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Communication at The Center: A Modest Proposal for an Oral Communications Center at Virginia Commonwealth University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

Communication at The Center: A Modest Proposal for an Oral Communications Center at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021

Committee Chair: Aaron D. Anderson, PhD, Department of Theatre

This thesis explores the potential for the creation of an oral communication center on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. It utilizes the author's personal experience in teaching oral communication in higher education and his students' experience. It examines the primary research, both past, and current, in the subject area of oral communication and its impacts on the college student population. It also examines multiple collegiate oral communication centers and the best practices instilled within their walls, ultimately breaking down significant barriers in student communication anxiety and overall communication competency. This thesis reveals the gravity of the dilemma that Virginia Commonwealth University faces in the absence of an oral communication center on its campus. The rewards and complexities of creating a communication center are closely scrutinized. However, with specific attention paid to two unique centers in Chapter 2, a roadmap for developing and facilitating such a center at VCU is realized in Chapter 3. Ultimately, this thesis aims to provide real-world experiences, methods, and research to argue and confirm why Virginia Commonwealth University should establish an oral communication center accessible to its entire population.

Introduction

This thesis proposes an oral communication center for Virginia Commonwealth University to benefit all students' public speaking education and assist educators inside and outside the classroom. An open and accessible oral communications center is pertinent to VCU to establish the teaching and direction of communication as essential to enhancing student competency and retention, strengthening faculty communication comprehension, overall attainment and sustainment of institutional mission goals, and leading students to employment upon graduation.

By utilizing the author's personal experience and research, this paper elaborates upon why an oral communication center will benefit the student body, faculty, and staff as a whole at Virginia Commonwealth University. In Chapter One, the paper next examines numerous centers across the United States which employ the beneficial and critical practices needed to facilitate such a center. Following this examination, Chapter Two narrows in on two specific college oral communication centers at Virginia Tech and The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Through this case study, comparison and contrast highlight the commonalities and non-commonalities found between the two centers and how these centers can serve as a template for creating an oral communication center at VCU. Lastly, Chapter Three provides a preliminary plan for creating and facilitation of an oral communication center on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

In this thesis, I argue that Virginia Commonwealth University will significantly benefit from creating an oral communication center. The center begins with the student and expands through

its reach to faculty and staff as well. As is discussed in the following chapters, oral

communication skills are necessary far beyond the college classroom. However, the classroom is

where the communication lesson starts. Listening to the needs of the student and allowing them

to safely express their apprehension and concerns while at the same time guiding them to the

resource of the communication center is imperative. Keeping this fact in mind, the student can be

led to solutions to aid in communication apprehension and understanding, ultimately leading to

the student continuing their academic pursuits.

Furthermore, with the aid of a peer consultant at the center, either undergrad or graduate,

students seeking assistance will be met with supportive feedback. Students, including many of

the individuals I have taught, feel intimidated to speak with their teachers about their work, and

this hesitation can be alleviated via a peer tutor. The communication centers examined within

this paper and the two closely scrutinized in the case study exemplify how and why college

communications centers are necessary to the overall success of a university and its students. The

resources provided in these centers transform student populations, and in return, they better

communicate as they enter the workforce. These communication centers serve as a well-

grounded roadmap for Virginia Commonwealth University to create, for instance, the plan that I

have laid out in Chapter 3, a cutting-edge center that begins with the student and ends with a

better understanding of communication competency.

Background

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), Oral/ Written Communication is the **number two** sought-after skill. It falls in line right behind Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving. The NACE website states, "Oral/Written Communications: Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others." This skill is also considered to be "absolutely essential" ("Career Readiness Defined"). At Virginia Commonwealth University, public speaking courses are taught and facilitated by the Department of Theatre. The School of Business also teaches the course Winning Presentations, which has been developed and is led by theatre professionals. The School of Business also boasts Studio BE. "Business Essentials faculty teach courses that help all business majors develop core business and professional skills," including public speaking and presentation prep ("Business Essentials"). Unfortunately, Studio BE is only open to business majors and not the rest of the university. So, where can the remainder of the students at VCU turn to for presentation and public speaking help? One could argue that the student could seek help by reaching out to a teacher or class peer, but should it be easier than this? Should students at VCU have the ability to access a communications center to hone their skills in the areas of presentation performance in the classroom and beyond? Strong oral communication is not only required within the college environment, but it is also considered to be one of the most sought-after skills in the workplace. The Association of American Colleges and Universities facilitated a decade-long survey to find out the most relevant skills wanted by employers, and "oral communication skills got the #1 slot among the 15 job skills that executives and hiring managers

identified as very important in new hires" (Gewertz). The need for strong oral communication skills, which can be developed and learned within a communication center, cannot be overlooked. As a teacher of oral communication at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have been challenged to develop this skill with my students. The following paragraphs will highlight this experience. By also looking closely at my students' background, I will call attention to communication apprehension, peer-to-peer consulting, and student retention in academia as they relate to college communication centers.

A Background of Personal Experience

Upon completing my first semester of teaching Winning Presentations in the School of Business at Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall of 2016, I knew that something significant was taking place within my classroom. One of my students approached me after the last day of class and informed me that their life had been changed. I was taken aback by this comment because, after all, I was just an adjunct instructor who was new to the world of teaching in higher ed. Rianna went on to elaborate on how she had finally learned to communicate with an audience and how by doing this, she felt like she could accomplish her pursuits outside of college. Here was an impressive young lady who worked very hard inside and outside of the classroom, who attended multiple coaching sessions with me and her peers, who would always look for the answers to the task at hand and never shy away from asking for help. One component to Rianna's success was essential to her superb presentations, an accessible communication center.

Being in the School of Business, my students are fortunate to have Studio BE at their disposal. Studio BE is a learning studio that is only accessible to VCU Business students. More specifically, it focuses on written and oral communication consulting, along with math tutoring as well. The BE in the name stands for Business Essentials. Business Essentials is a unit within the School of Business that teaches a curriculum based on core business and professional skills that are crucial in developing the student for success while in school as well as when they enter the workforce. I sent my students to Studio BE for coaching, and I eventually made it a requirement for their overall grade. Knowing that my struggling students had a place to go when they needed help with their presentations gave me peace of mind. My students suffering from communication apprehension could make an appointment and gain the critical feedback that was so desperately needed for their progress. More invaluable than just the center alone were the trained peer consultants. Studio BE is headed by faculty; however, it is staffed by hired student consultants. There is a big plus to this operation. "Perhaps the reason is there is less pressure and more common ground between two students than between a teacher and a student" (Irvin 42). Peer coaching works, and it has proven itself at Studio BE and numerous other college communication centers in America and around the globe. According to Parker et al., "The dual perspectives develop awareness and allow peers to improve their mutual coordination and collaboration with others by creating continuous feedback not only from others but also by viewing themselves as both participant and subject" (169). Simply stated, peer consultants can cultivate a safe environment for students coming in for tutoring, "for the level of comfort between the two is typically much higher" (Irvin 43). For example, one of my past students, Giovanni, states that "Peer coaches make a difference outside of the classroom because it takes the pressure off. They're students who "speak my language." It's nice having someone readily

there to help me outside the classroom because professors can't always be there" (Knight).
Giovanni's experience makes for few strong arguments in favor of peer consulting. For one, peer-to-peer coaching is unique in that it creates a supportive environment where common ground is easily established. Secondly, peer-to-peer coaching found in university public speaking centers fills the gap between the professor and the student. This gap can exist within differences in teaching. For example, a student may not quite understand their instructor's means of pedagogy, and the peer consultant can offer clarity in this area. Thirdly, referring to my dilemma, an instructor cannot always find the time in a given class session or office hours to assist all students fully and directly. The communications center is able and ready to tackle the tutoring that is needed.

Perhaps this is where the story starts. More often than not, when it comes to public speaking, asking for help is something that some students will not even attempt because it can be daunting and uncomfortable to appear vulnerable. More importantly, this is because vulnerabilities are put on full display when one has to give a presentation in front of their peers, and the stakes are even higher when one walks into a world of strangers. This fact also leads into the matter of communication apprehension (CA), which is "defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McKroskey 78). Communication apprehension affects nearly 61% of the general population, and this number does not shrink by any means as one approaches higher education (Dwyer and Davidson). In fact, research conducted at a large midwestern university found that students, more often than not, checked off public speaking as their number one fear, with financial problems and death coming in second and third on the list (Dwyer and Davidson).

