The *Centrality* of the Center: Best Practices for Engaging Students on Campus

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In a recent issue of *Communication Center Journal*, then Editor-in-Chief Russell Carpenter (2019) reinforced the centrality of the communication center as an entity that spans both campus and community "through the opportunities, services, and programs they provide for their students, faculty, and their local publics" (p. 1). Communication centers have a wide reach. Stakeholders and clients at most centers go beyond solely a student population and, as Carpenter (2019) claims, faculty, staff, and even communities are all within the purview of communication center services. Yet, we recognize that centers exist primarily as a complementary service to serve students (Strawser, Apostel, Carpenter, Cuny, Dvorak, & Head, 2019).

Students, our centrally served population, have inordinate competing entities for their time, energy, and efforts (Mancall-Bitel, 2019). Student engagement, then, is of paramount importance for communication centers. For our purposes, we are using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) definition of student engagement. Student engagement is both the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities and how an institution deploys resources and organizes curriculum to enable student participation activities linked to student learning (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2019). This definition emphasizes, primarily: (1) how students use their time and (2) student involvement in campus activities.

The recurring theme surrounding modern definitions of student engagement centers on learning. For instance, according to Zepke and Leach (2010), student engagement can, broadly, also refer to a student's cognitive engagement and participation in their own learning. We believe the communication center can become a fulcrum for student engagement and a place where high-impact practices, mechanisms identified by Kuh (2008) as having a positive and transformative effect on student learning, and consistent student engagement with educational partners (i.e. students engaging with students, students engaging with faculty, and students engaging with the institution) can come to life. As a hub for entrepreneurial and experiential learning, the center may positively influence student knowledge, behavior, and affect. In addition, we believe centers can build and sustain student engagement by connecting our initiatives to the four NSSE (2019) engagement

indicators: challenging academic experiences, collaborative learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and reinforcing a positive campus environment. To have this conversation, a unified best practice framework should be identified that uses student engagement as the primary thread to then encourage centers to think about student expectations, participating in first year experiences, and crafting programming that enhances student motivation.

In 2019 this group of authors identified a list of best practices for developing a robust center on campus. Recognizing that all communication centers functionally serve their specific institution differently makes it difficult to develop best practices. In addition, "minimal research exists about communication centers that allows for generalizability and comparability to improve scholarship and inform best practices" (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, & Anderson, 2017, p. 411). Our initial best practice list was well received and this subsequent offering addresses yet another important topic for communication centers, student engagement.

Best practices to encourage appropriate and effective student engagement have been identified by leading communication center scholar-practitioners. Designed to address needs of varying institutional identities, these initiatives may be configured to suit schools of varying size, scope, and available resources.

Best Practices for Engaging Students on Campus

Best Practice #1: Utilize Client-Based Projects

Client-based projects and small group work have become increasingly popular communication pedagogy techniques. Students create portfolios as they apply theory and practice to a project for presentation in and beyond the classroom. In addition to helping with communication components, communication centers can become the space for meetings. By this means, local business leaders, non-profit directors and their respective associates and board members may become acquainted with your center's important mission and work, with and for students. Students are likewise apprised of the feedback, services, and career-oriented benefits offered by the center. These assignments allow students to build their portfolios as they apply communication theory and practice to a project that will be used and seen outside of the classroom setting (Lopez & Lee, 2005). Communication centers can work with client-based courses to provide meeting space and to serve as a resource to student groups who have questions regarding the most strategic and effective way to serve the client within the confines of the course.

In addition to providing a meeting space with available consultation, client-based projects bring local business leaders and non-profit directors into your center--allowing you to showcase the important work we do with students. And students, who may have never visited your center, can understand the type of feedback and services you provide.

Best Practice #2: Showcase Student Projects

Students visit communication centers to get feedback on their communication assignments: speeches, writing, and, increasingly, multimodal pieces. Students commonly bring these types of assignments to draft and revise, or to receive complementary tutoring that reinforces classroom experience (Hannon, Bracewell,

& Head 2014). A good way to increase student engagement in your center is to showcase the final project in the center or in some cases to have students actually present their completed assignment in the center.

