

**Recommendations for Communication Centers based on Student and Tutor Reflections: Insights about Students' Reasons for Visiting, Session Outcomes, and Characteristics of the Tutoring Approach**

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Communication centers exist to help students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course develop their presentational skills (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2014). Based on the model of writing centers, communication centers provide support in the form of one-on-one tutoring. Previous studies have looked at services offered by communication centers, along with the impact of communication centers on student confidence, communication apprehension, and overall public speaking ability (e.g., Jones et al., 2004). The scholarly community needs to continue exploring the utility of communication centers from the perspective of students, and sharing thoughts from experienced communication tutors, to enhance communication centers.

In particular, understanding why students come to communication centers, what they gain, and what they like about the tutoring approaches can help communication centers pinpoint their perceived usefulness to students. These three areas of inquiry can also help communication centers determine the types of services they should consider offering, ways they can consider marketing their services, and approaches they could consider taking to the tutoring process. Therefore, the topics we explore include the purposes for students' visits to a communication center, the outcomes of their appointment, and the attributes of the

tutoring and characteristics of the tutor that students appreciate.

This paper addresses students' and tutors' experiences in a communication center at a large Midwestern university to offer recommendations for new and improving communication centers. We integrate empirical research conducted on student reflection forms with existing literature and insights from our own professional experiences with communication centers and as past introductory public speaking course instructors. The first three authors of this paper are former and current tutors in the communication center, while the fourth author is the director of the communication center. Our goal is to bring awareness to the experiences of students who attended tutoring sessions in a communication center and offer commentary rooted in knowledge from the academy and from our time serving as tutors to help improve and expand the services available to students in communication centers.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding of students' experiences in a communication center and offer recommendations for new and growing communication centers about serving students in the introductory public speaking course. To begin, we briefly review literature on communication centers to provide a working conceptualization of what

a communication center is and describe both the introductory public speaking course and the communication center at our university. Then, we outline our methods, including an explanation of how we analyzed students' reflections and a justification for offering our professional insights. Then, we describe recommendations for communication centers, which include evidence from our empirical research and suggestions based on our professional experience. Finally, we offer a conclusion that summarizes the students' reflections and recommendations.

### **Communication Centers**

Communication centers offer students instructional experiences that enhance their education. The goal of communication centers is experiential learning (Brann-Barrett & Rolls, 2004). A survey of communication centers at almost 50 institutions found that most were housed within the Communication department and served students in only the introductory public speaking course or similar courses (LeFebvre et al., 2017). Communication centers are staffed by a combination of undergraduate, graduate, staff, and faculty tutors who assist students with a variety of topics related to public speaking. Some communication centers offer sessions addressing only delivery-related concerns, whereas others offer more comprehensive services that assist students through the entire oral presentation process (LeFebvre et al., 2014).

Communication centers experience challenges with developing their services and justifying their existence to departments and schools with restricted budgets. However, limited research evaluates the benefits and outcomes of communication centers. Because of this, more comprehensive evaluations of communication centers are needed (Leek et

al., 2015; LeFebvre et al., 2017). Turner (2015) questioned the field of communication about how scholars can identify what students gain from using communication centers. Exploring students' perspectives on communication centers offers an important way of answering this question and securing a place for communication centers on college campuses.

The topics we address include why students seek tutoring from the communication center, what students gain from the tutoring, and what students appreciate about the tutoring and tutors. Learning about the reasons why students visit communication centers can encourage communication centers to offer the services students seek and prepare tutors for the reasons why students may make an appointment. Understanding what students feel they gain from their visits can help communication centers establish their necessity and secure funding. Knowing what students appreciate about approaches to tutoring and tutors may enable communication centers to provide more effective training for their employees. Therefore, the questions we explore include:

- Why do students visit communication centers?
- What do students feel they gain from visiting communication centers?
- What approaches to tutoring and characteristics of their tutors do students appreciate?

Answering these questions can assist communication centers in planning, implementing, and funding their services, especially those geared toward the introductory public speaking course.

