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CONCEPT

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COMPREHENSIVE SERVICE

College of Business creates communication center

In a college focused on building technical business knowledge, teaching communication skills has become a priority—and for good reason.

Even the most technical careers in business require an employee to share information with others. Whether informally with co-workers or presenting vital information to a board of directors, students graduating from Iowa State's College of Business need effective approaches for delivering information to different audiences.

Teaching these communication approaches posed an obstacle for the college, as most business faculty are not trained in communication, yet still need to teach the technical details of their discipline. The college needed a unique solution—and they found one in the Communication Center.

An integrative vision

In 2006, the college established the Communication Center to help students strengthen skills in business communication and critical thinking. Additionally, the center assists faculty with bringing a communication focus to the classroom.

The center did not happen overnight, but grew from Sue Ravenscroft's vision of integrating communication principles into the classroom. The Roger P. Murphy Professor of Accounting, Ravenscroft felt strongly about the vital role communication has in business. "There is no way to get around communicating with others in a business career," she says. "No matter the job, communication is involved."

Ravenscroft's idea was timely, as the university had also begun to realize the value of emphasizing discipline-specific communication lessons in the classroom. "Iowa State was solidifying ISUComm, the university's communication-across-the-curriculum

initiative, when we started the center," Ravenscroft recalls. "We were able to use the ISUComm directive of developing student competence in written, oral, visual, and electronic communication to support our efforts."



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** SUE RAVENSCROFT*

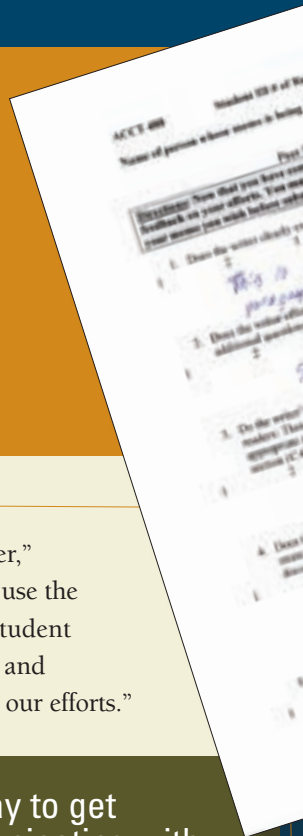
Even as the college worked to meet ISUComm expectations, there was still a need to do more. Feedback from recruiters and others in industry indicated a need to concentrate on improving students' writing and communication skills in specific business disciplines to better prepare them for their future careers.

Others linked to the college also noticed the need to focus on communication principles. Jeremy Galvin, director of development, periodically asks alumni to reflect on skills that would have helped them feel more prepared and confident as they began their careers. Not surprisingly, many respond with communication.

"Through the Communication Center," Galvin says, "we have a real opportunity to provide skills to students that will help them achieve their goals throughout their entire career."

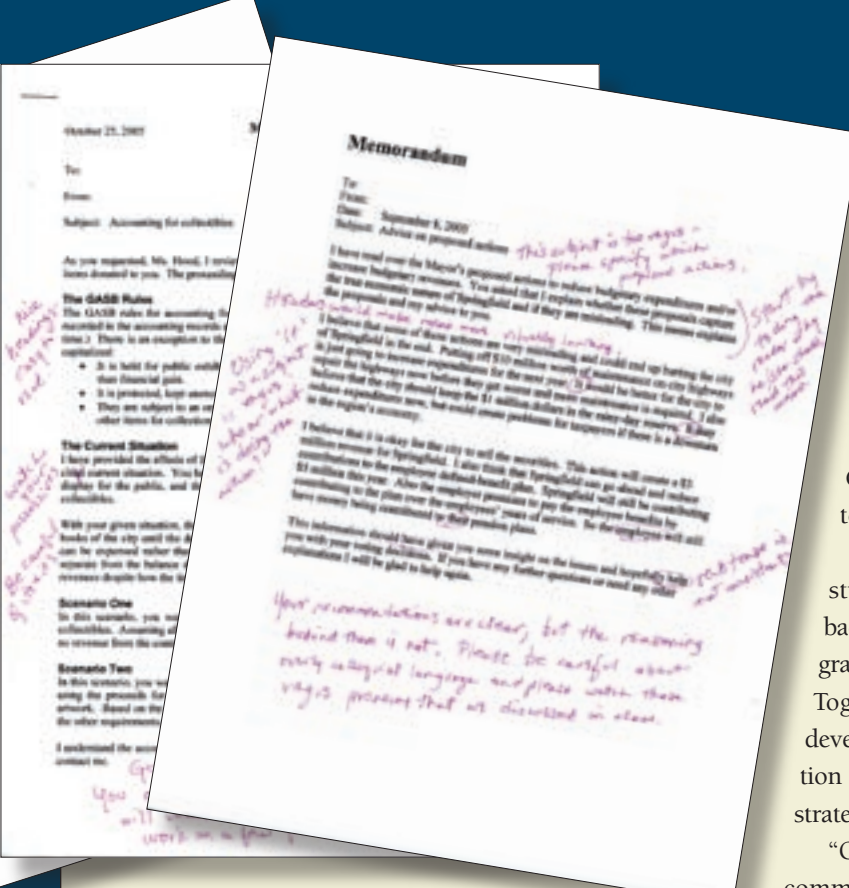
A team develops

As more people talked about a communication curriculum within the college, it became evident that developing student communication skills was



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their understanding of core concepts in shorter, more formal written and oral assignments.”

