Factors Influencing the Communication Skills of College of Agriculture Ambassadors

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Abstract

First and second-year College of Agriculture Ambassadors shared similar factors which influenced their attainment of communication skills. Focus group findings revealed five overarching domains, including: Ambassador experiences, recommendations for other students, influences on participation as an Ambassador, past communication experiences and personal preparation for speaking. Experiences which most directly influenced Ambassador's communication skills included those which forced students to step out of their comfort zone with regards to communicating with university and industry professionals. The importance of observing others with both strong and weak communication skills was emphasized. Ambassadors recommended that faculty build assignments which promote student attendance at university functions where they can observe professionals communicating. Such assignments could involve students attending poster sessions and lunch-and-learn workshops with industry leaders. Ambassadors also recommended providing opportunities for students to serve as leaders in class discussions. Assignments that create a learning environment where students are comfortable making communication mistakes and can reflect on those errors (such as through video observation) are also recommended.

Introduction

From an employer standpoint, undergraduate and graduate students lack soft skills needed on the job (Brooks et al., 2008). Soft skills, including communication, decision-making, problem-solving, self-management, teamwork, professionalism and leadership experiences, are complimentary to a students' content knowledge-base and can influence the likelihood of successfully navigating an interview (Crawford et al., 2011).

One main skill that is especially important and has been stressed in the literature is communication (Guenthner and Moore, 2005; Schneider, 2015; Thomas, 2010). Employers, teachers and even college students themselves have been studied and all agree that communication skills are in need of improvement among college students about to enter the workforce. However, research concludes that students perceive their "soft or practical skills" to be stronger than that of employer perceptions. A recent report released by the Association of American Colleges and Universities highlights the discrepancy between students' and employers' views. While 62% of students said they were well prepared in written and oral communication, only 24% of employers believed that to be true of recent college graduates (Schneider, 2015). Leaders in the 21st century must be able to communicate in diverse situations and with diverse individuals and the need for enhancing student communication skills has been discussed for over a decade (Watt, 2003).

Employers are less likely to hire individuals lacking strong communication skills (Stephens, 2013; White, 2013). In a study by Bronson (2007), the majority of high school students lacked many professional characteristics, including communication skills. In fact, communication has been listed as the most important soft skill to employers (Crawford et al., 2011; Schneider, 2015). The types of communication skills that employers are looking for, listed from most important to least important, respectively, are listening effectively, communicating accurately and concisely, effective oral communication, communicating pleasantly and professionally, effective written communication, asking good questions and communicating appropriately and professionally using social media (Crawford et al., 2011).

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These soft skills are important to potential employers, especially in the agriculture field (Guenthner and Moore, 2005). Agriculture leaders must be able to communicate with diverse groups and do this effectively to maintain group motivation and support for an organization's mission (Kaufman et al., 2010). A study by the Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development at the University of Georgia showed job candidates (undergraduates seeking positions) were overly focused on technical skills and not soft skills such as communication and leadership (Brooks et al., 2008). Moreover, the researchers found job candidates had poor communication skills, needed more emphasis on leadership skills, critical thinking, problem solving and analytical skills. Communication is an important skill needed for employment and understanding how to better prepare future employees and leaders is key to giving them a competitive advantage in the workforce.

Although building communication and other soft skills is important, college students often have a negative perspective about strengthening these skills (Mangan, 2007). In fact, Mangan (2007) called on college faculty to strengthen soft skills in college students and Dwyer and Davidson (2012) more recently suggested that public speaking skills specifically should be targeted. Soft skills are not just related to particular careers, they are needed in every career and Peckham (2009) emphasized the importance of communication specifically. Although the importance of communication skills in college students is well known, little has been discussed concerning where college students acquire such skills.

Although building soft skills like communication in students is critical, educators are often not equipped to help students build such skills (Hofstrand, 1996). Some teachers lack effective communication skills, so they need reinforcement in these skills themselves (Stephens, 2013). Teachers and professionals are aware of this need to help students in communication, but often lack the knowledge of how to incorporate communication strategies into their classrooms and assignments. Understanding what college students believe have contributed most significantly to strengthening their communication skills would be beneficial as curriculum is developed to target communication skills.

