

# ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES ON MISSION-CRITICAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR NEW JOB-MARKET ENTRANTS

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## ABSTRACT

Nearly 700 graduates of a regional state university rated the relative importance of a set of 50 discrete communication-related skills based upon their perceived utility for new job-market entrants. An analysis of the survey data (aggregated both at the full university and at discrete college sub-unit levels) suggests that oral, aural/listening, and reading comprehension capabilities may prove to be more valuable than many written communication skills for employees operating within their first 2-3 years on the job. Moreover, regardless of the broad set of undergraduate programs pursued by these alumni as students, a significant degree of overlap appears to exist across college units regarding the top- and bottom-ranked communication skills for new-market entrants.

**Key Words:** Business communication, Communication skills, Career success, Core curriculum, Oral communication

## INTRODUCTION

While business-communication courses remain a staple of AACSB-accredited programs, students from multiple disciplinary groups take business communication courses to improve their oral and written skills and to introduce themselves to the language and forms typically employed by business communicators. At Stephen F. Austin State University, a sophomore-level business communication course (and a course required of all business majors) simultaneously serves as a core-curriculum option for all students on campus, and on an annual basis, roughly fifty percent of the university's introductory Business Communication (BCOM 247) students originate from outside of the business college. This broad institutional population, however, raises several important curricular-design and course-objective issues for any BCOM instructor, including (but not limited to) the following questions:

- What are the mission-critical communication skills needed to enable students to transition successfully from their academic to their workforce roles?
- Do the skills targeted in core BCOM classes serve the needs of both business and non-business undergraduates?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Communication skills remain central to the workplace success for the graduates of virtually every academic discipline. Yet survey after survey has indicated that communication weaknesses have resided for decades at the top of workforce-preparedness deficiencies (Eisner, 2010; Hart, 2010; Hartman & LeMay, 2004; Huegli & Tschirgi, 1974; Mitchell, 2008; Rippey, 1990; Texas Workforce Commission, 2016; Wilhelm, 2004). Adding to the difficulty of helping students to hone their communication skills through classroom practicums is the fact that the market surveys upon which workforce-preparedness studies are often based have traditionally tended to focus on the macro-level categories of “oral” and “written” communication. As such, instructors charged with responding to these studies often struggle to negotiate or to interpret the meaning of such inherently generic and broad terms (as in Gabric & McFadden, 2000; Kane, 2012; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Mitchell, 2008; Nakagawa, 2011; National, 2008-16; Reinsch & Shelby, 1997). More recently, some scholars have broadened the range of skills and practices contained within their workplace evaluations, most particularly when it comes to oral communication skills (as in Ortiz, Region-Sebest, & MacDermott, 2016). Indeed, Gray and Murray (2010) expanded this particular category into more than two-dozen oral practices and behaviors, while Keyton et al. (2013) subdivided oral communications into more than three-hundred verbal workplace behaviors. At the same time, scholars like Cyphert, Holke-Farnam, Dodge, Lee and Rosol (2019) have adopted multi-modal approaches to determining which skills employers value most highly by deploying a combination of interviews and questionnaires involving supervisory personnel to determine the current expectations of employers regarding the communication skills of their newest (versus their more experienced) employees.

Even if the results of many of these studies have tended to imply that “more” of any of these forms of written or oral communication would be beneficial for students, some like Gray and Murray (2010) and Keyton et al. (2013) have subdivided a specific but still relatively broad communication category into more discrete sets of skill activities. Yet as Coffelt, Baker and Corey noted, broad skill categorizations and single-mode investigations have left “instructors of business and professional communication ... little guidance about the valence of course topics and how to best allocate time to written, oral, visual, and electronic modes” of communication (2016, p. 301). In order to improve workforce-preparedness training suitable for all students, this author has attempted to identify a discrete set of communication practices, skills, and behaviors privileged in the workplace. Thus, this study’s survey targets a pedagogically actionable set of practices associated with relatively discrete deliverables and outcomes, rather than interrogating survey respondents on a broadly defined set of skill categories like listening, informing, and persuading. In so doing, the author hopes that the resulting survey data could potentially lead to more impactful curricular designs for BCOM and other business-curricula courses.

The study follows up on a recent attempt at determining a more concrete set of communication forms, outputs, and practices representing a “mission-critical” set of communication-centric skills (McKenna & Bayless, 2017). That prior study surveyed a combination of more than one-hundred business practitioners, recently graduated students, and business-communication instructors about the perceived importance to new job-market entrants

of a granular set of communication skills. These skills were variously culled from prior communication-skill surveys, from discussions with fellow business-communication instructors at professional events, from the author's twenty-plus years of experience hiring and training financial-technology employees, and from several workplace "soft skill" surveys (including Gabric & McFadden, 2000; Mitchell, 2008; National, 2008-16; Perrigo & Gaut, 1994; Wilhelm, 2004; Williams, 2015).

