

The Centrality of the Center: Best Practices for Developing a Robust Communication Center on Campus

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Abstract:

Communication centers are a complementary student service that can help stakeholders improve communication competency. Centers can often serve as a foundational interdisciplinary resource for communication students as well as those in other majors. As the presence of communication centers continues to rise, because of their centrality on campus, it is important that center praxis receives continued exploration. To assist communication center directors, university administrators, faculty, and student center tutors, this article provides 10 best practices for developing a robust communication center on campus.

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The Centrality of the Center: Best Practices for Developing a Robust Communication Center on Campus

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Communication centers are a complementary student service that can help stakeholders improve communication competency. Centers can often serve as a foundational interdisciplinary resource for communication students as well as those in other majors. As the presence of communication centers continues to rise, because of their centrality on campus, it is important that center praxis receives continued exploration. To assist communication center directors, university administrators, faculty, and student center tutors, this article provides 10 best practices for developing a robust communication center on campus.

Communication centers serve a valuable purpose on college campuses and continue to be a necessary and well utilized student support service. In fact, the number of centers on both two and four-year institutions continues to rise (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). Originally supplementing the basic or introductory communication course (Nelson, Whitfield, & Moreau, 2012), communication centers can also be catalysts for campus-wide service and institutional culture (Strawser, Apostel, O’Keeffe, & Simons, 2018). No matter how institutions use the communication lab or center, faculty and students can greatly benefit from an effective center experience.

The center can provide all campus stakeholders, but especially students, with invaluable supplemental communication training. For context, communication centers can serve a variety of roles on college campuses. Primarily, centers help students communicate effectively in various contexts. Some communication centers focus exclusively on oral communication while others may be more multimodal (oral, written, and/or digital). Centers may employ student tutors or recruit faculty to help train student communicators and center audiences are not limited to communication majors. According to Turner (2015), students who use center facilities become more competent and confident public speakers and, even more so, more effective holistic communicators. As a complementary resource to classroom communication content (Helsel & Hogg, 2006), students who visit

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communication centers, also called communication labs or oral communication centers, reported decreased communication apprehension (Dwyer, Carlson, & Hahre, 2002) and improved grades (Hunt & Simonds, 2002).

Because all communication centers functionally serve their specific institution, establishing generalizable best practices is difficult. Unfortunately, “minimal research exists about communication centers that allows for generalizability and comparability to improve scholarship and inform best practices” (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, & Anderson, 2017, p. 411). Therefore, the list of best practices below represents an attempt by several leading communication center scholar-practitioners to identify unifying best practices that can inform center praxis. This list of best practices addresses institutional differences across Carnegie classifications (i.e. doctoral universities, master’s colleges and universities, baccalaureate, associate's, special focus, and tribal colleges). The authors believe the best practices identified here are useful for any institutional communication center, no matter the size, scope, or resources available.

Best Practice #1: Make Your Students Stakeholders

Thomas Merton once said, “The least of the work of learning is done in the classroom.” His words are particularly true in communication centers. Students come into these centers to receive feedback on their assignments, and the results are stronger projects. However, we can stretch this give-and-take a bit further in communication centers and make our students our strongest stakeholders. Here’s how: as we listen to student ideas, write them in a public area, and encourage others to offer ways of accomplishing that idea, the communication center should continue to evolve (Strawser, Apostel, O’Keefe, & Simmons, 2018). To make students our stakeholders, center directors and staff need to listen to them, encourage them, and dream big with them, letting our communication centers be the hub for their ideas. Specifically, centers may consider employing student surveys to gauge student user needs.

