

## **Toxic Inclusivity: When Student Support Centers Fall Victim to Neoliberalism**

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### **Introduction**

In the ever-evolving environment of university education, Communication Centers have historically served as integral disciplinary spaces cultivating students' oral competence, rhetorical agility, and interpersonal communication skills (Davis et al., 2017; Von Till, 2012). Often organized or housed within the institution's Communication Department and functioning as institution-wide support services, Communication Centers are situated at the nexus of academic support and pedagogical praxis, offering tailored assistance not only in students' communication-specific courses, but also in the development of additional critical skills essential for success across disciplines and in future careers (e.g., argument refinement, public speaking practice, identifying problems and solutions, etc.). Employing undergraduate or graduate student workers, Communication Centers also serve a vital space of professional development for tutors to gain transferable skillsets in managing communication interactions (e.g., conflict de-escalation, guiding peers through complex topics, etc.), supporting students with high communication apprehension, and practical skills development such as administrative experience. Yet, as universities face increasing pressure to streamline operations amid shrinking budgets, heightened competition for outside funding, and declining enrollment, Communication Centers may face subsummation into broader student support structures to prioritize efficiency and optics over disciplinary expertise and depth through the continued push towards neoliberalism (e.g., a political and/or economic ideology that emphasizes the efficiency of free markets, the significance of individual entrepreneurial freedom and advocates for the reduction of government intervention in the economy, the reduction of public spending, deregulation Harvey, 2005). This work synthesizes the scholarly conversation on the integral role of Communication Centers in the context of academic and professional success and the systemic devaluation centers face in today's neoliberal university in which consolidation is rationalized as "necessary" to address challenges of inclusion, equality, and access (Laurie & Bonnett, 2002; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). The case discussed in this paper serves as a cautionary tale and a case study on how such developments risk dismantling long-standing, research-driven support structures under the guise of progress and innovation.

## **The Role of Communication Centers**

Communication Centers emerged in the late 20th century as distinct support structures offering students in university education academic and professional development opportunities in oral communication and related topics, a critical yet frequently overlooked area of academia. This distinct support structure first established its legitimacy in colleges and universities by linking performance-based pedagogy with theory and rhetoric to offer learning beyond classroom instruction, in a lab-style environment (Morreale, 1998; Nelson et al., 2012; Von Till, 2012). Originally, these student success structures were developed as a means to provide additional support to students in foundational or basic courses at universities, to supplement communication skill development specific to public speaking (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Helsel & Hogg, 2006; Nelson et al., 2012). As Von Till (2012) details, Communication Centers became relevant venues for practice, collaboration, and skills development that directly address students' need for oral communication practice. Today, these support structures are a nationally recognized discipline, having formed several organizations, including the National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) and the Communication Centers Division of the National Communication Association (NCA). As such, research throughout the 2000/2010s has examined and established the work and positive effect of communication centers across the United States (U.S.) (LeFevbre & LeFevbre, 2014; Nelson et al., 2012). In a qualitative investigation of 35 centers, LeFevbre & LeFevbre (2014) found that "the most popular service of their communication center was public speaking" (p. 158); additionally, this study highlights that Communication Centers today also frequently provide communication support for academic departments, institutions and the wider community (LeFevbre & LeFevbre, 2014).

Additionally, Yook (2012) argues that Communication Centers correlate with increased student retention, especially among at-risk or marginalized populations, by building communication competence. Stewart et al. (2021) further provides context to the positive effects of communication centers by detailing that these units take on an integral part of student success by, "providing access to students, making education more equitable, and providing support for those who need it most" (p. 319). In fact, students who seek out additional support from communication-centric student support services while taking foundational communication courses report an improvement in grade averages and general speech performances (Brophy et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2017; Hunt & Simonds, 2002) and show significant reduction of public speaking anxiety (Dwyer et al., 2002).

Thus, the importance and value of Communication Centers has been extensively empirically tested and researched showcasing both data driven performance benefits (Davis et al., 2017) and rich transformative experiences through student comments (Benedict et al., 2020). We provide a brief overview of the literature documenting the crucial services and functioning of Communication Centers above to demonstrate the important role that Communication Centers play in our campus communities. However, despite their tangible positive impact, resource centers, like Communication Centers, may become targets of administrative restructuring efforts

that threaten disciplinary integrity and expertise to prioritize efficiency, lower budgets, and optics.