The center can provide varying presentation equipment. The center can also record a video of the presentation for the student to use later in a digital portfolio or to share with potential clients or online. Bringing the students out of the classroom to present their projects enables the opportunity to share their work with people outside of the class. The center may even help promote the event thus adding awareness to the center and its purpose on campus.

Best Practice #3: Design Partnerships to Promote Student Engagement in First-Year Communication Experiences

Partnership designs can become best practices in student engagement and learning. Communication centers can establish structured programs to promote student engagement that involve required, sustained consultations for all first-year communication students, if the institution promotes a first-year major declaration. This practice 1) promotes valuable learning experiences, 2) models communication-design processes inside (and outside) classrooms, and 3) encourages intentional and meaningful communication interactions (Kuh, 2007). First-year communication students are thus engaging regularly with the communication center and, by extension, the larger institution. Most importantly, however, first-year communication students are working collaboratively with skilled student staff members, connecting them with the values of the program while visualizing how these practices operate and transferring them to future academic scenarios.

As an engagement strategy, modeling effective rhetorical and design approaches with first-year communication students encourages them to adopt highly effective behaviors, practices, and habits of mind. When possible, developing systematic collaborations that span communication centers and departments can create new opportunities to structure academic moments in students' educational development that will enable them to gain momentum in their first year that will prepare them for success during their sophomore year and beyond.

Best Practice #4: Design and Provide Undergraduate and Creative Research Experiences

Communication centers are in an ideal position, institutionally, to design and provide highly visible, collaborative, and productive undergraduate research experiences. Center directors can draw from Kuh's (2008) high-impact practices, to explore ways in which undergraduate research can be structured into the daily and long-term operations and goals of the communication center with a focus on center-or program-based activity; center or program-specific designs; student-faculty or program-oriented collaborations that result in powerful outcomes and connect students back to the communication center and institution.

Centers can be intentional in collaborating with and supporting undergraduate research and, then, supporting undergraduate student researchers. Envisioning the communication center as a site of valuable undergraduate research and creative endeavors ensures that student staff members are engaged and contributing to ongoing dialogues, working with research methods, and sharing their training and expertise as mentors with the larger institutional and scholarly communities. In

addition, undergraduate research and creative endeavors originating from the communication center can be shared via campus presentation venues, showcases, and other high-profile recognitions and events designed to feature the institution's distinctiveness—these will extend scholarly dialogue and welcome participation by faculty and students in greater numbers.

Best Practice #5: Demonstrating University Value

One strategy for bringing attention to spaces is to host events that may *seem* outside the core mission of the center. To counter this reality, sponsor high visibility events that draw students, faculty, and administrators into center spaces so they can better understand the work we do there. While events like games nights, concerts, or watch parties (for everything from major sporting events to television series finales) may seem outside the tutoring mission, opening spaces for other events allows a variety of campus constituents to experience the space when they might not otherwise cross our thresholds. Having sample work on display, along with readily available marketing materials, offer powerful opportunities to share the important resources we provide.

Best Practice #6: Reach International Students

While there are cultural and linguistic challenges international students face as they acclimate to US higher education institutions, generally, directors should also consider the role of communication centers as "safe spaces" that link linguistic and cross-cultural awareness and the mental well-being of our international students. International students fear failure for many of the same reasons that domestic students do, but notions of

failure are also magnified by the negotiation of *self* within an American academic culture and the possibility of being rejected from that culture--the most extreme form resulting in deportation. With the stakes so high, it is unsurprising that international students have greater anxiety, especially communication anxiety, than many of their domestic colleagues (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015).

Consequently, communication centers are part of a support response that acknowledges academic issues alongside issues of well-being. We cannot begin to address issues with perceived audiences, and the accompanying problems of race, gender, ethnicity, and so on, until we find ways to create spaces that buffer or eliminate the concerns about acclimation.