At the start of each new semester, I witness numerous students who are ridden with

communication apprehension. For the most part, they come into class somewhat confident;

however, after their first presentation, they immediately become aware of their dilemma. The

nerves, the tension, and the brain fog that comes with public speaking anxiety have settled right

in. Success stories are common within my classroom, and many students later in the semester,

with well-built lessons, rehearsals, and coaching, appear confident and comfortable in their

presentations. Even will full classes, I am still able to make time for some of those struggling

students. During the allotted class time, I rely upon myself and the more experienced students to

assist the struggling students with communication apprehension issues. For instance, we have a

back and forth dialogue with the students having the most trouble. This dialogue consist of them

going over the most troublesome areas of their vocal delivery. It starts with the student

pinpointing the trouble area, whether it be the hook, body, conclusion, or even a transition

phrase. The student then rehearses the material with the rest of the class and me, and eventually,

even if we go a few minutes past class time, we manage to break through whatever barriers

might be in the way. The mission is accomplished, or at least the pressing matter is addressed,

and the students walk away with more clarity and perhaps a little bit of hope going forward. This

works well for many of the students in the class, but I can still not fully get to everyone who is

grappling with speaking fears. Some of the students receive the help they need, but due to no

fault of my own or the students, some others remain quiet and blended into the background of

uncertainty. In some instances, I am able to get to the other students in the subsequent classes.

However, in the end, we still have to cover the class lessons and also prepare students who are

not anxiety-ridden but who still wanted presentation prep help. Over my first semester, I learned

how valuable it was to meet with students during my office hours, whether via Zoom or in

person. I would even have students Facetime me for help if they were in a pinch. I would also pair up partners, usually a more skilled student with a less confident one, and they would almost always come away with a positive experience. Still, even with the peer-to-peer work and my one-on-one coaching outside of class, I was left with insufficient time and resources to coach all of the students within my three classes. However, Studio BE provided a much-needed resource for myself, but more importantly, for my students. A communication center like Studio BE should not end with the School of Business, but rather there should be a center open to all of VCU.

The experience of my past and current students inside and outside of the classroom, the outside referring to their work in Studio BE, leads me to highlight another area of concern regarding oral communication assistance or lack thereof at Virginia Commonwealth University. Over the past five years, I have had more than a third of my students share how they wish that more resources were offered for oral communication coaching and rehearsing at VCU. Studio BE is a good start, but it is only afforded to business students, as mentioned before. What about the students from other majors seeking assistance? Students will commonly switch to new majors and take classes in other schools. They have access to the tutoring resources per their given program; however, there is no speech center at VCU, even though there are over ten-degree tracts that require public speaking classes. Roni, one of my previous students, referring to Studio BE, states, "I think it was definitely a great resource provided to us" (Crenshaw). Should not this resource be provided to all students at Virginia Commonwealth University? Especially when "students commonly experience communication apprehension related to public speaking in any course that requires presentations" (Meluch et al. 299). Should not students who are somewhat comfortable in their

communication abilities but just want to brush up on their skills also be able to access such a center? The answer to this question is a definite yes. After all, Virginia Commonwealth University's mission statement states that it is the school's goal to "advance knowledge and student's success" through its programs ("Mission Statement"). Once again, it cannot be ignored that studies show that up to 63.9% of college students suffer from public speaking anxiety (Marinho et al. 1). Can knowledge and success indeed be accessed to their fullest potential if not all of the necessary ingredients are present to do so?

My experience has shown me that the students of Virginia Commonwealth University want more. They want to live up to their potential, and as with any institution that is lacking in resources, some essential components are missing for them to do so. The critical element that I am focusing on, oral communication and a university center built around its core foundations, has been proven to work. Universities must take up the task of focusing "on improving the communication skills of their students, to ensure that they are preparing them for their future" (Leath iii).

College speech centers play an essential role in facilitating the communication curriculum and pedagogical practices needed for students' overall academic success. Oral communication is vital for career growth and success, and without it, the student lacks the necessary means to compete in the workplace (Yook and Atkins-Sayre 37). In regards to oral communication, a void appears in between what can be achieved in the classroom and what cannot. With regards to faculty, both full and part-time, "scheduling additional appointments with students to aid them in their preparation can be difficult among all the other obligations undertaken" (Coats 7). "The

communication center and its staff can help fill this void, especially for students who either need

additional oral communication instruction or those who wish to hone their skills" (Yook and

Atkins-Sayre 40).

According to Eunkyong Lee Yook, in her article, "The Effect of Communication Centers on

College Student Retention: An Argument,"

> "The communication center can play a significant role in all of the variables found to
>
> impact college student retention, namely communication competence, academic
>
> performance, interaction with students and faculty, and involvement in campus activities"
>
> (348).

Communication skills and academic performance are enhanced via a communications center,

leading to student retention and ultimately leading to more employment opportunities upon

graduation. These results are why VCU's peer universities, and hundreds of other academic

institutions, have implemented such centers. And it is not just communication competence that is

addressed with the aid of an oral communication center on campus. Still, there is also a crucial

mental component that is addressed as well. As mentioned before, public speaking anxiety or

communication apprehension runs rampant amongst college students, and it often can become a

debilitating complication to a student's overall growth. A class in public speaking, or any other

subject that requires communication and presentations within its curriculum, is limited in its

capacity to address all communication apprehension issues with its students. However, a

communication center can address the issue head-on. For some students, speaking in public "is

an unreasonable burden," which exacerbates the problem of communication apprehension even

more so (Lorenz). Oral communication, and the presentations that go hand in hand with a higher

ed curriculum, are impossible to avoid when one approaches college. And this is where the communication center comes in. Accessible communication centers on the college campus offer valuable skills training and an invaluable aid in overcoming paralyzing stage fright.

It is imperative to address the oral communication skills attained within a center and the safe space created for students to access the help they need to overcome public speaking anxiety. "Speaking anxiety has serious consequences for academic performance" and in some cases leads to the student dropping out of school altogether (Coats 3). So how does a college confront these dilemmas? The answers are found within an open and accessible communication center on the college campus. Fortunately, hundreds of communication centers can be found in colleges across the United States and the next chapter examines sixteen of them.

Chapter 1: An Examination of Existing Collegiate Communication Centers

A sample survey of peer institutions, elite schools and private institutions, and community colleges in and out of state that currently have established communication centers will be examined in this chapter. As will be shown, these centers offer invaluable communication resources to their student populations. More specifically, institutions within the state of Virginia that have speech centers that address these needs will be scrutinized in order to reference the schools that Virginia Commonwealth University directly competes with.

Peer (or Near-Peer) Institutions in State

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University / Virginia Tech

CommLab

> "Our mission is to provide Virginia Tech students and faculty members with access to constructive feedback and practical resources for improving oral presentations. By visiting CommLab, our clients will gain valuable presentation-related insight and develop the necessary toolsets to become successful speakers" ("Comm Lab").

The communications center also "is a student-operated tutoring center that promotes success in Public Speaking. CommLab coaches can provide services for oral presentations in any discipline, regardless of course subject or context" ("Comm Lab").

George Mason University

Communication Center

"The Communication Center supports students and faculty at George Mason University through one-on-one coaching focused on developing communication skills" ("Communication Center"). The Communication Center provides:

> "a safe place for students to receive feedback, ask questions, and have conversations about their own public, interpersonal, and group communication. Our center is a judgement-free space in which our coaches' primary goal is to help students achieve their personal goals. Some students make appointments to receive support on completing oral communication requirements for course assignments (both Communication courses and those outside the discipline), while others have personal or professional oral communication goals they wish to focus on" ("Communication Center").

Currently, the Communications Center employs twelve student consultants that are available to all George Mason students.

James Madison University

Communication Center

The JMU Communication Center works towards developing "skilled and ethical communicators" on campus, in the community and throughout the world ("Communication Center"). The center supports "JMU students, faculty and staff through innovative instruction, interdisciplinary research and collaborative reflection" ("Communication Center"). The center focuses explicitly on presentation support in the areas of development, delivery, speech anxiety, presentation recording, and visual data presentation ("Communication Center").

University of Mary Washington

Speaking Center

The Speaking Center at the University of Mary Washington works in conjunction with the schools Speaking Intensive Program. The Speaking Intensive Program, along with the Speaking Center, aims to enhance student learning. This is achieved by using oral communication to increase critical thinking to communicate more effectively, creating an understanding of fundamental theories and principles of verbal communication, deciphering between different modes of communication, and formulation of oral messages. Ultimately, an appreciation of oral communication and competence is achieved ("Speaking Center"). More specifically, the center provides individualized peer consultations in which students can access their "diversity of views" in order to build a robust oral communication skillset ("Speaking Center").