Best Practice #2: Choose Sustainable Technology

Usually when we think about sustainable technology, we concentrate on two major time periods: when the components are being purchased (Are they environmentally friendly? Were the materials sustainably harvested?) and when the components are being recycled (Is the designated recycling company ethical in its practices?) (Apostel & Apostel, 2015). While these decisions are very important, probably the worst thing we can do for sustainability is purchase technology that will not be used at all (Apostel & Apostel, 2017). Given the risk of doing so, purchasing usable, sustainable technology can be accomplished with the following best practices: 1. Favor open source software over proprietary. What happens if that company goes out of business? Or, what happens when the new version comes out and the old version is no longer supported? Open source software allows you to figure out a solution. 2. See what technology is already being supported by your IT department. Your IT may have components or software they are very familiar with, and if you have a question, IT can offer immediate support. For instance, if they already work with a certain type of camera for recording events, get that same camera for your center. 3. Favor software and hardware that’s intuitive/easy to learn and that has built in tutorials or

training available. You can have the best document camera money can buy, but if teaching people how to use it is difficult, the device will grow dust on a shelf. Center directors and staff, by considering sustainability before purchasing, you'll ensure the software or component you purchase will have a long life in your communication center.

Best Practice #3: Develop Creative Confidence in Students

Kelley and Kelley (2013) believe that “everyone has creative abilities and that creativity can be taught. For them, creative confidence is the belief in your ability to create change in the world around you” (p. 2). Developing creative confidence in students through the communication center helps students build confidence during each phase of the communication-design process—from brainstorming and invention to final editing. Creative confidence allows students to explore available possibilities and means of persuasion for the communication projects, including presentations, slides, and other deliveries. Communication centers offer numerous benefits to their institutions, students, and faculty. The opportunity for students to engage in new and emerging strategies for designing and honing communication projects can be among the most impactful.

A focus on students’ “creative confidence,” however, can open new pathways and opportunities for students to develop communication skills, strategies, and habits. As such, center tutors and consultants would be wise to engage critical reasoning and creative thinking in student participants. For students, creativity is broader than the creative and performing arts. As Kelley and Kelley (2013) explain, “We think of creativity as using your imagination to create something new in the world. Creativity comes into play wherever you can generate new ideas, solutions, or approaches. And we believe everyone should have access to that resource” (p. 3). Creative confidence, however, allows students to develop communication in ways that encourage development of new ideas, solutions, or approaches. Importantly, though, students can find creative confidence by embracing the messiness and complexity of process-oriented approaches, and communication centers can encourage students to defer converging—or deciding on—communication approaches until all ideas have had the chance to grow and develop. Centers would also benefit from training student consultants to think creatively themselves.

Best Practice #4: Cultivate Leadership and Mentorship

Educational development and training are critical to any communication center. Communication centers are ideal sites for leadership and mentorship development as well. Leadership skill development can come in many forms, depending on the size and scope of communication center. Leadership training can come in the form of skill development, with increasing responsibility assigned to students as they acquire training and advance in the communication center. Communication centers and center directors can design specific leadership roles for consultants and allow them to take on increased administrative responsibility. Mentorship is an approach for cultivating leadership in communication centers. Mentors and mentees can be matched at the beginning of each academic year or semester. During the early weeks of the semester, mentors can support mentees as they acclimate to working in the communication center. When mentees begin doing consultations, mentors can observe and offer specific, measurable, and actionable

feedback, usually focused on about three areas for future growth. Mentors and mentees document the process, review goals, and build on earlier experiences to increase their depth of knowledge and experience. Then, after the center assesses current (or potential) development, revise current practices to adjust to those key metrics.

Best Practice #5: Initiate Course-Embedded Programing Beyond Communication Courses and Develop Strong Connections to Faculty

Communication centers are often recognized as support units for basic communication-related courses (Jones, Hunt, Simonds, Comadena, & Baldwin, 2004; LeFebvre, LeFebvre & Anderson, 2017), similar to how early writing centers supported basic writing (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). As more communication centers are positioned to serve wider academic support services at their institutions (LeFebvre, LeFebvre & Anderson, 2017), communication centers might benefit from having another similarity to writing centers: by growing through the development of course-embedded consulting initiatives that connect them to courses across the curriculum. Doing so establishes a campus-wide sustainability for centers.

