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Oral Communication Skills: Are the Priorities of the Workplace and AACSB-Accredited Business Programs Aligned?

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Our purpose in this study was to assess the alignment of oral communication (OC) skills between the workplace and business schools. Drawing on theory related to communication interactivity, we differentiate three types of OC: presenting, listening, and conversing. In reviewing prior empirical research, we found that listening was the most important of these OC types in the workplace, followed by conversing and presenting, respectively. We review and analyze learning goals of U.S. undergraduate business programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. We found that 76% of the business programs had an oral presentation learning goal, 22%, a conversing goal, and 11%, a listening goal. Our research reveals a misalignment between the OC skills needed in the workplace compared to those emphasized in business curricula. We discuss potential reasons for the misalignment and offer suggestions for closing the gap.

From the perspective of recruiters or prospective employers, oral communication (OC) is either the most important competency or at least among them (Buckley, Peach, & Weitzel, 1989; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Kane, 1993; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002). Ample research shows that OC skills are critical for success as a manager (Hynes, 2012; Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991). Dozens of criterion-domain taxonomies, typologies, and competency models specific to managerial job performance have been developed over the past 60 years. Without exception, these models include OC skills (see summaries by Dierdorff, Rubin, & Morgeson, 2009; Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000). Within the human resource management (HRM) profession, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted surveys of students, human resource (HR) professionals, and senior HR professionals and all rated "interpersonal-communication skills" as the most valuable knowledge, skill, or ability for career success for both undergraduate (Kluttz & Cohen, 2003) and graduate (Dooney, Smith, & Williams, 2005) HR students.

Clearly, OC skills are important in the workplace. Given that OC is a broad, multidimensional construct, some facets of OC may be more important than others. Here, we put forth a definition of communication and differentiate it from other types of social or interpersonal skills. Next, we define OC

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and identify three predominant types: presenting, listening, and conversing. We then address three questions: What types of OC skills are valued by employers and needed for business graduates to succeed in employment? What types of OC skills do AACSB-accredited undergraduate U.S. business programs value? Are the types of OC skills that are valued in the workplace and in business schools aligned?

DEFINING COMMUNICATION AND OC

Little consensus exists regarding the definition of communication competence (Wilson & Sabee, 2003) or social skills (Spitzberg, 2003). *Interpersonal, social*, and *communication skills* are used interchangeably, and distinctions among them are not widely recognized (Segrin & Givertz, 2003). Indeed, nearly every action in the workplace—especially social or interpersonal interactions—involves some element of communication (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Roberts, O'Reilly, Bretton, and Porter (1974: 503) observed that organizational communication is often confounded with leadership, control, motivation, and so forth, and that the term "has been so often used in different ways, its efficiency for theoretical purposes is greatly reduced." Without adequate theories, the research cannot be effectively integrated. Almost 30 years later, Spitzberg (2003:117) echoed that "there still are no widely accepted theoretical models that specify what skills comprise the essential competencies of social interaction."

Although definitions of communication vary widely, information exchange is a common element in all of them (Roberts et al., 1974). Therefore, "*communication*" could be defined as the exchange of information between two or more parties (cf. Katz & Kahn, 1966). For the purposes of our research, broader social or interpersonal skills are excluded from our operational definition of communication, which is consistent with the management literature, in typically regarding social or interpersonal skills as separate constructs that warrant their own attention as workplace competencies and research constructs. In contrast to our definition, much of the communications literature (e.g., Greene & Burleson, 2003a; Hargie, 2006a; Hayes, 2002) includes social skills or social interaction skills (e.g., teamwork, group dynamics, leadership, interpersonal skills, helping behaviors, impression management, building relationships, motivating employees) in the same domain as communication skills. However, if the communication construct is to add value to theory, research, and practice in its own right, it must be distinguished from related constructs. Although most social or interpersonal skills necessarily rely on communication, their construct domains expand beyond it, extending into broader forms of interpersonal interaction.

OC can be differentiated from other forms of communication (cf. Dickson, 2006; Hargie, 2006b). Communication includes both nonlinguistic and linguistic forms. Nonlinguistic communication is the body language that is used including *tacesics* (body contact), *proxemics* (utilization of space, personal space), and *kinesics* (gestures, body movement, body posture, facial expressions; Hargie, 2006b). Linguistic communication is the use of the voice, speech, or words. Both oral and written forms of communication are considered linguistic. We define "*oral communication*" as linguistic communication that exchanges information vocally and aurally.

OC Types: Presenting, Listening, and Conversing

We develop a model of OC by drawing on established communication theory. Figure 1 shows its three types, which vary along a communication interactivity continuum. At one end of the

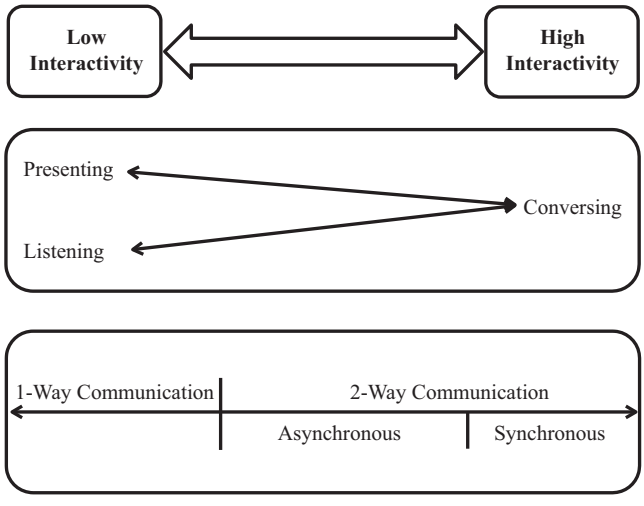

FIGURE 1

Oral Communication Interactivity and Types. *Note.* The figure depicts the relationships among our three oral communication types (presenting, listening, and conversing), and maps them to the one-way to two-way continuum and the asynchronous-to-synchronous continuum (Barry & Fulmer, 2004). The asynchronous-to-synchronous continuum is nested within two-way communication.

continuum, OC is one-way and is comprised of one party "presenting" and the other, "listening." The predominant form of one-way OC in the workplace would be presenting or public speaking.[1] Listening would include active listening, as well as understanding and following instructions. At the other end of the interactivity continuum, communication is synchronous, that is, live, simultaneous two-way communication (Barry & Fulmer, 2004). We refer to synchronous OC as "conversing" to distinguish it from other types of synchronous communication (e.g., nonlinguistic, written, or electronic). In the context of the workplace, conversing might include behaviors such as explaining, describing, informing, advising, influencing, persuading, managing or resolving conflict, or negotiating.

