Communication Centers as Leaders in Inclusive Public Speaking Pedagogy

Elizabeth Reeves O'Connor
Rochester Institute of Technology

Kelly Norris Martin
Rochester Institute of Technology

Courses that require public speaking represent a significant component of higher education curricula, with many institutions including presentation skills as part of general education requirements (Morreale et al., 2016; Valenzano, 2013). However, these courses often emphasize communication norms and assessment practices that can unintentionally create barriers for neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students, who make up an increasingly significant portion of the student population (Brenneise, 2020; Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Rouse, 2022, 2024). As universities and colleges aim to create more inclusive learning environments, public speaking instructors and communication centers find themselves reconsidering traditional assumptions of effective oral communication and the methods by which it should be taught and evaluated.

Within higher education there is a growing awareness of diverse communication styles and learning needs. However, many traditional approaches to oral communication instruction and assessment continue to privilege neurotypical and able-bodied delivery norms that emphasize eye contact, vocal variety, and physical movement–delivery styles that often do not align with the natural, authentic communication patterns of many students (Rouse, 2024; Tigert & Miller, 2021). This disconnect between pedagogical practice and student diversity raises questions about equity and access in communication education. When assessment rubrics prioritize normative behaviors over content mastery and message effectiveness, they risk transforming learning opportunities into exercises in masking, requiring students to suppress their natural communication styles to conform to prescribed standards. Such approaches not only drain cognitive resources, but they undermine the authenticity that effective oral communication pedagogy purports to develop. For neurodivergent individuals, the harmful effects of prolonged masking are well-documented and include significant mental health impacts such as stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as burnout from the constant effort required to maintain a neurotypical facade (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021).

While instructors are typically well-meaning and deeply invested in their students' success, many lack specialized training and dedicated time necessary to adequately address the diverse communication needs of learners. This often results in inconsistent, case-by-case reactive approaches that place an unfair burden on individual faculty to tackle these complex pedagogical challenges without institutional support or expertise. Communication centers, with their emphasis on inclusive and individualized support, are uniquely positioned to lead institutional

efforts toward more inclusive public speaking pedagogy. These centers serve students across disciplines and often encounter the challenges that diverse learners face in presentation contexts before instructors do. While public speaking faculty may struggle with inclusive pedagogy, the problem is magnified in courses with speaking requirements taught by faculty from other disciplines who lack specific training in communication instruction and may be even less equipped to recognize or accommodate diverse communication styles. Communication center staff (both peer consultants and administrative staff) can dedicate focused attention to developing specialized expertise in matters of diversity and can serve as institutional resources for training and supporting faculty across disciplines, unlike individual instructors who must balance competing demands within their courses.

Creating truly inclusive public speaking environments requires a foundational examination of what constitutes effective oral communication and how it should be assessed. Importantly, understanding how to better support neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students in public speaking contexts is more than a matter of compliance or accommodation. Rather, it presents an opportunity to enhance communication pedagogy for all students by expanding definitions of effective communication and creating more flexible, responsive learning environments.

To explore how institutions might realize this opportunity, the present study examines these tensions through the perspectives of both campus support professionals who work directly with diverse student populations and faculty who regularly teach public speaking courses. By examining current practices, existing challenges, and potential solutions, this research aims to provide practical guidance for communication centers and educators seeking to develop more inclusive approaches to oral communication instruction. The findings contribute to ongoing conversations about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in communication pedagogy while highlighting the specific leadership role that communication centers can play in leading institutional change.

This study addresses three primary research questions: (1) What challenges do neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students face in traditional public speaking contexts? (2) How do current public speaking assessment practices potentially disadvantage diverse learners? (3) What pedagogical approaches might better support diverse communication styles while maintaining appropriate academic standards?

Literature Review

As noted earlier, the landscape of higher education's public speaking instruction is undergoing a critical reevaluation considering increasing recognition of neurodiversity, disability, and the need for inclusive pedagogies. Traditional approaches have often emphasized normative communication behaviors such as eye contact, vocal modulation, and physical movement, which privilege neurotypical and able-bodied students (Rouse, 2024; Tigert & Miller, 2021). These norms can inadvertently create barriers for diverse learners, exacerbating issues of equity and access (Brenneise, 2020; Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Rouse, 2022,

2024). Therefore, there is a need to develop and implement inclusive communication pedagogy that recognizes diverse styles and promotes equitable participation.

