

Top Schools, Different Tactics: A Comparison of Business Communication Assignments

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Abstract

Building upon previous audits, this 2017 audit examines and compares assignment requirements and weights in business communication course syllabi, and the study focuses on the Bloomberg top ranked business schools. The purpose was to explore expectations, course content, and common assignments. Current results allow a comparison of data from 23 different universities' business communication course syllabi. This paper reviews the literature, addresses assumptions about course content, and explores the ways that the data met or complicated the assumptions. We discovered deep divides in how different institutions and business schools incorporate writing and presentation. When a single three-hour business communication course is required, instructors typically include both writing and public speaking assignments. However, some schools require a course for each topic, or drop one topic. We found a shift away from requiring emails and resumes. Obvious disagreement exists about what assignments should form the core of a business communication course.

Introduction

As instructors work to ensure consistent and rigorous standards, some may wonder how their course design, textbook selection, and assignment requirements compare to what other universities and colleges do presently. Understanding how other professors and schools manage goals, assessment, assignments, and content can all help to refine teaching goals and program aims. Previous business communication course and syllabus audits have provided information on course offerings, course format, and course delivery methods among many other topics.

This study follows in the tradition of published research on and audits of business communication practices, course design, and instructors. However, those comparisons of assignments and expectations often depended upon surveyed rather than a more comprehensive focus on the types of institutions and what appears in syllabi. One reason for this is that business communication is approached and housed very differently within various institutions and the schools within those institutions. Publicly available materials, like a syllabus and course catalog description, in combination with syllabi solicited from instructors can provide a more precise way to address course expectations and assignments in practice rather than theory or by instructor perception. Further, this audit's use of syllabi analysis builds upon existing business communication audits. The results in this article include 23 syllabi, for both public and private institutions, from the top 31 schools as ranked by *Bloomberg Businessweek*. These materials are assessed for commonalities in terms of assignments and grade percentage weights ascribed to written documents and presentations, and to determine trends in course organization, emphasis, and structure based on the syllabi and calendars when available. This study aimed to ask how courses were organized,

what assignments were included, what foci the course selections and design imply, and how this information can start to determine shifts in the field and possible differences between survey responses and syllabus analysis. This study found fewer required traditional written assignments than previous surveys have implied and little consensus on required texts; further, job documents such as the resume are rarely required and reflect a potential alteration in standard business communication curriculum.

Previous Surveys and Audits

Previous audits of business communication courses have found slight shifts in content covered, the school within which the courses were offered, and the types of assignments required of students. As Russ (2009) points out, a number of audits have been done on the business communication course.¹ In the past thirty years, four significant audits have been published. The two most recent overall audits are by Russ (2009) and Moshiri and Cardon (2014), and there are two additional audits similar in method by Knight (1999) and Sharp and Brumberger (2013).

Audits have provided guidance and tracked course trends since the early 1980s. Ober and Wunsch (1983) began the audits to assess "course offerings, course content, enrollments, and the like" to determine "trends in business communication instruction" (p. 5). Nixon and West (1993) focused on international topics and found about two-thirds of respondents from Schools of Business Administration included at least one international assignment. Based on mailed surveys, Ober and Wunsch (1995) found consistency in the content of courses in the early 1990s.

Two audits from the 1990s demonstrated an end to the consistency; a focus on writing skills became increasingly primary. Wardrobe and Bayless (1999) had Association for Business Communication members rank business communication concepts. They pointed out the shift from earlier placement of business communication courses, which were now generally located in business schools, and they found that instructors prioritized writing skills. Because of technological changes, courses now include required assignments like email or course topics like social media usage. Using the top 50 undergraduate business schools as ranked by *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Knight (1999) surveyed 52 highly ranked undergraduate business schools using web site data and follow-up email verification to determine lower and upper-level core curriculum writing and oral communication requirements in order to determine business school priorities. She determined that both are valued, with writing emphasized most heavily; 100 percent had lower-division writing requirements and 72 percent had upper-division writing requirements, with 50% offer upper-division business communication courses.