We derived our model by synthesizing existing communication theory. Centuries ago, Aristotle identified three key ingredients of communication, or rhetoric: the speaker, the speech, and the listener (Berlo, 1960). Contemporary communication models still build upon these ingredients. Many contemporary communication models also trace back to Shannon and Weaver's (1949) mathematical theory of communication, which was developed in the engineering field and applied to electronic communication of that era. This model has been subsequently adapted to interpersonal communication (e.g., Barnlund, 1970/2008; Berlo, 1960; Hargie, 2006b; Stead, 1972). The mathematical theory of communication and Berlo's (1960) source–message–channel–receiver model depict communication as a linear process in which a source encodes a message and transmits it by way of a communication channel or medium to a receiver, who decodes the message. The sender–receiver blueprint of these models is a mainstay in communication theory and research spanning across multiple disciplines, including organizational behavior.

The sender–receiver models imply that communication is one-way and is comprised of two broad activities: sending messages (i.e., constructing and sending a message) and receiving messages (i.e., receiving the message, perceiving its meaning, and interpreting the message). Hence, when the communique is oral, the sender–receiver models provide the basis for *presenting* (the act of sending a message vocally) and *listening* (the act of receiving a message aurally) OC types, and highlight the importance of these two OC skills. In support, Berlo's (1960) model depicts five communication skills that he argued would result in more accurate communication; the two skills that pertain exclusively to OC are speaking and listening.

Likewise, Fleishman's taxonomy of human abilities (Fleishman, Quaintance, & Broedling, 1984) contains two verbal cognitive abilities that are nearly identical to Berlo's two skills: *oral expression* (defined as the ability to communicate information and ideas in speaking so others will understand) and *oral comprehension* (defined as the ability to listen to and understand information and ideas presented through spoken words and sentences). It is likely that these two constructs are widely used by HR practitioners because the abilities that are contained in the Occupational Information Network Consortium (O*NET; n.d.) are from Fleishman's taxonomy. Furthermore, O*NET also includes two nearly identical basic skills: *speaking* (defined as talking to others to convey information effectively) and *active listening* (defined as giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times). Thus, presenting and listening are two well-established OC constructs that have a long history in the research literature (e.g., see Shelby's 1986 summary of the roles of the sender and receiver in the communication process from the perspective of several major theories) and are widely used in practice.

Although linear models of communication serve to highlight the importance of the sender and receiver, communication is often an interactive process, so these models do not adequately represent many forms of communication. Berlo (1960) modeled communication in a linear fashion, but he recognized that communication is a dynamic and interactive process. The source might become a receiver, and the receiver might become a source, and feedback can improve communication effectiveness. Communication models developed subsequent to Berlo's model (e.g., Barnlund, 1970/2008; Hargie, 2006b; Stead, 1972) depict communication as an interactive process and, when the communique is oral, serve as the basis for the conversing type of OC. Interactive, or two-way, communication is akin to Leavitt and Mueller's (1951) transmission of

[1] Dance (1987) explains how presenting and public speaking may have situational differences, but in terms of the behaviors required of the presenter, there are no discernible differences. One difference is that the presentation is slightly more interactive than the public speech. Presentations are more common in the business setting.

information with feedback, which they adapted from information and learning theories. One-way communication, in contrast, does not involve feedback. Strict, one-way communication begins with the sender and terminates with the receiver.

The distinction between presenting and listening versus conversing becomes blurred as interactivity moves toward the middle of the continuum. With asynchronous communication there is a delay between the receiving of a message and sending of a return message; the acts of receiving and sending are separated in time (Barry & Fulmer, 2004). Although asynchronous communication is two-way communication, the difference between presenting and listening—as separate skills—is more pronounced than it is with conversing, but less so than it is with one-way communication. The distinctions among the three OC types are also complicated by the fact that these constructs are hierarchical: conversing requires both presenting and listening. Nevertheless, the three constructs have traditionally been regarded as separate concepts in management and HRM research. The differences are also corroborated in established competency taxonomies. Tett et al.'s (2000) taxonomy of managerial competence includes OC, public presentation, and listening competencies. Similarly, O*NET (n.d.) includes social skills, speaking, and active listening competencies.

IMPORTANCE OF OC TYPES IN THE WORKPLACE

Subscribing to the communication competence perspective (e.g., Wilson & Sabee, 2003), presenting, listening, and conversing can be regarded as skills that can be developed; the more developed the skills, the greater the capability to communicate effectively. Identifying the relative value of these skills is critical for prioritizing education and training and for increasing our understanding of communication competence and its relationship to overall job performance.

Theoretical Basis for Importance of OC Types

Prior research suggests that listening might be the most important of the three types of OC in the workplace. Berlo (1960: 52) emphasized that "if we limit our discussion to effective communication, the *receiver is the most important link in the communication process*…When we speak, it is the listener who is important." Similarly, King (2010: 70) argued that a key problem with the use of rhetoric is "a lack of focus on listening." Active listening and understanding others and their points of view are critical for effective two-way communication. For example, Shelby's (1988, 1991) macrotheory of management proposes that communication success depends on strategic choices that the sender makes, based on the sender's perceptions of the receiver's needs, goals, and probable response. Also related, viewing communication as a social-cognitive process, Hale, O'Keefe, and colleagues drew on personal construct theory to show that communication competence is impacted by one's capacity to assume another's point of view (Hale, 1980; Hale & Delia, 1976; O'Keefe & Delia, 1979; O'Keefe & Sypher, 1981). Their results suggest that the active listening skill is critical for successful communication and, in turn, job performance.