Note that the McKenna and Bayless (2017) study intentionally eliminated from consideration most of the personal qualities, traits, and work habits (such as a candidate's determination, timeliness, perseverance, and ethical behavior, etc.) often included in "soft skill" studies. Due to curricular BCOM concerns, the study focused solely on demonstrably communication-related skills. However, some of the study's limitations involved the size of its survey population and the relatively narrow geographic focus of its business practitioners, given their concentration in finance, banking, and technology in the Northeastern United States. Certainly, not all universities serve such professional or geographic populations—not even the author's university. Per the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in fact, Stephen F. Austin State University remains a "top ten" institution as measured by the percentage of its graduates that continue to live and work in-state after graduation (Colleges with the most students, 2018). Furthermore, since not all undergraduates expect to pursue banking, finance, or technology as a career, a broader survey incorporates a respondent population more representative of the full spectrum of an undergraduate university's academic disciplines. While the McKenna and Bayless study generated and validated a list of communication skills that professionals could (and did) rank according to their perceived value for new market entrants, it remained unclear whether the skills that its survey deemed essential within business school-centric career fields (e.g., banking, finance, technology, etc.) would be rated equally highly by respondents from a broader set of academic units.

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

In order to address this question while simultaneously accumulating significantly more data than the material generated during the 2017 survey, the author initiated a survey targeting all of Stephen F. Austin State University's alumni in order to rank the perceived importance of fifty communication-related skills for new job-market entrants. All of the survey's respondents had previously transitioned to a post-university existence, and therefore all could offer an informed opinion as to the skills that they felt contributed positively to early career success. The survey's respondents, who collectively self-reported belonging to dozens of professional fields, rated each skill on scale of 1 to 100 based on rating guidelines that notionally characterized each skill as either "unimportant" (0 to 19), "infrequently used" (20 to 39), "common" (40 to 59), "preferred" (60 to 79), or "essential" (80 to 100) for new job-market entrants. The survey defined new-market entrants as workers operating in their first two to three years of professional employment.

It may be worth noting for fellow researchers that garnering institutional approval for an alumni survey of this breadth proved a non-trivial task, in part because no "full alumni" academic survey had been previously attempted at the university. Indeed, no clear process existed as to how to initiate or manage one, and a lack of clarity existed as to who institutionally "owned" alumni email addresses, who safeguarded them, and who could grant or deny access to them. Ultimately, the university's Alumni Office (responsible for managing alumni relations) and its Development Office (the university's principal fundraising arm) agreed to implement a research-based email survey for every college whose Dean, as the notional owner of his or her

college’s alumni list, authorized the survey. In addition to attaining IRB certification for the study therefore (Approval No. 1166, IRB, Stephen F. Austin State University), the author lobbied for and attained survey permissions from all of the college Deans and the Provost. In return for granting survey permissions, the author committed to providing each Dean with both granular and aggregated survey data for each college unit and for the entire university upon the project’s completion.

This permissions process, however, placed some key constraints upon the anonymous survey instrument—and upon the survey’s execution. While campus administrators agreed to include a few survey fields to elicit each recipient’s graduation year, state of residence, and field of employment, the Alumni and Development Offices vetoed questions concerning gender and major course of study for fear of alienating potential respondents. Finally, mass e-mailings containing links to a Qualtrics-based survey that was managed via the MailChimp marketing-automation tool were distributed by the spring of 2018 to all of the university’s alumni on record. For a complete copy of the survey questions and their associated skill categories, please refer to Appendix A.

## RESULTS

Ultimately, a total of 34,687 emails were initially sent out to Stephen F. Austin State University alumni, each of whom had three months to respond to the survey. After subtracting out the number of unsuccessful sends based upon “bounce back” messages recorded by the survey’s email manager, the total number of apparently successful email transmissions stood at 29,730. Yet if 3.52 percent of all survey recipients clicked on the email’s embedded survey link—and thereby viewed at a minimum the survey’s first page—only 2.31 percent of the survey’s respondents (and roughly two-thirds of those who clicked on the embedded link) fully completed the survey. While the author and the Deans requested that follow-up emails be sent to non-respondents during the three-month survey window in order to increase survey response rates, the Alumni and Development Office advised that alumni “touches” be kept to a minimum so as to avoid depressing responses during subsequent fundraising initiatives due to email fatigue. Therefore, potential respondents received only the initial survey email.

Since the Development Office segregated outgoing messages by the recorded sub-college affiliation of each intended recipient, and since each respondent self-identified his or her college sub-unit when responding to the survey, the response rates per college unit could be calculated (see Table 1):

Table 1:  
Survey Response Rates per College Sub-Unit.

College Unit:	<i>Science &amp; Math</i>	<i>Liberal &amp; Applied Arts</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Forestry &amp; Agriculture</i>	<i>Fine Arts</i>	<i>Business</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Messages sent:	3,694	8,418	13,719	1,683	1,943	5,230	N/A	34,687
Bounce backs:	508	1,307	2,167	280	296	759	N/A	5,317
Net sends:	3,186	7,111	11,552	1,403	1,647	4,471	N/A	29,370
Fully completed surveys:	81	161	107	98	48	124	60	679

Net survey response rate (%):	2.54%	2.26%	0.93%	6.99%	2.91%	2.77%	N/A	2.31%
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*Note.* Perhaps having graduated before subsequent name changes affected their college sub-units, some respondents could not identify the institutional unit that houses their program of study today. These responses have been labeled as unaffiliated or “Other” in Table 1.