More recent audits have focused directly on the required assignments. The Russ (2009) study does so and analyzes the institutional or instructor level of the courses. To perform the audit, he surveyed 505 instructors at 321 U.S. colleges about program and course design, including class size and delivery methods. He also investigates at what level and how courses are taught. He notes that his analysis did not focus on the academic discipline within which the business communication course was delivered. Russ notes that audits up until this one did not consider required assignments. On course design, he finds most instructors emphasize written documents, which include the resume for about 70 percent of instructors. He finds most students take a face-to-face course in the business school as juniors. He also explains that instructors report requiring reports, letters, memos, group presentations, and individual

¹ He lists: "David, 1982; Glassman & Farley, 1979; Nelson, Luse, & DuFrene, 1992; Nixon & West, 1993; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995; Persing, Drew, Bachman, Eaton, & Galbraith, 1976; Wardrobe & Bayless, 1999." This paper includes Ober; Nixon and West, and Wardrobe and Bayless.

presentations, based on the top five ranked assignments by percentage. He notes the advantage of later studies analyzing required assignments in order to enable longitudinal analyses (Russ, p. 410).

Further analysis of course descriptions expands the understanding of course focuses as seen in Sharp and Brumberger (2013). Their article was based on a 2011 presentation and did note the opportunity of looking at syllabi for further information. They examine the top 50 schools in the 2011 *Bloomberg Businessweek* rankings. They focus on what has been presented on university Web sites such as the collection of course descriptions. Sharp and Brumberger present findings on “course sponsor, course level, requirements and electives, programs and course sequences, and course content” (p. 10). In short, they found that most students took a required course independent of any larger communication sequence as an upper level student in a business school. Their brief analysis of keywords in course descriptions found that most courses include common topics “in addition to written and oral communication”: “job-seeking skills, teamwork, technology, intercultural communication, ethics, visual communication, service learning, and interpersonal communication” (Sharp and Brumberger, 2013, p. 21). They conclude in suggesting the need for business communication to take a more central role in the curriculum.

Finally, the most recent significant published audit finds an increase in the number of assignments and the emphasis on some types of communication studies. The Moshri and Cardon (2014) audit is particularly useful and up-to-date on the placement of courses and the information about instructors. Moshiri and Cardon surveyed 169 instructors, and asked about class size, delivery, assignment types, and topics. They note an increased focus on interpersonal communication in comparison to the findings of the Russ study. For written assignments, Moshiri and Cardon find the majority of instructors require persuasive messages, routine or positive messages, cover letters and/or resume, bad news or negative messages, and business proposals. Further, proposal and grant writing, crisis management, and public relations are rarely covered in class; social media and international communication are covered “some” but rarely assessed unless through a quiz or test.

This study builds upon this strong history of course and syllabus audits; the continued focus on what has been and continues to be included in business communication courses demonstrates the commitment of instructors to pedagogical excellence and institutional progress. Traditionally, a new audit has been done every four years, and this present study comes almost at the four-year mark.

Method and Innovations

This study’s method and focus differs from previous audits in one significant way: the collection and analysis of course syllabi. Focusing on the top-ranked undergraduate business schools narrows the selection criteria to programs that have been publicly recognized as successful based on employer survey, student survey, starting salary, and internship (Levy & Rodkin, 2016). Further, this study does not consider in detail instructor education or employment status or course sponsors. Surveys can collect that information more efficiently. Data about course levels, whether the course was required, and whether the course appears in a sequence or independent of other communication courses was used in order to insure a more accurate comparison, but was not used beyond the selection of the courses. Our data collection included course sponsors and course levels, but the analysis itself focuses on the content of the courses based on the assignments listed or not listed on the syllabi.

Due to school or governmental requirements or use of peer-to-peer student sharing Web sites, syllabi can often be found online. The study aimed to include analysis of at least one sample syllabi from

business communication courses at the undergraduate level from a narrowed selection of public and private four-year institutions. The collection of syllabi focused on the top 31 schools from the *Bloomberg Businessweek* ranking of the “Best Undergraduate Business Schools 2016” (Levy & Rodkin, 2016), which does notably omit elite liberal arts universities like Harvard and Stanford. These institutions are not ranked in Bloomberg’s undergraduate business school ranking because they do not offer a business major for undergraduates (only a “pre-business” or “business concentration”). These omissions would not have greatly affected a comparison of the business communications undergraduate upper-level writing assignments at these institutions, because there is currently no comparable business communications core course as part of the curriculum. As an aspect of this examination, determining where business communication courses were housed, this study looked at where business communication was addressed within the required core for business majors in order to determine the name of the course when the school Web site was unclear.

This study focuses on the assignments required of students rather than instructors’ reports of what they include in their business communication courses. Some content covered by instructors but assessed through tests or quizzes will not be included given this method of collecting information. The inclusion of topics not assessed is a value of the survey method; however, syllabus collection can identify trends in assignment giving. This study assumes that assignments demonstrate the importance of the content included in the course. For example, many instructors discuss resume writing, but many do not include a resume assignment. Previous research has shown the value of including an assignment that requires students to create a resume and having students participate in a workshop in order to emphasize the importance of excellence in writing skills (Tillotson & Osborn, 2012). While this aspect of resume writing could be covered elsewhere, when it is no longer a requirement in the core business curriculum, this change indicates a shift in priorities.

