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TITLE: The Centrality of the Center (Early COVID Edition): Best Practices for Sustaining Communication Center Operations During a Global Pandemic

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## **The *Centrality* of the Center (Early COVID Edition): Best Practices for Sustaining Communication Center Operations During a Global Pandemic**

--Michael G. Strawser, Kimberly M. Cuny, Russell Carpenter, Kevin Dvorak, and Suzy Prentiss

### **Abstract**

Like other student services on college campuses, communication centers have not been immune to challenges surrounding COVID-19. Traditionally a primarily face-to-face operation on campus, the communication center tends to thrive on high-touch interaction between students and consultants as well as amongst the center staff. During COVID-19, communication centers have had to adapt their operations. To determine how center operations changed because of COVID and what challenges COVID-19 presented to communication centers, 59 ( $N=59$ ) center stakeholders were surveyed. The authors, all communication center directors or staff, then provide ten best practices to overcome these unique communication center obstacles.

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Students are concerned about COVID-forced online education and asking for refunds (Whistle), there is a forever changing landscape of the university (Metz), declining enrollment numbers across the board (Hartocollis & Levin), the death of collegiate athletics (Kilgore), and the complete upheaval of private institutions (Hobson & Hagan). We need to pay attention to the thread behind these reports—college is changing.

At the risk of blasphemous hyperbole, though, there are some potentially positive benefits that may arise as we survive, then thrive, in our world. Specifically, we believe university communication centers have an

opportunity to reassess our value to our institutions, community, country, and world. As communication scholars, we can provide context for crisis, dialogue in the midst of difference, and overarching narratives of hope. We can also provide a necessary skillset for students. However, achieving these goals requires discernment and diligence. Identifying center needs, in the midst of such a unique time, requires feedback from communication center stakeholders. As such, this article explores challenges experienced by communication centers as a result of COVID-related ordeals and provides best practices for overcoming those trials.

## **Methods**

To develop a list of concerns facing communication center staff in a post-COVID context, a short survey was distributed to communication center stakeholders ( $N = 59$ ). We obtained approval for this study from the university institutional review board. Stakeholders included student staff, professional staff, and directors. Specifically, 35 center administrators, 11 student center employees, 4 professional center employees, 5 participants identified as ‘other’, while 5 did not respond. The survey was brief and contained only two open-ended questions: 1) *How have center operations changed because of COVID?* and 2) *What challenges has COVID-19 presented to your center?*

To analyze the data, trained researchers employed a multi-stage approach. In the first stage, the coders gained familiarity with the data. In the second stage, the coders employed the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss) to identify themes or clusters of words that, when taken together, refer to an underlying, unified idea (Weber). This was a repetitive process, with coders going through the transcripts multiple times refining categories, determining thematic connections, and looking for exceptions (LeCompte & Schensul). In the third stage, the first author reviewed the themes and subthemes identified by the coders.

## **Results**

Data analysis revealed several themes and sub-themes represented in the tables below. Table 1 displays themes related to changing center operations. Sample quotes are included. Major themes include consultation modality, budget, and physical space design.

**Table 1.** *How have your center operations changed because of COVID-19?*

<b>Operations Themes</b>	<b>Operations Examples</b>
Consultation Modality	“We moved to entirely remote consultations (at first) and then to mostly remote consultations after campus reopened.”
Budget	“It has affected our budget and forced us to cut down on hours.”
Physical Space Design	“Our consultations are both in-person (in larger rooms for distancing) and virtual (this was not the case before COVID).”

Table 2 addresses challenges COVID-19 presented to the communication center. In the table, overall themes are included as well as subthemes when appropriate. Major theme one was operations, with attendance, budget, procedures, physical space design, and virtual meetings serving as subthemes. Major theme two was staff management with mental health/team bonding and training serving as subthemes. Major theme three was faculty outreach with messaging and advocacy serving as subthemes. Finally, major theme four was technology/equitability with tutor equipment as the primary subtheme. Example quotes are provided in Table 2, which begins on the next page and continues onto the following page.