Soft skills can also be strengthened outside of the classroom. In addition to classroom instruction, extra-curricular activities are an opportunity for college students to hone and polish their communication skills. College student organizations (extra-curricular opportunities) generally fall under the following categories: governing bodies, college Ambassadors, Greek letter social organizations, student government groups, academic clubs and professional honor societies, publication and media groups, service groups, intramural sports clubs, religious organizations and special interest/cultural groups (Astin, 1993; Montelongo, 2002). Extra-curricular activities add different dimensions to a students' college experience, can reinforce the goals of higher education and can help undergraduate students with the transition from college to the workplace (Tchibozo and Pasteur, 2007). Additionally, participation in extra-curricular activities has been shown to be a strong predictor of workplace competence—even stronger than grades (Kuh, 1995).

College Ambassadors are often the first individuals' potential college students interact with when visiting campus; thus, they should, in theory, have strong communication skills. They help to recruit new students, answer questions about the college or university and potential majors and options, give campus tours and act as a direct contact for prospective students (Woelk and Weeks, 2010). The typical Ambassador program has five main components, including leadership development, promotional activities, standardized college presentations, student benefits and building relationships (Arnold, 2012). If a student becomes a college Ambassador, this experience can reinforce personal development and professional leadership skills (Arnold, 2012). Communication is obviously a key skill for student Ambassadors and many students who have participated in an Ambassador program state their experience helped them gain leadership development, communication and self-confidence (Arnold, 2012). However, it is still unknown as to what contributed to building Ambassadors' communication skills which can be associated with their overall Ambassador experience.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors which influenced College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Ambassadors in their attainment of communication skills, allowing for more purposeful incorporation of these factors into high school and college courses. The following research objectives guided this study: (1) describe the demographics of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Ambassadors; (2) describe the past experiences of Ambassadors which contributed to their communication skills; (3) identify the current practices of college Ambassadors which have contributed to their communication skills; and (4) describe recommendations that Ambassadors have for strengthening future communication skills in other students.

Methods

This qualitative study sampled all fifteen College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Ambassadors (census) on the University of Georgia Athens campus and involved them in two separate focus groups with each focus group consisting of seven to eight students. Decisions about which focus group a student participated in were made based on each students' experience as an Ambassador. Students in their first year as an Ambassador participated in focus group one; students in their second year as an Ambassador participated in focus group two. The Ambassador selection process used by College administration was based first

on ensuring that student diversity represented that on campus, followed by a representative mix of student majors, year in school and leadership experiences held by the student. Regardless of their tenure as an Ambassador, students participated in a training that consisted of a retreat before the school year to practice speaking skills and preparation for their Ambassador duties. The Ambassadors also participated in a yearlong course for one-credit hour meeting weekly to practice leadership and speaking skills and hear from guest speakers specializing in communication and leadership.

Data Collection

The fifteen student Ambassadors were invited to participate by email and focus groups were conducted at a convenient time for the Ambassadors. The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study. The focus group questions (Table 1) were written based on the objectives of the study and the findings from a synthesis of available literature. Both groups of Ambassadors were asked the same questions about their communication and Ambassador experiences. The focus groups met face-to-face and were audio recorded. A note-taker was also present during each focus group to assist with writing notes for the facilitator to refer back to while Ambassadors responded. Students were also given a communication demographic questionnaire about their curricular and extra-curricular activities to determine if such activities contributed to their communication skill acquisition prior to participating in the focus groups. This researcher-created demographic survey was completed before the focus group began.

Data Analysis

The data from the two recorded focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim. Domain analysis, a form of content analysis, was used to summarize the data and identify reoccurring, emerging themes as recommended for focus groups by Jackson (1999). Dominant themes were listed in order of their occurrence in the raw data without any direct identifiers. The authors and several other researchers reviewed the focus group data and conducted separate domain analyses before comparing findings to ensure consistency in interpretation. The transcribed focus group data were peer reviewed

to reduce the introduction of bias and the themes which emerged were validated by an outside source. Reoccurring themes were referenced with findings from the demographic questionnaire to identify potential influences and experiences that contributed to those themes. Recommendations were then made based on the transferability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