To determine the courses that would best fit within “business communication” for assessment, we first began by looking at required courses for undergraduate business majors (the business core curriculum) among the top 31 ranked schools. We limited the analysis to the top 31 for the initial audit in order to account for the time involved in finding or requesting syllabi from these schools and instructors. Out-of-date information about course offerings and instructors created some difficulties in obtaining information. Many syllabi were not easily found online.

We reviewed required courses to determine the placement or existence of a business communication course, and we analyzed offerings on university and business school Web sites. We identified course names, numbers, and instructors. We found 17 syllabi through research; another 6 were received through email after a direct request to a professor. One school responded that a business communication course was no longer offered although the course remained listed on the Web site. One school was in “pilot” mode on a course. Five schools were contacted by e-mail to an instructor of record for the course, but no response was given to the two emails sent. One school had no business communication type course. No reasons were provided for the lack of response to those messages. Of the schools reviewed, 9 of the 31 did not list an upper-level writing requirement as part of the university or business core curriculum. A business communication course was an elective. In contrast, Sharp and Brumberger (2013) found 8 of the 50 schools did not require a business communication course. Some schools include business communication at the MBA level but not at the undergraduate level, and additional research could determine how common this has become at graduate-degree-granting institutions.

Once syllabi were collected using online searches and direct solicitation from professors, we collected data in two categories: institutional information and assignment information. We read the syllabi to determine the types of assignments required and how they were weighted for the final course grade, including assignments requiring individual presentations, group presentations with a visual aid, emails, letters, videos, and personal websites. We then catalogued whether or not students appeared to create a PowerPoint presentation, to give a group presentation, to give an individual presentation, to write an incident report, to create a tutorial, to write an email, to write a letter, to create presentation slides, to create a Web site, to create a video, to write a resume, to create a LinkedIn profile, or to deliver bad news. We also collected information on the weight of the assignments. We asked how many writing assignments are worth at least ten percent of a course grade. We also asked whether a presentation or presentations, and whether a writing or series of writing assignments was worth more than 30 percent of the course grade.

Findings: Overall

Whether “Business Communication” is a writing-intensive or speaking-intensive course seems to be a question in shift. Many universities have split the course into two courses. Others favor writing, as business schools have, historically. This may be due to the requirement for a speech or public speaking course at the freshman or sophomore level for some institutions.

Analyzing syllabi enables the development of an institution profile. For example, 73 percent of the schools included are private, and they generally have between 10,000-15,000 students. Sixty percent of these schools offer business communication in the business school or department. All but one of the institutions offers the course at the sophomore or junior level; the remaining school offers a business communication course at the freshman level.

An analysis of the syllabi rather than an analysis of course descriptions or of the survey responses of instructors found significant differences. These differences included changes in assignment, textbook, and emphasis choices from course to course, and from school to school. For example, there was no true common textbook. Furthermore, saying business communication privileges written documents or presentations dismisses the uniqueness of many institutions when considering the top ranked schools. Individual instructors may be limited by institutional guidelines; the data demonstrates that no one “business communication course” profile exists at top schools. The analysis of the syllabi found differences exist from institution to institution possibly because of instructor specialization, institutional expectations and prerequisites, and/or student profile, experience, and aptitude.

Findings: Writing or Speaking Courses?

In these findings from 23 of the 31 top schools, 61.9% of the syllabi were weighted towards writing assignments as “business communication,” in which “A writing assignment (or writing assignments totaled as a group) is worth 30% or more of the final grade.” While some evaluated courses focus on speaking or presentations, an equal number focus on writing. The differences in course structures should not have affected the results of the research in a significant way. The findings on the requirement of a writing assignment is consistent with the prioritization of writing skills that Wardrobe and Bayless (1999) identified. In contrast, 40% of the syllabi met the criteria that “A presentation (or presentations totaled as a group) is worth 30% or more of the final grade.” There is, obviously, overlap. Some course syllabi weighted both written assignments and presentations heavily (30% or more of course grade). However, this is rare.

This study found a decreased emphasis on some of the traditional written documents, which includes the email in particular. In the initial results of this 2017 audit, a small percentage of the course syllabi specifically identified these assignments as collected or graded assignments for the semester. This creates a marked contrast to previous audits that reported much higher numbers of instructors requiring these assignments. Further, this study a significant of courses appeared to require a PowerPoint or slide presentation; whether this counts as “writing” or “presenting” is worth additional discussion in future research. Presentation slides appear to be taught as a matter of presentation rather than writing. No courses required LinkedIn profiles or Web site creation. In comparison to the relatively small percentages for the email assignments, a much higher percentage of schools required presentations.