### **Our Introductory Public Speaking Course**

Our exploration focuses on the experiences of students and tutors in the

Communication Help Center (CHC) at a large Midwestern university. The CHC serves students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course. The introductory public speaking course provides students with skills and experiences to help develop their public speaking abilities. The skills students obtain in this course consist of audience analysis, topic analysis, verbal and non-verbal delivery skills, and group communication skills; students also learn about visual aids, organizational patterns and structures, support and evidence, and persuasive and informative strategies. The day-to-day activities for students include reading the textbook, taking quizzes, and participating in interactive lessons where they test communication theories and participate in active learning. Five major presentations (i.e., narrative, explanation, instructional, persuasive, and group presentations) allow students to practice their skills and demonstrate what they learn in front of an audience of their peers. The experiences provided by these presentations can help students become more comfortable speaking in front of others and help develop skills that will help them in their personal and professional lives (Docan-Morgan & Nelson, 2015).

### **Our Communication Center**

The CHC is in a small room among the offices of faculty, staff, and graduate students in the school of communication. At the time of data gathering, the CHC was open 30 hours weekly for scheduled appointments and walk-in sessions for students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course. The CHC was staffed by three doctoral students (tutors) with advanced teaching experience and managed by the Introductory Public Speaking Course Director.

The CHC provides students a resource to obtain feedback on their preparation materials for oral presentations and practice their speaking skills. Specifically, the CHC aims to help students throughout the entire process of presentational speaking (i.e., topic selection, creation of an outline, integration of sources, creation of visual aids, and delivery). Oral communication is the focus of the CHC because students also have a writing lab on campus where they can develop their writing skills.

Before the session, tutors ask students what they hope to accomplish through the tutoring, as a way of ensuring students receive the help they seek. The success of the CHC is measured through the completion of reflection forms and a post-session online survey emailed to students, where students can debrief their visit and provide feedback that will help improve the CHC as a resource. Responses from the reflection forms and survey help measure the effectiveness of the CHC after the session.

When the data were gathered for this study, the CHC conducted 504 visits in the fall, 516 visits in the spring, and 236 visits in the summer. Of the 1,256 visits, 1,093 of them were with new students, meaning only about 200 appointments were with repeat students. Each CHC session lasts around 15-30 minutes. In 2017-2018, over half the students (54.89%) that filled out the post-session survey indicated that they would visit the CHC again. Currently, the CHC only provides services via individual tutoring sessions but aims to expand its services and provide workshops on topics such as verbal and non-verbal delivery, outlining, and communication apprehension.

Various strategies are used to promote the CHC. To begin, we have a webpage to promote the CHC and to

establish an online presence, as well as large signage within our building to bring awareness to our existence. A logo created by the Director of Public Relations for our School of Communication provides strong branding for our CHC. Additionally, tutors visit the introductory public speaking classes at the beginning of the semester to give an introductory presentation about the CHC and the services offered. Instructors also post information about the CHC in the learning management system for their courses. Lastly, tutors host a booth to promote the CHC at a variety of fairs and activities on campus and discuss the CHC in a preview session for the introductory public speaking course offered to first-year students during their orientation week.

Attending a tutoring session in the CHC was one of three options for an assignment in the introductory public speaking course where students viewed communication in action. Consequently, students could receive a small amount of credit for visiting the CHC, but were not required to, and could also attend tutoring sessions uncredited. Approximately 90% of the students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course are in their first year of classes at the university; therefore, the attendees of the CHC are, in large part, first-year students. The reflections from a sample of these students provide the basis for our methods.

## **Method**

The field of communication continues to discuss, at conferences and in academic journals, challenges of and strategies for assessing communication (see Leek et al., 2015 for a summary of a recent conversation). With pressures to demonstrate instructional effectiveness and report learning outcomes in higher education, quantitative methods are often

preferred for evaluating communication courses due to measurability (Boyd et al., 2014). However, there is a distinct call among scholars to undergo robust means of assessment that look at both qualitative and quantitative data, because they offer “more well-rounded understandings of what is happening at a communication center” (Leek et al., 2015, p. 57). This paper utilizes responses written by students in the reflection forms completed after their visit to the CHC. Although quantitative data was also collected about the utility of their visits, the qualitative data from the reflection forms are analyzed and presented here, because the richness better captures a more holistic view of their experiences in the CHC.

## **Analyzing Students’ Reflections**

The reflection forms were completed by students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course who attended a tutoring session in the CHC. To earn credit for visiting the CHC, students completed and submitted a reflection form to their instructors following their 30-minute appointment with a tutor. Instructors, then, gave all the reflection forms ( $n = 180$ ) to the Introductory Public Speaking Course Director who removed identifying information. The reflection form contained two prompts: 1) provide the purpose of the visit, and 2) reflect on the session and the tutor’s advice while identifying two things they will work on moving forward. The authors entered the information from the reflection forms into a spreadsheet. Each student’s reflection form was given a number to keep responses to both prompts connected.