### **Neoliberalism and Universities**

Historically, academia has been considered a space and place of knowledge creation and dissemination removed from larger political and economic societal context (Boulton & Lucas, 2011). As argued by Boulton and Lucas (2011) the true benefits of universities are often misunderstood, reduced to institutions that train students to participate and continue in a knowledge-based economy to achieve national priorities. In actuality, universities help to provide rational explanation and meaning in society, creating new possibilities in teaching and research, resulting in the formation of new civic-minded members of society. Thus, the effects of academia are more far-reaching than just preparing students to participate in the workforce, including social and economic benefits that can lead to improved living standards and quality of life for both individuals and society (Pee & Vululleh, 2020).

However, since the 1980s-90s, universities across the U.S. have been pushing towards neoliberal structures, policies, and practices that contradict the ethos of academia (e.g., human advancement through teaching and research versus market-oriented policies and practices with a focus on profits and “winning”) (Burke, 2020; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Neoliberalism, a term that emerged in the academic literature in the 1970s, often thought of as an economic policy agenda, has since become a powerful and expansive political policy agenda. Often discussed in conjunction with capitalism (an economic and political system in which trade and industry are privately owned for profit), neoliberalism is broadly defined as the “extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society” (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). Put another way, neoliberalism is a political and/or economic ideology that emphasizes the efficiency of free markets and the reduction of government intervention in the economy with a focus on economic growth emerging from the private sector and market forces. Gasser (2024) identified how ten key characteristics of neoliberalism may function in shaping university education include:

- **Privatization and reduced public funding.** Neoliberal policies encourage the privatization of university services and a reduction in public education funding in favor of corporate partnerships.
- **Marketization of education as a commodity.** Universities are focused more than ever on branding, marketing, and student satisfaction metrics as key performance indicators. Moreover, the reduction in public funding for education has put the brunt of costs associated with education onto students through the justification that it will be a personal investment that yields significant economic returns.
- **Performance metrics and accountability.** Universities are increasingly held accountable through performance metrics such as graduation rates, student satisfaction surveys, and research productivity, which can encourage over competition and under-resourcing among universities and within universities.

- **Commercialization of research.** Research agendas and funding are increasingly driven by commercialization, industry needs, and economic benefits over theoretical discovery and academic freedom.
- **Managerialism and corporate governance.** Universities adopt corporate management practices with a focus on efficiency, costing-cutting, and maximizing returns on investment. This includes a shift to a top-down leadership approach where decisions are made by administrators rather than academics and includes the adoption of strategic planning, performance management, and managerial oversight.
- **Casualization of the academic labor force.** Today, universities rely significantly on contingent faculty (e.g., adjuncts, part-time faculty, contract staff), rather than tenure track faculty members. This has led to reduced job security and benefits and increased workloads for faculty with little to no protections in the workplace.
- **Shift in educational priorities.** Universities prioritize programs and courses that align with market needs and have high employability rates. This can also lead to the standardization of curriculum and teaching practices that reduces creativity and responsiveness to students with diverse needs.
- **Students as marketplace consumers.** Students are seen as customers whose satisfaction is paramount. This can lead to both an increase and reduction in amenities and services to enhance the student experience, often at the expense of academic rigor.
- **Globalization and international competition.** International students are viewed as sources of revenue from tuition fees, leading to increased competition among universities to recruit international students.
- **From public to private good.** The focus of university education is shifted from serving the public good to providing private benefits to individuals, diminishing the role of universities to contribute to social well-being and equity, as well as democratic citizenship.

Overall, these values undermine the traditional mission of universities as spaces of critical inquiry and public service, shaping how university education operates, the role it plays within society, and how faculty and students value and relate to their home institution (Burke, 2020; Gasser, 2024).

Neoliberalism focuses on budgetary austerity and one of the potential effects of a neoliberal push in university education is the devaluation of student support centers which may generate little to no “direct” return on investment. However, decades of research has shown that student support centers like the Communication Center can play a pivotal role in student satisfaction and retention in ways that may not be visible to current performance metrics (Benedict et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2021; Yook, 2012). This is the crux of our piece. When faculty and support services are asked to do more with less, one of the neoliberal solutions may be to engage in a restructure. These restructurings are often justified through values that resonate in contemporary university education discourse, such as inclusivity, access, and equity; however they may actually result in significant harm in progress towards equity and social justice.

Ultimately, we seek to consider, what can we learn from experiencing a neoliberal restructure in a university setting that results in the loss of student support centers? The restructuring of a Communication Center at UAF brings us to the current case.