<center>**Peer (or Near-Peer) Institutions out of State**</center>

The University of Iowa

Speaking Center

The Speaking Center at the University of Iowa offers "quality, one-on-one and small group tutoring and consultation to students and instructors on campus who would like to work on any aspect of oral communication" ("Speaking Center"). The center provides a wide range of support in communication skills such as speech apprehension, creativity, interview preparation, development and delivery of oral presentations, comfortability with causal conversation inside and outside the classroom, and productive participation in class discussions (Speaking Center").

University of Kentucky

Presentation U

Presentation U is a "centralized tutoring center for speaking, writing, visuals, and all other forms of communication" ("Welcome to Presentation U"). Moreover, the center supports "efforts to graduate confident communicators by providing services to undergraduate students, graduate students, staff, and faculty" ("Welcome to Presentation U"). Presentation U pays particular attention on building the confidence of the undergraduate population by focusing on "communication competence" ("Welcome to Presentation U").

University of South Carolina

Student Success Center

The Student Success Center is a comprehensive resource for students that offers academic support for all majors to include a peer writing and a communications branch that focuses explicitly on speech writing and public speaking skills ("Peer Writing and Communications*")*.

University of Louisville

Speaker's Center

The Speaker's Center at the University of Louisville, which the Department of Communication facilitates, "is staffed with Public Speaking Mentors who help guide students through the process of preparing and delivering oral presentations" ("Speaker's Center"). The center is open to students across all majors. The peer mentors on staff are readily available to assist students with subject matter, speech preparation, and communication apprehension, which they acknowledge that they also experienced at one time or another ("Speaker's Center"). The Speaker's Center staff

also serve as coordinators of the center, and they strive to help students become "confident, competent communicators" ("Speaker's Center").

Community Colleges

Columbus State Community College

Communication Center

The Communication Center at Columbus State Community College is staffed with tutors who are "ready to help" students, faculty, and staff with organizing, preparing, and delivering their presentations ("CSCC").

Brookdale Community College

Speech Lab

The Speech Lab at Brookdale Community College offers Speech Communication students presentation assistance in the areas of "topic selection, research, source citation, organizing and outlining the speech, visual aids, delivery skills" and also offers workshops ("Home"). The center is staffed with Speech Learning Assistants that are available by appointment ("Home").

Des Moines Area Community College

Presentation Lab

The Presentation Lab at Des Moines Area Community College is open to all students who need help in the following areas; choosing a speech topic, researching a speech, developing presentations, outlining and organizing PowerPoint assistance, and building confidence. The staff is made up of trained speech teachers ("Presentation Lab").

Pasadena City College

The Speech Center

The Speech Center at Pasadena City College offers help to all students who need assistance with presentations. The center stands by its mission, stating,

"Public speaking is a fear for many people, but almost every career requires public speaking skills. At the speech center we help assist you so that you are able overcome your public speaking fears by finding what works best for you when giving a speech. This way, you are able to perform the best version of your speeches and eventually be an expert at public speaking. Going to the speech center will help you gain the practice you need in order to receive the best grade. The first step to overcoming this fear is to just get up there and do it" ("The Speech Center").

Tutors are available by appointment ("The Speech Center").

Dartmouth

Institute for Writing and Rhetoric

"The Speech component of the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric at Dartmouth College reflects speech at its best" ("Speech at Dartmouth"). The center aims to help students discover "ways to become more confident, more effective, more informed communicators" (Speech at Dartmouth"). Students are encouraged to engage in rhetorical theory from Aristotle to modern-day practices, which enables them to take on a "variety of rhetorical situations, across contexts, including advocacy campaigns, social movements, and persuasion analysis" ("Speech at Dartmouth"). Speech professors and consultants at the center provide "workshops or sessions on public speaking, discussion, argumentation, and speech theory" (Speech at Dartmouth").

Stanford University

Hume Center for Writing and Speaking

The Oral Communication Support Program at Stanford "provides opportunities for undergraduates, graduate students, and instructors to improve their presentation and communication skills" ("Speaking"). The center also offers courses and workshops where students can "refine their public speaking skills and enhance their general facility and confidence in oral expression" ("Speaking"). Trained tutors are available by appointment.

Washington and Lee University

CommCenter

The CommCenter at Washington and Lee offers individual and group presentation prep assistance to its students. Students at any level of communication ability are encouraged to visit the center ("CommCenter"). "Consultants help you say what you need to say as well as you can, show you strategies for revising and self-editing, and refer you to appropriate sources for help on matters that aren't solved during the appointment" ("CommCenter"). Students can request appointments, and they can also gain access to the CommCenter Practice Room to rehearse and hone their presentation skills. The consultants, together along with the student, address the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation while focusing on "thesis and purpose, organization, logical flow, support and development of ideas, uses of sources, physical delivery" and verbal delivery ("CommCenter").

University of Richmond

Speech Center

> "The Weinstein-Jecklin Speech Center offers assistance to those who wish to pursue effective speaking and articulate behavior across academic disciplines. The Center is operated primarily by trained student speech consultants who work with individuals to develop and refine their skills in preparing individual and group presentations" ("Speech Center").

The center is open to all students, faculty, and staff at the university. The trained consultants not only focus on aiding with class assignments and presentations, but they also assist in the areas of

job interviews, "conference presentations, broadcast appearances, senior thesis or capstone defenses, group presentations," and research ("Speech Center").

The sample survey examined in this chapter points to particular areas of oral communication competence and their importance to the student population and beyond. In summation, a majority of the centers listed efficiently allocate the following resources.

- **Toolsets for oral communication success**

- **A focus on every aspect of the oral communication and presentation process from start to finish that highlights critical thinking, rhetorical theory, and foundational principles of public speaking**

- **Constructive feedback that leads to the full development of ideas and processes**

- **Visual aid best practices and devising techniques**

- **Critical thinking skills training**

- **A safe space to identify and lessen communication anxiety, ultimately leading to the diminishment of public speaking anxiety in the individual**

- **Oral communication confidence-building methods that the individual can use inside the classroom as well outside of the school environment**

- **All majors, faculty, and staff are welcome to visit the center for assistance**

- **Undergrads, as well as graduate students, are welcome to make use of the center**

- **Trained student peer consultants and staff**

Summary

The allocations mentioned above are not limited to just the centers mentioned in the survey. The National Association of Communication Centers, an organization which is dedicated to the reinforcement and sustainment of college and university communication centers across the United States, lists over one hundred fifty-five oral communication centers on its website currently, with nine of these residing in the state of Virginia ("Directory of Centers"). One can easily find even more available college communication centers via a quick search on the internet. The value of college communication centers has gained headway and continues to do so with each new year. Centers continue to open up on campuses around the United States, and they serve various principal functions for a student's potential and academic growth. "What communication centers routinely do is to guide speakers in the art of critical thinking. Training and practice in oral communication lead to a better ability to participate in the kinds of conversations that matter— conversations in class, with instructors, in debates, and in the community" (Yook and Atkins-Sayre 22). Just as oral communication falls within the top five of most desired competencies for employers seeking new hires just out of college, critical thinking, refined and developed in communication centers, comes in at number one on this same list ("Career Readiness Defined"). This fact, among many others, might be the single best reason to create an oral communication center at Virginia Commonwealth University. Circling back to the beginning of this chapter, it becomes quite clear as to why to so many schools have created such centers. As students, we are required to "do" something, and in order to do this thing, we must think, and in order to think out loud, albeit with ourselves or another individual, we must communicate. And in some cases, one has access to an oral communication center at their school

in order to learn more about the process of communication and its barriers before entering the

workplace. A path to success is most certainly paved.