Conversing is also crucial in the workplace, because it is the method of choice when the oral message is important or complex. The communication medium richness model (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Lengel & Daft, 1988) presents a hierarchy of media richness depicting various levels of one-way and two-way communication. The richest medium is face-to-face communication, which "allows rapid mutual feedback. A message can be adjusted, clarified, and reinterpreted instantly" (Daft et al., 1987: 358–359). The least rich media include fliers and bulletins, which are forms of one-way communication. Drawing on the medium richness model, Barry and Fulmer's (2004) theory of media adaptation proposed that richer channels signal the message is more important and should be used to gain commitment or reduce resistance. The medium richness and media adaptation models propose that less rich channels are more appropriate and efficient for routine communication but may be less accurate; whereas richer mediums are more effective for conveying complex messages (Barry & Fulmer, 2004; Daft et al., 1987; Lengel & Daft, 1988).

Empirical Evidence of Relative Importance of OC Types

We conducted a literature review of empirical research that compared the relative importance of the three types of OC (i.e., presenting, listening, and conversing) for successful employment. We sought studies that must meet the following criteria: (1) Are quantitative empirical research; (2) are conducted with workplace samples (i.e., using employees as participants); and (3) compare all three types of OC

(i.e., presenting, listening, and conversing). After a thorough search,[2] we found no shortage of research with respect to communication and an abundance of research touting the value of OC, as well as the value of different types of OC skills. For example, extensive narrative reviews of research have focused on communication competencies, such as explaining, arguing, persuasion, conflict management, negotiating, listening, and nonverbal communication (see recent communication handbooks edited by Greene and Burleson, 2003a, and Hargie, 2006a). However, we found only four research articles that met all three of our criteria.

Table 1 summarizes the results of our literature review and displays the relative importance of the types of OC skills as reported in the original studies.[3] Respondents in the original research studies were asked to rate various skills with respect to their importance to successful job performance. We derived the ranks that are shown in Table 1 based on the mean importance ratings that were reported by the researchers. Some of the research studies summarized in Table 1 compared only communications skills (including skills beyond OC, such as written communication), and some compared a wider variety of skills in addition to communication skills. Therefore, many ranks from the original sources are not presented in the table.

To ensure that we accurately classified the variables from the original studies into our three OC types, we independently reviewed each of the variables included in the original studies and linked them to one of four categories: presenting, listening, conversing, or other/not applicable. Note that the conversing construct is broader than presenting and listening; as a result, it is comprised of many subcategories. Any discrepancies in linkages were resolved by the independent judgment of a third rater. Intercoder agreement was determined based on the independent ratings of the first two raters using percent agreement and Cohen's kappa. The percent agreement was .89, which is sufficient, according to qualitative research standards (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Cohen's kappa was .83 ($p < .001$), demonstrating sufficient intercoder agreement (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Sun, 2011).

The results depicted in Table 1 clearly show that presenting is the least important of the three OC skills. It was ranked as the least important in six of the seven workforce samples. The results suggest that listening is the most important. It was ranked as such in three of the seven workforce samples, tied as most important in one sample, and second most important OC skill in the remaining three samples. Even though one conversing skill (of the many) was rated as more important than listening skills in three of the samples, the relative importance of the majority of the conversing skills in all samples reported in Table 1 fell between listening skills and presenting skills.

IMPORTANCE OF OC TYPES IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Ideally, the relative importance placed on the OC skill types in business programs should match that of the workplace, and some empirical evidence supports this (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Dooney et al., 2005; Glassman & Farley, 1979; Kluttz & Cohen, 2003), but the preponderance of evidence suggests that presenting may actually be regarded as the most important OC skill in business schools. Research has shown that academics place higher value on oral presentation skills than do business professionals (Kluttz & Cohen, 2003). When comparing business communications courses taught by instructors from business disciplines versus from communication disciplines, Laster and Russ (2010) found that communications instructors ranked listening and various conversing skills (giving and receiving feedback, leading meetings, and participating in meetings) the highest; whereas business instructors provided more moderate rankings to

[2] We used electronic databases (e.g., ABI/Inform, EBSCO, Google Scholar) to search for research pertaining to OC and its types. We also perused two handbooks pertaining to communication skills (Greene & Burleson, 2003a; Hargie, 2006a) to identify relevant research. We manually reviewed the table of contents of eight journals for the years 1998–2012. Four of the journals (*Journal of Business Communication, Journal of Business and Technical Communication, Management Communication Quarterly*, and *Business Communication Quarterly*) were chosen because members of the Association for Business Communication regarded them as the highest quality and most read business or management communication research journals (Rogers, Campbell, Louhiala-Salminen, Rentz, & Suchan, 2007). Three of the journals (*Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*) were chosen because members of the Association for Business Communication included them among communication journals in their top-six journals for career-enhancing publications (Martin, Davis, & Krapels, 2012). Finally, given our research focus on business or management education, we also manually searched the *Academy of Management Learning and Education*'s table of contents.

[3] Table 1 depicts seven samples because one of the research articles (i.e., Di Salvo & Larsen, 1987) included four separate samples.

TABLE 1
Relative Importance of Oral Communication Skill Types in the Workplace

		Listening			Conversing						Presenting
Source	Respondent occupation		*Communicating with others*	*Conversation*	*Explain / describe*	*Discuss*	*Inform/ advise*	*Giving feedback*	*Persuasion*	*Managing conflict*	*Negotiating*	
Conrad & Newberry[a]	Manager	2				16		13	16	2	16	21
Maes et al.[b]	Manager	2	5	3				4		9	10	7
Di Salvo & Larsen[c]	Manager	3	5			4	9,12	2	7	10	6	17
Gray[d]	Accountancy	1,2	5	25	6,9,13	8	19	11	22			24,26,27
Di Salvo & Larsen[c]	Finance	2	5			4	7,14	3	6	11	8	16
Di Salvo & Larsen[c]	Engineering	3	2			5	6,12	4	7	13	8	16
Di Salvo & Larsen[c]	Legal	3	4			6	2,13	5	7	9	8	16

Note. Respondents rated skills based on their importance to successful job performance. Lower rank values represent more important skills. Ranks that are not reported in the table were for skills that were not related to oral communication. Some cells have more than one rank because the researchers included more than one skill that was related to the oral communication type.