Table 1.

Assignments Required in Comparison to Previous Audits²

Assignments, written	Russ, 2009	Moshri & Cardon, 2014	Present Study
Memo	70.1	91.1 percent	10 percent
Business Letter	77.6	85.7 percent	22.73 percent
Negative Message	Not given	Not given	19.05 percent
Email	56 percent	83.9 percent	18.18 percent
Team Presentation slides	Not given	Not given	54.55 percent
Presentation slides	Not given	Not given	63.64 percent
Presentation	79.4 team; 77.2 individual	Not given	59.09 percent
Resume	70.1	Not given	18.18 percent

While no longer the “letter writing courses” of the 1960s or 1970s as some thought, the current business communication still seems to privilege traditional forms of communication, including the letter, based on point weights for final grades. For example, the Business Communication syllabus at The University of Texas lists letter writing first under written communication in the course description. As another example, an older survey of employers found a perceived need for additional focus on writing skills at the sentence level, letter and report writing, presentation training, and job application training (Eckert & Allen, 1986). However, instructors who previously stated that they include an email may have meant that they include a lecture or in-class activity; the grade distributions in the syllabi do not reflect prioritizing these written assignments.

The pattern of many business communications courses, described by Moshri and Cardon, remains: “a typical business communication course allows the students to get extensive practice in writing and some practice in presenting materials orally” (2014). There seems to be a perceived (and perhaps even practical) need to define a business communication course as either “a writing course” or “a presentation course. Tradition and practicality could, most likely, have predicted that the word “Communication” would be used in 22 of the 28 course names (79 percent). Ten of the 28 identified courses included “Business Communication” in the course title (36 percent). Writing was used 5 times:

² Moshori & Cardon include presentations in their “coverage” section rather than assignments required. They report that the majority of instructors include “a lot of coverage” at 33.90 percent or “comprehensive coverage” at 34.50 percent (320). They also report that 79.2 percent cover “cover letters and/or resumes” (318).

the writing courses include Business Writing and Communication, Advanced Writing in the Disciplines, Business Writing, Professional Writing, and Advanced Writing in Professional Contexts. Names for presentation or speaking courses include Business Presentations and Business Speaking. General courses include Management Communication(s) (appeared four times in the results), Contemporary Skills for Business Professionals, Individual and Interpersonal Effectiveness for the Business Professional, and Organizational Communication.

The following table indicates relative frequency of word appearance. While the table does not depict all words used in course naming, it does show some interesting trends and preferences among these elite schools.

Table 2.

Course Title Word Usage

Word(s) in Course Title	Frequency of Appearance
Communication	22
Business	19
Business Communication	10
Professional	8
Management	5
Writing	5
Speaking	3
Presentation	2
Context	2
Managerial	1
Analysis	1
Leader	1
Critical Thinking	1
Persuasion	1

What is even more interesting is the level of these courses and how those levels compare in terms of the types of assignments required. As previous research has found, business communication is generally offered at the sophomore and junior levels. (See table below.) Obviously, there are different levels of business communications courses, and an extension of the “business communication” label to the 1, 1.5, or 2 credit professional development or foundational courses recently built into the business core curriculum at many universities might lead to very different assignment weights. Sophomore level courses tend to be somewhat different in focus and expectation from junior and senior level courses. In the current results, the junior level courses include more of what many assume are the traditional business communication course assignments like a group presentation, email, and letter. The percent of courses that privilege written documents and presentations differs from the sophomore level to the junior level.

Table 3.

Levels of Business Communication Courses

Course Level	Top 31 Courses	Courses in this Study
Freshman	0	0
Sophomore	13	8
Junior	15	15
Senior	2	0

Table 4.

Location Levels of Found Business Communication Courses and Assignments

Assignment Type	Sophomore	Juniors
Presentation Slides	42.86 percent	57.14 percent
Group Presentation	46.14 percent	53.85 percent
Email	50 percent	50 percent
Letter	60 percent	40 percent
Overall, presentation(s) worth 30 percent of grade or more	42.86 percent	57.15 percent
Overall, written document(s) worth 30 percent of grade or more	41.67 percent	50 percent

Note: These numbers are based upon the assignments found on the syllabi; only four email assignments were found, and the data reflects that 50 percent were at the sophomore level and 50 percent at the junior level.