While the effective survey response rates for most of the college units hovered between two and three percent, the college with the largest total number of alumni (namely, the College of Education) featured by far the lowest response rate, while the college with the fewest alumni (Forestry and Agriculture) returned by far the largest percentage of completed surveys. Yet the fact that over fifteen percent of the emails contained in the alumni database no longer exists (based on the bounce-back statistics) represents just one indicator of the spottiness with which the alumni email lists have been re-validated and culled. Since the primary use of the email database remains fundraising, its administrators see no particular incentive to remove outdated entries in the lists for fear of deleting a potential donor’s email account. Nor are any staffers tasked with validating the email lists due to staffing constraints, other than on an ad hoc basis when responding to account-update messages from alums. Indeed, those in charge of the survey’s email distribution could not recall the last time when the lists had been re-validated. Therefore, given that the alumni database is known to contain both duplicative and outdated email addresses, the response rate of alumni members who actually received the survey via a current email address is likely higher than the calculable response rate (2.31%), which can only account (via bounce backs) for the email addresses that targeted email servers could not process.

Despite several steps intended to increase response rates, including the use of a pilot survey (as suggested by Fink, 2017) and a reduction in the pilot’s original question set (as noted in Bayless and McKenna, 2017), almost certainly the accuracy of the email lists, the survey’s length, the impracticality of offering respondents monetary incentives, and the lack of non-respondent reminders suppressed survey response rates (Fink, 2017, p. 110). However, to what extent these non-responses represent potential sources of survey bias or error cannot be known (as discussed in Fowler, 2014, p. 58). Nor is it possible to state definitively whether a 2.31% survey response rate is somehow “too low” for academic research. As Fowler has noted, researchers recognize that the “bottom line credibility” for any survey is judged upon the survey data produced. While low survey response rates are often criticized, they are nevertheless regularly accepted, particularly when—as was true in this case—population-sampling techniques were not used and follow-ups with non-respondents proved impractical or impossible (Fowler, 2014, p. 151). Furthermore, as is true of the current study, low response rates do not necessarily imply the production of skimpy datasets. Indeed, while several of the more recent survey- or interview-based studies discussed in the literature-review section of this paper often featured perhaps dozens of respondents evaluating twenty or fewer skills, it is worth noting that this study’s survey generated more than *thirty-six thousand* pieces of respondent data with which to rank the relative importance of *fifty* communication skills.

Some of that data proved more useful for analytical purposes than others. For example, since over 83 percent of respondents resided in Texas and 66 percent of all respondents had matriculated prior to 2001 (and whose responses, therefore, could not be segregated by year because of database limitations), the survey’s data does not support a statistically meaningful breakdown of response patterns either by age or by geographic location. Since none of the individual skills in the survey generated a mean score below 60 either overall or within any of

the survey’s academic units, respondents rated all fifty skills in aggregate as “preferred” or “essential” for new market-entrants. Nevertheless, the data generated by the survey suggests three core findings:

1. A strong consistency characterized the rankings of the top- and bottom-rated skills across the entire survey population, regardless of a given respondent’s “home” college sub-unit.
2. The skill rankings within every academic division generally prioritized forms of oral communication, active listening, and reading comprehension over writing skills.
3. Of the higher-ranked skills, few if any privileged group skills or activities, while many of the lowest-rated skills involved group communication or the production of group-centric documents.

Due to the author’s concern whether or not the skills prioritized by business programs serve the interests of students in other disciplines, data aggregations were collected to compare the ratings generated by College of Business (CoB) alumni versus the aggregate ratings produced by alumni from all of the combined non-College of Business (Non-CoB) sub-units on campus. Breakdowns of the Top Ten skill rankings provided by the university’s business and non-business alumni (respectively) have been provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2:  
Top Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all CoB Respondents.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Quest. ID</i>	<i>Skill description</i>
1	89.19	14.61	<b>Q10_3</b>	Effectively communicates using at least one of the tools found within any standard document-processing software package
2	88.69	14.36	<b>Q4_5</b>	Converses successfully with managers
3	88.48	14.23	<b>Q8_1</b>	Demonstrates an awareness of phone, meeting, and general communications etiquette
4	88.19	14.98	<b>Q1_1</b>	Obtains information through active listening
5	87.46	15.53	Q8_8	Complies with common "email etiquette" practices
6	86.34	14.11	<b>Q4_4</b>	Converses successfully with peers
7	85.45	17.30	<b>Q2_1</b>	Reads accurately and attentively to establish a basic comprehension of content
8	84.11	15.30	<b>Q3_2</b>	Demonstrates emotional intelligence and/or emotional composure
9	84.02	15.19	<b>Q8_2</b>	Able to think and respond "on one's feet"
10	83.61	16.88	Q2_2	Reads critically to identify clear content gaps, issues, problems, or challenges

*Note.* The skills in Table 2 whose Question IDs are marked in bold represent skills also listed in Table 3.