Chapter 2: A Case Study of Two Communication Centers

In her keynote speech at the 2014 National Communication Center Association Conference, Kathleen J. Turner, Ph.D., who at the time was the President of the National Communication Association, stated, "communication centers exist to empower students" (Turner). It is probably safe to assume that a school's overall success is based upon its students' achievements, and so it goes without saying that for a student to excel, they must be empowered. College communication centers undoubtedly empower students. Also, in her keynote, Turner points to a diagram that expands outwards. At the core of this diagram, we see a communication center, followed by a college campus, then career, and with the outer ring, we see a community (Turner). The communication center is the epicenter or catalyst "to facilitate the educational process for our students, by working directly with students and by working with faculty on how to design, assign, and assess oral communication" (Turner). The educational process behind oral communication curriculum and its facilitation are complex, and a campus center solely focused on this subject matter must be regarded as an "essential institution-wide resource" (LeFebvre et al. 186). Within the centers currently in operation in hundreds of institutions nationwide, students and faculty alike are reaping the rewards; however, in order for centers to flourish, they must become academic "change agents" (LeFebvre et al. 448). How can Virginia Commonwealth University successfully assemble such a center? The answer to this question is the basis of what this paper leads to, communication. Communication "centers, a permanent fixture across landscapes of colleges and universities, provide important services for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty, and communication is crucial to the success of these centers" (LeFebvre et al. 448). Referring back to Turner and her keynote diagram, it is essential

to note the correlation and transference of the information obtained at a campus communication center as it makes its way to a real-world (community) application. Suppose a student is allowed to face their public speaking fears and hone their skills within an environment that is fully equipped to handle such tasks. In this case, the individual learns how to communicate effectively while in college and when they reach employment upon leaving school. The key elements of oral communication that are readily taught and learned at a center have been shown to improve social interactions, increase confidence in social capacities, be the difference in securing a job, but more importantly, build lasting relationships ("Quantified").

The Virginia Tech CommLab

The relationships built via the CommLab at Virginia Tech University span a student population of approximately 30,016. Of course, not every student at Virginia Tech frequents the CommLab; however, those who do "gain valuable presentation-related insight and develop the necessary toolsets to become successful speakers" ("Commlab"). With beneficial information into how Virginia Tech's CommLab operates, this insight will prove that creating a center like CommLab is also possible at VCU.

The CommLab employs anywhere from nine to fifteen student coaches per semester. The center is also staffed by unpaid graduate assistants who currently teach public speaking at the university and fulfill a required one-hour per week office hour in CommLab for undergraduates to receive the help they need. The center is open from 11 AM to 6 PM, Monday through Thursday, and 6 PM to 8 PM on Sunday ("CommLab"). These hours are made possible by dedicated staff;

however, this is also made possible by the much-needed financial component to running a communication center. Commlab is centered in and funded solely through the Virginia Tech School of Communication. Students from the communication department frequent the center; however, students from numerous other majors access the lab for assistance. Although Commlab has a home in the communication school, the center is limited in serving the entire student population. The reason lies within the funding. For example, the writing lab at Virginia Tech is a line item funded via the provost, and the Commlab is strictly subsidized via the communication department. With other tutoring centers, such as the math and writing lab, funded by the provost, it is evident why these centers have more financial opportunities than the communication center. This fact creates a financial dilemma, such as limited staff and facilities. However, the directors at CommLab have made the best of this situation. Brandi Quesenberry, the CommLab director, facilitates the tutoring of roughly two thousand students per semester. (Quesenberry).

Given the financial circumstances facing the CommLab, the student visits obviously would increase in the case where the university as a whole fully funded the center. A center can only do as much as it can under these monetary considerations and conditions. Funding aside, the CommLab continues to serve the student population, and Virginia Tech is better for it. The CommLab assistant director, Zack Sowder, has been witness to numerous students and peer coaches who have taken what they have learned in the CommLab and have applied it to career advancement when out of college. For example, an ex CommLab student coach, who now works for General Dynamics, uses the skills she previously obtained as a CommLab coach to hire new interns and coach them in her employment field. (Sowder). Quesenberry also adds that students,

both coaches and those being advised, receive "great benefits" in oral communication at the CommLab that they can take into the job force and beyond (Quesenberry).

The University Speaking Center at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Where the Virginia Tech CommLab is limited by funding, however, fueled and successful due to its staff's selfless dedication, other communication centers have the endorsement and advantage of being funded within the central university budget. One such center, which will be examined now, is located at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The University Speaking Center at UNCG opened to humble beginnings in 2002. The center validated its inception via the accrediting body associated with the school. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) "asserts that students need to be proficient in oral communication" (Evan). This oral communication necessity for students, being detailed in the report, prompted UNCG to create a center that could handle all aspects of oral communication skills training, tutoring, and best practices. With its headquarters located in the basement of a dated campus building, consultants helped speakers learn full particulars of every aspect of oral communication, including communication apprehension. The center directors were tasked with finding and implementing the most groundbreaking pedagogical practices in the nation, and the work paid off. Many students and peer coaches alike noted that they were walking away from the center with priceless lessons in public speaking that would change their lives forever (Evan). For example, a current communication consultant at the center not only coaches but at the same time learns from her peers. She goes on to state that the community at the Speech Center is "understanding, caring, and they helped me find my voice. I'm so glad the Speaking Center

found me; I wouldn't be the same without it" ("Center News"). This statement reinforces the

need for such a center. It reiterates the fact that peer-to-peer coaching and learning are essential

components for the success of a college communication center.

Under Kim Cuny's direction, who took over as director in 2003 and continues to head innovative

practices at the center to this day, the Speaking Center reaches over seven thousand students or

more per year. The University Speaking Center is now located in a permanent and much larger

facility on campus with state-of-the-art technology and over forty consultants on staff (Evan).

This success story presents compelling evidence as to how a communication center can come to

fruition. The next portion of this chapter will examine evidence and data from UNCG regarding

the overall success of its Speaking Center.

As stated above, The UNCG University Speaking Center is endorsed and fully funded by the

school as a whole. Funding for resources and facilitation of a communication center can start

within one department; as is the case with Virginia Tech's CommLab; however, a limited budget

can hinder a centers ability to reach every student within a school's population. UNCG's

Speaking Center's success is due to the discipline of its staff and their groundbreaking work.

However, they thrive due to a substantial budget. In summation, money talks and the growth of a

center must accommodate the large student population at a school such as Virginia

Commonwealth University. The director of the center at UNCG, Kim Cuny, states, "every center

is different, answering to the politics of their own campus. This includes funding. We are still

operating from a 2001 tuition increase" (Cuny). Funding can be achieved, and a communication

center must prove its worth. The value of a center can be found within its structure. As is with

the case at the UNCG Speaking Center, this structure must exemplify, prove, and reach the goals of a school's mission to make a valid case for continued support and funding.

The UNCG University Speaking Center presents itself as an in-depth and sophisticated yet welcoming and accessible facility that is open to all individuals no matter where they might be in their public speaking endeavors. For example, they state on their website, "The University Speaking Center provides consultation support and instructional services for UNCG students, faculty, employees, and members of the Greensboro community. Our support is designed to help speakers further develop their own oral communication confidence and competence. We provide peer-to-peer feedback, guidance, and other support in the areas of public speaking preparation and delivery, interpersonal communication, and group or team communication. We do not subscribe to a *one size fits all* philosophy, we never have" ("The University Speaking Center"). The structure of the Speaking Center begins here. It only improves upon further investigation. The mission statement of the center goes on to state that the goal of the Speaking Center is "to support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent communicators through instruction, collaborative consultation, & feedback ("The University Speaking Center"). The center's foundation is solid with a framework in guidance, support, development, collaboration, accessibility, and, most importantly, open communication. This is best summed up with the above mention of how the Speaking Center does not limit itself to a "one size fits all philosophy" ("The University Speaking Center"). The center makes it very clear that they "embrace changes" in order to accommodate and include any individual that walks through its doors ("Services").

The Speaking Center structure is impressive for numerous reasons, and it is essential first to take

a look at the services offered to students, faculty, staff, and the community surrounding UNCG.

The center provides help via the following categories:

- **Instructional Support**

- **In-Classroom Group Consultations**

- **In-Person Face to Face Consultations**

- **Online Consultations**

- **Orientation Tours**

- **Support for Non-Native Speakers**

- **Support for Advanced Speakers**

- **Scientific Communication**

- **Master Communicator Program**

- **Let's Communicate Program**

This comprehensive list of services is just the start of what the Speaking Center has to offer.

Highlighting a portion of these services is essential to explain better precisely what the center

aims to achieve for its clients ("Services").

Instructional Support Service

The Instructional Support service allows for faculty to call on Speaking Center staff who "works

with them to develop a workshop that focuses on the oral communication goals identified by the

faculty member" ("Services"). These carefully curated workshops and meeting sessions increase

oral communication competency in the faculty member and their students.

In-Person Face-to-Face Consultations

The In-Person Face-to-Face Consultation service provides a "safe place for speakers to get

feedback, ask questions, and have conversations about their own public, interpersonal, and group

communication" ("Services"). This is the communication center's bread and butter, if you will.

This "signature service" and the staff of over forty student consultants that facilitate it is the

reason why the Speaking Center helps over seven thousand students per year (Evan).

Online Consultations

The UNCG Speaking Center had been conducting online consultations before it was the norm.