The textbook selection is diverse; the results below show only two textbooks were used by more than one school. Three different versions of Guffey's Business Communication were used, but the textbook is basically the same in content and emphasis. Only 5 of the 21 syllabi required an industry-standard textbook. The rest of the courses either included a textbook or book specific to course emphasis, a variety of texts available through online course delivery methods, or a course reader developed by the department and available for purchase in the bookstore. The following are required published textbooks for the business communications course from the first 21 syllabi. Recommended texts have not been included on this list but appeared on many syllabi. These recommended texts often included writing-specific guides. Also not listed are short required readings such as one chapter out of a textbook.

Table 5.

Textbook Requirements

Title	Edition	Year	Authors	Publisher	Number of Occurrences
BCOM	3	2011	C. M. Lehman and D. D. DuFrene	South-Western College Pub.	1
Business and administrative communication	11	2014	D. Kienzler and K. Locker	McGraw-Hill Higher Education	1

Business and professional communication: plans, processes, and performance	5	2011	J. R. DiSanza and N. J. Legge	Pearson	1
Business communication: process and product	6	2007	M. E. Guffey	South-Western College Pub.	1
Business communication: process and product	7	2010	M. E. Guffey and D. Loewy	South-Western College Pub.	1
Business communication: process and product	8	2014	M. E. Guffey and D. Loewy	South-Western College Pub.	1
Communicating at work: principles and practices for business and the professions	11	2012	R. B. Adler and J. M. Elmhorst	McGraw-Hill	1
Elements of style	4	1999	W. Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White	Pearson	1
Guide to managerial communication: effective business writing and speaking	10	2013	M. Munter and L. Hamilton	Pearson	2
Guide to presentations	3	2010	L. Russell and M. Munter	Pearson	1
Management communication: a case analysis approach	5	2013	J. S. O'Rourke, IV	Prentice-Hall	1
Mr. shmooze: the art and science of selling through relationships	1	2010	R. Abraham	Wiley	1
Straight talk: oral communication for career success	1	2011	P. R. Timm and S. Bienvenu	Routledge	1
Technical communication: a reader centered approach	8	2013	P. V. Anderson	Cengage Learning	1
The alignment factor: Leveraging the power of total stakeholder support	1	2012	C. B.M. Van Riel	Routledge	1

The art of public speaking	11	2011	S. E. Lucas	McGraw-Hill Education	1
The mind and heart of the negotiator	5	2011	L. Thompson	Pearson	1
The truth about confident presenting	1	2008	J. S. O'Rourke	The Financial Times Press	1
Writing and speaking for business	3	2013	W. H. Baker	BYU Academic Publishing	1
<i>Custom text</i>					5

A number of commonly marketed business communication textbooks appeared on the syllabi. The online versions of the textbooks were rarely referenced, but Cengage, which specializes in online course delivery, was listed as a publisher. South-Western Publishing Company is a subsidiary of Cengage Learning, Inc. Only Pearson had as many books on the list as Cengage. As can be seen, old editions were specified for some textbooks such as the Guffey textbook. Two of the courses specified no textbook at all, while some offered university texts or readers, and others described online readings through eLearning systems. Surveys of instructors could better answer questions about textbook choices such as the motivation for selection an older text. Scant research exists on textbook usage in the business communication classroom. None of the recent audits included textbook information.

As discussed previously, instructors often verbally address, or create class exercises to address more course content than is described specifically in the syllabus. The syllabus tends to offer an outline of course policies and the contract with the student. However, most syllabi include course calendars, and a closer look at the calendars for the semester often, although not always, revealed more details about assignments. The following are terms used in these reviewed syllabi to describe class assignments. They are currently grouped by location in the semester. Although these items are not presented in quotation marks, these are the names used. Similar names have been grouped by the authors of this paper. These lists, with most of the specific assignment data gathered from the syllabi calendars, offer a sense of the overall priorities and material addressed in the courses.

Table 6.