### **Current Case**

The Communication Center (originally established as the Public Speaking Center) at the UAF was established in the early 2010s by the Department of Communication through a competitive grant process sponsored by UAF to build student support services. While the historical documents regarding the center's birth have been lost to time, outgoing chairs herald the center as a critical partner to student success in the Communication Foundational Course. Although its primary purpose was providing support to students in the institution's foundational communication courses and communication majors/minors, the UAF Communication Center in recent years has offered substantial interdisciplinary and university-wide support, to include coaching graduate students participating in the internationally recognized 3MT competition, selecting and coaching the annual commencement speaker, preparing graduate students to present at academic conferences and job talks, providing coaching to the local community, and developing the professional, personal, and civic skill sets of members of the university and local communities through workshops and trainings. Directed by a faculty member within the Department of Communication, the Communication Center was staffed by graduate students of the department who were on teaching assistant contracts and whose workload consisted of a 50/50 split between teaching foundational courses and coaching in the center. This combination offered graduate students a unique opportunity to develop relevant pedagogical and instructional skill sets that benefitted both their teaching and coaching practice. Through further weekly skills development, Communication Center coaches were able to provide students seeking assistance with detailed practical and theoretical insight into their courses and the communication discipline in general.

The Communication Center originally operated as a face-to-face center, quickly adopting virtual coaching technologies to service the unique needs of the UAF campus community. With students attending classes across the state of Alaska, often in rural and remote areas with limited access to high speed internet, the Communication Center pioneered telephonic and technology-mediated coaching. Like many resource centers navigating the pandemic, the Communication Center rapidly adopted Zoom and other video-based conferencing tools to ensure students had consistent access to needed support services as they learned off campus, endured quarantined, or exercised their right to seek out virtual sources to support their overall health and well-being. The Communication Center transition to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by the adoption of appropriate online learning pedagogy (Jaoua et al., 2022). This shift aligned with broader disciplinary and national trends, as communication programs have increasingly expanded online offerings in response to students' preference for flexible pathways to higher education and the steady decline of traditional, on-campus enrollment (Castro et al., 2021; Landrum, 2020). As students and face-to-face instruction returned to our campus

community, the center offered both in-person and virtual coaching and rapidly expanded programs and built relationships with stakeholders across the university. With a fully online Bachelor's and Master's communication program, a majority of coaches and students maintained and preferred virtual coaching.

### **Establishing the Student Success Center (SSC)**

In 2019, a UAF Steering Committee recommended UAF follow a national trend for reimagining how university libraries support the evolving needs of college students, i.e., transforming the UAF Rasmussen Library into a centralized learning commons for the campus community (Orr, n.d.). This reimagination was similar to the movement of "Learning Commons" in the 2000/2010s (Bennett, 2008; Heitsch & Holley, 2011). Specifically, the project envisioned core student resource centers from Math, Communication, and English along with other key student supports, would move from their physical locations across the campus community to a centralized "modern, inviting community environment" designed for collaboration named the Student Success Center (SSC) (SSC, n.d., our services). Under the SSC centralized model, a student only needed to find their way to the library's 6th floor to receive support, replacing the frustrating and often overwhelming process of seeking out services from individual departments and functional areas.

During the planning and construction phase, UAF established the Rasmuson Library SSC working group to better understand the unique needs of each student resource center. As Department Chair and then Director of the Communication Center, I, Amy May, served as a member of the committee. As a collaborative unit committed to building the SSC, we worked diligently to build a center to meet not only the current needs of the UAF campus community but the evolving and uncertain needs of the post-pandemic educational landscape.

The original structure of the SSC maintained departmental sovereignty over their resource centers to ensure discipline-informed practices and oversight. However, the two key concerns quickly emerged. First, the SSC, as a distinct administrative unit, anticipated a budget capable of supporting operations, including hiring support staff and academic tutors to support new and existing support services. Secondly, although the UAF Communication Center primarily operates virtually to meet the demands of asynchronous foundational courses, remote degree-seeking students in the Bachelor's and Master's in Communication, and the broader post-COVID-19 learning environment, SSC leadership repeatedly expressed apprehensions regarding this modality. Specifically, they voiced concerns about the perceived absence of "in-person" representation within the physical space of the SSC. This is despite the fact the SSC boasts on their website "all services are also offered online" (SSC, n.d., our services). An undergraduate student tutor in-person was trained and brought on, as well as faculty located in Fairbanks (Amy and Victoria) coached for a few hours a week in the center to try to appease these concerns. Overarchingly, we felt this model was working as student use of the center continued to rise and performance in the foundational communication courses showed improvement. Herein lies the beginning of the end.