Public Speaking and Diverse Learners: Challenges and Pedagogical Limitations

Courses requiring oral presentations serve as a cornerstone of many curricula, aiming to foster communication competence. However, these courses often operate under implicit assumptions rooted in normative delivery styles. For neurodivergent students, prolonged masking or "camouflaging" behaviors are associated with significant mental health costs, including anxiety, stress, and burnout (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021). Despite this, assessment rubrics frequently prioritize behaviors such as sustained eye contact or physical expressiveness, which may not align with authentic communication preferences of neurodivergent individuals (Gehrke, 2024; Tigert & Miller, 2021).

Furthermore, the pedagogical focus on standard oral communication practices historically marginalizes students who communicate differently or use assistive technologies, such as sign language, augmentative communication devices, or alternative vocalization methods. Adapting education to the student's needs as well as exploring emerging technology (Kooli & Chakraoui, 2025) is what can make a true difference. As Clouder et al. (2020) found for all higher education spaces, "A major catalyst appears to be the creation of a trusting and inclusive environment tolerant of difference that does not need labels, adjustments or special measures that will allow all students to flourish" (p. 775). The consequence is a form of academic ableism that subtly, yet profoundly, restricts access and participation (Dolmage, 2017). Indeed, the current paradigms often require students to mask their authentic communication styles, which not only hinders genuine expression but also drains cognitive and emotional resources critical to learning (Hull et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021).

Limitations of Current Assessment Practices and Opportunities for Change

Assessment rubrics tend to reinforce normative standards, emphasizing delivery behaviors over message content and authenticity, thus risking discrimination and inequities (Gehrke, 2024). Recognizing these limitations, scholars advocate for more flexible, differentiated evaluation criteria aligned with UDL principles, expanding access by accommodating various communication modalities and styles (Sanger, 2020). For instance, rubrics that prioritize clarity of message, critical thinking, and engagement over vocal dynamics or eye contact can create a more equitable assessment environment.

The Role of Communication Centers as Institutional Leaders

Communication centers and similar academic support spaces can play a pivotal role in advancing inclusive public speaking pedagogy. They serve as institutional hubs for supporting diverse communication needs, often engaging with students before they encounter traditional classroom assessments (Prentiss, 2021). While research outside the context of communication centers underscores the broader importance of ensuring that students are "treated with respect

and compassion, and [that] educational environments promote the comfort and success of all students" (Hilton et al., 2021, p. 58), these same principles can guide communication centers in shaping more inclusive practices. Such centers have the capacity to develop specialized training for faculty and students, integrating disability studies, neurodiversity research, and accessibility technologies, thus fostering an institutional culture of inclusivity (Palmeri, 2006; Yook, 2013).

Research suggests that communication centers' interventions can significantly enhance the accessibility and authenticity of oral presentations (Benedict et al., 2020). Moreover, by promoting flexible pedagogies and technological accommodations, communication centers can drive broader institutional change. They can exemplify leadership in aligning public speaking curricula with the principles of UDL, thus moving beyond mere compliance toward pedagogical innovation (Prentiss, 2021).

Towards a Transformative and Inclusive Pedagogy

Advancing inclusive communication pedagogy requires a foundational redefinition of what constitutes effective oral communication, one that embraces diverse styles, modalities, and cultural contexts. Incorporating perspectives from disability advocates, neurodiversity scholars, and students themselves ensures that pedagogical practices are rooted in authentic needs and experiences (Prentiss, 2021; Sanger, 2020).

Research should continue exploring how communication centers can serve as leaders in implementing these inclusive practices across disciplines, fostering collaboration between instructors and support staff. The integration of innovative technologies, especially recent AI technologies—such as captioning, speech-to-text, and accessible presentation tools—further expands possibilities for inclusive pedagogy (Kooli & Chakraoui, 2025). For example, communication centers might use speech-to-text to capture consultant feedback in written form with AI-generated summaries, benefiting Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, multilingual learners, and those who process feedback better through reading. Centers can also help students pre-record and real-time caption portions of their presentations to integrate into multimodal classroom deliveries and provide virtual reality (VR) environments for low-stakes practice that reduces communication anxiety (Daniels et al., 2020).