[a] Conrad & Newberry (2011) had respondents rate 24 skills. There were two skills tied at rank 2 and three skills tied at rank 16.

[b] Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle (1997) had respondents rate 13 skills.

[c] Di Salvo & Larsen (1987) had respondents rate 17 skills.

[d] Gray (2010) had respondents rate 27 skills.

these areas. In surveys of business-communication instructors, respondents rated the oral presentation higher than all other OC topics as far as the importance of, and course time allotted to, the topic (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999), and three of the top four most-covered OC topics in business communication courses pertained to public speaking (Russ, 2009). Students enrolled in business communication courses indicated that the course had the biggest impact on their ability to dress professionally for oral presentations; it had the least impact on participating actively in class discussions and communicating well during face-to-face interviews (Zhao & Alexandar, 2004).

The premium placed on the presentation is not specific to business communication courses. In fact, oral presentations were included in 35–38% of business school courses at AACSB-accredited programs and 45% of business school courses at non-AACSB-accredited programs (Yunker, 1998). Deans of AACSB-accredited business schools rated "effectively delivers an oral presentation" as the most important OC competency for new business majors (English, Manton, & Walker, 2007). Likewise, business department chairs rated "making oral presentations" the most important OC topic (Wardrope, 2002). Maes et al. (1997) questioned why the oral presentation is emphasized so heavily in the typical college business curriculum when it plays such a minor role in the recruitment process and is insignificant for newcomers in organizations. They concluded that business-meeting skills and conflict resolution are two OC competencies that are overlooked in the typical college business curriculum.

To better understand the relative value that business programs place on the three OC types, we investigated the learning goals of undergraduate AACSB-accredited business schools. We chose to focus on learning goals because they explicate a business school's mission and programmatic curricular priorities, as well as the competencies they deem important for all of their graduates to possess. More specifically, AACSB's *Standards*[4] (2012: 60) state that "the learning goals describe the desired educational accomplishments of the degree programs. The learning goals translate the more general statement of the mission into the educational accomplishments of graduates." Milton Blood, when he was the managing director of the AACSB, emphasized the importance of learning goals, saying that they are "a way of focusing on the competencies you want students to have as graduates of the program, and [give] the schools a way to say to both prospective students and to potential employers of graduates of that program. 'Here are the knowledge and skills that will be instilled in the graduates of that program'" (cited in Thompson, 2004: 437).

Learning goals that are established for the purpose of AACSB accreditation are the first step in the assurance of learning process and establish programmatic curricular priorities. The goals are then implemented by way of programmatic learning activities within or outside of the classroom, and goal progress or attainment is ultimately measured by way of programmatic assessment. Learning goals are not all-encompassing curricular goals, nor are they necessarily course-specific learning goals. Indeed, professors, courses, departments, and business programs attempt to develop many more competencies beyond those included in their program's learning goals, and professors may develop course learning goals and objectives that are more specific than their program's learning goals. Rather, per the guidelines of the AACSB's *Standards*, learning goals formally articulate and advertise the 4–10 competencies that a business program regards as most important and intends to instill in all of their students.

Methods

We content-analyzed undergraduate learning goals provided by a sample of AACSB-accredited U.S. business programs to determine which goals appear most frequently. Our analysis will determine the priority that communication skills in general, and more specific types of OC (i.e., presenting, listening, and conversing), are given in business schools. We assume, in accordance with the AACSB's *Standards* that having a learning goal that includes skill development in any of these areas means that the school is placing value and priority on developing these skills in its students.

Sample

We searched for learning goals on the websites of U.S. undergraduate business programs that appeared on AACSB's accreditation list. Searches of schools' websites yielded 116 sets of learning goals. If we could not find the learning goals on the website, we contacted each school's dean by e-mail

[4] AACSB's *Standards* refer to the "Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation" (AACSB International, revised January 31, 2012).

and requested that they send us their learning goals. E-mail correspondence from deans, or representatives of the deans, yielded another 91 sets of learning goals. In total, we obtained the learning goals of 207 of the 465 AACSB-accredited U.S. undergraduate business programs, which translate into a participation rate of 45%.

If a school listed an OC goal or a more general communication goal but provided no further explanation or details as to the type of (oral) communication, we sent an e-mail to the dean requesting additional information on what "oral communication" or "communication" means to the business school, and we also asked for any additional objectives and learning outcomes that are associated with these ambiguous goals. Supplemental documentation (e.g., learning goals, subgoals, learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, and course syllabi) was provided by 60 schools.

Learning Goal Content Analysis

Learning goals were coded in accordance with the six classes of goals shown in Figure 2. For example, if the goal was related to oral presentations or public speeches, it was coded as *presenting*. If the goal was related to listening or active listening, it was coded as *listening*. To be consistent with theory and the empirical research summarized in Table 1, conversing was a broader category that included a greater variety of subcategories (e.g., conversation, explain or describe, discuss, inform, giving feedback, advocacy, persuasion, influencing, managing or resolving conflict, negotiation, etc.); goals related to any of these subcategories were coded as *conversing*.

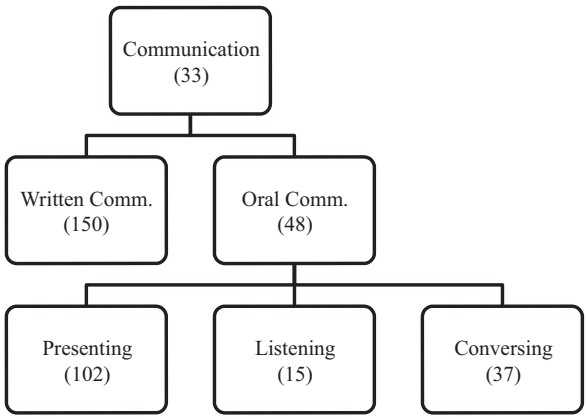

FIGURE 2

Hierarchical Communication Constructs and Their Prevalence in Business School Learning Goals. *Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times a learning goal in this category appeared in the entire sample of 207 schools. Numbers do not sum to 207 because a school could have learning goals coded into more than one category within and across the hierarchical levels.