The center started this service in 2010 via Gmail and Google Chat. The center moved into video

coaching years before the Covid-19 pandemic, bringing in-person meetings to a halt. The virtual

consultations present an even more accessible opportunity for students, faculty, and staff. Clients

can schedule appointments to work on "brainstorming sessions, speaking outlines, video reviews

and many other related public speaking competencies" (Evan).

Support for Non-Native Speakers

This specific service reiterates the fact that oral communication skills are universal. English

Language Learners and Non-Native Speakers might encounter barriers in their ability to

communicate to an American audience. These personalized consultations "provide speakers

with a space to practice English, while considering nonverbal elements of conversation, such as:

eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, use of space, silence, body movement, cultural artifacts,

clothing, and gender difference" ("Services"). This service is a valuable resource for the over six

hundred international students on campus at UNCG.

Scientific Communication

The University Speaking Center offers comprehensive "Communicating Science" workshops where the goal is "to help scientists and students of science communicate better among themselves, with policy makers, and with the general public" ("Services"). The workshop enables scientists and science students to "better communicate their research to non-science audiences" (Cuny and Ellis 68).

Let's Communicate

This groundbreaking program at UNCG is "designed for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, to teach communication skills through interactive activities ("Services"). Trained Speaking Center consultants provide a safe and sociable space for individuals to learn about communication competence.

Support structures are necessary within a communication lab. Within these structures, the center can be the catalyst for communication competency, which starts with the student and expands into a school's entire population. The University Speaking Center supports UNCG's students, faculty, staff, the surrounding community beyond campus, and it also provides a resource for other institutions to do the same. These specific support structures will be examined here.

Support for Students

Consultations and workshops for UNCG students are readily available at the Speaking Center. Whether one on one or in a group, students have the opportunity to hone their skills and overcome any oral communication obstacles that might arise during the course of their work.

The center invites all students, regardless of major, to partake in peer to peer feedback sessions which provide guidance and support "in the areas of public speaking preparation and delivery, interpersonal communication, and group or team communication" ("Support for Students"). The center presents itself as a very inviting place where students do not have to have any necessary means of preparedness in their work. They are invited to come as they are and to receive the help they seek out ("Support for Students").

Support for Faculty

The University Speaking Center supports "faculty and future faculty as public speakers themselves" ("Support for Faculty"). Oral communication competence is necessary for college teaching faculty. Teachers can receive assistance in classroom presentations, academic conference presentations, research talks, and webcam interview skills training ("Support for Faculty"). The center directors and graduate assistants are at the disposal of "UNCG faculty and future faculty who might be looking to get feedback on their own communication" ("Support for Faculty"). The Speaking Center has even implemented an online portal that faculty teaching oral communication can access. This portal serves as a gateway to request and receive reinforcement tools that aid in instructional workshops and micro-learning and student consultations ("Support for Faculty").

Support for Staff

UNCG staff is welcome at the Speaking Center as well. Staff is encouraged to come to the center for assistance with public presentations, whether "it's for their workplace, community, social events, or preparing to address the UNCG Staff Senate" ("Support for Staff"). The center also

provides visual presentation support with PowerPoint and Prezi programs ("Support for Staff").

The Speaking Center will also review previously recorded video of staff presentations "to help

identify areas for further development, and work with speakers looking to control speaking

anxiety" ("Support for Staff").

Support for Community

The University Speaking Center provides an incredibly unique service to the local community,

which puts them at the forefront of campus communication centers. The center makes itself

available to members of the Greensboro community. Members of the community can receive

support for speaking in front of the local government or even in their rotary club. Locals who

speak English as their second language are also encouraged to seek out public speaking support.

The Speaking Center's doors are open to literally anyone who wishes to improve their oral

communication competency ("Support for Community").

Support for Center Directors

With almost twenty years of experience behind The University Speaking Center, the directors

and staff have authored numerous writings and studies into their field. Institutions and those who

wish to learn more about creating a communication center can access dissertations, capstone

projects, faculty research presentations, faculty published articles, faculty published chapters,

student research presentations, student published articles, and student published chapters. This

information is made available via the center's website. The University Speaking Center states,

"as members of the communication center community we are happy to provide support to

others" ("Support for Center Directors"). This resource serves as a gateway to the limitless possibilities of creating a state-of-the-art communication center.

Campus speaking centers are only as strong as the staff that resides within them. There exists a "lens of empowerment" within a well-structured communication center, and it starts with the individuals that facilitate such a center (Yook and Atkins-Sayre 44). The University Speaking Center enables students, faculty, staff, and community members to discover their unique ability to communicate with the world around them. However, clients would not necessarily tap into this potential if it were not for the staff which facilitates this resource. The director, co-director, coordinator, and faculty of the Speaking Center liken their success to the hard-working peer consultants who make up most of the staff. The consultants who are referred to as "communicators" are made up of undergraduates and graduates ("Our People"). There are currently forty-six consultants on staff at the center. This number is astounding, considering how much work it takes to run a center with even a small team; however, The University Speaking Center continues to impact the UNCG population. Seven thousand consultations per year are no easy task, yet the center accomplishes this and much more. It would seem fitting to begin this portion of the research by first referencing the Speaking Center's directors; however, the center's website directs us to the "communicators" first. In my opinion, this seems very fitting. The Speaking Center caters to clients that need help in any area of their presentation work. No one needs to be perfect. All are welcome. Staff meets clients "where they are" ("Support for Students"). Who better to make this welcoming philosophy come to fruition than the students, both graduate and undergraduate, who once, and still are currently, in the position of having to work on the nuts and bolts of a presentation.

The Communicators

The University Speaking Center "communicators" are made up of undergraduates and graduates who take on the roles of consultants, managing consultants, assistants, and desk managers. Speaking Center consultants must complete a comprehensive, nationally certified three-credit course. This course, CST 390, is a speaking center theory and practice class that prepares each consultant for success in the facilitation of tutoring sessions and workshops. The consultants maintain a grade point average of 3.0 and higher, and they come from many different majors and minors throughout UNCG. Consultants engage in a "dialogue about oral communication which is nonjudgmental and value free while consulting" ("Our People"). This aspect is essential due to the communication apprehension that plagues so much of the general population. Peer consultants are considered to be "amazing listeners" because this is what they do for a majority of their sessions with clients ("Our People").

The consultants cultivate a "community of practice" because they are also involved in the ongoing process of learning and growing as confident speakers themselves ("Our People"). This peer-to-peer learning process is backed by research, and the communication center community has numerous studies into the practice. Public speaking requires continuous education and training within the subject, and consultants at the Speaking Center, also learn as they help others improve. "The communication between consultants (speaking center tutors/mentors) and clients (users of services) determines the success of speaking centers" (Ward and Schwartzman 363). For example, Katheline, a previous Managing Consultant at the Speaking Center, states that the center supports "you through the good, and find ways to help you in the bad and the ugly" ("Center News"). With this approach, success in communication competency is possible. The

University Speaking Center's staff "are personally invested in their own process of becoming more confident and competent oral communicators. They understand that practice is part of the process" ("Our People"). It is commonly understood that barriers do arise in public speaking consulting; however, many of these obstacles can be resolved with a dedicated staff and clients who are willing to do the work. The Speaking Center staff is ready to assist and help, and they have the backing to get the job done. Director Kim Cuny sums it up best when she states that out of all of her success at the center, she is "most proud" of the student employees (Cuny). The center has been changing the UNCG community's lives for almost twenty years and continues to help new clients discover their voice to this day. The "communicators" make this possible ("Our People").

The Faculty

The relationship-building that occurs at The University Speaking Center would not be possible without the leadership, which is at the core of its facilitation of communication work and consulting practices.

The guidance of Director Kim Cuny enabled the center to "enter into a period of rapid expansion and experimentation in its quest to help speakers become more confident and competent communicators" (Evan). Cuny has

> "earned numerous service awards from the National Communication Association
> including Outstanding Service Engagement (2020), VonTill Communication Centers
> Newcomer (2008), Hobgood Distinguished Service (2013) to Communication Centers,
> and Turner Advocacy (2018). From the National Association of Communication Centers,

Kim and her co-authors received the first-ever Ferguson Research Award (2010)" ("Our

People").

In addition to her service awards, Cuny has "presented over 110 conference papers, faculty

development workshops, panel presentations, and invited guest lectures. She has published more

than 35 peer-reviewed pedagogical innovations, book chapters, and journal articles" ("Our

People"). Cuny continues to add to her credentials every year, and the Speaking Center staff and

clients have the privilege to be led by her groundbreaking pedagogical practices and interest.