While existing scholarship establishes both the pedagogical limitations of normative public speaking instruction and the theoretical potential for communication centers to lead inclusive reform, empirical research examining the perspectives of both instructors and support professionals remains limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating how these key stakeholders understand current challenges and envision solutions, thereby providing practical guidance for implementing inclusive public speaking pedagogy at the institutional level.

Method

Participants

Eight participants were recruited through purposive sampling at a medium-sized private

university in the northeastern United States. Four participants were campus support professionals who work directly with diverse student populations: a coordinator for neurodivergent student support, a director of support services for neurodivergent students, a disability services professional, and a speech-language pathologist specializing in diverse communication needs. All support professional participants had a minimum of five years of experience working with diverse student populations in higher education settings. The remaining four participants were faculty members who regularly teach public speaking courses at the university and have taught for at least eight years: one adjunct, two non-tenure-track faculty, and one tenure-track faculty. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in April 2025. Support professional interviews focused on challenges faced by diverse student populations in public speaking contexts, current accommodation practices, and recommendations for creating more inclusive environments. Public speaking faculty interviews explored current teaching practices, assessment approaches, experiences working with diverse student populations, and perceived barriers to implementing accommodations.

Interviews averaged 50 minutes and were conducted via video conference using Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim using Zoom's auto-generated transcript feature, followed by manual verification by the researchers. To protect participant confidentiality, participant numbers were assigned during the transcription process.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This method was selected for its flexibility and capacity to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset while acknowledging the active role of the researchers in the analytical process. The analysis followed these phases: (1) close readings of each transcript to develop familiarity with the content, (2) generating initial codes, (3) collating codes into themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) selecting compelling extract examples and producing a final report.

Throughout the process, the researchers maintained a reflexive stance, actively considering how their own background and perspectives influenced the interpretation of data. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2019), reflexive thematic analysis is "about the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (p. 594). This approach was particularly important given the researchers' position as faculty members and administrators invested in creating more inclusive learning environments.

During the coding process, the researchers initially created separate sets of codes for

support professional and faculty interviews to capture the distinct perspectives of each group. These codes were subsequently analyzed in relation to one another to identify convergent and divergent themes across participants.

Results

The analysis revealed five major themes from support professional interviews and seven major themes from public speaking faculty interviews, with significant areas of convergence and some notable divergences.

Themes from Support Professional Interviews

Norms as Barriers to Inclusion

Support professionals described how traditional public speaking delivery norms privilege neurotypical, able-bodied speakers while marginalizing others. Expectations around eye contact, vocal tone, posture, and movement can outweigh communication clarity and message effectiveness in pedagogy and assessments. One participant noted, "We do need to change our criteria. Just because I don't make eye contact or make people feel super comfortable doesn't mean I'm not qualified" (Support Professional Participant 1). These normative expectations are especially challenging for neurodivergent students, who may feel compelled to mask by mimicking neurotypical speaking behaviors. However, as another support professional emphasized, "Trying to become a different thing... is taking out their energy towards actually being successful" (Support Professional Participant 4). One participant described this dynamic as rubrics becoming "instructions for better masking" and warned of the emotional toll and imposter syndrome that surface as students mature (Support Professional Participant 2).

Reactive Systems and Uneven Support

Support professionals emphasized that even when accommodations are technically available, students must navigate confusing pathways and unclear policies, revealing systems that support inclusion unevenly and reactively. Students delivering presentations face inconsistent support shaped largely by individual faculty discretion. While many instructors want to be accommodating, they frequently lack training to recognize disability-related needs or apply accommodations equitably. One support professional noted, "Professors are going to make a judgment call based on their conversation with that one student" (Support Professional Participant 2), highlighting the subjective nature of support. This inconsistency places the burden of access on students, requiring high levels of self-advocacy. "Sometimes the suggestion is... can you go talk to your professor about how you're struggling with this specific piece? That's a hard conversation to have" (Support Professional Participant 1).