Our first preference was to code learning goals according to the three aforementioned OC types. Goals were only coded into these categories if they were worded specifically enough to clearly determine that they fit. Sometimes OC learning goals were worded more generally and were not sufficiently specific to code them into one of these three types. In these instances, the goal was coded using a fourth, more general OC category as applicable. Furthermore, in some instances programs had a general or vague communication learning goal and provided no further information as to the type of communication; goals of this nature were coded using the fifth communication category as applicable. Finally, given that we were reviewing and coding communication and OC goals, we decided also to identify the prevalence of written communication learning goals to provide a more complete record of communication goals, so written communication was a sixth category. Figure 2 shows the three hierarchical levels of the six classes of learning goals.

Two raters independently coded all business programs' learning goals. For all six learning goal categories, a coding of "1" was assigned if the goal was present in the program's set of learning goals; a coding of "0" was assigned if the goal was not present. Any discrepancy between the two raters was resolved by a third rater. Intercoder agreement was determined based on the independent ratings of the first two raters using percent agreement and Cohen's kappa. The percent agreement for the six learning goal categories ranged from .88–.98, all of which are sufficient according to qualitative research standards (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Cohen's kappa for the six learning goal categories ranged from .68–.86 (all were statistically significant, $p < .001$), demonstrating sufficient intercoder agreement (Lombard et al., 2002; Sun, 2011).

Additional Variables

We included Bloomberg's *BusinessWeek* (2010) rankings of top undergraduate business schools and the Carnegie classification (Carnegie Foundation, 2010) in our analyses to determine if either of these variables might be associated with differences in the inclusion or exclusion of types of communication skills in the learning goals. For *BusinessWeek* rankings, we coded each school as ranked ($n = 51$) or unranked ($n = 156$). For Carnegie

classification, we grouped each institution into one of two categories: research (n = 79) and teaching (n = 122).[5] The research category was comprised of Doctoral/Research Universities—Extensive (n = 45) and Doctoral/Research Universities—Intensive (n = 34) schools. The teaching category was comprised of Baccalaureate Colleges—General (n = 3), Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts (n = 6), Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges (n = 1), Master's Colleges and Universities I (n = 104), and Master's Colleges and Universities II (n = 8).

RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the number of learning goals falling into each of the six classes of learning goals. A business school could have more than one learning goal within or across the hierarchical levels.[6] Of the sample of 207 AACSB-accredited U.S. undergraduate business programs, 193 programs (93%) have at least one learning goal related to communication (i.e., any of the six classes of learning goals). A total of 150 programs (72%) have at least one learning goal related to written communication. A total of 156 programs (75%) have at least one learning goal related to OC (including the OC category and the three OC types). Assuming learning goals are an indicator of competencies valued by business schools, clearly OC and written communication skills are highly valued.

Next, we examined the emphasis placed on each OC type in business school learning goals. Our analysis excluded programs with goals that did not have sufficient specificity to determine if the goal fit one of the three types of OC skills (i.e., it excludes programs with goals only in the more general communication or OC categories, n = 72); therefore, the analysis included the subset of 135 programs that either had learning goals that were clearly related to any OC type (n = 116) or had no goals coded in the communication or OC categories (n = 19; 14 schools had no goal in any of the goal categories, and 5 schools had goals in only the written communication category). Figure 3 shows the

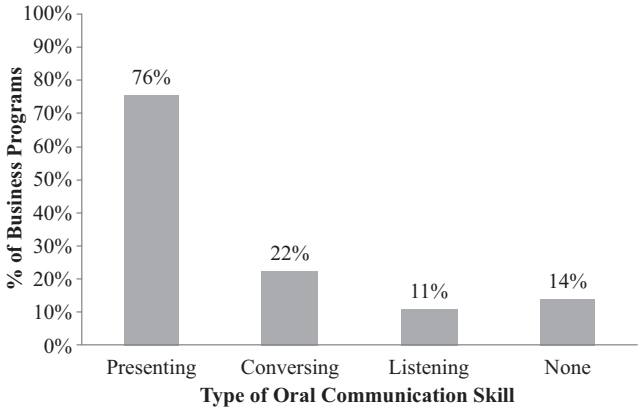

FIGURE 3

Prevalence of Oral Communication Skill Types in Business School Learning Goals. *Note*. Data included the subset of 135 schools with learning goals related to any of the three types of oral communication skills (n = 116) or no learning goal coded in the communication or oral communication categories (n = 19).

percentage of the programs in this sample subset with learning goals related to each of the three types of OC skills. Results show that 76% of schools have a learning goal related to presenting, 22% have goals related to conversing, and 11% have goals related to listening.[7] Even though conversing is a broader type of OC that includes several subcategories,[8] it is still far less prevalent in learning goals than the presenting skill. Assuming learning goals are indicative of what business programs value, the presenting skill is valued by business programs far more than conversing or listening skills. Although we are unable to evaluate the relative priority using tests of statistical significance, we believe the difference is obvious and meaningful. Figure 3 also shows that conversing is valued by business programs more than listening skills, but the difference is not as marked as compared to presenting skills.

Finally, we used the Pearson chi-square test of association to determine the relation between the *BusinessWeek* (2010) ranking (ranked vs. unranked)

[5] Six institutions that had other types of Carnegie classifications (e.g., "Other or Unknown" or "Specialized Institutions") were excluded from analyses that included the Carnegie classification variable.

[6] It is possible for a business program to have any combination of learning goals across the three hierarchical levels of goals (i.e., communication, OC, and the three types of OC). However, only nine programs have goals at more than one level. One school has a general communication goal and a goal related to one of the OC types. Eight schools have a general OC goal and at least one goal related to one of the OC types.