**Table 2.** *What challenges has COVID-19 presented to your center?*

<b>Challenge Themes</b>	<b>Challenge Subthemes</b>	<b>Challenge Examples</b>
Operations	Attendance	“Biggest concern-loss of attendance to the center.”
	Budget	“Budgets cuts are looming because of Covid and will be an ongoing challenge.”
	Procedures	“Coordination and establishment of effective workflow.”
	Physical Space Design	“I do not know how to do a lot of the physical actions and placement of things in the center.”
	Virtual Meetings	“Entirely remote based meetings.”
Staff Management	Mental Health/Team Bonding	“Challenges include the uncertainty of the mental and emotional state of employees since they can no longer drop in the office to talk and I can’t see them physically to tell if something is going on. Additionally, the challenge of keeping the spirits and morale high is hard to do.”
	Training	“Finalizing a remote, synchronous tutoring procedure in just a week was very difficult, but we did it with long hours, experimentation, and trial/error.”

Faculty Outreach	Messaging	“Advertising our services-getting the word out.”
	Advocacy	“Getting professors to remember to advocate for our services.”
Technology/Equity ability	Tutor Equipment	“Many of our student staff needed us to supply them with hardware to telework. Wi-Fi boosters were game changing, we also supplied Chromebook to some and others needed cell phone stands or headphones. One needed a webcam. Managing a 100% teleworking student staff was a big shift.”

## Best Practices for Overcoming COVID Communication Center Challenges

### *Best Practice #1: Overcoming Poor Attendance During a Crisis Event*

Few were expecting a global pandemic when 2019 ended. As the pandemic shuttered campuses and technology took over the higher education landscape, centers changed. Some center administrators, including those at Mary Washington and Hamilton College, were early adopters, shifting to 100% online consultation and teleworking in March 2020. For these two centers, this was a brave choice, as neither had ever offered online nor teleworking. Some institutions made the difficult decision to close for the remainder of the semester. Others had experiences similar to Havenford College, where administration concluded that communication center work could not be accomplished online, thus the opportunity to do so was never presented. In the end, it makes no real sense to compare one center to another, as each is subject to the unique history, politics, and needs of their campus (Emery), as well as their administrators. Regardless of what happened in March 2020, patron usage changed as the online pivot affected center operations.

One way to respond to this change in usage is to adjust expectations. During a global pandemic, numbers should change. Administrators could embrace the slower pace by considering a shift in focus. For example, moving from meeting the need in terms of a large volume of patrons to meeting the mental health and professional development needs of student consultants. This shift in focus could produce measurable outcomes that can be reported to administration and justify payroll expenses. Student consultants identify communication centers as a prime location for their own professional development (Brown; LaGrone & Mills). Center administrators might seek out online training modules that consultants can complete together or alone during or in place of a shift. One example is *The Safe Zone Project* (<https://thesafezoneproject.com/>).

Another way to address usage challenges is to change the way the work is done. Moving online is not the only change for administrators to consider. After going online with teleworkers for the first time in spring 2020, Hamilton College made the courageous fall semester pivot to offer both online and face-to-face sessions. As a result they are supporting students who might otherwise not show up in person. For those who remained face-to-face in the spring or returned to that modality in the fall, Nejezchleb's pre-pandemic research points to the need for administrators to add telephone consultations, as these have a positive impact on students who are otherwise not being reached.

Overcoming poor usage numbers can happen if administrators are open to changing the work being done. In the end, without faculty support, no student should be expected to seek out support from a communication center (King & Atkins- Sayer; Stewart et al). What does a pandemic faculty member teaching oral communication across campus need from the communication center? They need help and they need the center to step up and do some of the heavy lifting. For instance, when one center had classroom instructional workshop requests drop drastically, resources were used instead to develop oral communication content for faculty teaching online. Early creations included podcasts and micro-learning videos hosted on the web. Later, a LinkedIn blog for faculty teaching oral communication was launched. Soon after, the center began developing Canvas modules, with center consultations/visits as assessment of learning for faculty to import into their courses. While faculty started to request instructional workshops again in 2021,

instructional support continues to be about doing the heavy lifting for faculty. This particular center will not go back to offering only workshops as instructional support efforts.