Kay Palan, associate dean of undergraduate programs, coordinates the center’s staff and resources. “As Sue’s idea progressed into the Communication Center,” Palan notes, “we needed to add to the team.”

So Melissa Suek, an incoming MBA student with a strong communication background, joined the effort, ready to integrate communication into business courses. Together, Hentz and Suek helped faculty develop effective, context-specific communication assignments, along with the assessment strategies and rubrics to evaluate them.

“Once instructors began incorporating communication assignments in their classes,” Hentz says, “we made sure we were available to help students with these assignments.”

a piece to undergraduate education that needed specific attention. Despite the large undertaking this venture represented, Ravenscroft was ready to shine some light on the matter.

In 2005, Ravenscroft and Brian Hentz, then a concurrent MBA and rhetoric graduate student, received the Miller Faculty Fellowship. “I had a number of possible ways to help the college,” Ravenscroft says. “I just needed that little extra momentum to get the program going.”

After receiving the award, she and Hentz began developing material for faculty, effectively laying the foundation for what today is known as the Communication Center.

“We began by helping faculty incorporate more communication-enhanced assignments and instruction in their courses,” says Hentz, now an instructor at the University of Connecticut’s School of Business. “Students received more opportunities in their major coursework to practice communicating

Building on the foundation

In addition, Hentz and Suek presented instructional modules on communication principles to business classes, including team, speaking, and PowerPoint skills. Suek developed the team skills presentation to highlight effective ways of communicating in person and via electronic media, skills she feels will benefit students from all backgrounds. That module, she says, has been especially well received by faculty and students.

“In more jobs than ever, workers are required to work as part of a team,” Suek observes. “Frequently, these teams’ members include experts in different functional areas with diverse backgrounds located in various time zones.”

“Both Brian and Melissa provided an excellent foundation for the center,” Palan said. “Ensuring our students learn communication lessons relevant to their discipline is important to us. A communication piece delivering accounting information is going to differ from a marketing communication, which is something our students need to understand. This program gives them the resources to differentiate communication needs and deliver an effective message.”



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* Kay Palan



Melissa Suek, left, and Brian Hentz, center, were instrumental in the creation of the Communication Center.

During the center's second year, Suek and Maria Wolfe, a graduate student in rhetoric, forged ahead, focusing on one-on-one consulting with students. In addition, the team has been developing a plan to spread the word about the services available to students.

"We needed to draw attention to the center," Wolfe says. "The college provides a wonderful, free service for students and faculty, so we developed an extensive marketing campaign directed at both students and faculty to publicize all we had to offer."

The marketing effort began with a faculty brochure and Web site, located at www.business.iastate.edu/communication. "We also plan to focus on reaching students with posters located throughout the Gerdin Business Building," Wolfe adds. "And, we will continue expanding our Web site, turning it into a database of useful information for anyone who is interested."

Suek and Wolfe have already begun building a library of resources to put in the database, offering several videos from professionals in business communications, and even recording their own presentations to classes for students unable to attend the sessions.

A unique approach

To date, the center has assisted approximately 25 faculty and as many as 3,000 students, figures Palan says represent "just the tip of the iceberg." "Once our new services are in place," she adds, "we know we will be able to help many more."

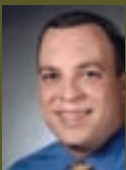
And while many similar programs offer writing advice that is more generalized—for example, correcting grammar and usage for students—Wolfe has broader goals for Iowa State.

"While business schools in some universities offer communication centers, our approach of making communication integral in the curriculum is unique," Wolfe says. "We are putting communication assignments into a rhetorical context so students will be prepared to handle similar situations when they are at work."

Future plans for the center include public workshops and seminars to make information more accessible to students, allowing the center to branch out to anyone interested in learning details about business communication. And as demand for the center's services grows, Palan hopes to expand the center's number of employees and physical space.

"Our long-term plan," Palan says, "is to have a larger area for students to visit, practice presentations, work on assignments at a computer, and receive instant feedback on their work."

In two short years, one idea has developed into a center dedicated to improving the communication curriculum offered at the college. As the college's Communication Center matures, adding staff, services, and resources, more students graduating from Iowa State will enter the workforce with communication savvy that will set them apart and guide them to future success. ■



"We have a real opportunity to provide skills to students that will help them achieve their goals throughout their entire career."

* JEREMY GALVIN

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