Communication

According to UND’s Essential Studies (ES) goals, the communication dimension should prepare students to “be able to speak in civic, academic, and professional settings with a sense of purpose and audience” and that “communicating skillfully involves learning the conventions associated with writing and speaking and learning to write and to speak clearly to diverse audiences.”

According to the ES website, students improve their communication skills when they practice the following:

- Present information, express ideas, or construct arguments for particular purposes and audiences.
- Use critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to create effective written or oral presentations.
- Present research, cite sources, and format documents in ways that are consistent with different disciplinary standards.

Starting with incoming freshmen and working towards seniors and alumni, we explore attitudes and beliefs of UND students, acquired through a number of different surveys, concerning various aspects of the communication curriculum.

Freshmen

Incoming freshmen answering the 2009 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey have a moderately strong belief in their ability to speak publicly, clearly and effectively as well as write clearly and effectively. In terms of public speaking, 34.9% rate themselves as “above average” or “highest 10%” compared to 37.8% of their public institution peers.

Turning attention towards writing ability, 40.9% of incoming 2009 freshmen rate themselves in either the “above average” or “highest 10%” categories compared to 37.0% of their public institution peers. This is up from 2007 (36.5%) and is the highest reported percentage since the question was asked regularly in 1985.

On a 5-point Likert scale (1=very low skill level, 5=very high skill level), UND freshmen score themselves a 3.8 on both their ability to write and speak clearly and effectively. These self scores have varied little since 2007 with a 3.9 for both in 2008 and 3.7 for writing and 3.8 for speaking in 2007.

A few other key findings in the 2009 CIRP Freshman survey concerning communication: 58.7% of respondents rate themselves as “above average” or “highest 10%” in their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues; 28.6% report that chances are good they will communicate regularly with their professors which is the highest reported percentage since the question was first asked in 2000 (23.2%); 43.8% (53.1% natl.) report “frequently” within the last year they would “seek solutions to problems and explain them to others”; and 46.3% (47.0% natl.) report that within the past year they would frequently “revise papers to improve writing.”
Another survey aimed at freshmen (and seniors), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), attempts to capture the experiences of students after they have attended classes at UND. Administered during the spring semester in 2009, the NSSE reports some interesting findings regarding communication. Concerning if they “asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions,” 44.3% of 2008-2009 first-year UND students report “sometimes” while 50.7% report either “often” or “very often” (natl. 40.3% “sometimes,” 56.0% “often” or “very often”). Also, 54.6% report “sometimes” for the frequency during the year they “made a class presentation”, 26.0% report “often” or “very often” (natl. 58.4% “sometimes,” 23.7% “often” or “very often”). Compared to the CIRP Freshman respondents, NSSE respondents report higher frequencies of communication with faculty members: 72.4% (77.6% natl.) “often” or “very often” used e-mail to communicate with an instructor, 45.2% (48.3% natl.) “often” or “very often” discussed grades or assignments with an instructor, 48.6% (55.9% natl.) “often” or “very often” received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on academic performance, however, only 17.3% (17.4% natl.) “often” or “very often” discussed ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class.

Again, as with the CIRP Freshman survey, respondents were asked about their academic abilities such as speaking and writing clearly and effectively. Of the NSSE respondents, 73.0% (72.9% natl.) report that UND contributed “quite a bit” or “very much” to their ability to write clearly and effectively, while 68.3% (60.9% natl.) report UND contributed “quite a bit” or “very much” to their ability to speak clearly and effectively. Further, 74.3% (70.3% natl.) report “quite a bit” or “very much” concerning working effectively with others which takes a great deal of interpersonal communication skill.

Sophomores

When asked how much of their education at UND contributed to their personal growth in writing effectively, 35.9% of respondents of the 2010 Sophomore Satisfaction Survey (SSS) report “very much.” However, female respondents feel more strongly with 41.1% responding with “very much” compared to 29.8% of males. Additionally, 51.5% of respondents report UND contributed “somewhat” to their personal growth in writing effectively.

Concerning speaking effectively, 34.0% report UND contributed “very much” with only small differences between males and females, while 53.4% report “somewhat.” Further, 21.9% of respondents feel that UND instructors place “great importance” on encouraging high-quality thinking and writing, while 36.2% feel “much importance” and 41% “some importance.”