Table 3:  
Top Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all Non-CoB Respondents.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Quest. ID</i>	<i>Skill description</i>
1	90.10	17.05	<b>Q4_5</b>	Converses successfully with managers
2	89.18	16.28	<b>Q1_1</b>	Obtains information through active listening
3	89.05	16.46	<b>Q10_3</b>	Effectively communicates using at least one of the tools found within any standard document-processing software package
4	88.72	15.57	<b>Q2_1</b>	Reads accurately and attentively to establish a basic comprehension of content

5	88.71	16.95	<b>Q8_1</b>	Demonstrates an awareness of phone, meeting, and general communications etiquette
6	87.60	16.36	<b>Q3_2</b>	Demonstrates emotional intelligence and/or emotional composure
7	87.58	21.90	<b>Q4_4</b>	Converses successfully with peers
8	87.58	16.16	Q8_4	Able to identify and navigate official lines of communication
9	87.47	18.10	<b>Q8_2</b>	Able to think and respond "on one's feet"
10	87.43	16.56	Q8_6	Provides/receives feedback professionally during performance evaluations

*Note.* The skills in Table 3 whose Question IDs are marked in bold represent skills also listed in Table 2.

Comparisons of Tables 2 and 3 indicate a strong correlation between the communication skills deemed most important for new-market entrants across the full spectrum of the university's alumni, as eight of the ten highest-ranked skills among non-business graduates also represent top ten-ranked skills among business alums. Given that most of Top Ten skills within both the CoB and non-CoB populations either involve oral communication (e.g., conversing with managers/peers and receiving feedback) or are evidenced in primarily oral forms (e.g., active listening, reading comprehension, displaying emotional intelligence, responding on one's feet, and showing an awareness of general communications etiquette), the survey's results offer at least indirect support to the claim that employers may consider oral communication to be "the predominant mode of communication needed for job performance" (Coffelt et al., 2016, p. 310). For that matter, not a single Top Ten skill generated by either the CoB or the non-CoB populations privileges the ability to produce a specific document type (other, perhaps, than email), while only two of the top-ranked skills imply generic writing capabilities: specifically, the ability to use a word processor, and a general conformance with email etiquette. Nor did the top-rated skills from across the survey involve the production of group-centric, project-based, or management documents. Rather, the highly rated activities of managerial and peer communications may in practice feature the forms of oral team communications that ranked particularly highly in the recent employer study by Ortiz et al. (2016, p. 325).

Similar patterns can be observed within the skills lying at the bottom of the survey rankings, as noted in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4:  
Bottom Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all CoB Respondents.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Quest. ID</i>	<i>Skill description</i>
50	65.93	22.17	<b>Q10_1</b>	Integrates visual or graphical elements within written documents
49	66.98	22.24	Q5_1	Delivers verbal praise and/or criticism to a peer or a subordinate
48	68.87	21.80	<b>Q5_4</b>	Able to lead team meetings
47	69.36	23.09	Q6_4	Offers tactful written praise and/or criticism
46	69.91	23.21	<b>Q6_2</b>	Develops internal memos
45	70.02	23.10	<b>Q10_2</b>	Participates in video or web-conferencing calls, training sessions, and/or presentations
44	70.7	23.07	Q6_6	Strong copy-editing skills
43	71.38	21.26	<b>Q7_4</b>	Creates or maintains project-management documents
42	72.11	20.39	<b>Q9_1</b>	Develops precise and thorough management reporting
41	72.31	21.79	<b>Q7_3</b>	Develops accurate technical reports

Note. The skills in Table 4 whose Question IDs are marked in bold represent skills also listed in Table 5.

Table 5:  
Bottom Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all Non-CoB Respondents.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Quest. ID</i>	<i>Skill description</i>
50	70.83	23.25	<b>Q10_1</b>	Integrates visual or graphical elements within written documents
49	71.29	22.22	<b>Q6_2</b>	Develops internal memos
48	72.28	24.08	<b>Q7_4</b>	Creates or maintains project-management documents
47	72.29	27.00	Q8_7	Recognizes and follows "business meal etiquette" practices
46	72.56	24.87	Q7_5	Prepares efficient executive summaries or management reports
45	73.43	23.16	<b>Q10_2</b>	Participates in video or web-conferencing calls, training sessions, and/or presentations
44	73.44	22.92	<b>Q9_1</b>	Develops precise and thorough management reporting
43	73.96	23.44	Q9_4	Creates and maintains project-planning documents
42	74.50	23.70	<b>Q7_3</b>	Develops accurate technical reports
41	74.80	21.24	<b>Q5_4</b>	Able to lead team meetings

Note. The skills in Table 5 whose Question IDs are marked in bold represent skills also listed in Table 4.

In all, seven of the skills ranked the lowest by CoB respondents likewise ranked in the Bottom Ten for non-CoB respondents. Additionally, more than half of the Bottom Ten-ranked skills in both the CoB and non-CoB lists involve written outputs, including graphic-centric documents, internal memos, project management documents, technical/executive/management reports, and project plans. When taken into context with the equally low-rated “ability to lead team meetings” skill, these rankings may indicate that group-work skills may be valued less highly than other communication skills (as suggested by Coffelt et al., 2016, p. 310), at least during the first several years of an employee’s work experience. These results also provide indirect support for Coffelt, Baker and Corey’s claim that writing skills may prove to be potentially less pervasive—or necessary—in workplace settings than perhaps previously expected within the ranks of higher-education leaders and faculty.