Structural Flexibility Enables Access

All support professional participants emphasized the importance of proactively embedding structural flexibility into courses rather than relying on after-the-fact

accommodations. They advocated for universal design principles that normalize diverse learning styles and reduce the need for students to disclose disability status. One participant noted, "You might offer that option to everybody in the class. And in that case, the same applies to everybody" (Support Professional Participant 1). Flexible options such as allowing students to present while seated, submit recorded speeches, use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), or deliver slide-based presentations were cited as effective strategies that uphold academic rigor while accommodating diverse needs. Support professionals called for revision of grading rubrics to reflect broader understanding of communication, noting that expectations around eye contact may disadvantage autistic students and assessments of vocal tone may be inappropriate for students using American Sign Language. Additionally, support professionals stressed aligning feedback methods with students' processing needs and utilizing peer coaching and academic support services as partners in scaffolding inclusive practices.

Communication is Contextual, Not Individual

Support professionals challenged assumptions that public speaking performance primarily reflects individual skill, preparation, or motivation, emphasizing instead the influence of contextual factors. Anxiety, sensory regulation, executive functioning, environmental conditions, and audience dynamics were all described as shaping students' ability to communicate effectively. Medical or mental health conditions such as migraines, autoimmune disorders, or trauma histories may unpredictably affect students' communicative capacities in ways not always visible. As one support professional explained regarding a student with mobility challenges: "He sometimes wouldn't even have access to using his legs anymore... the whole system would shut down" (Support Professional Participant 4). Recognizing this, support professionals advocated for low-stakes, supportive spaces such as practice sessions, scaffolded rehearsal opportunities, and alternative presentation formats that acknowledge and adapt to these contextual pressures.

Technology as a Conditional Tool for Inclusion

Support professionals identified technology as potentially powerful but requiring careful implementation. When thoughtfully integrated, tools such as pre-recorded presentations, speech-generating devices, and virtual rehearsal spaces can offer students greater autonomy and control. "Being able to practice things in a controlled environment... sounds like that would be helpful" (Support Professional Participant 4). However, participants cautioned that such tools must be offered as options, not mandates. "There are some tools where students can practice their presentation and get feedback, but those tools are not super popular and not free" (Support Professional Participant 3). The physical demands of technologies like VR may be inaccessible for students with mobility, visual, vestibular, or sensory processing differences. Support professionals warned that when tech solutions are implemented without student input, they risk becoming exclusionary in new ways.

Themes from Faculty Interviews

Scaffolded Pedagogical Design

All faculty participants structured their courses with progressive skill development, moving students from low-stakes activities to more complex tasks. This approach reflects conscious effort to reduce anxiety and build competence, demonstrating faculty willingness to incorporate UDL principles. Faculty use strategies such as improvisational activities like charades and reading children's books aloud as non-threatening ways to practice speaking in front of peers. This scaffolding extends to grading practices, with several faculty implementing lenient grading early in the semester. One instructor explained, "I'm also lenient on the grading. I tell them I'm here just to see what you can do and have a starting point to understand who you are as a speaker" (Faculty Participant 1). Some faculty allow students to revise and re-present speeches after receiving feedback.

Balance Between Consistency and Flexibility

Faculty are eager to support students with diverse needs but report tension between maintaining course standards and responding to individual requests, often making informal accommodations on a case-by-case basis. One faculty member explained, "I come in early on and set boundaries... then there have been times where I've allowed students to tell me... what is difficult... and so then we negotiate there" (Faculty Participant 1). The individualized approaches were inconsistent across instructors, with some noting that accommodations "... can just be overwhelming to manage" (Faculty Participant 1). The reactive nature of these accommodations means students must either disclose their needs or risk not receiving appropriate support.

Inclusive Assessment Challenges

Faculty participants acknowledged that traditional public speaking rubrics may disadvantage neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students, though they struggle with how to address these limitations. Several acknowledged that standard evaluation criteria don't fairly assess all students. "When I am assessing Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, it would actually be great to have a separate rubric for them" (Faculty Participant 1). In response, faculty make informal adjustments, often mentally modifying their expectations rather than changing rubrics formally. "I give feedback on those things... but mentally I'm thinking, okay... that's not within their realm of possibilities" (Faculty Participant 2). Faculty expressed desire for more inclusive assessment tools while grappling with preparing students for potentially exclusionary workplace expectations.