## **The Department of Communication Loses its Center**

The SSC opened in fall 2024, welcoming students and members of the campus community. We (Amy and Victoria) attended the ribbon cutting in-person with then Director Nike attending via a virtually controlled robot, highlighting our commitment to in-person and virtual coaching spaces. By April 2025, less than one year later, the Communication Center was stripped from the Department of Communication and fully integrated into the SSC. What happened? On the surface, funding. The UAF's College of Liberal Arts, under which the Communication Center was staffed and operated through the Department of Communication, recently faced significant fiscal constraints that necessitated widespread program reductions. Funding for the Communication Center and Writing Center was removed from the college's budget, resulting in the loss of expert staff and faculty oversight grounded in disciplinary expertise. Below the surface, pedagogical differences about how student support services can be successfully run through multiple modalities.

Consequently, the Communication Center has been subsumed under the SSC and is now minimally staffed, operating without direct connection to the Department of Communication. Importantly, neither the leadership of the Communication Center nor faculty from the Department of Communication were consulted or included in the decision-making process that facilitated this transition. At the time of writing this article, we find it imperative to note that two full weeks into the semester and no public information about the Communication Center has been published (i.e., staffing, hours, etc.). Instead, the restructuring was justified under the language of inclusivity and student success, while sidelining the disciplinary expertise and andragogical practices that had previously informed the center's operation. This absence of consultation and the resulting disconnection from the disciplinary leadership not only represent a departure from established practices in communication-centered academic support, but also reflect broader institutional trends in the consolidation of student services.

## **Methods**

To critically examine these developments, this article employs autoethnographic reflection (Ellis et al., 2011). As communication scholars directly involved in the operation and leadership of the Communication Center prior to its reorganization, we use our lived experiences and reflective narratives to interrogate the implications of this shift for disciplinary identity, institutional politics, and the future of communication andragogy in student support services.

## **Autoethnography**

This paper offers collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016) as a way to examine the restructuring and devaluation of the Communication Center within the broader context of a neoliberal university. Autoethnography, as Ellis et al. (2011) describes, is an approach to research that situates personal experiences as both data and analytical lens, which allows us to connect the particular to the systemic. Collaborative autoethnography bridges the gap between individual narrative and institutional structures by highlighting lived experiences drawing from

multiple perspectives, which creates our approach for interrogating dynamics of academic governance, language framing, and disciplinary devaluation. As the restructuring of Communication Centers is not merely an administrative shift, but a lived reality for those who lead and operate the centers, the integration of our lived experiences provides insight into the human and disciplinary consequences of institutional decisions, and offers relevant context to existing research on the shift in academia to neoliberal practices (Mintz, 2021; Nordbäck et al., 2022; Rosa, 2021). Further, our narrative accounts of exclusion from decision-making processes, the appropriation of inclusivity language, and the erosion of disciplinary autonomy serve as relevant evidence and analysis to link multi-perspective experiences to the broader critiques of neoliberal higher education. Through this autoethnography reflection, we not only document our case of disciplinary devaluation but want to highlight the cultural logistics that motivate and sustain such practices. Situating our personal experiences alongside existing scholarship allows us to move beyond mere sharing of our experience toward a critical analysis of how institutions enact and justify systemic change.

### **Positionality**

The authors of this paper share substantial involvement in the Communication Center and all have deeply rooted history with UAF. All authors have served as directors of the center at some point in time and have spent significant time coaching students, educating graduate student coaches, and engaging in university-wide outreach to further communication-centric student support across all disciplines at this institution.

We also reflect on the subsumption of the Communication Center as white women whose experiences in higher education are shaped by the privileges systemically associated with our racial and ethnic identities. Our ability to openly critique these institutional decisions and to be granted authority to speak on this matter is tied to the systemic advantages that afford us legitimacy that is not as readily accessible to scholars of color or to our colleagues from marginalized communities. We further recognize that the communication discipline and the pedagogical practices that we see embedded in communication centers practices are historically grounded in western traditions of rhetoric, performance, and discourse (Ladva, 2021; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Waisbord, 2022). These frameworks privilege certain ways of speaking, arguing, and presenting oneself that reflect the larger dominant cultural norms upon which our academic practices are still built. While our Communication Center strived to offer inclusive, equitable support, we realized that our positionality and the national standards in our discipline risked reinforcing standards that privilege dominant voices and practices while marginalizing alternative and non-western modes of teaching and expression.