## **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS**

Based upon the demographic data produced by the survey, there is no evidence to suggest that the survey’s results are extensible nationally on a *prima facie* basis since most respondents resided in a single state. It is conceivable that an extension of the survey to other geographic regions would yield different results. Moreover, when considering the population surveyed, it is possible that the academic programs offered at Stephen F. Austin State University influenced, and perhaps even partially pre-determined, the commercial fields pursued by its graduates. Therefore, the university’s program orientations may have influenced the survey’s results. As such, an extension of the survey to the alumni of other universities, as well as to hiring managers and business practitioners across multiple industries not directly served by the survey’s institution, seems warranted. Given the granularity of the fifty skills surveyed, it is not possible to compare each of this study’s rankings directly with those found in previous research studies, many of which focused on ranking a variety of personal qualities or characteristics (deemed “soft

skills”) and on broad communication-skill categories, rather than on discrete, measurable, and repeatable communication actions.

In addition, as is true of so many academic surveys, the survey’s response rate remains lower than desired. The fact that hundreds of the respondents who clicked on the initial survey link refused to fill the survey out completely suggests that the length of the survey limited the number of responses. The inability to send follow-up emails to non-respondents likely reduced the response rates, too. Since some college units produced relatively small response datasets (as with the College of Fine Arts), not enough data existed to perform statistically significant analyses comparing the Top and Bottom Ten lists of each and every college unit on campus. However, for a survey that produced hundreds of responses generating tens of thousands of skill-rating data-points, readers may still wish to view the charts located in Appendix B, which confirm the broad consistencies existing within the Top and Bottom Ten lists across each of the (non-aggregated) college sub-units.

As for the survey’s target population and its methodology, note that several previous communication and soft-skill surveys typically targeted either current students or employers. One can debate whether hiring managers represent the principal client for students produced universities. If not, then a general audience like the alums targeted within this study, all of whom confronted the issue of which skills matter most during their own college transitions, offers a perfectly reasonable survey population. And while any number of prior communication-skill surveys sought to target business practitioners or supervisory personnel, their survey populations have tended to be limited to dozens rather than hundreds of respondents, perhaps because of the limited scale of professional networks available to academic researchers. Indeed, even for instructors in business colleges, these networks can age and diminish as professors negotiate the tenure ladder and advance into administrative positions—and move further from private industry.

Given these factors, this author recommends that as a logical next step, multiple researchers in the business-communication field combine their funding sources to support a study utilizing a fully trained, commercial polling service to conduct market-research surveys (a best practice noted by Fink, 2017, p. 110). Such an effort could more specifically target a larger crop of hiring managers located across a diverse set of geographies, industries, and (potentially) countries than those available to a single researcher. Beyond the ability of a service like Qualtrics to support standard statistical analyses, the advantages of such an initiative would include the abilities (a) to maintain the currency of email lists, (b) to monitor survey responses on a real-time basis, (c) and to generate additional survey reminders to non-respondents as needed, all in accord with the response maximization techniques touted by Fowler (2014, p. 54).

Despite these constraints and limitations faced within this current study, however, the patterns evident in its results indicate that BCOM courses can indeed offer significant value for students enrolled within all of the college sub-units on a given campus. Since Stephen F. Austin State University’s foundational BCOM course resides within a core area-requirement matrix, its offerings remain well positioned to foreground many of the mission-critical skills needed by both its business- and non-business undergraduates alike. However, since many of the university’s BCOM sections currently prioritize written document production over engaging students in oral, aural, or reading-comprehension assignments, a reorienting of the course’s curriculum may be needed in order to target the highest priority skills identified in the alumni survey. Nor would this reorientation necessarily be simple to effect. It seems methodologically clear that developing top-rated skills within students like *Conversing successfully with managers or peers*,

*Active listening, Thinking and responding on one's feet, and Demonstrating emotional intelligence/composure* will involve some combination of role-plays, active listening, and situational speech exercises. These pedagogical approaches require additional instructional tools and assessment strategies beyond those typically applied to written documents. Moreover, given the time it takes to perform extended role-plays in class, class-section sizes may need to be reduced to approximate those featured in public-speaking classes. At Stephen F. Austin State University, for instance, a section of the core-curriculum's Public Speaking class contains 22 percent fewer students than those in a core BCOM class. Role-plays also likely require access to video recording equipment in order to capture classroom exercises for both instructors and students to assess, thereby suggesting further investments in classroom infrastructure (e.g., in video capture technology) and in instructor training (relative both to new pedagogical and assessment methods/rubrics and to the operation of new video devices). Along these lines, researchers like Coffelt, Baker and Corey have urged university administrators to consider increasing the resources used to support both interpersonal and oral communication training in their curricula (2016, p. 311).