Many writing centers have benefitted from initiating “writing fellows” programs that connect/embed a writing tutor (in these cases, known as a “writing fellow”) into courses, both lower- and upper-level, undergraduate and graduate, that assign discipline-specific writing assignments. For writing centers, facilitating course-embedded initiatives provides an “opportunity to export writing center philosophy to the campus,” and it allows peer writing consultants to act as ambassadors for the center (Severino & Knight, 2007, p. 20). That type of advertising—student to student, peer to peer—can be invaluable to developing student buy-in and voluntary visits.

Communication fellows can similarly serve to support students across the curriculum on oral and visual presentations, as they are often assigned in STEM, business, education, and health sciences programs. Course-embedded programming also offers centers stronger opportunities to work closely with faculty, who are incredibly important as allies. Unlike students, who may be on campus for two, four, or six years (depending on institution types and programs) faculty are expected to be around for a lot longer—and they are the ones who will recommend (or even require) their students to visit the center. In short, strong faculty buy-in should lead to strong student buy-in.

Best Practice #6: Align Your Center’s Mission and Assessment with the Institution’s

When developing a communication center, like any other entrepreneurial endeavor, it is important to establish a mission statement that clearly defines the center’s purpose. To do such, a center director can answer several questions:

- What does the center do? (e.g., one-one-one consultations, small group consultations, workshops, faculty development, community service)
- Who does the center support? (e.g., first-year communication students, all undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, community members)
- How does the center provide its services? (e.g., face-to-face, online: synchronous or asynchronous, in class, in a center)

- How does the center support the institution's mission? (e.g., supporting students and academic success, developing lifelong learners)

While the first three questions may sound familiar to any business, the fourth may be less recognizable, but entirely essential in this context since university- or college-based communication centers intentionally operate within and to support a larger organizational structure. As academic support units (with great potential for teaching and research), communication centers are often designed to work with specific communication courses, though they have the potential to offer even more services to their broader institutional communities (LeFebvre, L., LeFebvre, L., & Anderson, D., 2017). The role of such support units has become increasingly paramount to student success and aligning them to directly support an institution's mission shows their value and connection to the larger university. LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Anderson (2017) suggest that such "integration into the larger institutional fabric would provide a platform to become an "essential discipline and resource within the academy" (p. 446).

When developing a mission, it can be helpful to for center directors determine the learning outcomes that might be expected of the center and staff so appropriate assessment measures can help guide and improve the initiative (Leek, Carpenter, Cuny, & Rao, 2015). As Edwards, Edwards, and Spence (2018) recognized, "developing a mission for your lab will set the tone and guide your educational outcomes to be achieved" (p. 77). It is critical to understand the types of assessment valued by the institution in order to be efficient and effective (i.e., does administration prefer quantitative over qualitative, or vice-versa, or combinations of both?). It can also benefit the center to partner with another resource on campus—such as an office of institutional effectiveness (IE)—that can help provide and analyze data. For example, an IE office may be able to show student learning through increased GPAs over the course of several semesters, or they may even show greater student satisfaction with courses connected to the communication center.

Best Practice #7: Plan for Organizational Culture

Littlejohn and Cuny (2013) argue that early conversations need to identify an agreed upon purpose and goals for the learning space. After, the conversation needs to give much thought to organizational culture. Considering organizational culture early will greatly benefit both the people who work in the center and the experiences of patrons. Organizational culture is "the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members" (Keyton, 2011, p.1). Choices made in the earlier stages of development will profoundly shape the organizational culture of tomorrow.

Some material or tangible ways that the organization's culture is represented i.e. artifacts include a mission statement, room layout, interior design colors, signage, wayfinding, and furniture choices. A good resource for space design is Carpenter's (2013) Cases on Higher Education Spaces. Careful consideration, by the center, of these visible artifacts (including physical space design) will have an important impact on the invisible culture of the center.

Best Practice #8: Establish Values and Plan for Assumptions

Values, the attitudes or principles members of an organization should hold, will later guide behaviors and decision-making in the organization. At one center, where people and relationships are valued over everything else (Cuny, 2018), the values, coupled with the mission statement, guide all decisions. Values also guide how student educators/tutors/consultants are trained. Interpersonal communication competencies, which must be a part of initial and ongoing training at all centers, are the focal point at a center that values people and relationships.