This study examined two aspects of the College of Agriculture Ambassador experience: (1) what influenced College of Agriculture students to become Ambassadors and (2) what students gain personally and professionally from being a college Ambassador. Tables 2 and 3 describe the demographic characteristics of participants in the two focus groups along with a pseudonym representing their name. Thirteen Ambassadors participated in the focus group discussions and demographics questionnaire. The participating Ambassadors were made up of eight females and five males. There were three females and four males in focus group one and five females and one male in focus group two. The ethnicity of the Ambassadors included eight Caucasian students, two African American students, one white/American Indian student, one Asian student and one student

Table 1. Focus Group Questions

1. In some cases for some people, verbal communication skills come natural to them and in others verbal communication is a skill that they have to work on to be comfortable. Who in here is a naturally strong verbal communicator? Explain. Who in here had to work on their verbal communication to get where they are today? Explain.

2. Good communicators usually have techniques and strategies they use when they communicate, so they will be effective and more comfortable. What specific techniques do you practice to be an effective communicator?

3. What experiences would you have liked to have had in high school, college, or beyond to better prepare you to excel in communication?

4. Many individuals have a fear of speaking and this makes them nervous. What makes you most nervous when communicating?

5. As an Ambassador you all have proven to be good verbal communicators. What motivated you to want to apply to be a part of the ambassador program?

6. How has your experience as an Ambassador prepared you for either graduate school or a career?

7. In your opinion, what are some things that could be incorporated in a classroom in high school or college that would benefit future Ambassadors?

8. How has the Ambassador training impacted you positively or negatively?

9. What challenges have you faced in the program or training?

10. If you were in charge of the training, what might you add/do differently?

Table 2. First-year Ambassador Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Major	Minor	Previous Communication Courses Taken	*Club Involvement
Claire	Environmental Economics and Management		Introduction to Public Speaking	National Forensic League (NFL), High School Speech and Debate
Leon	Agribusiness		Introduction to Public Speaking	4-H, FFA
Tim	Agribusiness		Speech Communication	
Tammy	Biological Science		Introduction to Agricultural Communications	4-H (elementary), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., Resident Assistant
Carrie	Agricultural Communications		Telecommunication, Special Problems in Agricultural Communication	4-H, Block and Bridle
Michael	Agricultural Communications		Introduction to Public Speaking, Journalism, Speech	FFA, FCA
John	Agricultural Communications		Introduction to Communication in Agriculture and Environmental Sciences	4-H, FFA, FBLA

Note. *Club involvement included K-12 education and college.

representing "other ethnicity." The graduation year of ten of the participants was 2015 and three of the participants were to graduate in 2016.

The focus groups provided many different perspectives and experiences that influenced Ambassador's communication skills and the development of other soft skills. Both focus groups revealed similar discussions and topics; therefore, no topic or domain differences were noted between the two groups based on student tenure as an Ambassador, nor did student demographics influence domains shared.

The following five domains emerged from the raw data and are presented in order of their occurrence along with select raw quotes from focus group participants.

1. Ambassador Experiences

The participants reflected on their Ambassador experience and training that had impacted them personally and professionally (Table 4).

The Ambassadors also spoke highly of their Ambassador experience because it greatly impacted them through exposure to opportunities to grow in their knowledge about their career path or gain professional experience. They discussed many opportunities they participated in to broaden their horizons, gain networking opportunities and professional life skills.

2. Influences on Participation as an Ambassador

Ambassadors reflected on what influenced and motivated them to become an Ambassador (Table 5). Specifically, participants mentioned that the Ambassador program seemed like a fun way to get involved in the College and to give back to the College and others mentioned the opportunity to share their story with future students. Networking opportunities were a significant influence on these students' decision to become an Ambassador.

3. Past Communication Experiences

The Ambassadors also reflected on their experiences from elementary, middle, or high school and any organizations they partici-

Table 3. Second-year Ambassador Demographics				
Participant Pseudonym	Major	Minor	Previous Communication Courses Taken	*Club Involvement
Susan	Agricultural and Applied Economics		Introduction to Public Speaking	4-H, FFA
Lisa	Biological Sciences		Introduction to Public Speaking	FBLA
Kaitlyn	Poultry Science		Introduction to Public Speaking	4-H
Nancy	Animal Science	Agribusiness	Introduction to Public Speaking	FCCLA
Sam	Food Science		Introduction to Public Speaking	
Sally	Agricultural Communications	Agribusiness	Special Problems in Agriculture Communications, Advertising and Public Relations, Telecommunications, Journalism, Agricultural Sales, Introduction to Public Speaking	4-H, FFA, Beta, FCA, SAC

Note. *Club involvement included k-12 education and college.