Associate Director Erin Harrison, Coordinator Jenny Southard, and Research Associate, Taylor

Williams round out the remarkable faculty at The University Speaking Center. Between them,

they have numerous service awards and publications, professional communication memberships

and have also presented on multiple communication and communication center topics at

conferences. The directors and faculty not only facilitate consultations, orientations, workshops,

and workshop series, but they also teach various classes inside and outside of communication at

UNCG. ("Our People").

It is important to note that the Speaking Center Director and Associate Director roles have

acquired Academic Professional ranking at UNCG. By obtaining this status, the directors have

maintained the efficient running and facilitation of The University Speaking Center. The

University Speaking Center is in excellent hands, so to speak. The center continues "on its

trajectory of innovation and expansion" (Evan). Whether helping a student or a local community

member, the Speaking Center enables all individuals to access their full public speaking

potential.

Chapter 3: The Pursuit and Goals of a Communication Center at VCU

A Mission in Oral Communication Efficacy

Upon entering Virginia Commonwealth University's online landing page, one can immediately understand how and why the school is unique. The statement "It's different here. We know it, we welcome it, and we thrive on it" is followed by words such as "diverse," "urban," "involved," "inquisitive," and "pioneering" ("Virginia Commonwealth University"). As a student of VCU, I mostly agree with the statement above, but as a teacher, I am conflicted. I can only speak from my experience of teaching Winning Presentations and Effective Speech. However, I do believe that my voice is valid. I believe that by creating an oral communications center, we can diversify the experience of students to include public speaking assistance to all individuals regardless of major; by integrating with local organizations and companies, we can facilitate workshops focused on communication. By getting more involved with oral communication we can reach the community inside and outside of VCU. In researching oral communication pedagogical best practices, we can become even more inquisitive. Lastly, by combining all of these elements we are truly pioneering a breakthrough public speaking center. As mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, my experience has shown me that my students believe that VCU lacks the necessary resources to aid the individual in an overall comprehensive oral communication understanding. Should not Virginia Commonwealth University "thrive" on oral communication efficacy as well? The answer here is a firm YES. Virginia Commonwealth University makes it clear in its mission that it wants to create an environment where students, faculty, and staff alike have the ability to "explore, create, learn, and serve" ("Mission and History"). How can VCU realistically accomplish this goal when it lacks one of the main components to complete its mission fully?

Oral communication, at its core, is the understanding and discipline of utilizing "content, delivery, assessment, and research" in the transference of information from one individual to another (Valenzano III and Wallace). Implementing an oral communication center on the campus of VCU would most certainly lead to a better understanding of ways and means to bring the school's said intentions in a closer alignment with its mission.

Oral communication efficacy parallels self-efficacy in that it is "especially important for transferring skills from one situation to another, such as from the classroom to the work environment" (Cavanagh et al. 442). VCU students have many online and on-campus resources for success, but do they have all of the necessary components to carry on in the face of challenge? College presents a challenge for many students. However, tutoring centers provide a place to overcome these obstacles. If VCU has a math and writing center open to all students, why does it not have a speech center serving the same purpose? The VCU Writing Center states, "Your professor shouldn't be the first person to read your paper" ("Our Services"). This statement should make one significant point very clear, and this is that your professor should not be the first person hearing your presentation. This argument can be backed even further with a look into the college retention and graduation rates and how they directly coincide with communication efficacy data.

Oral Communication at The Communication Center and its Impact on Student Retention

Communication centers play a significant role in college student retention due to the fact that they focus specifically on oral communication efficacy. It is also important to note that "most courses include some form of communicative activity such as a speech or presentation, a communication center can additionally play an indirect, but significant, role in increasing retention rates by helping to boost academic performance in subject courses outside of the field of communication studies as well" (Yook 348). Studies conducted have shown that speech centers "aid retention not only by creating objective competence but also through increasing the psychological coping abilities of the student through improved communication skills" (352). For example, a study involving over two thousand students was conducted over five years at a small liberal arts school. It found that access to and support from a communication center was conducive to individual academic objectives (Yook and Atkins-Sayre 15). Also, the "study found that students felt that their confidence was boosted after having a consultation session at the communication center" (15).

A study conducted regarding the relationship between communication competence and its impacts on academic performance and student retention found that "communication competence played a role in student persistence. Those students who withdrew reported being less socially confirming than those who persisted" (Hawken, Leila, et al. 307). The study also highlights the fact that students who are anxious about communication often avoid it altogether. This research validates the necessity and "importance of the communication competence construct in a college student's social and academic experience" (307).

In my personal experience, I have also witnessed a majority of my business students receiving an overwhelming and convincing confidence boost after they visited Studio BE in the School of Business. After an interactive peer consultation, my students reported that they felt a sense of ease that they had not experienced previously. For example, one of my students voiced that after visiting Studio BE, she knew that she was headed in the "right direction" with her presentation (Crenshaw). She left the center with a stronger mindset, and she carried this focus and confidence into her final presentation. Like those who attend Studio BE, every student at Virginia Commonwealth University should have the opportunity to obtain their reward in oral communication success.

In a study conducted by Yook, which was previously mentioned in this chapter, students who visited one specific communication center experienced a significant increase in "self confidence in communication" (349). These same students also experienced a "lowering of communication apprehension, which has been found to be a result of communication training at communication centers and communication education" (349). Oral communication efficacy and overall communication competence could and would significantly increase with creating a public speaking center on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. More importantly, communication apprehension could also be addressed via the implementation of a center at VCU.

Apprehending the Apprehension

Research confirms "up to 70% of college students report anxiety about giving a presentation," and this number stands firm within the college classroom environment (Atkins-Sayre et al. 155). This "means that in every public speaking class of 25 students, it is likely that up to 17 of those students will feel anxious about giving a speech" (155). At VCU, Winning Presentations classes cap out at around 20 students, which means that 14 members of each section experience anxiety around public speaking. This information might be read as bad news to some. However, this problem can be countered via an active teaching faculty's combined work and the dedicated staff at a campus communication center. "The good news for anxious students is that peer tutoring centers can help them conquer much of their anxiety. In fact, communication research shows that the more students visit a communication center, the more they report a reduction in their speech anxiety, an increase in their confidence in public speaking, and higher grades" (156).

The attention given to combating speaking anxiety presents a much-needed solution to significant higher ed and beyond dilemma. Higher education institutions must face the fact that "communication apprehension does have an impact on learning, and that impact is negative" (McCroskey 29). Students can access numerous resources and solutions to facing and overcoming their oral communication anxiety by visiting the communication center. Combating communication apprehension solely within the classroom is a massive task. If we consider the 70% of college students who suffer from it, then it cannot be denied that a communication center can and will make a difference in aiding in this process. For example, suppose VCU students knowingly have the accessible resource of an oral communication center at their disposal. In that case, they can seek help for their speaking anxiety issues that might be overlooked in the

classroom. This resource can assist those students who are prone to "avoiding certain courses or even majors where oral presentations are required, never speaking in class, or deciding against certain careers because they would require occasional speaking before a group" (Kostić-Bobanović and Bobanović 2).

A recent study conducted with 263 college students measured the impacts of communication apprehension in its relation to:

> "leadership initiative, multicultural appreciation, adaptability, and academic performance. Results revealed that communication apprehension was negatively associated with students' willingness to take on leadership opportunities, appreciation for a multicultural world, and adaptability to new situations" (Blume et al.158).

In this case, it is vital to highlight and consider the fact that Virginia Commonwealth University represents a diverse population of students. VCU ranks above average amongst other colleges regarding its student body's overall diversity, and the school also represents students from over 101 countries ("How Diverse is Virginia Commonwealth University?"). The creation of a communication center at VCU would begin building a bridge for cross-cultural communication skills and overall adaptability skills for individuals, which in return would lead to even more students in general taking on leadership opportunities. The setbacks and avoidance of public speaking anxiety can be challenged and, in many cases, overcome if an oral communications center is commonplace at VCU.

Faculty and Staff Alike

Another critical goal of an oral communication center at VCU would be the attention of faculty and staff at the university. Referring back to The University Speaking Center at UNCG, which aids and assists faculty and staff at its campus, VCU can also do the same. Following in line with UNCG, a communication center at VCU would facilitate workshops, training, and feedback sessions in oral communication skills for faculty and staff. Whether in need of personal presentation assistance or better pedagogical practices, a center would serve as an asset to the VCU community at large.