Diverse Approaches to Providing Student Feedback

Faculty provide feedback in various ways, both written and verbal, reflecting recognition that students benefit from different perspectives and formats. One faculty member described their comprehensive system: "I give them feedback written at the end... talk about as a classroom, the things they did well and things that need improvement" (Faculty Participant 1).

Peer feedback is prominent in most courses. Faculty also adapt feedback timing and format based on student needs, with some providing immediate verbal feedback followed by written comments, while others delay feedback until all presentations are complete to ensure equity.

Communication Apprehension as Systemic Challenge

Faculty observe widespread anxiety around public speaking that extends beyond what they feel equipped to handle individually, leading them to recognize the need for more resources and training. One faculty noted that every semester they have "at least one student who delivers nothing in class because they are so... overwhelmed." Faculty recognize the limitations of their current approaches, with one participant reflecting that "even though you can have those discussions, it doesn't always mean anything" (Faculty Participant 2). This awareness points to faculty recognition that they need more sophisticated tools and institutional support.

Community-Building as Pedagogical Strategy

Faculty emphasized creating supportive classroom environments where students feel psychologically safe to take risks and support each other. The "snowball" activity, where students anonymously share fears that are then read aloud by others, exemplifies this approach: "They write it down, then they wad it up... other people pick it up and read it" (Faculty Participant 2). This activity validates individual fears while demonstrating their universality. Community-building also occurs through structural elements like peer timekeeper roles and collaborative feedback sessions.

Resistance to Proactive Communication About Accommodations

Faculty express reluctance to advertise flexible options proactively, reflecting concerns that students will exploit accommodations rather than engaging authentically with course challenges. One faculty member explicitly stated: "If I announced it, many students might just choose the recording option first and not even try in class" (Faculty Participant 4). This reluctance manifests in waiting for students to request help rather than offering support proactively. "I wait until a student comes to me... I encourage them to try to present in front of peers first" (Faculty Participant 4). The gatekeeping approach creates additional barriers for students who might benefit from knowing their options but lack the knowledge or confidence to advocate for themselves.

Areas of Convergence

Communication Apprehension as Complex Challenge

Both support professional and faculty participants acknowledged that public speaking anxiety extends beyond typical nervousness and represents a significant barrier requiring more sophisticated approaches than traditional classroom management. Faculty described encountering students who "deliver nothing in class because they are so overwhelmed," while support professionals emphasized how anxiety intersects with contextual factors like sensory

regulation and executive functioning. Both groups recognized communication apprehension as occurring broadly across the student population, though they remained uncertain whether it is more prevalent among neurodivergent, disabled, or Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, or whether these populations simply face additional contextual barriers that compound universal challenges.

Value of Scaffolded, Process-Oriented Instruction

Support professionals and faculty converged on the importance of progressive skill development and reducing high-stakes pressure, reflecting universal design principles that benefit all learners. Faculty described moving students from low-stakes activities to more complex tasks and implementing lenient grading early in the semester, while support professionals advocated for low-stakes, supportive spaces and scaffolded rehearsal opportunities. Both groups recognized that effective communication develops through repeated practice in supportive environments rather than through high-pressure performances.

Limitations of Current Assessment Practices

Both groups acknowledged that traditional public speaking rubrics inadequately serve diverse learners. Faculty questioned whether standard evaluation criteria fairly assess all students, and support professionals described how expectations around eye contact, vocal tone, posture, and movement can outweigh communication clarity. Both groups recognized the need for more inclusive assessment tools and agreed that content should outweigh delivery in public speaking assessment.

Importance of Individualized Support

Support professionals and faculty both emphasized the value of responding to individual student needs, though they approached this differently. Faculty described negotiating accommodations with students and making informal adjustments, while support professionals advocated for aligning feedback methods with students' processing needs. Both groups recognized that one-size-fits-all approaches fail to serve diverse learners effectively and viewed campus support resources, including communication centers, as essential components of student success.