[7] Any program could have goals present in more than one of the three types of OC skills. Of the subset of 135 programs, 93 (69%) have a goal in a single type of OC skill; 15 (11%) have goals in two types of OC skills; and 8 (6%) have goals in all three types of OC skills.

[8] Business schools could have multiple goals in the conversing goal category, but most do not. Of the 30 schools that have at least one conversing goal, 5 of the schools have two goals related to conversing and only 1 school has three goals related to conversing.

and the presence or absence of each of the six communication learning goal categories as well as the relation between the Carnegie classification (research vs. teaching) and the presence or absence of each of the six communication learning goal categories. When examining the association between the *BusinessWeek* ranking and the communication, OC, and written communication learning goal categories, analyses were performed on the entire sample of 207 institutions. Analyses of the association between Carnegie classification and these three communication variables excluded six institutions that had "Other or Unknown" or "Specialized Institutions" Carnegie classifications. Analyses of the association between *BusinessWeek* rankings and the presenting, listening, and conversing OC types were performed on the subset of 135 programs. Analyses of the association between Carnegie classification and the OC types excluded five institutions that had "Other or Unknown" or "Specialized Institutions" Carnegie classifications. Results of the chi-square analyses are reported in Table 2. None of the chi-square tests were statistically significant, indicating that ranking and Carnegie classification are not associated with the presence of the different types of communication learning goals.

ARE THE PRIORITIES OF THE WORKPLACE AND AACSB-ACCREDITED BUSINESS PROGRAMS ALIGNED?

Research clearly indicates that OC skills are important. Likewise, undergraduate business programs, without a doubt, value the development of OC skills. Our examination of the learning goals of 207 undergraduate business programs showed that OC appears as a learning goal in 75% of the programs. This percentage is probably underestimated because 33 (or 16%) of the business programs in our sample have vague communication goals, which, with more information, could feasibly indicate an OC theme in their operational definitions. Therefore, at a more macro level, there appears to be alignment between the workplace and business schools with respect to valuing OC skills.

Given that OC is a multidimensional construct, we sought to determine if the workplace and AACSB-accredited business programs were emphasizing the same types of OC skills. When examining the relative value that is placed on the presenting, listening, and conversing types of OC, a gap emerged. The gap is summarized in Table 3. Based on importance ratings from empirical research, we found that the workplace most valued listening, followed by conversing and presenting, respectively. In contrast, based on the prevalence of learning goals, we found that business schools most valued presenting, followed by conversing and listening, respectively. Therefore, there is an inverse relationship between the specific types of OC skills that are important in the workplace and those that are emphasized in business school learning goals, reflecting misalignment. The OC skills that are less important in the workplace are more emphasized in business school learning goals.

Potential Reasons for Misalignment

Several plausible reasons exist for why the misalignment in OC priorities has occurred. We, as business professors have noticed a stronger emphasis placed on oral presentation skills in business

TABLE 2
Learning Goal Association With *BusinessWeek* Ranking and Carnegie Classification

	BusinessWeek ranking				Carnegie classification			
Learning goal category	χ^2	p	Φ	n	χ^2	p	Φ	n
Communication	.25	.62	-.03	207	1.99	.16	.10	201
Written communication	.14	.71	.03	207	.27	.60	-.04	201
Oral communication	2.14	.14	-.10	207	1.71	.19	.09	201
Oral communication type:								
Presenting	.18	.67	-.04	135	.65	.42	.07	130
Listening	.01	.95	-.01	135	1.13	.29	-.09	130
Conversing	.32	.57	-.05	135	.30	.58	.05	130

Note. Learning goals were coded as 0 (absent) or 1 (present). *BusinessWeek* ranking was coded as 0 (unranked) or 1 (ranked). Carnegie classification was coded as 1 (research) or 2 (teaching). $df = 1$ for all analyses.

TABLE 3
Rank Order of Oral Communication Types

Oral communication type	Importance in workplace[a]	Learning goal frequency[b]
Listening	1	3
Conversing	2	2
Presenting	3	1

[a] Rank order was derived from published empirical research studies summarized in Table 1.
[b] Rank order was determined based on our research results summarized in Figures 2 and 3.

schools, so the misalignment is not entirely surprising. Might the misalignment result, in part, from an egocentric bias? Perhaps academics infer that the presenting skill is the most important OC skill in the corporate workplace because they believe it is so important in the academic workplace. Yet, Innes (2006) advocates using less lecture and more dialogic communication in the classroom to enhance learning. Engaging students in more open, two-way, dialogic communication allows for greater student learning, and it more closely mirrors and better prepares students for the workplace.

Another explanation for the misalignment may reside in the popularity of the oral presentation pedagogy. Indeed, the oral presentation is a commonly used pedagogy (Yunker, 1998). It fits the empowered learning culture that today's students are wanting; it is relatively efficient especially when a group presentation is employed; and it is a convenient way to introduce pedagogical variety into a course. Because these reasons are valid, we find no fault in using oral presentations in business education. However, its status has been elevated to a learning goal at the expense of more important communication skills, which should not be the case.

The primacy placed on the presentation could be a vestige of the past. In describing the history of business communication in education, Krapels and Arnold (1996) reported that prior to World War II, business communication focused primarily on writing. After World War II, business communication expanded to include speech. Reinsch (1996) recounted that the Carnegie Corporation research project conducted by Pierson in 1959 criticized business education, and business communication in particular. The report expressed the importance of communication and called for more emphasis on public speaking. Therefore, public speaking was the first OC skill that was emphasized in business education. However, as early as 1983, Aronoff (as cited in Krapels & Arnold, 1996: 335–336) stated that "business communication educators must broaden their approach and understanding to include not just writing and/or speaking skills, but also the social and behavioral communication dimensions of management." Despite the growing emphasis on other types of OC, it seems that the oral presentation and public speaking are still the primary emphasis.