We therefore frame our reflections of the devaluation of Communication Centers as partial: It is situated in our lived experience as communication scholars who were emotionally and professionally involved in the Communication Center we discuss, but also informed by a critical awareness of the privilege and western-centric assumptions that shape our perspectives as we continue to grow and reflect as scholars. From our reflections, we then provide an overview

of the “lessons learned” from our experience and consider the ways in which concepts and phrases such as “inclusivity” were used to obfuscate the push towards neoliberal practices and policies.

### **Reflections**

The following section seeks to outline our understandings and perspectives of how the situation unfolded.

#### **Department Chair**

As chair and former steward of the Communication Center, I often find myself reflecting on my role in higher education. Gardner and Ward (2018) capture the complexities and in-betweenness of the role, arguing “the department chair is arguably one of the most difficult roles in a college or university. These individuals straddle the often-precarious line between colleague and supervisor, between faculty and administrator, and between the present and the future” (p. 58). As the former director of the Communication Center, I felt a deep emotional connection to what the center represented: a place where students develop their voice and sense of community. As chair, I grieved what our department was forced to surrender. As a pseudo-administrator, I stood with the Dean and supported the decision to withdraw funding during an ongoing fiscal crisis. As an educator existing in an increasingly chaotic system, I felt devalued and deflated yet increasingly accountable to the community of learners and faculty peers I serve. Guided by these often conflicting roles, my autoethnographic reflection is guided by the following question: “What do current performance-based funding systems say about the values within higher education systems when the most human work, such as that performed by the communication center, is the first to be cut?”

As colleges and universities continue to deal with shrinking budgets, diminished enrollments, and external pressures, administrators are increasingly pressured to adopt business-based models with emphasis on productivity metrics, standardization, and efficiency (Morley, 2023) with decision-making driven by dashboards and performance indicators. These neoliberal ideologies task administrators with restructuring, consolidating, and revising functional units to “cut out any inefficient wastage of time by staff, schools, departments or facilities and to discipline all university workers to accept constant change” (Troiani & Dutson, 2021, p. 6).

For students, there is increasing pressure to “transform. . .into measurable entities” (Caissie, 2024, para. 5) as they are expected to contribute to free market capitalism. For faculty, there is increasing pressure to achieve student satisfaction measures that meet or exceed institutional averages, publish and build academic reputations often to the peril of work-life balance, and compete with other programs for students to ensure the number of majors and minors continue to increase year over year. Student support services, more humanistic-based systems, are increasingly consolidated to promote “student success” through centralized models and streamlined programming. In the push for operational efficiency and standardization, students are reduced to a number, aggregated with other data to assess return on investment (ROI). Furthermore, there may be a lack of consideration for the “rich portfolio of experiences”

each learner brings with them when seeking support services (Bragg, 2023, p. 89). Moreover, as centralized systems push for quantified measures of student support center success, e.g., algorithms, the factors impacting students' help-seeking behaviors, i.e., cultural differences, social stigma, historical and generational trauma, are negated (Johnson et al., 2022).

Unequivocally, the algorithms used to measure student success have inherent biases that must be interrogated (Idowu et al., 2024). Values have shifted from "historical consciousness, critical thinking, informed faculty, social responsibility and critical pedagogy" to economic metrics and free market (Giroux, 2024, para. 4).

### **Communication Center Director**

Autoethnographic inquiry invites us to interrogate institutional realities by situating our personal experiences within broader cultural and structural contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). In this practice, I am reflecting on the subsumption of the UAF Communication Center as its most recent Director, having served in the role for 1.5 years within a 9-year career at UAF, specifically in the Department of Communication. In my role, I consistently experienced a dissonance between the language adopted by the administrative team of the SSC and the lived realities of the center's operation after my unit's integration into the larger environment of a combined support structure. Although conversations were initially framed around a commitment to valuing the Communication Center as an individual structure, such interactions were persistently characterized by concerns over in-person representation of the center and its staff, even prior to the commencement of operations. Specifically, the leadership of the SSC problematized successful practices without examining data that demonstrated the Communication Center's solid student engagement and positive feedback by framing our virtual model as "deficit". Further, communication surrounding this topic was largely based in worries about the lack of physical presence of coaches in a physical location, although the majority of operations for the Communication Center specifically have been virtual for years prior to the construction of the SSC. This language move, i.e. foregrounding the physical absence of communication coaches rather than acknowledging the history of successful student support and the deliberate choice to serve asynchronous and remote students in a manner that best suits them, ignored the well-established fact that communication centers often serve as critically important spaces of equity to nontraditional learners and instead favored appearances of a costly new facility at the institution (Stewart et al., 2021; Yook, 2012), as well as artificially inflated efficiency that promises students immediate assistance with the help of inter-unit scheduling software.