This is not to suggest, however, that all written assignments be tossed aside. Many of the writing assignments in BCOM courses remain useful, and indeed all written compositional skills were still rated at least as "preferred" in the survey. It seems reasonable to hypothesize, too, that training in how to produce the project planning, management reporting, and advanced technical documents mentioned within the survey can eventually offer workforce value once students progress beyond their first- or second-year on the job. The task of preparing documents for an employee's performance review, for instance, likely falls to a manager with several more years of work experience than a recent hire. Similarly, the crafting and population of senior management reports or PMO documentation much more likely occupies the attention of middle managers than of recent market entrants.

In the end, the author offers the following recommendations to business-communication practitioners, instructors, and their institutions based upon an extended analysis of the survey's results:

1. Consider extending the study's survey (available in full in Appendix A) to additional universities—particularly to institutions located outside of the state of Texas—in order to validate the skill priorities relative to other local conditions.
2. Consider incorporating role-plays, situational-speaking exercises, and oral communication assignments more commonly within communication-related courses across the broad university curriculum.
3. To accommodate these assignments, consider utilizing video-capture technology to facilitate both student self-evaluations and instructorial reviews.

Additionally, the author recognizes that several potential next steps can be taken within the study's home institution, based upon the feedback from its alumni:

4. Since virtually all academic programs within the university offer communication-related training for their graduates, the survey's data has been shared with each college sub-unit, thereby enabling each program to consider implementing any additional pedagogical training or infrastructure to target the specific skills valued by its alumni.
5. Students within each college sub-unit should be polled to determine their perceived level of market readiness relative to the survey's "preferred" and "essential" skills. The most

significant gaps between alumni rankings and apparent student readiness may represent potential sites for effecting the most impactful curricular changes.

6. Once survey rankings and student self-evaluations have been compared and curriculums revised to target the most worrisome market-readiness gaps, each university program should consider instituting capstone assessments targeting the survey's highest-rated communication skills. Evaluations of *actual* student achievement in such courses can lead to more informed assessments of student readiness vs. the market expectations for new hires.

Of course, similar steps may be taken by institutions willing to use the data generated within this study without initiating large-scale surveys at home, as not all institutions may prove either prepared or willing to survey their alumni for research purposes. In any case, the author hopes that this study's results will prove directionally correct and practically useful for faculty and students at other post-secondary institutions.

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## Appendix A

### Detailed communication-skill survey sample

The complete set of survey questions sent to the university's alumni may be found below. Note that for those receiving the survey, a score of fifty (meaning, a "common" skill score) represented the default value for any skill relative to that skill's importance for new market entrants. In addition, the text below recreates the prefatory demographic questions and instructions offered to all survey respondents:

Before you begin to rank the importance of specific communication skills based upon your own workplace observations, please respond to **four non-personally identifying demographic questions** that will assist the survey's sponsors as they analyze its results.

1) Please identify **which college unit** currently **hosts your** (most recently completed) **degree program**:

NOTE TO SURVEY ADMINS: INSERT THE NAMES OF YOUR UNIVERSITY'S COLLEGE SUB\_UNITS

2) Please select the **year** when **you received** that **degree**:

NOTE: Options varied by year from 2017 backwards to 2001, while pre-2001 graduates were aggregated (due to database limitations) to a single group.

3) Please identify the **state** in which you **currently reside**. [NOTE: If you currently reside out of the United States, please choose the selection *Other*, which may be found at the bottom of the list.]

NOTE: A standard set of state codes was augmented with the response *Other*, which potentially represented alumni residing outside of the United States.

4) Please identify (as closely as you can) **your current industry or professional field** from the following list:

NOTE: The pick list represented a collection of professional fields culled down from NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) codes.

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The skills rating portion of the survey begins on the following page.

In your responses, please evaluate each skill according to your view of its **criticality for entry-level employees** during their first 2-3 years on the job (based upon your professional experience as a new hire or as a more seasoned employee or manager who interacts with new hires).

Q1 Active Listening and Responding. Move slider to percentage you think best reflects your response. (Response Category 1 of 10)

Unnecessary Infrequently Commonly Preferred Essential  
Used Useful  
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Obtains information through active listening. (1)	
Capably responds to questions in pressure situations (2)	
Chronically demonstrates civility in action, in word choice, etc. (3)	

Q2 Reading Skills and/or Capabilities.  
(Response Category 2 of 10)

Reads accurately and attentively to establish a basic comprehension of content (1)	
Reads critically to identify clear content gaps, issues, problems, or challenges (2)	
Reads critically to identify reasonable "next steps" or "action items" stemming from textual content (3)	
Reads critically to identify potential flaws in argumentation or reasoning (4)	

**Q3 Non-verbal Communication Skills.**  
 (Response Category 3 of 10)

Demonstrates a self-awareness relative to body language and placement, physical proximity, posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and personal hygiene (1)	
Demonstrates emotional intelligence and/or emotional composure (2)	
Projects an habitually "positive" presentation style (3)	
Recognizes the business reality of always being "on display" to peers, managers, and clients (4)	