To look for emergent themes, two authors independently coded each student’s reflection, which consisted of the two prompts. In the first prompt, open coding was used to determine the reasons students

gave for attending the CHC. In the second prompt, the coders again used open coding and noticed that students reported the outcomes of their visit, as well as the qualities they appreciated of the CHC and the tutors. The outcomes of the visit and attributes of the tutors and tutoring became areas of inquiry in the paper, along the students' reasons for visiting. After two of the authors open-coded each reflection, their codes were addressed together to assess similarities and differences in the themes identified by each author. After determining the collective themes that most correctly and succinctly fit the data, the themes were reported along with in vivo exemplars taken directly from the data. We also reported the general number of responses, out of 180, that fit with each theme where appropriate. The themes for each area of inquiry are reported.

### **Offering Our Professional Insights**

The findings from the analyses of students' reflections are situated within existing literature and insights from our experiences as tutors and directors to offer recommendations for communication centers. The first three authors of this paper are advanced graduate students who were former and current tutors in the CHC and have been instructors for the introductory public speaking course. The first author tutored in the CHC for one and a half years and is an assistant director for the introductory public speaking course. The second and third authors have served as tutors in the CHC for four and three years, respectively. And the fourth author has been the director of the CHC and the introductory public speaking course for four years. Throughout the coding process, we discussed our experiences as tutors, instructors, and directors, and developed ideas for enhancing communication centers.

Our commentary is injected throughout the paper via reflective statements and suggestions, given our first-hand experience with communication centers. We offer ideas that support what students discussed in their reflections and what we have seen as advantageous.

## **Recommendations for Communication Centers**

### **Purpose for Visiting the Communication Center**

Understanding the reasons students seek tutoring from communication centers is essential. Depending on what services are provided, students may have a variety of reasons for visiting a center including studying course content, meeting in a professional presentation space, accessing their presentation media, drafting presentations, and getting traditional feedback on outlines and delivery (Strawser et al., 2018). Students may also simply be seeking course credit or extra credit for their visit. We believe it is important to assess what, when given the entire spectrum of potential topics to discuss with their tutor, students want help with from communication centers to help tailor services to those that are most sought.

While most students indicated they came to the CHC for assistance on a presentation, students used distinct language to note the type of help they sought. Some students indicated they were looking for help, suggestions, advice, extra insight, assistance, and guidance. Other students wanted tutors to fix, check, or review their progress, make corrections on their outlines, or revise major problems. The type of language used points to where the student is in the presentation development process. For example, in the first set of verbs, students show they are still actively in the speech

preparation process (e.g., “I came to work on my persuasive speech”). In the second set of verbs, students seemed to be nearing the end of the preparation process (e.g., “I visited the [CHC] to get our group persuasive outline checked”). In our professional experiences, we recommend communication centers should offer a place for students to indicate the purpose of their visit before or at the start of their appointment, so tutors can provide students the best experience possible by knowing ahead of time what they wish to discuss. We have also found it useful to consider the verbiage used by students when describing their progress and their goals for the visit. Listening carefully to the language students use can help tutors determine the best way of assisting students through the drafting or finalizing processes.

The most mentioned aspect of speech preparation students sought help with was content and structure. Particularly, just over 100 student participants stated they wanted help with their outline (e.g., formatting and structuring), organization of content (e.g., the introduction, main points, and transitions), and topic selection. Examples of student purposes include:

- “I needed to split my topic into two main points.”
- “I needed to brainstorm a ‘catchy’ introduction.”
- “I came before my explanatory presentation for help on narrowing down my topic and organizing my speech.”

This finding demonstrates that communication centers offering help with only delivery may be missing an opportunity to help their students develop quality presentations.