The additional time and distance afforded by some technologies can provide useful interventions. As Ritchie (1989) explains,

> The personal, educational, and linguistic histories students bring to our classrooms contribute to the rich texture of possibilities for writing, thinking, and for negotiating personal identity. They also contribute to the confusion and anxiety many students experience. (p. 84)

Even if students fear failure, rather than a loss of identity, repeated failure certainly will have a negative impact on their self-perception—making them more likely to try to hide core deficiencies. Centers can create similar tensions to classrooms, but center consultants have more flexibility to focus on providing spaces to support and reinforce student well-being because they function apart from evaluation-driven classroom spaces.

Therefore, technology offers a variety of flexible options that can be especially useful for working with

international students (Robinson, 2017). As one example, video technology provides ways for students to feel less vulnerable while still interacting with consultants and other clients. English conversation practice groups, while not the purview of all communication centers, can be organized through a variety of learning management systems and video conferencing platforms. International students may also feel more comfortable in asynchronous workshops or bootcamps because they have more time to consider their contributions--both from how they engage with content and for lower-stakes, non-immediate English language practice. Using technology in these ways may simultaneously build skills and trust for international students--resulting in confidence that will contribute both to their academic success and their emotional well-being.

Best Practice #7: Value Faculty Relationships

Examining the relationships centers have with individual faculty members might help in understanding how student-patrons engage, through use of time, with the educational activities of communication centers. When King and Atkins-Sayre (2011 & 2012) found students will utilize a communication center only after their faculty communicated value for doing so they provided center administrators with reason to reexamine their center's working relationships with faculty. How might shifting from "student as patron" to faculty as the people that the center works for and their students as those that the center works with, provide further engagement opportunities for students? If student engagement is tied to faculty communicating value for use of services, then we need faculty to truly see our support as valuable.

Engaging in the activities that faculty themselves value is worth consideration. Each institution being different, do faculty on your campus value research? If they do, is your center already participating in the knowledge development of communication center studies, are you communicating that to the faculty? If you are not yet participating in scholarly endeavors, might it be time to mentor your students to submit essays for review in the student section of *Communication Center Journal*? Would your faculty partners be interested in working towards a publication? How can you invite those faculty to join with you in scholarship of teaching and learning endeavors?

Best Practice #8: Leverage Existing Resources

Institutions might get students to participate in activities that support their academic endeavors with a commitment of resources. In February 2020 as our economy officially entered a recession (Smialek, 2020) the hope of additional or continued resources to support centers is in peril. As the work of most communication centers involves peer educators, it seems relevant to consider resources as a motivator in their engagement in and with the work of their centers. What resources can center administrators facing shrinking or disappearing budgets apply to ensure they continue providing engaging opportunities? How do communication centers continue to provide student employees with the opportunity to participate in this professional development?

Fortunately, leveraging institutional resources to overcome budget shortcomings is an area for which there are communication center models. Understanding some of the models might help sustain operations. At the University of

Wyoming in Laramie, Beau Bingham operates with students enrolled in a repeatable academic internship course as peer educators. He has no payroll. Karen Sindlar opened Coe College's center with faculty release time. Her peer educators were paid from the Federal Work Study Program. At the University of Connecticut, Rory McGloin and his graduate students are seeking ways to leverage enrollment in an undergraduate applied communication course to provide peer educators. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's speaking center has quickly added services of content creation because faculty facing time constraints of shifting their courses to online are asking for modules and other work products for their courses now managed through Canvas. Center administrators looking for more resources might consider adding faculty fellows and inviting alumni to return as volunteers. How might both be viewed as resources working to support the professional development of student employees in engaging ways?

