

Improving the Oral Communication Center

Honors Capstone Project Review

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Abstract

The Oral Communication Center (OCC) at the University of Wyoming (UW) serves to help students inside and outside of the public speaking course in a way that produces well versed public speakers. While instructors in the OCC can help make improvements on students' work, how far their help goes has yet to be measured in a way that is easily identifiable. Students in public speaking courses are required to visit the OCC in order to complete a specific assignment, so analyzing its effectiveness is important. To identify how much the OCC helps students, a survey was created and distributed to students in public speaking courses at UW. The survey was filled out anonymously by students, and asked questions pertaining to how much they believe the OCC was beneficial to them, as well as how it could be improved. The results of the survey have indicated to us how instructors can help students better, as well as what specific areas they struggle with in their speeches and assignments. The data from this study will be summarized and presented to the instructors in the OCC so that future students in public speaking will have a better experience when they visit.

Introduction:

A common piece of advice for people who are nervous about speaking in front of crowds is to imagine that everyone is in their underwear. Ignoring that a piece of advice like that is bizarre and likely to create an uncomfortable image for most, it is also subpar advice for people looking to improve their public speaking skills. Here at the University of Wyoming there is a location on campus called the Oral Communication Center (OCC) that provides help to students and faculty looking to improve their public speaking skills. In recent years, the OCC has seen a lower turnout from both faculty and students, as the COVID-19 Pandemic has heavily affected the world of education. With the OCC seeing a lower number of participants since the pandemic started, an effort was made to see what the instructors in the OCC could be doing to draw students and faculty back in. In order to improve the OCC, a survey was created to get feedback from students on their experiences in the OCC.

Procedure:

The survey created for this project was distributed to all students enrolled in public speaking, whether they were in an online course, or an in-person course. An extra credit incentive was created to get students to fill out this survey. The survey was distributed via email and filled out digitally. Of all the public speaking courses, 85 students responded to every question in the survey. The questions in the survey are as follows:

- What is your name?
- What section of public speaking are you in?
- Did you visit online or in-person?
- Do you prefer online or in-person visits?

- What speech were you preparing for?
- What areas of your speech did you work on?
- Why did you visit the OCC?
- Were you satisfied with the help you received?
 - o Why or why not?
- What suggestion would you have to OCC consultants to better assist you on future OCC visits?
- How likely are you to visit the OCC again?
- Do you have any more thoughts you would like to share?

The first two questions in the survey were only created so that the students got their extra credit points. The rest of the responses were all geared to get an idea of what the student did at the OCC, as well as their thoughts on how the experience went. Of the 12 questions in the survey, three of them were open ended, with the rest being multiple choice or a box to fill out their name. The only person able to view these responses was myself. This was done so that students would have their answers be confidential from any person in control of their grade in the course. This was expressed to them before filling out the survey.

Analysis of Survey Responses:

The responses received yielded a lot of helpful information to apply to the OCC going forward. Of the 12 questions, two open-ended questions yielded the most useful information.

The question asking the student why they were or were not satisfied with their OCC visit provided a range of responses detailing things that the instructor did well, as well as things they could have done better. Positive responses commended OCC instructors for their helpfulness in

correcting mistakes as well as kindness and flexibility in meeting times. These positive responses also indicated that OCC instructors were skilled in clarifying any course content questions that they asked. Students who reported that they were not satisfied cited that their instructors gave advice that in turn caused them to lose points, as well as receiving advice that was vague and not helpful. A couple students also indicated that they were refused any help from instructors because they did not come prepared with any work.

The next open-ended question asked students what suggestions they had for the OCC that would benefit them in future visits. A vast number of the responses had no suggestions and said that the OCC should keep up what they are doing. With that being said, a good number of students indicated a few changes to the OCC that they would like to see implemented. One suggestion that was seen rather often was that the OCC should offer longer meeting times, changing the current time slot of 20 minutes to 30 minutes. Another suggestion asked that OCC instructors and interns are all grading by the same criteria. These responses came from students who indicated that they lost points from a change they made under the advice of an OCC instructor. The other most common suggestion was that instructors should give advice and help to a student no matter how much work they come into the OCC with.

While the open-ended questions yielded beneficial responses, the closed ended questions also provided helpful information. The question asking whether or not students had a preference of online or in-person meetings indicated that around 60% of students preferred in-person meetings, 20 % preferred online meetings, and 20% had no preference. Another helpful question asked respondents what area of their speech they received help on. Around 82% of responses indicated that they received help on their speech outline, 9% received help on their speaking skills, 5% received help on speaking notes, and 4% indicated they received help on another

aspect of their speech. One last closed-ended response that yielded helpful information was a question asking whether or not the respondent is likely to revisit the OCC. 47% of respondents said they were “Very likely” to revisit, 43% indicated that they were “Likely” to revisit, 8% indicated that they were “neutral” to the idea of revisiting, and 2% of respondents indicated that they were “Very unlikely” to revisit.