Names of Required Assignments

Presentations and Presentation Role Play Activities Self-Introduction/Elevator Pitch/Impromptu Speech Peer Introduction Role Play Best Team Experience Company Profile Change Communication/Strategic Issue Response Crisis Communication/Bad News (Negative Message) Presentation New Business Idea Pitch Product Pitch Proposal Pitch Benchmark Team Presentation on [Company]
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Article Presentation
Screening Interview
Behavioral Interview
Informative Speech
Persuasive Speech
Celebratory Presentation/Toast
Cross-Cultural Negotiation
Final Group Presentation/Meeting with Client/Presentation to Company

Presentation-Paired or Presentation-Dependent Written Assignments

Written Outline
Handouts
Visual Aid
PowerPoint
Prezi
Audience Evaluation
Group Agenda/Group Meeting Minutes
Team Contract
Self-Evaluation (Presentation)
Peer Feedback on Presentation
Peer Evaluation (Group Work)
Cross-Cultural Negotiation Analysis
Proposal
Report

Written Assignments

Email
Email Self-Introduction Assignment
Memo
Intro Memo
Business Document Identifying Purpose
[Company] Document
Company Analysis Fact Sheet
Case Solution: Letter & Memo
Negative Message/Bad News Letter
Claim Letter
Letter of Application
Business Card
Business Report/Recommendation Report
Analysis/Case Analysis
Self-Evaluation (Group Writing Assignment)
Progress Report/Work Plan
Reflections/Reflection Paper/Performance Appraisals
Executive Summary
Leader Interview Paper/Informational Interview
Ethics Case
Resume

Cover Letter
Client Project
Individual Case Analysis (ICA)
Feasibility Study
Bibliography
SWOT
Press Release/Communicating with the Press
Draft (Report, Memo, Email, Proposal, Cover Letter, Letter)
Journal
Threaded Discussion
Formal Report/Informal Report

Online Assignments

GoReact Feedback
LinkedIn Profile (Create or Update)
Video Resume
View Your Video & Comment
Video Feedback
Elevator Pitch
Blogs

Career Center Assignments

Mock Interview
Attend a Career Event

Quizzes

Grammar Quizzes
Chapter Quizzes

Generic Terms Used (Used in Grade Categories or Calendar Notations)

Short Workplace Messages/Short Correspondence Genres/Business Communication Foundations and Channels
Intercultural Messages/Writing for Clarity
Social Media/Writing for Web
Informal Papers
Persuasive Documents
Career Documents/Employment Communication/Writing for Employment
Informative Communication/Writing for Understanding
Reflections/Reflection Papers
Discussion Board Contributions
Peer Comments
Discussion Papers
Formative Papers
Quizzes/ Chapter Quizzes
Worksheets
Papers
Tests/Exams
Final Presentation

Test 1, 2, 3.... Document I, II, III.... Unit Writing Assignments Surveys Journal Participation Attendance
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The variety of names to describe assignments, which probably share similarities, demonstrates the diversity of the business communication field. The variety of names also complicates a straightforward count of, for example, how many courses include a memo. For example, a course may require a memo for an informal paper or in-class activity but not state as much on the syllabus. However, we find that a consideration of the names uses helps to reflect priorities given how instructors weight grades and to emphasize the distinctions that may exist between regions, schools, or approaches to the courses.

Limitations

Syllabi can be very clear and organized, but they are also relatively opaque. An analysis cannot always demonstrate how letters and emails are covered within a course. It is possible that the syllabi do not tell the entire story of the course. For example, consider in-class writing exercises. According to Moshri and Cardon (2014), “The average and median number of written assignments during a course” is no longer “around 10 assignments” (common in the 1980s) or the eight or more required in 2014. In terms of identified written assignments, most of the “writing assignment” courses (67% of all syllabi) identified three or more specific writing assignments. However, about a fourth of the syllabi collected for this study included “writing exercises” that were not specifically delineated. On the calendars of these syllabi, such individual writing assignments typically were due either once a week or once every two weeks. These written assignments—as is evident from the collection of assignment descriptions here—could align with the types of assignments described in previous audits, short assignments that challenge students rhetorically and allow them to respond to a “real world” scenarios. The assignments probably address standard business communication topics or include communication reflections. The use of the survey method as in some previous audits helps to address the inclusion of topics when not assigned for points.

Further, the time-consuming collection of syllabi prevents a wider analysis without additional devotion of resources. This study uses the Top 50 rankings to limit the analysis to a manageable amount, but doing so prevents a wider analysis that would include smaller schools, community colleges, and the more typical business school outside of the highest ranked, well-known programs. As mentioned, the schools included in this study tend to be mid-sized, private schools. Differences probably occur due to university and class size, and the possible differences between public and private schools more widely. The analysis of the ranked schools provides insights into what departments with more resources or stronger reputations per Bloomberg do in their courses.

The shift in method and the focus on top schools also presents a limitation in discussing changes during the past twenty years. However, this limitation would exist generally unless the same instructors or instructors at those same institutions are surveyed again.

Career Documents: Phasing Out or Moving Locations?