Assumptions will reinforce or challenge the organizational culture. An example is how a center has established how things are done and no one questions them. Over time, the stories told in the workplace will reinforce assumptions. What might happen to assumptions if student educators are taught to ask “why” at every opportunity? When they ask, the discovery might reinforce and/or challenge organizational culture, participating in this conversation contributes to their interpersonal communication competency development.

If the institution, or the center, has not yet identified who will take on the role of the director of an emerging center, the values and assumptions should reveal themselves during the personnel search. It is best to leave establishment of the organization’s values, and the assumptions that will take root, in the charge of the new hire. Organizational culture is ultimately tied to a center’s ethos.

Best Practice #9: Better Communication of STEM Data through Visual Design

One of the major communication challenges of the 21st century is sharing complex STEM information in a sense that broader audiences can understand, and visual design is one way to do improve this process. The growing emphasis in the STEM fields of what is often more generally labeled “communicating science to the public,” has many students visiting writing centers to seek help.

Visual design exercises, like storyboarding and comic jams (Losh, et.al., 2014), provide excellent tools to help students re-envision the ideas they need to communicate. Traditionally, these visualization processes have helped artists plan out their projects to examine the best way to achieve maximum audience engagement. However, visual design methodologies can also be useful in analytical assignments to discover main points; analyze themes; and consider multiple viewpoints.

Quantitative Physiology professors at MIT found that students “often find themselves at a loss of what to do with the data tables and figures they have produced” and “are likely to simply dump raw data tables into laboratory reports with the claim that the data support a given” (Losh et al., 2014, p. 115). Frustrated that the students seemed unable to show the meaning of their data, they began teaching students to use visualization tools to better negotiate data presentation into a more coherent narrative. Because students in STEM focus so strongly on showing their process, they often forget to contextualize their information and emphasize the point of their research. Visualizations encourage them to show the meaning behind the numbers.

Best Practice #10: Building Trust through Identity Management

Creating a culture of trust as quickly as possible can mean the difference between a student seeking our help or not. Students, or clients as they are often called in communication center language, recognize academic discourse as a core requirement, and they fear it because it is likely in opposition to elements key to their personal identities—if not in opposition then clearly requiring some competencies they have, yet, been unable to achieve. Even if clients fear failure, rather than a loss of identity, repeated failure certainly will have a negative impact on their self-perception, making them more likely to try to hide core deficiencies.

Clients may downplay the significance of any deficiencies if they perceive these deficiencies as undermining their identities as high performing students. Colleagues who have worked in communication centers know that identity is a central issue, but they may not consider this issue as completely as they should. As Denny (2010) explains, “Identity is ubiquitous to the everyday life of writing centers. For them [clients], struggles with face involve a complicated juggling of identities in relation to perceived audiences” (p. 8). However, we cannot begin to address issues with perceived audiences, and the accompanying problems of race, gender, ethnicity, and so on, until our clients overcome a more fundamental problem of identity: the stigma of communication deficiency and the moves clients make to deny and/or disguise this deficiency.

Addressing the issues that prevent students from seeking help from communication centers is as important, if not more important, than the help we provide once they arrive. Interestingly, if clients, like the ones at our institution, find comfort in an atmosphere of multimodality—one where we are as open to discussing their Instagram posts as we are their academic projects—it may prove significant that multimodality provides entry points to communication competencies that clients do not necessarily recognize themselves possessing because that part of their identities has been segregated from their academic selves.

Conclusion

In this article, several communication center staff and directors provided 10 best practices that communication center directors, campus administrators, faculty, and even student tutors can consult as they build and sustain a center on campus. While the list is not exhaustive, it is helpful to have a starting point to then establish even more consistent techniques that apply to individual institutions. As communication centers change, evolve, adapt, and improve (Carpenter, 2018), center stakeholders should reassess and continue to develop even more best practices for sustained center success.

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