**Q4 Oral Communication Category 1: "General" Speaking Behaviors and Capabilities.**  
 (Response Category 4 of 10)

Demonstrates a broad and a precise vocabulary (1)	
Speech patterns accord with established grammar conventions (2)	
Tailors vocabulary selections to match the expectations or needs of specific audiences (3)	
Converses successfully with peers (4)	
Converses successfully with managers (5)	
Fully capable of engaging clients in basic social (i.e., non-work specific) conversations (6)	
Speaks up during team meetings (7)	
Speaks with confidence in front of peers, subordinates, and managers (8)	

**Q5 Oral Communication Category 2: Situational Speech.**  
 (Response Category 5 of 10)

Delivers verbal praise and/or criticism to a peer or a subordinate (1)	
Tactfully questions peers, managers, subordinates, and clients to achieve clarity and mutual understanding (2)	
Capable of persuasive argumentation (3)	
Able to lead team meetings (4)	

**Q6 Written Communication Skills and Capabilities: Part 1.**  
 (Response Category 6 of 10)

Competent in document organization, layout, and formatting (1)	
Develops internal memos (2)	
Drafts, updates, and/or maintains accurate procedural documentation (3)	
Offers tactful written praise and/or criticism (4)	
Possesses an advanced command of grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules and usage (5)	
Strong copy-editing skills (6)	
Strong proofreading skills (7)	

**Q7 Written Communication Skills/Capabilities: Part 2.**  
 (Response Category 7 of 10)

Drafts and sends efficient email and memos (1)	
Able to develop written or oral messages and materials destined for external audiences (2)	
Develops accurate technical reports (3)	
Creates or maintains project-management documents (4)	
Prepares efficient executive summaries or management reports (5)	

**Q8 Organizational Communication Behaviors.**  
 (Response Category 8 of 10)

Demonstrates an awareness of phone, meeting, and general communications etiquette (1)	
Able to think and respond "on one's feet" (2)	
Able to identify and navigate unofficial lines of communication (3)	
Able to identify and navigate official lines of communication (4)	
Avoids gossip (5)	
Provides/receives feedback professionally during performance evaluations (6)	
Recognizes and follows "business meal etiquette" practices (7)	
Complies with common "email etiquette" practices (8)	

**Q9 Team and Group Communication Capabilities.**  
 (Response Category 9 of 10)

Develops precise and thorough management reporting (1)	
Offers timely and precise team status updates (2)	
Updates and integrates documents within or across project teams (3)	
Creates and maintains project-planning documents (4)	

**Q10 Technical Communication Skills/Capabilities.**  
 (Response Category 10 of 10)

Integrates visual or graphical elements within written documents (1)	
Participates in video or web-conferencing calls, training sessions, and/or presentations (2)	
Effectively communicates using at least one of the tools found within any standard document-processing software package (e.g. Microsoft Office, Office 365, OpenOffice, Adobe Acrobat, etc.) (3)	

## Appendix B: College sub-unit skill ranking comparisons

As noted in the survey's Results section, a common set of skills dominated the top and bottom of the ranking sets generated within the survey. As an illustration of this overlap, consider Tables B1 and B2, which rank skills according to their ordinal ratings as produced by the alumni of individual colleges. A comparison of the Top Ten highest-rated skills across each academic sub-unit indicates a strong correlation between the communication skills deemed most important for new market entrants across the full spectrum of the university's alumni, as noted in Table B1. In fact, the seven highest-ranked skills at the overall university level all fell within the Top Ten list of at least six of the seven college sub-units. Only two skills lying outside of the full university's Top Ten list (i.e., Q8\_6 and Q1\_3, or ordinal ranks 11 and 13) appeared within the Top Ten lists of most of the university's college sub-units.

Table B1:  
Top Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all Survey Respondents (and within each College Sub-unit).

<u>Topic description</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Std. Dev.</u>	<u>Quest. ID</u>	<u>Full Survey Rank</u>	<u>CoB</u>	<u>S/M</u>	<u>LA</u>	<u>ED</u>	<u>FOR</u>	<u>FA</u>	<u>OTH</u>
Converses successfully with managers	89.84	11.77	<b>Q4_5</b>	<b>1</b>	2	2	1	1	1	3	2
Effectively communicates using at least one of the tools found within any standard document-processing software package (e.g. Microsoft Office, Office 365, OpenOffice, Adobe Acrobat, etc.)	89.07	16.05	<b>Q10_3</b>	<b>2</b>	1	3	5	4	2	7	
Obtains information through active listening	89.00	13.20	<b>Q1_1</b>	<b>3</b>	4	1	2		8	1	3
Demonstrates an awareness of phone, meeting, and general communications etiquette	88.67	14.18	<b>Q8_1</b>	<b>4</b>	3		3	3	9	2	4
Reads accurately and attentively to establish a basic comprehension of content	88.12	15.05	<b>Q2_1</b>	<b>5</b>	7	5	4	8	6	9	1
Converses successfully with peers	87.36	13.28	<b>Q4_4</b>	<b>6</b>	6	4	9		5		9
Demonstrates emotional intelligence and/or emotional composure	86.97	13.57	<b>Q3_2</b>	<b>7</b>	8	9	6	2		4	10
Complies with common "email etiquette" practices	86.86	17.32	Q8_8	8	5			6		8	
Able to think and respond "on one's feet"	86.85	14.33	Q8_2	9	9	7		7			5