This pattern extended to fiscal decisions that ultimately removed the Communication Center from departmental, disciplinary oversight. Despite my position as Director, I was excluded from any conversations about budgetary concerns or restructuring while the only information I received came informally through my department chair, not through institutional leadership. This lack of consultation exemplifies the broader devaluation of Communication Centers; decisions were made not with input from those who are knowledgeable about the

center's andragogy and operations, but through top-down processes that positioned disciplinary leaders as peripheral, middle-management.

From the beginning, the restructuring and streamlining of institution-wide student support services was framed as a means to increase student support, streamline and ease administrative work, and to build more community across support units. Administrators frequently claimed that each unit's standard operating procedure would remain intact with minor improvements such as streamlined scheduling, centralized operations, and shared resources. While that might have been the case for other support structures, specifically those with substantial funding and in-person presence, the extreme aversion to and constant discussion of the Communication Center's departure from this traditional face-to-face modality made this a false narrative. This language also functioned as what I now view as toxic inclusivity: the projection of unity and equity as a justification for structural absorption and loss of autonomy. This framing also mirrors what Muzzatti (2022) and Morley (2024) identify as neoliberal moves in university education, where inclusivity and efficiency become discursive tools to mask the erosion of disciplinary identity and expertise.

The contradictions in these narratives became increasingly clear as the SSC further problematized the Communication Center's operations. Leadership dismissed the pedagogical importance of online coaching despite national trends in the expansion of online communication courses and instead emphasized the critical importance of physical presence. This was aligned with a broader institutional logic that privileges optics and physical visibility over effectiveness, and that replaces disciplinary staff with "generalist" personnel under the guise of efficiency.

After the subsumption and transition of operations to the SSC, it became clear that leadership assumed that I and other faculty in the Department of Communication would continue to advise and consult on communication coaching, despite stripping the positions of authority. This kind of managerialization of academic labor as described by Mintz (2021) highlights how disciplinary expertise is hollowed out and repackaged as consultative rather than authoritative to ensure that institutions of higher education fall into a neoliberal framework. My lived experience as Director exemplifies how Communication Centers, despite their documented values, are systematically devalued through restructuring processes that erase disciplinary leadership while appropriating the language of inclusivity and student success.

### **Foundational Communication Course Director**

As a young, bright-eyed graduate student one of my main responsibilities from 2017-2019 was serving as a Communication Center coach. This was one of my favorite roles as a graduate student as I enjoyed working directly with students to build their communication competence. I was always so excited when I got a repeat student who specifically asked to work with me, as I greatly enjoyed building long term working relationships with students and seeing their confidence and communication growth throughout the semester. Dr. Amy May, the director at the time, also pushed us to work on individual projects during our downtime which resulted in

getting connected with and showcasing research at the NACC annual conferences and participating in the Communication Centers Section at the NCA.

From 2019-2022 I served as an adjunct instructor in the Department of Communication, teaching the foundational communication courses with a maximum load of five classes per academic year and two classes in the summer. The Communication Center was a vital lifeline as an adjunct instructor that provided students with different perspectives and approaches to the public speaking process. And to be frank, it took work off my plate to send students to get one-on-one direct support when teaching 40-60 students in a semester. Communication Center coaches worked diligently with students to build long term relationships and anecdotally, the students who frequently attended the Communication Center scored higher on their speech related assignments and reported decreased public speaking apprehension.

Because of my experience working in the Communication Center, I was able to successfully transfer my skills and knowledge into two separate and vital career opportunities. I was an Oral Communication Fellow at the University of Maryland while completing my doctorate, providing communication coaching to graduate students across the university. During the summer of 2021, I served as an Intern Coaching Specialist at NASA Goddard coaching high school and undergraduate NASA interns on building their communication competence and assisting them in developing their final summer project presentations. Based on my experiences, I wrote a piece about the value of Communication Centers outside of academia for continuing professional development (McDermott, 2022).

From 2019-2024 I also served in the leadership team for the Communication Centers Section at the National Communication Association. I greatly enjoyed connecting with and learning from directors and coaches across the country. Overall, so much of my professional and personal development has been a direct result of the Communication Center.