The second most frequent area was delivery with 25 student responses mentioning various aspects of presentation

delivery. In addition to feedback on individual aspects of delivery (e.g., gestures, eye contact, and fillers), students wanted advice on extemporaneous speaking, using notecards, and being less nervous and more confident while presenting. Students indicated they came to the communication center “to help fix [their] problem of eye contact and help [them] become more confident” and “to work on using gestures and also how to be less theatrical with my movements and speaking.” Therefore, we suggest offering a quiet space for students to practice their presentational speaking skills in communication centers. Offering students a quiet room to give their speech has been useful to us in the past, because it enables the tutor and student to interact with fewer distractions and to give and receive maximum attention. Students who attend the center can experience giving their presentation in front of an audience of one person before presenting for a grade in class, which our past experiences indicate help students overcome their delivery challenges. Additionally, we also propose tutors should be familiar with different strategies for managing communication apprehension and be prepared to share their own personal coping methods to help students reduce their speaking anxiety; we notice many students who have speaking anxiety seem comforted by learning about both proven and anecdotal approaches to decreasing their apprehension.

The last major reason students visited the CHC was wanting direction for finding credible sources and incorporating them into their presentations, which was mentioned in 12 student responses. A student came to “learn about the utilization of citations in visual aids and during presentations and the use of note cards.” With the importance of visual aids and sources in presentations, we recommend communication centers offer televisions or

projectors, when budgets permit, so students can display their visual aids both for evaluation and practice. In our experience, technologies enable tutors and students to evaluate the size and quality of text and graphics and can give students the opportunity to practice aspects of their physical delivery related to referencing their visual aids.

Reasons why students may avoid seeking tutoring from communication centers are also important to consider. Strawser et al. (2018) found busyness, lack of awareness, and the belief that assistance was not needed to be reasons students did not use a communication center on campus. The potential for uncertainty exists surrounding public speaking and communication center visits; the anxiety caused by this uncertainty sometimes results in missed appointments or simple refusal to attend the communication centers (Zakia-O'Donnell & Cuny, 2016). However, there may be other unseen barriers to student attention.

Communication centers should strive to help students feel more comfortable with their services. Two strategies communication centers can use that we have done and will be doing in the upcoming years consist of: 1) having tutors give brief presentations about the communication center (e.g., who they are and what they do) in communication classes at the start of the semester, and 2) creating an introductory video for their website showing students how to find their space and what to expect when they arrive. In addition, support from instructors is also essential to the success of communication centers (King & Atkins Sayre, 2012), because some students may only visit because of instructor suggestion or course requirement. Therefore, instructors should also be prompted throughout the semester to remind their students of the

CHC services. After exploring students' reasons for visiting the CHC, the next section explores the reported outcomes of these visits.

### **Outcomes of Visiting the Communication Center**

Previous research recognizes the various benefits students experience from visiting communication centers, including improved skills, enhanced presentations, and better grades. Dwyer and Davidson (2012) found that students reported an increase in public speaking skills but did not identify the specific skills that were improved. Students with moderate to high communication apprehension reported a decrease in anxiety and increase in their grade after utilizing a communication center (Dwyer et al., 2002; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). However, tutoring was also found to be more influential to the organizational structure of students' speeches and on their final presentation grades than on their communication apprehension and speech delivery (Davis et al., 2017). Providing further inquiry into the benefits of communication center visits, we explore the outcomes students report in their reflections.

#### ***Drafting the Presentation***

Students indicated they commonly received help with drafting their presentation, including organizing the main sections of their speech and planning the content in the sections. Specifically, students obtained help with choosing topics and thesis statements; writing introductions, main points, conclusions, and transitions; and removing and adding content:

- “The tutor was very helpful in finalizing my topic for the explanatory presentation.”

- “[The tutor helped] fix my conclusion so it restates my thesis without exactly repeating it.”
- “I learned that each main point should be balanced with supporting points and there should always be a clear reason for supporting information.”

We reflect on how we, as tutors, facilitate the process of drafting presentations. First, we ask many probing questions to help students identify what they want the purpose of their presentation to be and what information they feel is important for the audience to know. Second, we give students the option of watching example presentations from previous students (with prior permission) to hear how others have structured their presentations; then, we discuss strengths and weaknesses. Third, we offer to talk through tips for structuring presentations. To help students draft their presentations, we offer tip sheets addressing the main parts of speech writing (e.g., introductions, main points, conclusions, organizational patterns, and outlining) that students can take home with them. Communication centers may consider providing similar information sources and worksheets, because students mentioned having access to the documents after the session was useful. We also utilize notepads or dry erase boards to help students visualize their presentations, which may be beneficial for other communication centers, too.