### *Best Practice #2: Stretching the Center Budget*

The need to do the same work with fewer resources is not new to communication centers. What has changed is the insensitivity of the budget crisis. Facing budget shortfalls and possible elimination, some center administrators need to lean heavily into scholarship. Fortunately, they will find many provide evidence-based proof that communication centers make a difference in retention (Yook), aid student-patrons in their competency development (Benedict, Shields, Wieland, & Hall), lead to higher presentation grades (Davis, Jacobs & Linvill) higher overall course grades and attendance for patrons (Stewart, Broeckelman-Post, & Rossheim), reach those who have not utilized services in innovative ways (Nejezchleb; McCall, Harrison, & Murphy), and provide important professional development for the student consultants themselves (Brown; LaGrone & Mills; Wilson). Everyone will need to find alternative ways to stretch their budget allocations while supporting their missions for the foreseeable future.

One way to stretch the communication center budget is to reallocate funds. With less funding, administrators need to find creative ways to get the work completed. One way to accomplish this, for those with graduate students on assistantship, is by reworking graduate student responsibilities. Administrators should seek to identify what from their own responsibilities can be moved to the graduate students. This will be especially important if staff positions have been lost or furloughed. For example, one center moved the responsibilities of coordinating their undergraduate student-tutor presentations at the Excellence at the Center conference to a graduate assistant. Another way to stretch the budget is to hire one fewer graduate assistant so that the remaining funding can be allocated differently. That might mean more funds for undergraduate wages. Administrators should also look at what responsibilities can be moved from graduate students to the undergraduate student consultants.

Outside resources should be considered as a valuable way to stretch the budget. While each campus is different, this might involve looking more closely at any endowments a particular center has. Can funds be used to



help the center engage in meaningful work aligning with the center's mission? Another option is to increase undergraduate student hires with Federal Work Study (FWS) awards. This move provided one center with 43 thousand additional undergraduate dollars for payroll. This FWS conversation starts with financial aid offices.

Some communication centers have robust faculty-fellows programming. These appointments allow the center to provide additional opportunities to support and extend their mission while keeping the center's work relevant locally and nationally. One example is to appoint a fellow from the sciences to support/extend/start scientific communication efforts. Other ideas can include a fellow for undergraduate research, new faculty mentorship, the basic communication course. Regardless of the focus, fellows need to do work that is meaningful to them and advances or supports the mission of the center.

Continued stretching of the technology budget is likely here to stay. One center argued that since the students who work in the center included those enrolled in the center's credit-bearing theory and practice and internship courses, the center is actually a classroom space. As a result, most of the technology in the physical spaces are repaired and replaced by Instructional Technology Services (ITS). Opportunities for different funding can be leveraged as well. A center might sell apparel via social media or have a bake sale in the lobby to fuel discretionary spending. Alumni staff of the center will likely be interested in providing support. Could the creation of an Alumni Corps provide a rich support group of volunteers doing online consultations?

Many campuses offer internal grants. In one example, a center received a grant from a campus program designed to create opportunities for students to increase their sense of belonging. Public university systems also offer grants that may be applicable. In one fall 2020 example, an academic department chair was asked by campus administration if they had an interest in joining a group applying for system-wide funds to support virtual student learning. As the speaking center was 100% online, this type of funding was a good fit, and funds were awarded. This change was only possible because the department chair is seen as a stakeholder in the speaking center and was kept abreast of what the center was doing.

### *Best Practice #3: Developing New Center Practices*

Communication centers around the country had to adapt procedures, including new ways of working, coordinating, and providing related programming and services for their institutional communities, including faculty and student collaborators. Developing new center procedures connects several interrelated areas including the following: flexibility, adaptation, increased access, focus on students, hybrid, expanded hours, rethinking appointments and access to consultations, and moving workspace online (chat, video, and virtual desk).

Centers had to adopt and adapt new and more flexible modes of operation. Centers moved toward more flexible procedures, which included 1) allowing plans for consultants to offer services from home and 2) adapting flexible schedules to best fit consultants' workflows and preferences (in some cases, offering early morning hours or late night availabilities outside of the previous, normal schedule or "on time"). In addition, centers created more flexible channels by and through which students could request services (normally individual or small-group consultations) but also to include access to valuable interactive workshops. Centers offered these in flexible formats, including synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for student engagement, and to ensure equitable access to all students, considering bandwidth and socioeconomic concerns. Centers designed these flexible access points, on-ramps, or pathways for students by leading (and designing) with empathy for students. Whereas in many cases, traditional access options had been somewhat limited to some students, centers employed flexible options that varied (and, in many ways, deepened) the range of options students had to choose from.