Table 4. Ambassador Experiences Contributing to Current Communication Skills	
Participant	Response
Tammy	I think that the Ambassador program has impacted me positively because it's like I'm being exposed to a lot more things that I haven't been exposed to before. I kind of feel like I've had the wool over my eyes, for a lack of better words before this because I wasn't really sure like, I didn't really know how many jobs or opportunities that are involved in agriculture, and like I've seen that there are so many, and I kind of wished I had known this beforehand cause it's senior year now. It's been a good experience and a good networking experience too.
Nancy	We are able to interact with other people in job settings and really important people that we may not have had the opportunity to learn how to talk to or be able to get that experience and that's incredibly valuable for me and so that I'm not nervous anymore or that you just learn how to get those communication skills that are needed in those environments and especially for grad school, time management is a huge thing with this and I think just definitely being able to talk to anyone that you could possibly need to talk to rather it's a child or on up to a CEO of a company.
Susan	We are also able to learn how to work in a group and with different people because at the events we go to, we are not in the same group every time we do an event. We have to learn how to interact with everyone in the group. We also learn people management, so you have to learn how to manage people and make sure that everyone gets the information they need so they are not clueless when they go do things. Our advisor has very high expectation of us, so that is definitely a big thing. They expect us to be early to everything and communicate everything to him; like when we cannot make it to something, he expects us to be able to communicate with him and if not they do not take it lightly. So we get that boss experience before being out in the real world.

Table 5. Influences on Participation as an Ambassador	
Participant	Response
Carrie	It just seems like a fun way to get involved with the college as a transfer student, it's sometimes, hard to get involved with organizations, but this was everyone had an equal chance to get selected and I like that. You really get to meet people that you would have never gotten to meet in any other organizations, so I really appreciate that too.
Susan	The networking opportunities that we have are awesome and we get to tell our story to different students and give them advice that we wish that we have had as freshman or high school seniors making decisions, so we really get to help those students that come on tours or that just needing questions answered at different events that we go to.
Tammy	I think my motivation stemmed from the fact that I felt that the college has invested so much in me, therefore I wanted to give back to the college. I really like to share my love for the college. Coming to a big college it was kind of hard at first to find my niche, so I guess I want to help others find it faster than I did.

Table 6. Past Communication Experiences Contributing to Current Communication Skills	
Participant	Response
Leon	FFA, every application that I filled out since the 9th grade for any type of job, school program like this, I've always reverted back to FFA and the things I've learned there. My experiences there have always helped me along.
Sam	I think that one of the best ways that I learn to speak well is to hear speakers that are good, like good examples, especially when they come to class and you get to ask questions afterwards. They know and they've been practicing for a long time and they have tricks that I wouldn't know, so just observing them and listening to them, you pick up a few things.
Claire	I participated in the National Forensic League in high school, which is a nation-wide speech and debate organization. I spent most of my Fridays and Saturdays, freshman through senior year presenting speeches, both auditories and impromptu, so I have that experience with presenting and memorizing speeches. I also had the experience of thinking of a five minute speech given only two minutes before the presentation.

pated in that influenced their communication skills prior to becoming an Ambassador (Table 6).

The past communication experiences of the Ambassadors were greatly impacted by participation in organizations and clubs and this participation often gave them exposure to effective communicators who served as role models. The Ambassadors gained communication skills through their involvement in personal development activities and by observing effective and ineffective communicators and these experiences influenced their own communication skills.

4. Personal Preparation for Speaking

The participants also shared personal strategies and techniques to prepare themselves for speaking with others and handling potential speaking anxieties while giving a speech (Table 7).

5. Recommendations for Other Students

Finally, the participants reflected on their past experiences that they wished they had when formulating recommendations for other students (Table 8).