### ***Delivering the Presentation***

Outcomes associated with delivering the presentation that students mentioned included handling verbal and nonverbal aspects of delivery and getting ready to deliver their speech. Students stated tutors gave ideas for how to remember key parts of the speech, like oral citations and the conclusion, and encouraged students to

practice more. Students often found it useful to practice with the tutor because they could improve their vocal and physical delivery.

The tutors were also reported to give assistance as students prepared for delivering their presentations. Many students revealed their appointment helped them feel more confident. Notably, a student mentioned, “This appointment helped me gain more direction and confidence in this presentation.” Many students revealed the tutor helped them organize their notecards. A student specifically stated, “The tutor was very helpful, especially regarding questions I had about how to make note cards.” We suggest that tutors in communication centers should be prepared for students to be anxious about the delivery of their presentations, since many individuals fear public speaking (Montopoli, 2017).

Through our experiences, we have noticed that students often wait until the last minute to schedule their CHC appointment, which makes achieving beneficial outcomes challenging. Students should be encouraged to make appointments at least 24 hours prior to their presentation to allot enough time for revisions and practice. However, especially when students have a communication center appointment only hours before their presentation, we believe reducing their anxiety is key. Drastic changes to the presentation in a short amount of time could potentially increase the anxiety of the student. Therefore, we advise tutors to suggest small but realistic changes, while expressing support and encouragement to the students that utilize their services. In instances where students are fearful of public speaking, tutors should strive to be calm and reassuring as they work with students on preparing their note cards.

### ***Supporting the Presentation***



Two key forms of support students reported getting help with before their presentation were sources and visual aids. Many students revealed the tutor assisted them with oral citations (e.g., stating references while giving a speech or presentation) and APA style, or with using PowerPoint to enhance their presentation. Students explained:

- “I learned how to find more reliable sources using tools such as Google Scholar, the library website, and Ebscohost. She also showed me how to access articles and how to use Google Scholar to make things easier for me. [...] I will work on finding and citing reliable sources and if I use a biased source, make sure it is well-known.”
- “[The tutor] proceeded to show me how to screenshot to set up my visual aid for my speech.”
- “The tutor gave us advice on how to better organize our visual aid so that the audience can clearly identify the topic.”

Given the difficulty of locating and integrating strong research into presentations, we argue communication centers should ensure their tutors are trained on resources for finding high quality-sources and using technology available on their campus.

### ***Debriefing the Presentation***

In our experience as CHC tutors, we find students sometimes attended the CHC after speaking in front of their class to debrief their presentation. In addition to sometimes just visiting to get credit, students wanted to discuss their grade or what to do moving forward, making the outcome of the visit challenging. Therefore, we propose that tutors ask how the student felt about the presentation and what help

they feel they need. Otherwise, the tutor could recommend the student come back after their speech is graded to tackle the feedback together. However, a concern is undermining the credibility of their instructor with potentially differing feedback from the tutor. Thus, communication centers should think about the relationship between training and power (see Moss, 2019) when deciding on their protocol for helping students after their presentations and need to make sure all tutors are on the same page.

### **Characteristics of the Communication Center Visit**

Specific approaches to tutoring and characteristics of the tutors can help address the tensions between the needs of communication centers and the needs of students. Communication centers need to be efficient and effective, while students need for supportive learning environments; tensions between these needs are noticeable in interactional constraints, like students feeling underserved, rushed, and frustrated, and organizational constraints related to promotion and logistics (Anderson et al., 2015). An investigation of the appreciated approaches to tutoring and tutor characteristics may provide insight into students' perceptions of their communication center experiences and be useful to consider when hiring and training tutors.

### ***Approaches to Tutoring***

We explore the attributes of the tutoring and characteristics of the tutors that students most appreciate in communication centers. The themes of guided learning, clarification of course materials, and identification of both student strengths and weaknesses were found to be the most salient in students' reflections.

Guided learning is the helpful walkthrough of the speech writing and delivery process. Students reported appreciating the opportunity to get one-on-one guidance from the tutors in the communication center and frequently noted the detailed guidance they received while there. For example, students said, "I also know how to properly handle the Q&A session," and "we also have a good foundation going into the Q&A portion of the presentation after meeting with the attendant." Notably, many presentational speaking courses move quickly through material and speech assignments which causes some students to fall behind or get lost. Students appreciated the CHC's ability to slow things down and walk through material at a slower pace.