Also, 29.4% of SSS respondents report that UND contributed “very much” to their personal growth concerning working cooperatively in a group, which requires a great deal of skill in communication and 48.5% report “somewhat.” Again, there was more than a slight difference between males and females with 35.7% of females and 21.7% of males answering “very much.” However, only 20.8% report “frequently” or “very often” did they study with others rather than study alone, while 34.9% of the respondents report “sometimes.”

Sophomore respondents did report higher frequencies of discussing class assignments with fellow students (56.6% either “frequently” or “very often”) and discussing current issues with other students (22.9% “frequently” or “very often”). Interestingly, 76.9% of sophomore respondents report improving their ability to get along with others as a college-related goal but with a noteworthy difference between male and female respondents (84.4% female, 67.9% male).
Student-faculty interaction, an important dimension of most university-administered student assessments, is once again asked of respondents in the SSS. Of these sophomore respondents, 15.1% report discussing their studies with an instructor either “frequently” or “very often” and 29.3% report “sometimes.” Further, 53.5% report being “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the level of interaction with faculty outside of class.

**Seniors**

On to the 2009 NSSE survey, 68.5% of UND seniors report they “often” or “very often” asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions while an additional 27.6% report “sometimes” (natl. 66.0% “often” or “very often,” 31.8% “sometimes”). 2009 senior respondents report higher frequencies of making class presentations than freshmen respondents with 59.6% of seniors reporting “often” or “very often” compared to 26.0% of freshman respondents.

Compared to the NSSE freshman respondents, NSSE seniors report higher frequencies of communication with faculty members: 84.0% (72.4% fresh., 87.9% natl.) “often” or “very often” used e-mail to communicate with an instructor, 59.0% (45.2% fresh., 57.5% natl.) “often” or “very often” discussed grades or assignments with an instructor, and 63.5% (48.6% fresh., 62.7% natl.) “often” or “very often” received prompt written or oral feedback from faculty on academic performance. However, discussing ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class was still low among seniors, though slightly higher than freshmen: 24.6% (23.7% natl.) “often” or “very often” versus 17.3% for freshman respondents.

Interestingly, freshman and senior respondents differed little concerning UND’s contribution to their ability to write clearly and effectively with those responding “quite a bit” or “very much”: 72.3% for senior and 73.0% for freshman respondents. Senior respondents edge out freshmen concerning “speaking clearly and effectively” in the same response categories: 68.9% for seniors versus 68.3% for freshmen.

Somewhat surprising, is that NSSE freshmen report higher frequencies of preparing two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in than NSSE seniors. Those reporting “often” or “very often”: 69.0% of freshmen versus 44.6% of seniors. This is a trend that has held true at UND for five administrations of the NSSE —which goes back to 2000.

In addition to the CIRP Freshman Survey, UND also administers the CIRP Senior Survey which is designed to assess how college students have changed since entering college. Compared to when they first entered college, 92.9% of respondents report their interpersonal skills are “stronger” or “much stronger” versus 88.3% of national seniors. Concerning public speaking ability, 49% rate themselves as “above average” or “highest 10%” versus 45.1% of national CIRP senior respondents while 68.4% rate themselves in the same categories for writing ability (versus 65.6% of national CIRP seniors).

Asked if they communicated regularly with professors, 45.9% of CSS respondents report “frequently” (36.7% natl.) and 50.0% “occasionally” (53.7% natl.). Also, 28.9% report “frequently” asking professors questions after class (21.9% natl.) and an additional 67.0% report “occasionally.”

**Alumni**

Respondents of the 2008 Alumni Outcomes Survey which studies the impact of UND on the 2004-2005 graduates also answered questions concerning communication. Of the respondents, 70.7% (70.9% natl.) report that recognizing and using effective verbal communication is of “major” importance in being successful in today’s world, however, 43.8% (40.9% natl.) of the same respondents believe UND had a “major” impact on the development of this skill. In the same vein, 55.2% (63.1% natl.) report recognizing and using effective written communication is of “major” importance in being successful in today’s world while 45.1% (44.1% natl.) of the same respondents believe that UND had a major impact on the development of this skill.