A Peer in Communication

Since the 1980s, peer tutoring programs at American universities have served as a significant resource to students on both sides of the table. More specifically, during a consulting session, the peer tutor and tutee simultaneously receive the help they both require to excel in their education (Yook and Atkins-Sayre 56). Peer consultations at communication centers have successfully developed tactics that "require tutors to use and apply their subject matter knowledge and transform this knowledge in creative ways to teach their tutee" (Roscoe and Chi 7). By utilizing this transformative tutoring process, tutees also find creative ways to learn, adapt, and excel in their work. The business students that attend my Winning Presentations class have benefited dramatically from Studio BE. For example, one student who is inherently shy and was very insistent about keeping to himself during class was required to attend Studio BE for his second to the last presentation. The student started to open up and become more comfortable in presentations in front of the class; however, he still could not overcome his shyness. His presentation format was always spot on, but he continued to present in a monotone fashion and

remained reserved. After two consulting sessions a Studio BE, he began to open up even more. He informed me that the peer consultant provided a new face and a new perspective in his overall presence in delivery and communication. On presentation day, the student blew everyone in the class away. He was finally able to add depth and emotion to his language and topic. When I inquired as to why and how this occurred, he stated, "I got creative, and I felt empowered by my peers in Studio BE."

In an interview with Emma Farmer, a previous Studio BE consultant, I learned first-hand that her life had also been incredibly transformed via her interactions with students as a tutor. Emma relates that her tutees learned "the idea that you can mix being professional and saying things that are important with not being boring," and the students considered this to be a breakthrough lesson (Farmer). Even though this concept and skillset are taught in Winning Presentations, sometimes it is ultimately heard and accepted via a peer teacher/ consultant in Studio BE. This documented experience presents even more proof that a university expansive communication center can serve a necessary need and service at VCU. Emma goes onto state, through her experience as a student and a peer consultant, "with a peer I think it is easier to get people to open up" and "it doesn't matter if you mess up" (Farmer). The peer-to-peer communication consulting experience builds trust and rapport that is sometimes not found amongst the student and teacher in the classroom. Emma is currently in graduate school to receive her Master's of Science in Global Marketing Management. She contributes her want and desire to pursue this degree because of her time spent in Studio BE. Emma states, "honestly, it's not something I would have considered without having done Studio BE. As I was doing presentation consulting, I

realized that I really liked helping people who had an idea and then get it to that endpoint" (Farmer).

The Pedagogy Within

In their books, *Real-World Public Speaking*, Anderson and Leong offer essential and valuable insights into "two different but inter-twined skill sets: *what* to say (or not say) in a presentation, and *how* to say it effectively" (xii). Anderson and Leong built their text regarding their real-world personal experience in presenting. Still, more importantly, they were able to do this with the advice they learned from coaching professionals in "business, medicine, nursing, allied health, education, and the arts" (xii). With its breadth of real-world presentation knowledge, their text will serve as a template for pedagogical practices at the VCU communication center. The Winning Presentations course taught in the VCU School of Business was developed by Anderson and Leong. Considering the course's success and the author's connections to VCU, it seems fitting to place their material in the forefront of the communication center pedagogy. The skills taught and acquired at the center will also be informed via the most up-to-date oral communication teaching tools available. For example, communication center teaching materials utilized at schools such as UNCG, Virginia Tech, and The University of Richmond will be considered for consulting practices. More specifically, rhetorical theory, such as Aristotle's take on rhetoric, which happens to be utilized and taught at UNCG and U of R, will be part of the curriculum at VCU's communication center. "Because communication centers use classical and cutting-edge theoretical concepts to help students understand the complexity of the communication process and improve their role in it, communication centers advance the discipline on their campuses" (Turner et al. 9). A pedagogical collaboration between VCU and

other communication centers will, in turn, provide a much-needed boost to a comprehensive understanding of oral communication for all students.

A Structure in Oral Communication

A recent article in the Carolinas Communication Association Annual entitled "The Centrality of the Center: Best Practices for Developing a Robust Communication Center on Campus" states, "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" (Strawser et al. 98). The article goes onto state, "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" (98). Virginia Commonwealth University will also benefit significantly from a well-structured communication center. With a close reference to "leading communication center scholar-practitioners" the plan for a center at VCU will be laid out within this section (99). Student success, favorable outcomes, such as retention rates, improved grades, and overall empowerment, have been documented in colleges that utilize oral communication centers, and VCU can tap into this potential as well.

- **Organization:** The communication center will be centralized and integrated within the VCU institution as a whole and will have the full support of the university.

- **Staffing:** A highly trained staff of VCU faculty, peer student consultants, and graduate assistants will facilitate and run operations at the center. The center will employ a director, with hopes of also employing a co-director as the center grows.

- **Outreach:** Students from all majors will have the ability to access the center. Students and faculty alike will learn about the center via word of mouth, teacher referrals, university public relations campaigns, and advertising (ex: physical flyers, social media, and email).

- **Access to assistance:** Whether by walk-in or appointment, via in-person or remote, clients will be able to access tutoring assistance. The virtual component will allow for readily available appointments to be accessed.

- **Aim for a Centralized Center:** The goal is to locate the communication center in a centralized common area within the campus in order for students and staff to access the center easily.

Best Practices at The Center

Referring to the article "The Centrality of the Center: Best Practices for Developing a Robust Communication Center on Campus," which was mentioned previously, Virginia Commonwealth University has a template to build and create a communication structure that can facilitate a "unifying best practices" praxis program and curriculum (Strawser et al. 99). The student seeking help at VCU will be at the center of this invaluable resource.

- **VCU Students as Stakeholders:** Not all work is performed or completed in the classroom. VCU communication center staff will be trained to listen to and encourage

students empathetically. Through this encouragement, students will learn how to accomplish their goals and "evolve" in their communication (Strawser et al. 99). "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" (99). Creating a "hub" for VCU faculty and students to safely express their oral communication ideas, concerns, and fears is a necessary component to the individual's overall success (99).

- **Technology at the Center:** The communication center will utilize open-source software already provided and used via the university as a whole. For example, Zoom will be available for remote sessions and Google Docs for collaborative work and notes. Studio in Canvas (VCU's institution-wide learning management system) will also be utilized for recording. Visual aid software such as a PowerPoint and Google Slides will be readily available for student presentation work. By utilizing accessible software, students, faculty, and staff at the center will be able to refer any technology issues or questions to the university IT department. Equipment, such as cameras, lighting, recording devices, and computers, will align with what the university currently uses. The simplicity of using interfaces and working with equipment should also be considered.

- **Creative Abilities and Confidence in VCU Students: "**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" (Strawser et al. 100). VCU students will have the ability to utilize and develop their communication skills from start to finish in the center via the pathway of creativity and imagination. Students will be

encouraged to let their discovery process thrive and mature in the center as they learn to embrace the, sometimes mucky, situation of presentation development. New and multi-approach techniques will be welcomed and accepted in order to reach a final product.

- **Building and Leading at the Center:** In order to create a sustainable communication center, it is imperative to develop and mentor leaders at the center. The center director and staff will facilitate training to build consulting skills for student peer support and graduate assistant support. Whether they are directors or trained staff, mentors will serve the mentees that are new to the center staff. Mentors will observe and provide feedback to mentees regularly to meet the center's expectations, which ultimately benefits the client accessing the center for help. The goal is to create outstanding leadership amongst all members of the communication staff. Each mentee will ultimately be a mentor at the center in the future. The development, practice, and reflection process of training new staff parallels what consultants will share with clients that come to the communication center for assistance.

- **Connection to Courses and Faculty Throughout VCU:** The integration of the communication center curriculum in communication-centered classes and other courses across the VCU will allow for the establishment of "course-embedded consulting initiatives" that will increase communication competency within the school as a whole (Strawser et al. 101). Allyship amongst teaching faculty and the communication center will increase visitations to the center and increase student oral communication understanding and comprehension. This integration is imperative to the sustainability of the center. Teachers have the opportunity to create a better experience of oral

communication for their students by recommending or even requiring them to visit the center in conjunction with presentation assignments.

- **The Communications Centers Mission is VCU's Mission:** The communication center's mission will align with Virginia Commonwealth University's mission. For example, VCU's mission statement promotes "real-world learning that furthers civic engagement, inquiry, discovery, and innovation" ("Mission Statement"). The communication center will incorporate the same language and goals within its mission statement by promoting communication competency skills that enhance and lead to a better understanding of the above learning objectives. These objectives can be aligned with the communication center initiatives and goals.

- **A Culture of Organization:** The pre-development of the center will positively impact the communication centers culture. "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" (Strawser et al. 102). A clear path of navigation within the center presents a stronger impression on students that visit the center.