Areas of Divergence

Proactive Versus Reactive Accommodation Philosophy

A significant divergence centered on when and how to offer accommodations. Support professionals consistently advocated for proactive, universal design approaches, calling for early and frequent communication about accommodation options and embedding structural flexibility into courses. In contrast, faculty demonstrated resistance to proactive communication about accommodations, preferring to "wait until a student comes to me" and expressing concern that advertising accommodation options might lead students to "choose the recording option first and

not even try." Support professionals argued that reactive approaches create significant barriers for students who need accommodations but lack the knowledge, confidence, or advocacy skills to request them.

Masking and Authenticity Concerns

Support professionals explicitly addressed the harmful effects of requiring students to mask their authentic communication styles, describing how traditional expectations can become "instructions for better masking" that drain cognitive resources and undermine learning goals. Faculty did not demonstrate awareness of masking as a concept or concern, instead focusing on helping students meet traditional presentation expectations through scaffolded support. This gap represents a fundamental difference in understanding how accommodation requirements can either support authentic communication or perpetuate harmful conformity pressures.

Discussion

This study provides important insights into the challenges and opportunities for creating more inclusive public speaking environments for neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students. The findings reveal tensions within higher education's efforts to create more equitable learning environments while highlighting the unique position of communication centers to lead institutional change.

The areas of convergence between campus support professionals and public speaking faculty provide an encouraging foundation for advancing inclusive public speaking pedagogy. Both groups recognize communication apprehension as a complex challenge, moving beyond simplistic notions of "stage fright" toward understanding how anxiety intersects with contextual factors, executive functioning, and sensory regulation. The universal embrace of scaffolded, process-oriented instruction demonstrated intuitive alignment with universal design principles, suggesting that inclusive practices are intentional refinements of approaches many instructors already employ rather than radical departures from existing pedagogy.

However, the divergent perspectives on accommodation philosophy reveal a fundamental tension that may perpetuate exclusionary practices despite good intentions. Faculty resistance to proactive communication about accommodations, rooted in concerns about student exploitation and beliefs about the pedagogical value of discomfort, creates significant barriers for students who most need support. This gatekeeping approach places a burden of advocacy on students who may lack the knowledge, confidence, or energy to navigate complex accommodation processes while managing their academic responsibilities.

The absence of faculty awareness regarding masking represents another concerning gap. Support professionals' discussion of how traditional expectations can encourage masking highlights the cognitive and emotional toll of requiring students to suppress authentic communication styles. When faculty focus solely on helping students meet traditional presentation expectations without recognizing the potential harm of enforced conformity, they risk transforming learning opportunities into exercises in performance that drain rather than

develop student capacities.

Implications for Communication Pedagogy

These findings suggest that truly inclusive public speaking pedagogy requires more than individual instructor goodwill or case-by-case accommodation. The convergent recognition of current assessment limitations points toward the need for fundamental examination of what constitutes effective oral communication and how it should be evaluated. Traditional rubrics that prioritize neurotypical and able-bodied delivery norms over message effectiveness may inadvertently measure students' ability to conform rather than communicate.

The contextual nature of communication performance, emphasized by support professionals, challenges individualistic assumptions underlying traditional public speaking instruction. When anxiety, sensory regulation, executive functioning, and environmental factors significantly influence communicative capacity, pedagogical approaches must become more flexible and responsive to fluctuating needs rather than expecting consistent performance across all contexts.

Communication Centers as Institutional Leaders

The findings support positioning communication centers as leaders in inclusive pedagogy development. Unlike individual faculty who must balance competing course demands, communication centers can dedicate focused attention to developing specialized expertise in diverse communication patterns and support strategies. Their cross-disciplinary service positions them to encounter challenges before classroom instructors do and to develop systematic approaches that benefit students across the curriculum.

Communication centers' emphasis on individualized, student-centered support naturally aligns with inclusive practices. However, their potential impact extends beyond individual consultations to institutional change leadership. Centers can serve as bridges between disability services expertise and classroom practice, translating accommodation principles into practical pedagogical strategies while providing ongoing professional development for faculty across disciplines.