Centers adapted programs and services to best suit student needs. Consultations, the dominant service for many centers, were adapted to multiple formats, including in-person (at a social distance), synchronous (real-time) virtual, asynchronous (occurring at different times, often via Google Drive or email), and, in some cases, using audio-only, phone, or various chat options as a process of adapting the consultation as a service. Communication centers are complex spaces and programs, too, and, for many centers, the front line is a reception, welcome, or check-in desk, and these had to be adapted as well to best fit the online, hybrid, or

socially-distanced configuration. Centers adapted to new forms and operations for the “welcome” service that helps to route students, provide information about the center’s services, and guide students in confidently seeking the information, help, resources, and the experience they need.

Centers adapted the ways in which they provided access not only through the process of moving more options to virtual spaces and platforms but also by expanding hours of operation. Through the process of adjusting operations to an expanded set of hours, centers were able to offer more students options for consultations that aligned with their ever-changing schedules (for school, homework, work, health concerns, and increased needs with family and in their personal lives).

#### *Best Practice #4: Redesigning the Center’s Physical Space*

The physical space of the communication center also changed rapidly and drastically as a result of safety precautions put into place amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While much research and planning has gone into many communication center spaces, with thoughtful arrangements of furniture, including arrangements of monitors and dedicated areas for collaboration, practice, and rehearsal, communication centers were forced largely to revise their physical spaces.

Redesigned spaces, for centers offering on-ground consultations and even workshops, had to be carefully envisioned, mapped, and implemented. Many center leaders worked closely with institutional COVID-19 planning and public health teams to 1) arrange furniture to meet socially-distanced regulations, 2) secure and implement safety features, such as panels, 3) reduce areas that were previously used for close collaboration (such as benches and comfortable seating), and 4) put into place guidelines for use of technology, such as monitors, keyboards, and mice.

Communication center spaces were mapped with precision to allocate spaces for specified activity, and many established ingress and egress parameters that would give students and all visitors safe entry and exit of the facility, usually with minimal need to touch doors or handles. Floor signage marked appropriate and pre-designated paths students would use to flow into and out of the space, while ensuring that traffic would be manageable.

Importantly, physical spaces also became hybrid. As many communication centers redesigned physical spaces, areas that would usually be staffed heavily with consultants or technical support staff were now monitored differently. Communication centers implemented technologies such as chat features, scannable “virtual help desks,” and help channels that were staffed remotely to support student use of the space while access was drastically limited and social distancing measures were in place. This design allowed access to the spaces (and resources) while helping to ensure that students could use related communication spaces to practice and hone communication design using reliable, professional spaces often provided by the communication center. Physical spaces became hybrid spaces, with long-standing in-person practices remediated by virtual ones to ensure safety.

Communication centers increased communication and signage to reach students and faculty, balancing the care needed to ensure social distancing and safety for all while allowing access to important resources. Signage needed to be more specific, guided, and clear through the COVID-19 pandemic to balance safety with access to communication center physical spaces, which in many cases is viewed as a “service” offered to students and members of various institutional communities.

### *Best Practice #5: Virtual Meetings*

Zoom fatigue and burnout are real (Robinson). Whether face-to-face or virtual with groups large or small, many of the time-tested tips for managing meetings efficiently and effectively hold true. Three important suggestions are especially helpful for center directors working with student staff: have purpose, set an agenda, and honor time.

To be productive and successful, meetings must have a clearly-stated, shared purpose and goals (Baker & Murphy; Egts; Phillips). Also, it is wise to consider if there is a more efficient way to communicate, such as through a targeted email, or a more effective way to collaborate, such as with Google Docs or a Doodle, than to schedule a meeting. Finally, if there is no need for the meeting, cancel it (Baker & Murphy; Egts).