The misalignment might also stem from the absence of communication theory, a bona fide typology of workplace OC skills, or even a common definition of OC (Greene & Burleson, 2003b; Roberts et al., 1974; Segrin & Givertz, 2003; Spitzberg, 2003; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). DeKay (2012) concluded that verbal presentations might be overemphasized and interpersonal communication underemphasized in business communication curricula because interpersonal communication in the workplace is a "largely unexplored region," and is so because we do not have clear definitions of "soft," interpersonal, or communication skills or a clear understanding of their interrelationships. There is a need for a comprehensive typology that details different types of communication and OC skills, provides a hierarchy of complexity for these categories, and demonstrates appropriate convergent and discriminant validity with related constructs such as nonlinguistic, interpersonal, social, and soft skills. Roberts et al. (1974: 518) explained, "without a taxonomy of organizational communication, research will continue to be fragmented which, in turn, will make it difficult to develop any theoretical positions." We encourage more integration and collaboration across the communications and business disciplines to develop communication theory as well as more consistent operationalizations of communication, social, and interpersonal constructs. Given that OC is perhaps the most important competency in the workplace, it is surprising that it has received so little attention in management literature and journals (see Martin et al., 2012).

Another reason for the misalignment could lie with a school's misguided attempt to meet AACSB's *Standards*. Soft skills are difficult to teach and assess (Robles, 2012). In contrast, oral presentations are relatively simple to assess. Rubrics are common, allowing for easy measurement of the presentation; whereas assessing listening or conversing (e.g., persuading, resolving conflicts, negotiating) may be a more arduous and unfamiliar task. Kilpatrick, Dean, and Kilpatrick (2008) have

argued that business schools have abandoned difficult-to-measure learning goals and opted for easy-to-measure goals to meet AACSB's standards and maintain accreditation. Even the AACSB's *Standards* provide an example that uses the easily assessed oral presentation as the method of demonstrating achievement for a communications learning goal (see Example 2 on p. 67 of the AACSB's *Standards*). Perhaps the safest and easiest way to maintain accreditation is to adopt the learning goal and assurance of learning method explicitly described and implicitly endorsed by AACSB. We hope the rampant use of oral presentations in learning goals is not a result of business programs simply adopting the methodology described in AACSB's example. AACSB's *Standards* make clear that curriculum management should not be based on ease of measurement, but should be aligned with the program's mission and stakeholder needs.

Moving Toward Alignment

Curriculum management and redesign should include input from all stakeholders (*BizEd*, 2011), and external guidance from the business community, employers, recruiters, and graduates may provide valuable information about critical competencies for graduates. The AACSB's *Standards* (2012) state that "definition of the learning goals is a key element in how the school defines itself" (p. 61) and the "contents of the learning experiences provided by programs should be both current and relevant to needs of business and management positions" (p. 70). As such, it is important that business programs carefully choose the competencies that are included in their learning goals because they signal the program's priorities to internal and external stakeholders.

Any real or perceived gap in skills or curricula could be closed through a programmatic realignment of priorities through revised learning goals. The gap we identified indicates that business schools may not be meeting the needs of student or employer stakeholders. As further evidence, Reinsch and Shelby (1996, 1997) found that young business professionals' most challenging work-related incidents involved OC in a dyadic relationship. In terms of skill deficiencies, the skills perceived as being needed or desired the most were persuasiveness, explaining things clearly, and conflict management. Challenging incidents related to presentations was the least frequent context for communication challenges. Graduates perceive that they are least prepared with respect to listening and conversing skills; presenting skills are of less concern to graduates (Di Salvo & Larsen, 1987; Huegli & Tschirgi, 1974). Business-meeting skills and conflict resolution are two OC competencies that are overlooked in the typical college business curriculum (Maes et al., 1997). Hynes (2012) noted that the typical business communication course focuses on writing and formal speaking; she advocated for a course in interpersonal communication and interaction to prepare students for a career in business.

Aligning the OC skills currently emphasized in business programs' learning goals with the OC skills needed for success in the workplace appears to be not only justified, but sorely needed. Unless workers are in a formal sales or trainer role, they may rarely have the opportunity to present a well-planned proposal or deliver a presentation. The formal oral presentation may be too staid and contrived. Today's workforce faces uncertainty, quick changes, complexity, and ambiguity. Providing quick, unrehearsed, reasoned, and persuasive arguments in favor of solutions to new problems leads to career success. A highly rehearsed, organized, and planned persuasive presentation does little to mirror the cognitive complexity of the spontaneous, synchronous persuasion called for in the business environment. The late Steve Jobs held this perspective:

> One of the first things Jobs did during the product review process was ban PowerPoints. "I hate the way people use slide presentations instead of thinking," Jobs later recalled. "People would confront a problem by creating a presentation. I wanted them to engage, to hash things out at the table, rather than show a bunch of slides. People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint" (Isaacson, 2011: 337).

With the exceptions of the impromptu speech and the question-and-answer segment in the standard oral presentation, the presentation does not appear to develop the student's ability to "think on their feet." Indeed, we have observed numerous instances in the classroom where students deliver presentations with ease and then struggle to answer basic questions or have simple conversations about what they just presented.

We caution that our findings do not necessarily indicate that (business) communication professors, courses, or course activities neglect conversing and

listening skills. We know that faculty can and do develop the full spectrum of communication skills, and there are many well-established pedagogies that have been successfully used to enhance the type of OC skills that are more common and more important in the workplace. For example, Smart and Featheringham (2006) describe the fishbowl discussion technique for enhancing interpersonal communication, discussion, and conversation skills that are needed in the workplace. Krapels and Davis (2000: 107) conclude that "classroom activities could replicate training in business and industry," and they propose using simulations and role plays in the classroom. Another useful pedagogy is the case method; the *Business Communication Quarterly* journal has had two issues that focused on the use of cases in business communication (see Dyrud & Worley, 1999; Rogers & Rymer, 1998). Costigan and Donahue (2009) advocated the use of the leaderless group discussion pedagogy to introduce informal debate into business education.