Clarification of course materials was a second component students mentioned they appreciated of the tutoring. When covering complicated topics, students benefitted from tutors helping them more fully grasp the content of the course and the requirements for each presentation. Tutors walked through the assignment details and course materials with students to clarify and reiterate the most important and most confusing components. For example, many of our students made statements that the appointment was "very helpful in giving me ideas to use for my main points," and "after leaving the appointment I had a clearer idea of what my presentation should focus on in my main points." Thus, we recommend communication centers aid tutors in explaining course materials by having a collection of course assignment details in an online folder or a binder within the center itself. The CHC contains two binders with the presentation assignment descriptions for the major communication courses in the department. Students who attend the communication center and forget the

requirements can look over the descriptions and rubrics with the tutor to make sure they understand the course materials and are fully prepared. If communication centers allow students to describe their reasoning for scheduling an appointment ahead of time, tutors can see what the student expects to work on during their session and can prepare accordingly, by pulling up materials or reviewing the assignment details before the student arrives. The ability to prepare for each session can create a more effective and useful consultation for the student.

The last attribute of the tutoring noted by students was the identification of both strengths and weaknesses associated with students' work. Students reported that the critical feedback was unexpected but highly effective. For example, many students attend the CHC with a finished speech intending only to practice their delivery. As they practiced, tutors pointed out other content areas (such as citations, organization, or transitions) that could use additional work. For example, students have said the tutor, "gave some good advice on how to fix that [outline/framework] including using more pathos," and told them to "keep [their] call to action concise/explicit," despite coming in for help with delivery.

The constructive criticism, balanced with the identification of strengths to boost confidence, seemed to be an important component of the tutoring for students. These results are also supported in other communication help center research. For example, Blau et al. (1998) found tutors should use directive tutoring strategies and tell students what they are doing right and wrong and how to fix it. While some may view directive strategies as unfavorable, our experience indicates students value tutors who use a critical eye and gently discuss what they need to do to improve. Tutors

may also consider using journalistic techniques, like beginning with easy questions, maintaining self-control, and taking nothing at face value, in their training sessions (Ellis-Harrison, 2017), if directive strategies are less preferred.

To reiterate a point of caution, some students attend the CHC with only a day or a few minutes before giving their presentation. We advocate that all tutors must keep due dates and timelines in mind when providing feedback to students. If students only have a few hours until their official presentation, we contend that tutors should balance their desire to provide feedback with the utility of boosting student's confidence. Tutors should consider not informing the student of errors in their presentation when there is no time for improvement. In those situations, tutors should focus on a few small adjustments (mostly related to delivery) so as not to reduce students' self-efficacy or ability to perform well.

### ***Tutor Characteristics***

General literature on tutors and tutoring has identified qualities such as expertise, helpfulness, and friendliness as factors that can increase a tutor's effectiveness (Cooper, 2010; Chae & Shin, 2016). For communication centers, positive communication is beneficial to both students and staff (Spadaro & McIntyre, 2019), as is facilitation (Smithberger, 2016). Given the anxieties associated with seeking help and public speaking, the approach to tutoring and verbal and nonverbal presence of tutors can greatly influence students' experiences in communication centers, potentially more so than in other disciplines. Students reported many characteristics of the tutor that contributed to a positive experience. These traits included previous experience teaching presentational speaking, listening, and attitude.

The most frequently reported characteristic of a helpful tutor by students was their previous (or current) teaching experience. Over 50 students appreciated the examples and experiences the tutors used from their time as an instructor. Tutors gave personal recounts of what goes well in class, what students struggle with most, and ways they have seen students grow. Previous experience teaching the course helped each students' appointments move quickly and efficiently, as tutors were already informed about each assignment. Subject-matter expertise is one of the most useful characteristics for tutors (Kiedaish & Dinitz, 1993) as reported by students (Mackiewicz, 2004). Thus, we propose communication centers hire tutors that have previously taught the introductory public speaking courses on their campus or are advanced undergraduate or graduate students to help boost the effectiveness of the tutors. Their experience can enable them to respond quickly and accurately with the best advice for students to move forward with their presentations. As a student stated, "I am really happy we decided to come to the help center because the attendant that was there gave us so many helpful suggestions. I feel a lot more confident about our outline and our presentation, too." Another student added, "The session was really helpful with understanding how to get my audience's attention. The attendant's advice was extremely valuable."