Setting an agenda is critical to meeting success and efficiency. The agenda should be shared prior to the meeting for planning and

preparation purposes (Baker & Murphy). Other helpful suggestions include setting expectations for active and engaged listening (Phillips) with people asking questions, offering suggestions, and making connections, involving everyone (Bryant), and managing the meeting while supporting conversation (Bryant). Another empowering suggestion is to “make meetings more inclusive” (Phillips). Though all people invited to a meeting should have a clear reason for being there, often other people may appreciate being invited to share their perspectives and add new ideas, and foster collaboration and innovation. Make sure to leave time at the end of the meeting to develop action items for the next meeting and collaboratively identify those people who will take the lead on each task. A meeting agenda that allows time for future planning helps create buy-in, allows people to “step up” and contribute in ways that are meaningful and engaging, and, ideally, supports a more even distribution of task and responsibilities.

To respect everyone involved, attendees can be honored by beginning and ending on time. Also, meetings should be short, whenever possible, no more than 40-45 minutes (Baker & Murphy). Brevity and clarity are effective communication tools in all situations, especially in meetings.

### *Best Practice #6: Tutor and Staff Mental Health*

The pandemic increased stressors, producing physical, chemical, and mental responses internally for everyone. Those responsible for administering communication centers face a significant need to attend to these challenges among their consultants and staff. Without mental health training themselves, administrators need to lean on outside resources. Campus resources already available are also attending to an increase in student concerns. This reality makes it all the more important that administrators, facing the need to provide more and more support for the mental health of their staff, add to their own resources and practices.

One strategy for supporting this increase is finding ways to develop emotional intelligence across all staff at the communication center. Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, empathize with and relate to others, and resolve conflict. Attaining emotional intelligence starts with increasing self-awareness

(recognize and observe emotions within oneself) and cultivating self-management (regulate emotions and take appropriate actions). Helping staff increase their self-awareness directly involves asking two important questions. The first seeks to have them identify when they are most frustrated, and the second to identify what is working. Prior to the global pandemic one communication center had a tradition of meeting face-to-face with every student employee to ascertain the climate of the organization. The questions asked were rooted in increasing self-awareness. Student employees were asked first to identify what was not working in the organization by talking about the times that they found most frustrating at work. Next they were asked to identify what was going well for them at work. During the pandemic the same center might use this strategy to take the pulse of the student employee mental health. Questions could be altered to get to the bottom of any college-life stressor. The best questions are ones that are framed in a way that students can use them again later. So instead of asking what is working for you, the students should be taught to ask (themselves) what is working for me. Examples of pandemic stressors include online learning, living at home, being isolated, teleworking, and the likes. For example, when are you most frustrated when teleworking or what about teleworking works for you?

After helping a student employee increase self-awareness around a stressor, the next step is to cultivate self-management of that stressor. Questions are at the root of this strategy as well. Extending the teleworking stressor, a good first question might be what is within my control in the teleworking experience? That would be followed with what is one idea I could implement to improve my teleworking experience? Consultants should be encouraged to use these same four questions during consultations.

Additional resources for administrators to tap include Mental Health First Aid's monthly newsletter and web page (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>) organized around identify, understand, and respond. Organizations like The Kellin Foundation provide free yoga classes via Facebook and other platforms for those experiencing mental health stressors. Yoga could make a great group-cohesion experience for staff. Meditation videos like the ones produced by *The On Being Project* abound on the internet. These can be used at the start of center shifts. Administrators on campuses with a license for the Question Persuade

Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention Program should seek to have staff complete that training as well. Alternatively, the evidence-based book associated with QPR can be downloaded for free (<https://qprinstitute.com/>). Finally, the invitation to move communication centers to intentionally support mental health including neurodiversity (Prentiss) is likely the right shift to be considering.

### *Best Practice #7: Training Staff for Virtual Operations*

Communication center consultants need to be trained to conduct consultations in a variety of formats in order to meet students' needs across the board, from students who have easy access to in-person consultations to students whose lives do not afford such easy access to physically visiting an on-site location. To meet the specific needs of the latter, consultants should be trained to aid both synchronously and asynchronously, even though some may prefer to shy away from that second option. Of course, directors should determine the best ways to train their consultants based on their institutional context. Making these decisions can involve asking the staff of their needs, but there are some additional considerations as well.