Given that a variety of OC pedagogies are already available, we suspect that the most fruitful avenue for moving toward alignment would be to advance the programmatic assessment of conversing and listening skills. AACSB's *Standards* provide little guidance with respect to conversing and listening learning goals and assessments, and most business faculty are probably less familiar with the assessment of these skills. Nevertheless, assessment of these skills and pedagogies could be easily implemented by way of measurement methodologies that mirror those used in the workplace, such as behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS). BARS have a well-established history with respect to employment selection, training and development evaluation, and performance appraisal purposes (e.g., see Campbell, Dunnette, Arvey, & Hellervik, 1973; Guion, 1998; Smith & Kendall, 1963). Indeed, BARS are used to assess a variety of communication skills in assessment center exercises, such as oral presentations, role-play exercises, and leaderless group discussions. These assessment center exercises resemble the aforementioned pedagogies available for use in the classroom, and they have been successfully implemented in the academic environment. Some AACSB-accredited business programs use the assessment center methodology for the assessment of nearly all of their learning goals. In fact, Waldman and Korbar (2004) found that students' individual performance in a small leaderless problem-solving group exercise was the best predictor of the student's promotion rate (after graduation) and their future salary.

Developing and implementing BARS rubrics for conversing and listening skills does not have to be an arduous task (see Ohland, Loughry, & Woehr, 2012 for a detailed description of how to develop a BARS for assurance of learning purposes). First, subject matter experts (e.g., individuals with expertise in the course content, business communication, or HR) develop critical incidents, which are example behaviors of effective and ineffective (or high, moderate, and low) performance with respect to the exercise being assessed. Students participating in the exercise are then rated based on how their behaviors match up to the example behaviors provided. A BARS not only allows for accurate assessment—it is also instructive for students. For example, the BARS can be used as a teaching tool to help students understand what is effective versus ineffective behavior before they engage in the exercise. In addition, after completing the exercise the students can be provided with rich feedback related to the effectiveness of their behaviors. Once developed, BARS can be implemented for assessing conversing and listening skills in the same manner as the oral presentation rubrics that have traditionally been used.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our business school sample is made up of 45% of U.S. AACSB-accredited undergraduate programs. Whether our results generalize to the learning goals of the other 55% of accredited undergraduate programs or graduate, international, or non-AACSB accredited programs not in our sample is uncertain. Although generalizability is a concern, it is worth noting that our sample has a good balance between ranked (25%) and unranked (75%) schools as well as research (39%) and teaching (61%) schools. In addition, research by *The Council for Industry and Higher Education* has shown that OC is the most important competency to employers in the U.K. (Archer & Davison, 2008). Other research has shown that interpersonal or conversing communication skills are the most important type of OC skill in Singapore, the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (Goby, 2007), and Jordan (Freihat & Al-Machzoomi, 2012). Therefore, it is likely that the gap is quite similar internationally.

We caution that even though our sample is comprised of AACSB-accredited business programs, our results should not be interpreted or misconstrued as an indictment of the AACSB or as being limited to the schools accredited by the AACSB. We suspect

that the misalignment is just as pronounced in other business programs. In fact, given that oral presentations are required in a greater percentage of courses in non-AACSB-accredited schools (Yunker, 1998), we suspect that there might be a greater misalignment in the non-AACSB-accredited schools.

The research summarized in Table 1 is limited in that nearly all studies used a sample from a small geographical region or a single occupation. Furthermore, we know little about the extent to which OC research findings apply to younger generations and newer communication technologies. The Millennial generation is stereotyped as being more technology connected than interpersonally connected (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). The extent to which mobile technologies and social media are altering OC in the workplace is unclear. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010: 232) questioned whether these technologies are the "best media for developing and maintaining workplace relationships (compared with face-to-face interactions with coworkers and customers)." Future research might focus specifically on Millennials and newer communication technologies to better gauge any changes regarding the importance of OC and its effectiveness across worker generations.

Much of the OC literature reported here is based on respondent perceptions of the utility of different OC skills for job performance rather than empirical associations with job performance. In fairness, there has been no strong empirical study that has definitively ruled against the effectiveness of oral presentation skills for predicting job success. Although there is no reason to believe that incumbents and managers are oblivious to which skills are important in the workforce, empirical relationships with performance would bolster their claims. More research linking communication quality to business-related outcomes is needed (Shelby, 1998). A similar limitation is that workplace and business school priorities were determined at an ordinal (or rank order) level; the exact magnitude of the gap is unknown.

Another possible limitation is that our analysis of alignment compares different levels of analysis. Data regarding workforce values reported in Table 1 were gathered by way of surveys at the individual level; whereas data regarding business school values were gathered at the program level. Although this may be a confound, we suspect it has no impact on our findings. Our literature review showed consistent results across several different workforce samples with respect to relative importance. Our analysis of learning goals examined goals at the school level, but prior research has found that individuals at all levels within the business school place the highest value on the presentation including deans (English et al., 2007), chairs (Wardrope, 2002), and instructors of the business communications course (Russ, 2009; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). The premium placed on the presentation in business schools is consistent at all levels. We did not, however, identify whether programmatic priorities and values are consistent with programmatic actions, nor did we investigate what actually goes on in the classroom. A closer examination of the implementation (i.e., learning activities) and evaluation (i.e., assessment measures) of the different types of OC skills is an important topic for future research.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The OC learning goals for our sample of AACSB-accredited business programs are out of sync with the OC competencies needed in the workplace. This gap is particularly noteworthy, because it exists in the learning goals that symbolize what competencies business programs value the most, and drive schools' curricula and program assessment. This is not a trivial gap given that our review of the literature suggests OC to be among the most important competencies for success in the workplace. Furthermore, there is evidence that communication is the most frequently used learning goal among AACSB-accredited undergraduate business programs (Brink, Palmer, & Costigan, 2014)—the most frequently used goal is off target. Although we have offered plausible explanations for this misalignment, business school deans and faculty ultimately bear the responsibility for any faulty OC learning goals. With detection of this gap, there is hope that business schools will, in the future, take greater care to insure that each and every learning goal is properly aligned with the interests of their stakeholders. In sum, we see the value of learning goals related to listening and conversing skills; but more important, we believe that any new OC goal should be evidence-based and then be fitted to the business program's mission and stakeholder needs.

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