Takeaways

The survey yielded extremely helpful responses and information for the OCC and its instructors to use moving forward. While questions asking for respondents’ satisfaction with the OCC as well as their likelihood to revisit indicated that the OCC is helpful, a number of other responses indicated that improvements could be made.

Respondents’ level of satisfaction with the OCC they reported to the survey shows that a large majority of students appreciate the help instructors provide. More specifically, students appreciate the clarification and fixes that the instructors provide and suggest. While most responses were positive, the negative responses revealed a pattern. Respondents indicating that they were “neutral,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” or “extremely dissatisfied,” cited issues such as receiving help that was too vague, as well as receiving help that negatively impacted their grade in the long run. This indicates that while instructors in the OCC are providing help that they believe is correct, in the end, it does not always help students. This implies that instructors have different views of what is correct and incorrect when it comes to public speaking outlines. Suggestions from respondents asking for longer meeting times implies that meetings end up being rushed. This may also explain why some students feel as though the help they receive is vague or not specific to the content in their outline, as instructors may be trying to skim and get

the most done in the little time they have. Other suggestions asking that instructors help students no matter what material they come prepared with implies that instructors have been wrongfully turning students away despite the fact that they are supposed to provide any help they can to students.

When it came to closed-ended questions, the ones asking for meeting preference and their area of work needed were the most helpful. While the number of respondents who preferred online meetings was lower than anticipated (around 20%), the number was still high enough to acknowledge. The preference of online meetings also points to the idea that some students need to meet online, as their schedules or location prevents them from attending in person. As for the question asking for what area of work students received help on, an overwhelming amount of respondents indicating they worked on their outline implies that that is where instructors and students put the most focus on. While the OCC provides help on all aspects of public speaking, most students seeking help on their outline indicates that that is most likely where they see the most value.

Lastly, the questions asking for satisfaction and likelihood of revisiting the OCC tell us that the instructors and interns in the OCC are doing their job. While other questions point out short comings, having an overwhelming majority give positive feedback shows that the OCC is at least headed in the right direction. As for the negative feedback, it shows a pattern of behavior by instructors that can be fixed for future students. Given that each year there are new instructors and interns in the OCC, it is likely that these problems can be fixed so long as they are addressed.

Going Forward

It is clear that the OCC here at the University of Wyoming is headed in a positive direction. With that being said, certain behaviors need to be addressed going forward if the OCC wishes to gain back the notoriety it had before the COVID-19 Pandemic. First, communication between OCC instructors and interns alike needs to improve. Respondents indicating that they were given advice in the OCC that negatively impacted their grade shows that not every instructor or intern is on the same page in terms of what is correct in incorrect in public speaking. To fix this issue, instructors and interns need to meet together throughout the year and make sure that they all agree on guidelines for the course content. Another change that needs to be made in terms of how instructors conduct meeting is how precise and analytical they are. Respondents noting that advice was often too vague means that instructors in the OCC need to offer help that directly addresses the issue they see instead of using vague terminology. Offering examples of how students can better their content would help remedy this issue. Referencing the course textbook would also be a great way for instructors to offer better advice. As for how analytical instructors are, it would be in their best interest to fully read through students' outlines and notes. By doing this, instructors will be able to offer more help with a students' speech instead of just offering easy fixes.

Outside of instructor behavior, some changes could be made to how the OCC operates in general. Respondents suggested that longer meeting times would be beneficial to students who may need more help than most. Providing longer meeting times would also allow the instructors to look more carefully at the students' outline and notes, which would lead to a better analysis. Going forward the OCC should offer 30-minute meetings on certain days of the week, or perhaps during a week that is not expected to be busy. As long as this is heavily emphasized to the

students, it would reach those who need help. Another thing that could be changed is the amount of online meetings offered to students. Around 20% of students indicated that they preferred online meetings and 60% preferred in-person meetings. This indicates that the OCC could offer less online meetings and more in-person ones. Certain days of the week should be advertised to students as days with more online meetings so that those who need to meet online can do so without worry. Lastly, at the end of each semester it would be beneficial if this survey or some modified version of it should be distributed to students to get feedback. This would ensure that any problems in the OCC can be addressed and remedied for the next semester.

Overall, the OCC is in a great place to get back to the notoriety it once had on campus. Small changes need to be implemented in order to help students who visit, but the OCC is on the right track. Should the suggestions highlighted in this paper be implemented, the OCC will likely see an uptick in visitors as well as levels of satisfaction from those visitors.