When I was hired in 2022 as a term instructor, I served as a Co-Director of the Center. It was amazing to be back in the center working with students and mentoring graduate students on the coaching process. While the formation of the Foundational Communication Course Director role took me away from directing the center, my perspective of the center as a vital lifeline to the department grew exponentially. A majority of students visiting the center came from our Foundational Communication Courses and thus began the development and trial/error of fully integrating the center into the Foundational Communication Courses to support students. I did also continue serving as a coach because I enjoy the work.

I provide my background with the Communication Center to showcase the deep entwinement I have had personally and professionally with the center. I am just one story of the incredible impact that a Communication Center experience can have. As noted above by Amy and Nike, I was similarly not brought into any meetings related to the Communication Center and heard about the loss second hand. The feelings of anger, sadness, loss, and dismissal still permeate today. I significantly grieved the loss of the center and I believe I am still going through the grieving process. When the center was lost, in a professional capacity my first thought was the instructors and students. I was immediately concerned with the increased

workload on underpaid, overworked adjunct faculty covering most of the teaching load for the foundational communication courses, as well as the significant learning loss that students would face. I was also concerned that this loss was occurring at the same time communication anxiety continues to rise in undergraduate students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dost, 2025). In a personal capacity, my first thoughts were of my co-authors on this paper and how the Communication Center functioned as a cornerstone in our lives.

Following the announcement of the loss of the center, I struggled to truly understand “the why”. “Funding” just did not feel like a real, rational reason for removing a well-performing student support center, backed up by data. I still believed in the original conceptualization and missions of academia as a place of public good versus a privatized industry (Boulton & Lucas, 2011; Pee & Vululleh, 2020). Over time and following the significant disruptions of executive orders throughout the spring, summer, and now early fall 2025 semesters, I came to the realization that neoliberal practices and expectations had taken over the university I loved and taught for since 2017 in ways I did not fully recognize.

As time passed further, I recognized the significance of neoliberal values infiltrating the university. It became clear quite quickly that the true value, services provided, and discipline specific expertise needed to run the Communication Center were not fully understood by administrators after multiple attempts to get us to work on Communication Center tasks that were no longer on our workload or under our purview. This led to increasing concerns regarding the potential quality of Communication Center coaching now with no Department of Communication oversight. Heading into the fall 2025 semester, no information about the status of the Communication Center (staffing, hours, accessibility) has been made public. After spending significant time thinking about how to close my reflection, I find that the situation feels unfinished.

### **Lessons Learned**

In the reflections above, each of us take a different perspective and lens in an attempt to understand and make sense of the loss of our Communication Center. Amy’s reflection from the perspective of a pseudo-administrator sought to question the constant push for performance based funding systems and the values an emphasis on metrics communicates to faculty and students. Nike shared her experience of lip service and the ways in which neoliberal language supports concepts like inclusivity on the surface, but not in practice. Victoria shared her fears based in experiences as both an adjunct faculty member and foundational communication course director for masking the erosion of disciplinary identity and expertise and increasing contingent faculty workloads (Muzzatti, 2022; Morley, 2024). Overarchingly, throughout our reflections we can now clearly see the points in which neoliberal values (i.e., performance metrics and accountability, public budget austerity, managerialism and corporate governance, and from public to private good, Gasser, 2024) shaped and molded our experiences. From these experiences we provide some lessons learned:

- **Pushing Back on Resource Consolidation.** One of our immediate takeaways from this experience has been to push back on the discussions of resource consolidation.