- **Assuming a Strong Value:** The center will be guided by well-established core values, which will serve as a foundation for those who work and those who access the center. These values will instill solid and trusting relationships between staff and students.

- **A Trust in Communication:** Students, faculty, and staff who enter the communication center for assistance will be welcomed to come as they are. Trust must be established and cultivated for the client to feel comfortable overcoming oral communication obstacles. Multi-modalities of learning will allow the client to learn in such a way that they can

access their full potential. Rather than a set learning model, the learning process will be

open-ended and discovery-based. The communication center will have the training and

resources to accommodate the diverse population at VCU.

- **Equity in Communication:** This best practice is perhaps one of the most significant

  within the communication center. It is necessary to note that "racism exists

  institutionally, pedagogically, and at the micro-level. Questioning these conventions is

  essential" (Nguyen 3). Antiracist values will be promoted and taught within the

  communication center in order for the BIPOC community at VCU to find a place of

  support in their oral communication pursuits. The center will align and facilitate

  workshops and pedagogical practices with faculty and campus organizations that serve to

  empower the BIPOC population. This collaboration aims to create a supportive

  communication center and staff that will serve the diverse population at VCU.

The foundational structure of a speaking center at Virginia Commonwealth University is only the

beginning of what it would take to establish such a center on campus. The process is complex

and entails many facets of collaboration between the individuals proposing the center and the

institution. However, the task at hand is not an impossible goal. Higher education

communication centers are steadily appearing every year on college campuses across the

country. I recently attended the 20th annual meeting of the National Association of

Communication Centers. Over two days, I was privileged to communicate and learn from

incredible colleagues who are the foremost experts in the communication center field. The

experts that have been involved with the creation and facilitation of some of the most prominent

communication centers in the United States are willing and able to offer invaluable insights into

how to create similar centers on other college campuses. There happens to be a generous amount

of support in the field of oral communication center development and facilitation, and the

answers to the many questions that will arise can and will be answered. One only has to ask. I

asked many questions during my attendance at the conference, and I came away with a sense of

ease rather than discomfort. More importantly, I learned that communication centers must

address any and all challenges that arise, whether newly formed or already established. In doing

so, the center remains steadfast for the institution and students that it serves. Resiliency is a

common thread amongst the centers that currently exist. College communication centers across

the United States not only communicate with the population that they serve, but they also

communicate with each other. The 20th annual meeting of the National Association of

Communication Centers taught me that Virginia Commonwealth University is not alone in the

pursuit of oral communication competency. A door to communication is open. It is time for VCU

to walk through this door.

The Path to The Center

In this paper I have made an argument as to why Virginia Commonwealth University needs a

communications center, however as a graduate student nearing the end of my course of study, I

am not in a position to make this vision a reality. That task must fall to others. Here I present

three steps that might help in that endeavor.

Identify and Establish University Stakeholders

Reaching out to schools within Virginia Commonwealth University is one of the first steps to

gain interest and obtain stakeholders for establishing a communication center. More specifically,

the schools at VCU listed below would likely see the benefits of oral communication related to

their students communicating while in school and after they have graduated. Even though public speaking courses, such as Winning Presentations and Effective Speech, are currently taught through schools at VCU, it will still be critical to get those specific schools on board as stakeholders in the pursuit of a center as well. Listed below are the schools that will be considered as possible stakeholders.

- College of Engineering

- College of Health Professions

- College of Humanities and Sciences

- School of the Arts

- School of Business

- School of Dentistry

- School of Education

- Honors College

- L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs

- Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture

- School of Medicine

- School of Nursing

- School of Pharmacy

- School of Social Work

- School of World Studies

- VCU Graduate School

- VCU Life Sciences

- VCU da Vinci Center

- University College

Realizing the commonalities of the schools within VCU between their curriculum and communication needs is essential to creating a communication center at the university. By creating a dialogue with each school, it will be easier to determine what programs would directly benefit from an oral communication center. This evidence builds the argument for a comprehensive and university expansive oral communication center at VCU.

Identify Accreditation Standards for Communication

The establishment of a university communication center can also be justified via the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the accrediting body for Virginia Commonwealth University. More specifically, VCU has curated its general education learning goals, definitions, and outcomes to align with SACSCOC's communication requirements. In making a direct reference to the SACSCOC via their General Education requirements, VCU states that students will aim to "develop and present cogent, coherent and error-free oral communication with general and specialized audiences" ("General Education Curriculum"). VCU further explains their communication requirements in stating,

> "Communicative fluency is understanding and creating shared meaning with effective use of language and communicative practices, intentional engagement of audience, cogent and coherent iteration and negotiation with others, and skillful translation across multiple expressive formulations and modes" ("General Education Curriculum").

This evidence solidifies the argument that VCU aims to meet the accrediting bodies' requirements. It is imperative to present this evidence in arguing for creating an oral communication center at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Identifying a Home

In researching schools within Virginia Commonwealth University, I have concluded that University College could serve as a possible nest for the beginnings of a communication center. University College states that it is,

> "committed to helping students think independently and critically, to pushing students to develop their analytical skills, to strengthening students' engagement with the campus and the community, and to providing students with the tools they need to succeed at VCU and as lifelong learners" ("University College").

University College has made it clear via their Strategic Plan that they are expanding and positively impacting the VCU population and community. For example, "as the entry point for the majority of first-year students," University College emphasizes "student success," which centers around "pedagogical excellence" and "civic engagement and learning" (Strategic Plan).

More importantly, University College is home to the Department of Focused Inquiry which is part of the core curriculum at VCU. Focused Inquiry fosters "curiosity about the world at large through community-engaged, experiential, and problem-based learning" ("University College"). University College also facilitates the Focuses Inquiry Learning Lab (FILL), which supports student success in critical thinking and analytical skills and overall experiential learning. Trained and experienced peer mentors assist students in Focused Inquiry by offering consultations at the

lab. Being that Focused Inquiry is part of the core curriculum, it has the ability to reach the vast student population at VCU. A communication center could start here, or an oral communication component could be built into the FILL curriculum. The possibility of a union between a communication center and University College is a solid beginning for comprehensive oral communication competence and efficacy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Conclusion

Upon starting my research for this paper, I was impressed with the resources available within such a short distance from Virginia Commonwealth University. I must begin this conclusion by giving credit to one of the individuals that inspired my research. Only 8.5 miles away from Virginia Commonwealth University, I found Linda Hobgood, the Speech Center director at The University of Richmond. Hobgood is one of the pioneers in the field of college oral communication centers. Hobgood "proposed and hosted, on behalf of the University of Richmond, the nation's first conference of speaking center/communication lab directors," and her work continues to set the standard for communication center best practices across academia ("Linda Hobgood"). In my speaking with Hobgood, I learned that the Speech Center at The University of Richmond was, at one time, just an idea for a pilot project that she wanted to see come to fruition. In recalling her dream and pursuit of U of R endorsing and financing the Speech Center, Hobgood relates that she had to "prove" the center's worth and its impact on the student body and school as a whole. With the Speech Center now in its twenty-sixth year of operation, Hobgood proudly states, "I would much rather have to prove myself" (Hobgood). Hobgood proved, along with a phenomenal team's help, that the Speech Center is a much-needed asset to The University of Richmond. With this same idea, I put forward my proof for a communication center at VCU, which will one day prove its worth as well. The creation of an oral communications center at Virginia Commonwealth University, despite the complexities of its development, will set VCU apart. With this center, VCU will be known for the fact that "they promote effective and ethical communication, demonstrate the central educational value of communication, promote the inclusion of the communication discipline in the studies of other academic programs." Its students will be better for it (Turner et al. 10).

Throughout the previous pages, I have examined why Virginia Commonwealth University is in great need of an oral communication center to provide a well-rounded and diverse education for its students and live up to its mission statement fully. For a student to receive a well-rounded education, it is vital to consider the transformational teachings within oral communication pedagogical practices and resources. These teachings at their root are undoubtedly transformative. Strong communication takes the individuals involved from one specific point to another, and in return, the individuals change, learn, and adapt. The communicator "has to develop so as to: prepare him- or her as a thinker and citizen for a challenging world; question and affirm or change what she or he believes; and come to a greater understanding of the complex questions of his or her own life and the lives of others than they otherwise would" (Hersh 2). Competence in oral communication creates a pathway to a more complete understanding amongst individuals in an otherwise challenging world of miscommunication. With the creation of an oral communication center at Virginia Commonwealth University, the school and its mission, in all its glory, stands a chance to now pave this new path. This thesis serves as a map to tread this path.

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Vita

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