Best Practice #9: Use Social Media
Communication centers should be using social media to connect with various stakeholders and encourage engagement among students, faculty, administration, and the greater community. Building on research published in the recent *Communication Center Journal*, it is important for centers to proclaim, via social platforms, their strategic brand, how they engage different publics, and how centers enhance consultant professional development (Morris, Lehman, & Dvorak, 2019). Peer consultants can collaborate--and learn with each other--to help identify, build, and promote their center's brand while, as Truman (2019) noted, "also helping focus the clarity of your message and its appropriateness to both

audience and media" (p. 135). Their engagement with the center can become even deeper as they identify themselves as "empowered 'influencers' in your institution's culture, which will help them be aware of their own responsibility" (p. 135). The time and effort consultants put into these projects can help them build stronger connections to their centers, and they can see the direct payoff with the numbers of likes, shares, or retweets their social media posts get. To be an influencer in their campus environment means they are having a direct impact on student life and student learning.

In addition to developing their center's brand, communication center directors should offer opportunities for their peer consultants to be content creators, design developers, and managers of their social media accounts (Chasteen, Cole, & DeRoss, 2019; Truman, 2019). These opportunities encourage peer consultants to engage more critically with their centers, as they become partners in marketing and promotion. Social media positions allow consultants to work closely with directors while learning more about administration and leadership. If the peer consultants are communication majors, these positions also allow them to add developed products into their portfolios.

Best Practice #10: Connect Center Initiatives to NACE Career Competencies
As communication centers continue to recommend effective ways to assess their contributions to their institutions, it should be important to note that their employees are usually students acting as peer consultants. Communication center directors can use the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Competencies to assess the professional development of peer consultants and show how campus

employment at the communication center--a co-curricular experience--raises their levels of student engagement. For example, peer consulting easily connects to seven of the eight NACE competencies:

1. *Critical Thinking/Problem Solving*: every consultation requires consultants to analyze problems and develop plans to solve them
2. *Oral/Written Communications*: from clearly articulating advice to writing post-session client report forms, both skills are part of everyday work
3. *Teamwork/Collaboration*: every consultation requires working alongside someone (often someone consultants do not know) to achieve a desired goal
4. *Digital Technology*: consultant may use a variety of hardware (laptops, tablets, recording devices, VR glasses) and software (Adobe, Slack, social media)
5. *Leadership*: consultants are often viewed as authority figures by their peers, and they can be given leadership positions in the center (e.g., social media chair)
6. *Professionalism/Work Ethic*: consultants learn about arriving on time, how to collaborate with team members and clients, and how to assist others
7. *Global/Intercultural Fluency*: consultants may work with a wider variety of students from various backgrounds

Perhaps the only competency consultants may have difficulty identifying as part of their work might be *Career Management*, as they may not see their work at the center as directly connected to their professional goals.

Since peer consultant positions are often paid (stipend or hourly, and sometimes via federal work study) and applied, directors can recognize their centers as sites of two additional high-impact practices: campus employment and experiential education. McClellan, Creager, and Savoca (2018) recognized the importance of showing students how campus employment can be valuable to their professional development and personal growth. Peer consulting is also a form of experiential learning that begins with education and training, progresses to field work, and then can culminate in reflection as final assessment. Combining high-impact practices (HIPs) with NACE Career Competencies and the NSSE engagement indicator of a challenging academic environment can provide directors with robust ways for training and assessing their peer consultants while simultaneously demonstrating their engagement.

Moving Forward

NSSE (2019) prioritizes four "engagement indicators," including 1) academic challenge, 2) learning with peers, 3) experiences with faculty, and 4) campus environment. Communication centers, as described here through the lens of best practices, are positioned to support larger institutional missions and priorities of student engagement in these areas. While we recognize that the preceding best practice list is not exhaustive, we believe centers can use these best practice strategies for student engagement to foster genuine institutional goodwill and sustained connection, while enhancing the value of the program within the institution's larger goal(s) of student engagement, and enhance communication programming that is central to institutional success, especially in ways that students are encouraged to progress toward graduation. The communication center is but one campus resource, however, it is a vital and

necessary institutional program that can be central in student engagement.

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