Recommendations

Based on the convergence of perspectives and the gaps identified in current practices, the following recommendations provide practical guidance for creating more inclusive public speaking environments.

For Public Speaking Faculty

Faculty should critically examine current assessment criteria to distinguish between essential communication skills and potentially exclusionary practices rooted in neurotypical and able-bodied norms. Rubric review should focus particularly on elements like eye contact requirements, vocal variety expectations, rigid time limits, and prescribed physical movement

patterns that may disadvantage diverse learners without meaningfully assessing communication effectiveness. Assessment should balance attention to delivery with stronger emphasis on content, prioritizing message clarity, organization, evidence quality, and audience adaptation over performative delivery elements.

Faculty should move beyond reactive accommodation toward proactive communication about presentation options and support resources. This includes establishing early dialogue about presentation requirements, clearly communicating available alternatives, and inviting students to discuss concerns before assignments begin. Flexible presentation scheduling should accommodate students whose performance may vary due to anxiety, fatigue, medical conditions, or other contextual factors.

In addition, faculty can enhance inclusive pedagogy by intentionally scaffolding speaking assignments and coordinating these stages with support from communication centers. Rather than directing students to seek help only at the final practice stage, instructors can encourage or require visits during early phases of speech development to support students as they brainstorm topics, refine the specific purpose and thesis, select and arrange main ideas, incorporate and cite sources, and shape accessible language choices. Building skills gradually in this way eases the performance pressure that typically accompanies end-stage preparation. Integrating the center into the scaffolding process not only normalizes help-seeking but also ensures that students who benefit from more structured, gradual skill development receive that support throughout the entire assignment cycle.

For Communication Centers

Communication centers should position themselves as institutional leaders by collaborating with disability services, academic affairs, and faculty development offices. Centers can serve as bridges between accommodation expertise and classroom practice, translating inclusive principles into practical pedagogical strategies while providing ongoing professional development for faculty across disciplines.

Centers should deliberately expand consultation services to address inclusive communication needs, ensuring that students navigating public speaking challenges related to neurodivergence, disability, or Deaf and hard-of-hearing identity receive equitable support. This includes training peer consultants in inclusive practices and establishing clear referral pathways with campus resources.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. The small sample size and focus on a single institution limit generalizability. Future studies should examine inclusive public speaking practices across diverse institutional contexts, including community colleges and minority-serving institutions.

The researchers' positions as campus administrators may have influenced data interpretation, particularly given their investment in positioning communication centers as

institutional leaders. While reflexive analysis practices were employed to address this bias, the researchers' advocacy stance toward inclusive pedagogy and institutional roles could have shaped both participant responses and thematic development.

This study focused on perspectives of faculty and support professionals rather than students themselves. Future research should center the experiences of neurodivergent, Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and disabled students in public speaking contexts to better understand their specific challenges and accommodation preferences.

The study did not evaluate the effectiveness of specific accommodation strategies. Intervention studies that measure the impact of UDL approaches on student performance and anxiety would provide valuable evidence for pedagogical decision-making.

Conclusion

Creating truly inclusive public speaking environments requires coordinated institutional commitment rather than individual instructor initiative. The convergent themes between campus support professionals and faculty provide hope for change, while the divergent themes highlight important areas that warrant further exploration and institutional debate. These areas of tension represent important conversations that institutions must engage with systematically rather than leaving to individual faculty discretion.

Communication centers, with their dual expertise in communication pedagogy and student support, are uniquely positioned to facilitate these institutional conversations while providing concrete resources for implementation. Their cross-disciplinary service positions them to work with faculty across departments, helping them to address inclusive pedagogy beyond traditional speech courses. This role would leverage centers' expertise in both communication instruction and accommodation strategies to support consistent inclusive practices across the curriculum.

The findings suggest that inclusive practices are not radical departures from existing pedagogy but rather intentional refinements that can benefit all learners while ensuring equitable access for diverse students. Given higher education's ongoing concerns about student retention, particularly among underrepresented and marginalized populations, addressing barriers in required courses represents both an equity imperative and a strategic institutional priority. When students encounter exclusionary practices in general education requirements, they may struggle academically or disengage from their educational experiences entirely.