Some of the more interesting questions to emerge about the assignments themselves involved the focus on the job market and the degree to which assignments were tied to students’ pursuit of jobs. Part of

the Bloomberg ranking privileges job placement and hiring party perceptions. As discussed previously, Russ found in 2009 that about 70 of instructors included the resume as a course document; this study found that only four of the 23 course syllabi specifically identify the resume as a writing assignment in the course. One course did have a behavioral interview assignment that may have included the use of a resume, but several courses were vague on the requirement for a resume. Three of these courses are at the junior level and one is at the sophomore level. The previously ubiquitous “Cover Letter and Resume” assignment is no longer prominent, and no course required the creation or “polishing” of a LinkedIn profile, which would seem a critical element of a job search in 2017. This finding raises several questions. The change could have been made due to economic differences, or could be related to differences in student profiles. However, it seems likely that the rise of career centers (onsite career counseling, typically offering mock interviews and individual tutoring sessions for standard business documents), readily available resume workshops and required one-credit hour professional development courses (recently introduced at many business schools) have addressed most of the perceived need for resume instruction, editing and feedback in the business communication classroom.

This major shift, from an emphasis on career documents within the business communication classroom to a movement to address career documents – like the resume – outside the classroom, could have taken place in eight years. Moshri and Cardon, in 2014, discussed “the Great Recession and its impacts on university budgets” as one of the key factors that might have influenced business communication course class size change. The impact of the recession could have altered business school focus and investment to an extent that affected the curriculum of business communication courses. Students invest in their educations and typically carry debt as a result. The Bloomberg article found the median outstanding student debt to be \$25,000 (Levy & Rodkin, 2016). The decision to invest their time and (borrowed) money in college is part of a public conversation about the value of college and an institution’s degree.

According to the Business Cycle Dating Committee at the National Bureau of Economic Research, the “US Great Recession” is officially considered to have lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, a total of 19 months, yet the effects on student and parent attitudes towards the need for college to serve as a career vehicle may have had a ripple effect. In 2010, just after Russ’s survey, articles with titles similar to “Consider a School’s Career Services Before Applying” began appearing in publications like U.S. News and World Report (Hannon). While the official recession may have ended, recent graduates were still struggling in a saturated market. In 2012, the Associated Press paid for a study and posted the result: “Half of Recent College Grads Underemployed or Jobless, Analysis Says.” These graduates were continuing to hold the jobs that they held while in school: “waiter or waitress, bartender, retail clerk or receptionist.” By 2014, articles like “Colleges Ramp Up Career Centers for Students” in USA Today reported large business school investments in career centers which positioned the career centers in strategic places, focused on sleek and attractive interiors, created space for corporate interviews and declared an intention to create partnerships with local companies to facilitate internships and job interviews.

This investment seems to be a response to student interest and concern resulting from the low entering salaries encountered by graduates during and after “The Great Recession.” Since recent graduates’ job placement and starting salary play a key role in business school rankings (e.g. *Bloomberg Businessweek*), it would make sense that business schools might offer both more structure and support for career readiness and development while the business communications courses themselves pulled back from including major assignment grades for work addressed elsewhere.

As their reach has expanded, course offerings may have responded by removing the need for an additional written document in the course. However, the expectations represented by assignment listings does not show a comparable replacement assignment. Instead, students may simply write less or spend more time on tests or quizzes. Finally, only three of the schools analyzed for this study appear to have a business communication center specific to the business school; however, all appear to have a writing center for the university. Future research could consider the offerings of campus or business school specific writing and career centers.

Changes and Opportunities for Future Research

The results of the study verified a number of expectations based upon previous audits, but raised questions particularly about the differences between schools. Most business communications courses still function, primarily, as writing courses. The typical business communication course in the 1980s and 1990s included a series of short one-or-two-page assignments intended to allow students enough practice to build to a longer “end of semester” assignment, like a proposal or report. Currently, 81% of the writing-focused business communications course syllabi included a report or proposal. Obviously, this is still a critical element of business writing, and allows students to better demonstrate their skills. The “standard assignments,” however, might be changing. Memos and resumes might, no longer, be staples of the experience. Even emails and negative messages could be covered in different ways. Collection of an assignment, for example, could provide a deeper understanding of not only that instructors required an email but also that some instructors may consider content over writing or editing over audience consideration. Additionally, further research invites questions about when and where individual and group presentations are taught and assessed within and outside the business curriculum and the perceived value of presentations in business courses. Future research could also examine and compare the prerequisites required for these courses. For example, that research could determine whether a first-year speech class reduces the need for individual presentation assignments.