First, use hybrid training options if possible. If consultants work onsite at a communication center, they may benefit from being trained both on-site, where a good deal of hands-on, one-on-one, and small-group conversations can occur, and online, where they can directly experience what happens when they are learning remotely. This logistical change will help them develop an understanding of how both contexts work so they are prepared to facilitate sessions in either format.

Second, expose staff to multiple technologies and ensure they have capable technology. The increased reliance on technology has proven that our staff members need to be proficient using a variety of platforms, especially since technology can often be imperfect. Wi-Fi can be lost, video-conferencing tools can go down for periods of time, and emails can be lost. Consultants should be trained to have back-up plans in case they or their student writer have technology issues. In addition, to supporting their work, centers should focus efforts on ensuring consultants have appropriate technology to facilitate such sessions. Higher education has experienced even more significant inequity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring that consultants

can effectively perform their jobs—without the persistent concern of having their technology cause complications—may mean shifting funds, if available, to obtaining and caring for better equipment. It may even mean requesting more funds from the institution.

Third, consider including practices from corporate training on remote work. This is especially significant since consultants will benefit from developing professional skills necessary for future hybrid and remote work. These skills go beyond just facilitating consultations online. They include staying motivated while working afar; being more mindful of time management; knowing how to stay connected to colleagues, especially during their shifts; and understanding how to project a professional image, particularly when working synchronously via web conference platforms (think background images and noise).

Fourth, consider using a learning management system (LMS) to engage in virtual education and training. Having training materials and modules in an LMS can prove to be quite effective when onboarding consultants at different points of a year (Greer et al), and they are great for storing supporting materials, such as handouts, syllabi, and notes about working with particular disciplines or assignments. An LMS also provides a platform for ongoing discussions among staff members.

Fifth, assessments can help center personnel determine greater effectiveness. Directors need to be conducting regular assessments of how well the consultants are performing from the perspective of both consultants and students. Assessments should be conducted to determine consultants' proficiency with various technologies, as well as how effectively they use them. In addition to asking students to evaluate the quality of the assistance they received, they should be asked questions about how well consultants utilize technology during online consultations. An LMS, again, can be beneficial for obtaining and storing such assessments.

### *Best Practice #8: Enhancing the Message of Our Value to Faculty*

It is frustrating when our colleagues and greater campus community do not know what we do in our centers or fail to see our value. We should be one of the first places faculty turn for resources, such as including instructional support like workshops and serving as guest speakers, and



for collaboration on topics including communication across the curriculum, oral communication, competency, and multi-disciplinary communication projects. We must have a seat at the table and use our voice to advocate for our work and the positive impact we can make. As students lack intrinsic motivation to visit our centers (Stewart et al), faculty sending them to us is imperative (King & Atkins-Sayer). The value of centers is well supported in the literature, including edited works and the *National Association of Communication Centers Journal*, and we can make a consistent and compelling impact (Stewart; Davis; McCall). Three specific ways we can share our value across campus include reinforcing retention efforts, showcasing soft skills, and highlighting empowerment and agency.

Across campuses big and small, retention was an important focus before the pandemic (Strikwerda), often serving as a benchmark for many institutions. With enrollment figures falling during the pandemic (Burt; June), it is and will continue to be a high priority for the foreseeable future. Communication centers can and do improve retention rates (Yook) and are ready to lead in many of the areas being recognized as key to higher education's post-pandemic strategy, such as being flexible and proactive, rather than reactive, preparing students to be agents of change, and focusing on "wellness and inclusion" as practice (Lake & Buelo). Furthermore, the keys to retention that existed pre-pandemic are already in the Communication Center wheelhouse, such as strengthening individualized instruction, supporting introductory and high-impact courses, sharing information, and building partnerships and collaborations across campus (Strikwerda).

More than just a place for students enrolled in public speaking class or for students needing help with a speech, communication centers can provide resources, support, and skill development in multiple areas of communication (Atkins-Sayre). In fact, centers can help students effectively develop many of the soft skills in demand by employers, such as active listening, resilience, ability to engage in Q & A, self-awareness, and confidence to make suggestions and offer feedback (Forbes). In addition to those skills, consultants can further enhance their own soft-skills training by improving their emotional intelligence, developing creative problem-solving, and establishing empathy (Forbes).