Providing students the opportunity to practice communication skills in classes and become involved in organizations and clubs, such as FFA and 4-H, were strategies that the Ambassadors provided that could

Table 7. Ambassador's Personal Preparation for Speaking	
Participant	Response
Lisa	One of the things that I do, is that I tend to speak very fast when I'm in front of friends and people that I'm comfortable with so the thing I try to do is slow down and to enunciate my words so that people will understand me better. And also, by slowing down it helps me, if I have nerves it helps to eliminate my nerves and everything. So that's just one of the things I do.
Susan	Whenever I'm speaking to a big group, one thing that I try to do is to kind of get rid of any nerves or any awkward moments that might happen is to not look directly at people but look above people's heads when you are speaking to a group, just to so you don't make direct eye contact with someone, but they know that you are looking in their direction.
Carrie	To be an effective communicator, you need to have direct eye contact, really try to make your voice heard out into the crowd and really try to be as personable as possible when talking to either students, professors, or just random strangers. You are just really trying to get them to remember you and what you are representing.

Table 8. Recommendations Shared by Ambassadors for Other Students	
Participant	Response
John	I would say growing up in 4-H, you can do different tracks of things and leadership is one of the principles that they try to instill in you like from the 5th grade all the way up until you graduate from high school and I think that pretty much anyone has the ability to be a leader and I thinks that something that should be recreated for everyone growing up because being able to serve as a leader in any situation gives you the ability to effectively communicate with others and also learning how to push yourself and I think that's a something that everyone needs to, or everyone should take advantage of before they get to college.
Nancy	Opportunities to get to talk in large groups, opportunities to give speeches, opportunities to just talk without anything planned and then I think opportunities to interact with adults and important people. I don't know how you would facilitate that but that's really kind of trial by fire. In my opinion like there's no way to really, I guess you could figure out a way to practice it but until you actually sitting there talking to someone really important you don't know how you are going to do it. That's the only way I could really gotten good at it or ok with it I guess.
Sally	One thing that would be really beneficial is if there was some way you could do a professor luncheon thing, where students interact or stuff like that and just learn skills about how to really communicate with people in the workforce and stuff like that.

influence a students' attainment of communication skills prior to and during their college experience.

The Ambassadors all had different backgrounds that influenced their communication skills. The experiences and recommendations that the Ambassadors shared were classified by the researchers as either "point source" or "non-point source" in terms of assignments and experiences. "Point source" experiences were classified as specific activities which could be directly traced back to the students' attainment of soft skills. These would include, for example, a specific assignment in a college course, or events related to an extracurricular activity. "Non-point source" experiences were those which have components that collectively worked to build soft skills, but which are difficult to identify any one aspect as contributing solely to building soft skills.

Both point source and non-point source experiences were shared by the Ambassadors. This was prevalent in the discussions on the Ambassador experience, recommendations for other students and past communication experiences. Many point source experiences were provided, such as assignments, speeches and involvement in clubs and organizations. Point source experiences were the most prevalent experiences discussed in this study and students researched in earlier studies noted that leadership positions gave them the opportunity to learn in the "real-world" classroom (Haber, 2006).

Non-point source experiences were less prevalent in the raw data. Along with communication skills, 77% of the participants discussed professionalism and personal growth that they have obtained in their experiences as a student and an Ambassador; 69% of the participants mentioned some experiences they wished they had been provided to help prepare them professionally and to allow them more practice with communication. The participants shared what influenced them to become an Ambassador, which was mostly improving their communication skills, professional preparation, networking opportunities and preparation for the workforce. Many mentioned that they wanted to be an Ambassador to build upon their past experiences to help themselves personally and professionally and some mentioned that they felt the need to give back to the College because it had helped them to further their education.

Non-point source experiences were important to the Ambassadors' attainment of communication skills, as well as other soft skills, but these non-point source experiences were less common. In a study by Fuhrman and Ladewig (2008), students had a more positive learning experience with out-of-class assignments involving communication and leadership when those assignments were less structured compared to assignments with specific instructions and guidelines. Students can have a sense of ownership in their educational experiences when assignments are less structured and allow students to be creative. Students will participate and create experi-

ences that are more relevant to their lives, career goals, interests and personal growth.