Listening skills were another characteristic reported by 30 students. Students appreciated the tutors' attentiveness and their ability to patiently listen and pay attention to the concerns of the student before jumping into a response. Because of this, tutors should be encouraged to use active listening (see Cuny et al., 2012) and empathic listening (Fabian, 2019). Low-stakes conversations with tutors who

attentively listen can give students the opportunity to engage in self-reflexivity (Boger, 2019). One student described their experience by stating, "During my session, I received feedback on both my speech and my presentation skills. It helped a lot to read my speech out loud because it allowed me to hear how my grammar and sentence fluency really was. The attendant gave me several tips on how I can turn my speech into an extemporaneous tone. She also gave me tips on how to ease my speech anxiety." By using empathic listening and taking time to listen to students' whole presentations, students can use their time to talk through their questions and concerns and receive beneficial feedback.

Lastly, the tutor's attitude and demeanor played a role in the positive experiences of students at the CHC. Twenty students reported that they appreciated the calm, friendly, nice, and relaxed atmosphere the tutor created, which is consistent with research indicating that students appreciate kind, polite, and caring tutors (Mackiewicz, 2004; Thonus, 2001). For example, tutors took their time to produce thoughtful answers to student questions and let students fully describe their needs and concerns about their presentation materials. As one student stated, "I really enjoyed the sessions. The lady was very nice and helped a lot." Positive attributes (e.g., respecting students' opinions, understanding student feelings, and being friendly and kind) are found to result in an overall more positive communication center experience and potentially more confidence in the student themselves (Kassab et al., 2006). Further, communication tutors' verbal immediacy is related to a decrease in student anxiety and can result in higher perceptions of tutor credibility and caring (Ellis, 1995). By maintaining a warm and comfortable atmosphere in the CHC through verbal and

nonverbal immediacy, tutors can ease students' nervousness while helping them with their course materials.

## **Conclusion**

Our exploration of students' reflections - situated within existing literature and our professional insights - provides discernment into the reasons students use communication centers, perceived outcomes of their visits, and aspects of the tutoring and tutors they appreciated. We offered recommendations about ways of improving the quality of services provided by communication centers based on students' experiences and tutors' insights.

In addition to the specific considerations described in this paper, we present more general suggestions. Given the wide variety of reasons students visited the CHC, we believe communication centers should assist with all steps of the public speaking process from development to delivery. Communication centers, based on our experiences and assessments of students' reflections, may also work on encouraging students to visit the communication center early and often, as many students indicated they were near the end of their speech preparation with their verbiage and reported being given more or different constructive feedback than they were expecting.

We contend that tutors should be reminded that presentational speaking can be a challenge for many students, who often approach communication centers nervously and anxious about their upcoming speeches. Communication centers should be both a safe and brave space (Tonkins, 2018). Further, understanding what diversity looks like in communication centers (Ray, 2019), acknowledging the needs of diverse populations, and gaining cultural proficiency

are essential for communication centers (Lampkin, 2017). While this paper explains some beneficial tutor attributes and training, there is still abundant research to be done on this topic. Future studies should focus on consultation effectiveness in relation to tutor characteristics and training practices (Thompson et al., 2009). Other tutoring centers have begun this exploration, but communication centers specifically should follow in their footsteps and begin to dive more deeply into how best to assist students.

The role of communication centers and their unique position on campus needs to be understood for effective assessment (Leek et al., 2015), as differences in communication education across universities can be more evident than similarities (Emery, 2006). Therefore, the findings and considerations here may not be generalizable to communication centers at all universities. Comparative analyses of data from multiple communication centers could provide fruitful insights.

While we offer comprehensive recommendations, limitations exist. We used students' self-reported data to determine the outcomes of visiting the communication center and, therefore, only addressed their perceptions of what they gained. Future studies should examine the measurable impact of visiting a communication center on student performance. In addition, students were motivated to attend a tutoring session in the CHC through an assignment with a small amount of associated points. Therefore, students' true purpose for the visit may have been for course credit, which students could have produced vague language for the purpose of their visit (e.g., "to get help with my upcoming presentation"). Regardless, almost all students, despite their vague purposes, were able to identify specific things they gained from the tutoring session.

Our exploration highlights the valuable assistance provided to students by communication centers. We offer practical considerations for new and expanding communication centers. Continuing to study communication centers is important to helping improve services and attendance, enhancing students' presentational skills, and offering more robust educational experiences to students in the introductory public speaking course.

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