For many students enrolled in basic communication courses, this is often their first class in public speaking. They may feel overwhelmed, disenfranchised, and unprepared, especially if they are first generation or minority students. Uniquely equipped to offer that personal connection and content expertise, communication centers can provide resources, support, and a place to develop and share their voice while intentionally crafting a safe, welcoming, and inclusive space (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhouse; Villano). By helping our students reduce their speech anxiety (Cuny; Radecki), promote their engagement (Strawser et al.), and manage their health and wellness, we not only help students excel on our campus but thrive as integral and contributing members of our campus communities to the benefit of all.

### *Best Practice #9: Advocating for the Center*

While the college experience changes rapidly, the need to develop students' communication skills will remain a top priority. To that end, communication centers should continue to play a significant role in assisting students; however, due to the potential for increased budget cuts, directors need to become even stronger advocates for their centers. Such advocacy can take many forms and involve many people, so it may help to craft a strategic communication plan designed to reach three key audiences: administration, faculty, and students.

As part of that strategic communication plan, it can be useful to narrow down each of the groups. For example, who are the key administrators or decision-makers regarding the center? What messages can you provide them? How often? Which faculty are recognized as influencers, and how do you share your center's mission with them? Which faculty are willing to establish partnerships with the center? What student groups, clubs, and organizations are most popular? Do staff members belong to any of them, and can they help share the center's message?

Our key audiences are flooded with information every day. Therefore, staff should work together to clarify and simplify the center's message—that “we are here to help”—and make sure that message is recognized widely by constituents. The message should be conveyed in print and electronic formats and can include basics such as short reports to administration, email reminders to faculty, and social media posts or hard copy posters and fliers for students. In addition, centers can invite

faculty to post reminders in their course learning management systems, on assignment sheets, and even in syllabi.

Remember to be present, even if the center is online/remote. The pandemic has increased the popularity of remote work, which can make it more difficult for directors or consultants to be “seen” around campus. The informal moments—seeing a colleague while walking across campus and having a short conversation—have become limited, which means directors should focus more attention on designing and maintaining intentional communications across campus.

Continue to build connections with courses and programs across the institution. A deeper sense of advocacy can begin by building connections between the center and programs across the university, academic and non-academic. For students, the communication center experience should be built into the fabric of their academic experience; it should not be a tangential, one-time requirement or suggestion. Providing course-embedded consultants to programs promotes the work of the center, and it has a positive impact on student learning and engagement. Students and faculty who are happy with these programs do not want them taken away.

Conduct assessment and use it to enact change. When conducting assessment, ask for assistance and collaboration from offices that can help with such endeavors (for example, an office of institutional effectiveness). These partnerships can often produce more robust data, especially since directors have limited access to student information. Directors should collect feedback from students as well, which can be easily done through post-consultation surveys. The information that is collected should be used to make data-driven and student-driven changes to the center in order to stay current and meet the ever-changing demands the institution faces. These efforts and changes should be shared with leadership.

### *Best Practice #10: Encouraging Equitable Technology*

As the feedback from center stakeholders shows, equitable use of technology and equitable provision of technology were important considerations during the pandemic. Center staff and directors would do well to provide hardware when appropriate and within the confines of the budget. In this particular case, even encouraging staff to use personal

devices, assuming a valid software, could be helpful. In many cases, providing Wi-Fi boosters, laptops, cell-phone stands, webcams, or headphones can provide staff with an equitable and manageable experience. While we may not be able to solve access issues for our students, we should strive to create an equitable experience for consultants when we can. Surveying staff to determine their needs while simultaneously establishing clear expectations and guidelines for software and hardware use can facilitate a positive remote working environment.

## **Conclusion**

Communication centers must remain an integral part of the campus landscape. To ensure our long-term validity and sustainability, centers must address the concerns mentioned above as well as issues and challenges that are still on the horizon. While not an exhaustive list, we believe the best practices mentioned here can help center staff and directors continue to move forward in a pandemic-ravaged workspace. Ironically, the move to remote operations may provide a wonderful opportunity for our centers to reach even more students through virtual engagements. However, the shift will not be without continued concerns.

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