Faculty should allow students the flexibility to take ownership in aspects of out-of-class assignments which have the potential to build soft skills. For example, students could be encouraged to attend a seminar or conference and mingle with invited guests. Although less structured (e.g., lacking structured questions to ask guests), this type of experience was mentioned by participants in this study as being influential in building their communication skills in a "participant observer" type role. If students are given the freedom to be creative in their assignments, it opens the door to employ critical thinking skills and produces a higher quality of work and skill growth. In another study, the act of role playing was an educational strategy to develop leadership and communication skills, especially in developing "people skills" (Guenthner and Moore, 2005). In the role playing study, students developed a better understanding of issues, improved their communication skills and had a choice of a topic that they wanted to research (Guenthner and Moore, 2005). When students have the freedom to choose topics and create their own structure for an assignment or speech, students can relate more and gain more communication and leadership skills. Not only are students gaining communication skills, leadership skills and confidence, they are also learning more of the content matter (Guenthner and Moore, 2005). As discussed in the focus groups in this study, participants mentioned allowing students to choose speech topics that they are interested in, participate in organizations and club experiences of their choosing and watching other speakers and leaders as recommendations for building communication skills in other students.

Point source experiences seem more common in the educational system and many Ambassadors shared stories about these experiences. In a study by Culp and Cox (2002), ten principles for effective youth leadership development were shared. Some of the principles of an effective program included high expectations and confidence, experiential learning and opportunities for leadership, collaboration and networking with others and positive relationships with important adults. When students are presented with high expectations, they are encouraged to come out of their shell and develop more self-possessed communication skills. The Ambassadors in this study described some of these experiences and situations that made them step out of their comfort zone and helped them to better themselves as an effective communicator.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were shared by Ambassadors that they experienced personally or wished they had experienced which could help other students:

1. Public speaking opportunities to help develop speaking skills, such as extemporaneous and prepared speeches, with a variety of audiences.

2. Creating an environment to foster good demonstration skills. For example, providing feedback to students on how to improve and what they are doing well and creating scenarios that represent real-life presentations, such as mock job interviews.
3. Attending conferences, events, or poster sessions to learn by observing others.
4. Opportunities to serve as a leader in a class case study or through a club or student organization.
5. Interacting with adults and professionals to prepare for communication in the workforce, such as professor luncheons.

Other recommendations for college faculty based on this study that would benefit students include:
6. Offering a 1-credit seminar course on communication skill attainment.
7. A mentoring experience where faculty are videotaped teaching and asked to reflect on their communication skills with a teaching and learning professional.
8. Slowly incorporating communication experiences into existing curricula and monitoring student reactions with formative data collection techniques. Once student data is collected, share a summary of student responses with the class and be prepared to make changes to reflect student feedback.

Many of the Ambassadors mentioned strategies they acquired from participating in FFA or 4-H, but similar experiences can be used in any subject to help students improve their communication skills. Not all students are involved in clubs and organizations that encourage students to practice and gain these skills, so there is a need to incorporate those strategies in classes and throughout the students' educational time in college. Point source and non-point source experiences may help students succeed in an interview by building confidence and grow in a career by building skills to collaborate with others. Lastly, being involved in extra-curricular activities not only can be a strong predictor of workplace competence (Kuh, 1995), but can also help improve their perceived communication skill competence.

Additional research is needed in this area. Specifically, greater attention is needed to better understand the reactions of more experienced Ambassadors (e.g., second year Ambassadors). The more experienced Ambassadors did not indicate greater communication growth, so perhaps the focus group questions were not sensitive enough to detect skill growth in these students. More specific focus group questions may be needed for students with more experience as Ambassadors. Students may have acquired communication skills through their participation as an Ambassador, but the focus group questions were not able to detect such skill attainment.

Summary

Factors which influenced College of Agriculture Ambassadors' communication skills most significantly could be classified as "point source" experiences. These experiences, such as students interacting with industry professionals and campus leaders in a relaxed atmosphere with limited structure, were influential in building Ambassadors' communication skills. Observing ineffective communicators could also be valuable. Many of the Ambassadors mentioned strategies they acquired from participating in FFA or 4-H. However, not all students are involved in FFA or 4-H where communication skills are emphasized, making the need for college faculty to create a comfortable learning environment conducive to building student communication skills even greater.

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