- **Identify Co-opting of Inclusivity Language to Promote Neoliberalism.** One of the more striking moments that has stood out to us as we have reflected on this experience has been the guise of inclusivity, equity, and access that was used persuasively by administrators to affect our decision making. As aptly defined by Nike, toxic inclusivity is the projection of unity and equity as a justification for structural absorption and loss of autonomy. When inclusivity is mobilized linguistically to mask budgetary reductions, eliminate disciplinary leadership, and present consolidation as progress, it becomes a discursive tool to mask the erosion of disciplinary identity and expertise: toxic inclusivity. As argued by McDermott et al. (2024) inclusivity is a term often used, but seldom clearly defined. When terms like inclusivity are not clearly defined, they lose their moral and political dimensions (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Neoliberalism, driven by marketization and commercialization, appears on the surface to support diversity, yet it very specifically glosses over the creation and reproduction of inequity and does not engage with the structures and systems of power (Burke, 2020). Instead, it moves the needle so that equity is equated to meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity. Thus, the question becomes inclusive of what and inclusive for whom?
- **Building the connection between meritocracy, neoliberalism, and the reproduction of inequity.** Goudarzi et al. (2022) sought to identify the intersection between neoliberalism and equity beliefs. Using data from 160 countries collected over two decades, they identified that neoliberalism has been instrumental in moving the emphasis from equity principles (i.e., providing a level playing field for all and preventing bias) to merit principles (i.e., that talent or intelligence is inborn from birth and it depends on an essentialized conception of intellect and aptitude, Littler, 2013). Adams et al. (2019) argued that neoliberalism enforces an “individualist-entrepreneurial” understanding of self, in other words, it encourages people to view themselves as autonomous from society and their material surroundings. This perspective then creates a perceived correlation between one’s successes or failures as a reflection of their own choices. As a result, societal benefits and burdens are then allocated in proportion to one’s individual “inputs”. Overtime, neoliberalism has become a powerful factor in shaping people’s perceptions of mortality and justice to assume success and blame should be placed on the individual without considering the many social and structural systems that may impact success and failure (Burke, 2020). In the process, inequality is rationalized as meritocracy, reproducing social inequities (Burke, 2020). Meritocracy as a concept is the antithesis of student support center work, as meritocracy assumes a level playing field and positions help as an unfair advantage. Student support centers, like Communication Centers, recognize structural inequities and shifts the responsibility from the individual to relational and institutional responsibility, reframing help as equity. Moreover, meritocracy rewards those who already have access to resources and seeks to pathologize struggle, whereas student support services seek to intentionally redistribute resources and normalize struggle.

- **Look for the continued devaluation of knowledge and services that do not produce immediate economic or metric related outcomes.** One of the major impacts of operating a university from a neoliberal perspective is the systematic devaluing of key services that may not directly generate profits, but significantly contribute to the overall health and functioning of the campus community. This reflects a broader pattern within academia in which disciplinary expertise and research-driven support structures are chronically underfunded, under supported, and marginalized under the pressure of efficiency, optics, and fiscal austerity. Although the Communication Center and the Writing Center were both initially defunded at the same time, the university was able to identify and provide funding immediately for the Writing Center to continue their work. Even though communication skills are vital in any workplace and often the top skills employers are looking for in new graduates are related to communication (e.g., interpersonal communication, oral communication skills, teamwork, etc., Gray & Koncz, 2025), communication as a discipline and a practice may not be viewed as inherently vital as a Writing Center. Reports from universities across the country showcase a troubling rising trend in the continued devaluing and disinvestment in a variety of disciplines, centers, and institutional support structures ranging from terminating entire degree programs and departments to closing institutions such as the Institutes of International Studies (Moody, 2025). The reduction of services to only that which is “evidence-based” or metric-driven, focuses on what and how inequalities in higher education can be measured. If it cannot be measured, it does not count (Burke, 2020).
- **Continual stratification of winners and losers.** Both neoliberalism and meritocracy rely on and endorse a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which, by definition, people must be left behind as the top cannot exist without the bottom (Laurie & Bonnet, 2002; Littler, 2013). Not everyone can get to the top and unrealized talent is both the necessary and structural condition of its existence. This is inherently dichotomous to the role and value of student support centers that seek to provide the opportunity for anyone, regardless of talent, to improve and meet the learning outcomes. The continued defunding of student support services will result in an uneven development of skillsets that deepen inequality of institutional performance by denying “poor performers” the resources they need to improve.
- **Reconsidering, what is a “student”?** Neoliberalism emphasizes “some profit at the expense of others” (Mintz, 2021, p. 3). The resulting “competitive” market of academia that prioritizes “some profits” over the long-standing values of academia has resulted in the long identified and increasingly troubling trend of the “student-as-consumer” model (Mintz, 2021). When students are viewed through the lens of tuition dollars and positioned as consumers and alumni donors, decisions are made based on money and product satisfaction over public good. This erases the many structural challenges a student may face in seeking to pursue a university degree and assumes that those who benefit from higher education are primarily self-interested consumers, imagined as

operating outside the social and structural constraints of gender, class, and race (Burke, 2020).

Overall, the neoliberalism American institutions of university education today increasingly positions efficiency over expertise, transforming students into customers and devaluing support functions that do not actively generate revenue (Mintz, 2021; Morley 2023; Muzzatti, 2022). Mintz (2021) argues that contemporary view of academia as a private good has solidified and furthered the beliefs underpinning neoliberalism of personal responsibility, faith in the market, education as job training, and the need for the privatization of public services. Taken in combination, the result is a crisis in university education, and more specifically a crisis for student support services (Burke, 2020; Gasser, 2024; Slaughter & Leslie, 1999). A crisis of identity, a crisis of morals, and a crisis of longevity.

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