However, realizing this potential requires moving beyond individual goodwill toward systematic examination of assumptions, policies, and practices that may inadvertently create barriers. Communication centers are particularly well-positioned to lead this institutional transformation, serving as bridges between disability expertise and classroom practice while fostering ongoing dialogue about inclusive pedagogy across the curriculum.

Author Note

References

Benedict, B., Shields, A. N., Wieland, M., & Hall, J. (2020). Recommendations for communication centers based on student and tutor reflections: Insights about students' reasons for visiting, session outcomes, and characteristics of the tutoring approach. *Communication Center Journal, 6*(1), 79–93. https://janeway.uncpress.org/ccj/article/id/1070/

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brenneise, A. D. (2020). Presuming competence: Troubling the ideal student. *Communication Education*, *69*(3), 317–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2020.1770307

Brockmann, B., & Jeffress, M. S. (2017). Unleashing disability perspectives in the public speaking course. In M. S. Jeffress (Ed.), *Pedagogy, disability and communication: Applying disability studies in the classroom* (pp. 203–218). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315399423-13

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rojo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis. *Higher Education.* 80, 757–778. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

Daniels, M. M., Palaoag, T., & Daniels, M. (2020). Efficacy of virtual reality in reducing fear of public speaking: A systematic review. *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, *803*(1), Article 012003. https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/803/1/012003

Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9708722

Gehrke, P. (2024). Creating more equitable rubrics to reduce discrimination and inequities in public-speaking courses. *Communication Teacher*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2024.2372345

Hilton, J., Syed, N., Weiss, M. J., Tereshko, L., Marya, V., Marshall, K., Gatzunis, K., Russell, C., & Driscoll, N. (2021). Initiatives to address diversity, equity, and inclusion within a higher education ABA Department. *Behavior and Social Issues*, *30*(1), 58–81. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42822-021-00082-y

Hull, L., Petrides, K. V., Allison, C., Smith, P., Baron-Cohen, S., Lai, M., & Mandy, W. (2017). "Putting on my best normal": Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *47*(8), 2519–2534. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3166-5

Kooli, C., & Chakraoui, R. (2025). AI-driven assistive technologies in inclusive education: Benefits, challenges, and policy recommendations, *Sustainable Futures*, 10, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.101042

Miller, D., Rees, J., & Pearson, A. (2021). "Masking is life": Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(4), 330–338. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0083

Morreale, S. P., Myers, S. A., Backlund, P. M., & Simonds, C. J. (2016). Study IX of the basic communication course at two- and four-year US colleges and universities: A re-examination of our discipline's "front porch". *Communication Education*, *65*(3), 338–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1073339

Palmeri, J. (2006). Disability studies, cultural analysis, and the critical practice of technical communication pedagogy. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *15*(1), 49–65. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1501_5

Prentiss, S. (2021). Transforming communication centers to IDEAL spaces. *Communication Center Journal, 7*(1), 108–114. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1340575.pdf

Rouse, M. N. (2022). *Academic responsibilities: Challenging ableist perspectives in public speaking programs* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama]. The University of Alabama Institutional Repository. https://ir-api.ua.edu/api/core/bitstreams/27a237e6-2bcb-49a2-9ab2-a9cfa9e39138/content

Rouse, M. N. (2024). Assessment 'responsAbilities' in the basic course: Evaluating public speaking rubrics. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, *36*(1), 29–54. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol36/iss1/5

Sanger, C. S. (2020). Inclusive pedagogy and universal design approaches for diverse learning environments. In C. Sanger & N. Gleason (Eds.), *Diversity and inclusion in global higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1628-3_2

Tigert, M. K., & Miller, J. H. (2021). Ableism in the classroom: Teaching accessibility and ethos by analyzing rubrics. *Communication Teacher*, *36*(4), 264–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2021.2006254

Valenzano, J. M., III. (2013). Directing the winds of change: The basic course and general education. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 25*, 1–37. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol25/iss1/6

Yook, E. L. (2013). The Effect of Communication Centers on College Student Retention: An Argument. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *14*(3), 345–357. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.14.3.d