Able to identify and navigate official lines of communication	86.77	14.10	Q8_4	10			10	9	3	5	6
Provides/receives feedback professionally during performance evaluations	86.46	15.30	Q8_6	11			8	5	7	6	
Recognizes the business reality of always being "on display" to peers, managers, and clients	85.86	16.12	Q3_4	12					4	10	
Chronically demonstrates civility in action, in word choice, etc.	85.45	19.28	Q1_3	13		10	7		10		7
Projects an habitually "positive" presentation style	85.40	14.05	Q3_3	14							
Drafts and sends efficient email and memos	85.34	16.72	Q7_1	15							
Reads critically to identify reasonable "next steps" or "action items" stemming from textual content	84.83	16.36	Q2_3	16		6					8
Demonstrates a self-awareness relative to body language and placement, physical proximity, posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and personal hygiene	84.45	16.79	Q3_1	17				10			
Reads critically to identify clear content gaps, issues, problems, or challenges	84.30	16.63	Q2_2	18	10	8					

*Note.* The last seven columns in Table B1 contain skills ranking for all six of the college sub-units in the university—denoted with headings for the Colleges of Business (CoB), Science and Math (S/M), Liberal and Applied Arts (LA), Education (ED), Forestry and Agriculture (FOR) and Performing and Fine Arts (FA). The final column represents the notional sub-unit containing all of the survey’s “non-affiliated” responses (OTH). Please note that the rows in Table B1 featuring bold-fonted Question IDs and Full Survey rankings (all clustered at the top of the table) represent skills ranked within the Top Ten lists of at least six of the seven college sub-units.

Similar patterns can be traced among the skillsets lying at the bottom of the survey rankings, as noted in Table B2. While all of the Bottom Ten ranked skills across the full survey population fell at least thirteen percentage points below the lowest ranked item in the Top Ten, the seven lowest-rated skills across all respondents also ranked in the Bottom Ten lists of nearly all of the seven college sub-units. Only one skill falling outside of the full survey’s Bottom Ten list fell within the Bottom Ten lists of most of the college sub-units: the skill coming in at number 40 (in other words, the very next skill lying above the Bottom Ten).

Table B2:  
Bottom Ten-Rated Communication Skills across all Survey Respondents (and within each College Sub-unit).

<u>Topic description</u>	<u>Rating</u>	<u>Std. Dev.</u>	<u>Quest. ID</u>	<u>Full Survey Rank</u>	<u>CoB</u>	<u>S/M</u>	<u>LA</u>	<u>ED</u>	<u>FOR</u>	<u>FA</u>	<u>OTH</u>
Capable of persuasive argumentation	77.26	19.03	Q5_3	33				41			
Drafts, updates, and/or maintains accurate procedural documentation	76.49	20.71	Q6_3	34							43
Offers timely and precise team status updates	76.37	21.63	Q9_2	35							
Speaks up during team meetings	76.23	17.90	Q4_7	36							
Offers tactful written praise and/or criticism	74.84	21.27	Q6_4	37	47				48		
Updates and integrates documents within or across project teams	74.69	22.49	Q9_3	38		41			41		
Strong copy-editing skills	74.68	21.98	Q6_6	39	44	47					48
Develops accurate technical reports	74.10	23.38	Q7_3	40	41		48	44		50	
Able to lead team meetings	73.73	21.46	Q5_4	41	48			43	44	42	
Delivers verbal praise and/or criticism to a peer or a subordinate	73.70	19.58	Q5_1	42	49		41		45		49
Creates and maintains project-planning documents	73.69	23.10	Q9_4	43		46	43		42	45	41
Develops precise and thorough management reporting	73.20	22.49	<b>Q9_1</b>	<b>44</b>	42	43	46	42		49	42
Participates in video or web-conferencing calls, training sessions, and/or presentations	72.81	23.19	<b>Q10_2</b>	<b>45</b>	45	42	42	45	46	48	
Prepares efficient executive summaries or management reports	72.69	24.44	<b>Q7_5</b>	<b>46</b>		45	44	49	43	47	45
Recognizes and follows "business meal etiquette" practices	72.68	26.59	<b>Q8_7</b>	<b>47</b>		44	47	46	47	41	46
Creates or maintains project-management documents	72.12	23.60	<b>Q7_4</b>	<b>48</b>	43	50	49	48		46	44
Develops internal memos	71.04	22.41	<b>Q6_2</b>	<b>49</b>	46	49	45	50	50	43	47
Integrates visual or graphical elements within written documents	69.93	23.13	<b>Q10_1</b>	<b>50</b>	50	48	50	47	49	44	50

*Note.* The last seven columns in Table B2 contain skill rankings using the same campus sub-unit designations as in Table B1. The rows in Table B2 that feature bold-fonted Question IDs and Full Survey rankings (all clustered at the bottom of the table) represent skills ranked within the Bottom Ten lists of at least six of the seven college sub-units.

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