committee to provide information about verbal assessment activities. One issue of the *Verbal Assessment Bulletin*, slated for May 2003, will be distributed in the period covered by this report. In response to the findings of previous assessment studies and changes in the Comm-B requirements under consideration, this issue will serve as a resource on teaching both information literacy and oral communication within general education courses.

The *Verbal Assessment Bulletin* is circulated to faculty, lecturers, and instructors instrumental in presenting Comm-A and Comm-B courses. In addition, copies of the newsletter are sent to a variety of campus administrators. Thus, the *Verbal Assessment Bulletin* continues to be an important source of information about verbal assessment efforts for administrators, faculty, and instructional staff involved in delivering the general education communication courses on this campus.

##### *TA Training*

In August 2002, Professor Solomon participated in the Comm-B Instructor Training Session. In light of evidence from previous assessment studies that oral communication instruction is relatively ineffective in

these courses, Solomon focused on strategies for integrating oral communication into the Comm-B course.

#### VERBAL ASSESSMENT PROJECT AGENDA: 2003-04

The primary activity in the 2003-04 academic year will be disseminating and acting upon the results of the two most recent assessment studies: the Senior Survey and the Comm-A Information Literacy Assessment. In addition, we will continue to produce issues of the *Verbal Assessment Bulletin* as part of our continuing efforts to share the results of verbal assessment efforts with the campus community.

#### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE EFFORTS

With the authority for the Verbal Assessment Project agenda transferred to the L&S General Education Committee, directions for future research are necessarily contextualized by the broader goals of General Education Assessment. With respect to the communication requirements, two issues merit attention in the near future.

First, although the Verbal Assessment Project has completed studies at all three levels targeted in our long-range plan (i.e., Comm-A, Comm-B, and upon graduation), the variety of outcomes assessed at those levels has been incomplete. Most notably, the broader Comm-A study was cancelled and replaced by a more focused assessment of information literacy skills. Likewise, oral communication skill outcomes were not directly assessed in any study to date. Thus, we see the implementation of the Comm-A assessment study previously planned for 2001-02 as an continuing goal for the Verbal Assessment Project.

A second and more specific issue concerns the decision rules for granting Comm-B credit to transfer students. At present, a transfer student can earn Comm-B credit for courses taken elsewhere that are similar in content to a UW-Madison Comm-B course regardless of whether the course taken was communication intensive. Although this decision rule was perhaps a necessity during the implementation of the Comm-B requirement, the extent to which this option compromises the general education communication program is unclear.

As these two items exemplify, we conceive the future of the Verbal Assessment Project as a balanced mix of studies that combine to support generalizable conclusions about the outcomes of the general education communication courses and to provide specific insights into the effective implementation of the program.