Previous audits of business communication courses have not taken into account the variety of types of courses. Some consistency exists in the level that courses are offered. A slim majority (52%) are offered at the junior level for schools that have an undergraduate business communication course. These courses are often slightly less presentation-focused than the courses offered at the sophomore level. For future research, the generation of a series of models that classify university approaches to business communication courses in terms of the core curriculums and recommended course sequences (and correlate the course level and model with assignment types) could better serve as a tool for comparison. This would better illustrate how courses are arranged differently, particularly if included in conjunction with professional development and “student success” one-hour courses. Schools seem to craft business communication courses in directed ways to target student needs, and those needs – at a very pragmatic level – seem to be critically assessed by the fact that students need jobs when they graduate. Additional information on the average student profile and on job placement statistics could expand upon how courses are designed to meet student needs.

This study emphasizes the top ranked undergraduate business schools in order to narrow the selection criteria to programs that have been publicly recognized as successful based on employer survey, student survey, starting salary, and internship (Levy & Rodkin 2016). Additional work could be done on business communication courses offered at the graduate level as well as the two-year college level. The *Bloomberg* ranking privileges the employer survey and student survey. While the ranking methodology has weakness in its sourcing of opinions from students and recruiters, the list provides a way to emphasize practices utilized by schools that recruiters, students, and alumni perceive as the top

business schools. A more comprehensive study could expand to including other ranking systems, including schools not on the Bloomberg Businessweek list but included on the lists of the Economist, the Financial Times, Forbes, and U.S. News and World Report (some of these ranking systems only look at MBA programs whereas this study focuses on undergraduate programs). Further, contrasts could be made between schools ranked highly by the public in comparison to research rankings such as The UTD Top 100 Business School Research Rankings, which ranks based on journal publications. Finally, this focus privileges schools that have 10,000 to 20,000 students; almost 50 percent of the schools included in the initial research were in this group. Seventy percent of the schools are private institutions. About 60 percent of the schools teach business communication out of the business school based on our findings. Sharp and Brumberger found 78 percent taught business communication out of the business school. They note this was an increase from the Knight study, and we found a decrease back to the Knight level. This could be a change in institutional design or due to the presentation of information on school Web sites. However, this may be due to different requirements by different institutions. The 31 top-ranked schools considered in this study may differ slightly from the next 20 or next 70 schools.

Finally, the authors of this study have begun to gather syllabi for all of the top 100 Bloomberg ranked schools and to consider the weights of the assignments and to what degree those assignments appear to dominate the grade division and even the course calendar. This could provide information on what ultimately instructors deem of the highest importance for a typically junior-level business communication course. This will also allow additional analysis of private in comparison to public institutions, and more information on changes based on school size among other factors.

Conclusion

There are a variety of takeaways from this study, some of which involve “hard data” comparison, while others are more representative of unanswered questions. Some of the most highly ranked institutions in the world (e.g. Harvard, Stanford) do not offer a course at the undergraduate level that explicitly focuses on “business communication,” preferring to impart course information through assignments in other courses or through a career center. Sharp and Brumberger discuss this finding; they found 8 of the top 50 schools did not include a business communication requirement. However, a few schools appear to offer business communication at the graduate (MBA) level. Previous audits question whether this could be suggestive of the diminished state of business communication courses at top institutions. However, given the percentage has not dramatically increased from 2011 to 2017, we suggest the number does not reflect a diminished state. Instead, we suggest differences in student profiles and university offerings influence the types and frequency of courses. Simply put, a student who needs writing help generally may not get into Harvard; therefore, Harvard might opt not to have a writing intensive business communication course. Consequently, some business communication courses privilege writing over speaking, or vice versa. This could be based not only on the undergraduate students attracted to the schools, but also because of a perception of the field and classes. There is not enough data to answer this question with 23 syllabi. Future research could build even further upon existing data and previous audits to analyze student populations in conjunction with curricular design.

By focusing on what is offered at the top thirty Bloomberg-ranked institutions for 2016 and the specific assignment expectations of these courses based on the syllabi, this study found that business communication is more diverse and less “cookie cutter” as a field than assumed in the past or as reflected in survey-based audits and studies. Most of the 23 syllabi outlined distinctly different courses with different (often university-produced) texts and unique assignments. Rather than finding a simple answer about the types of assignments offered, the readings required, or how grading privileges certain

aspects of the course, the study complicates prior research and suggests numerous opportunities for additional studies. The examination of 23 different syllabi from 31 schools found 23 very different curricular approaches to teaching business communication.

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Appendix

Schools Analyzed for 2017 Syllabus Audit

Rank	School	Course Name	Syllabus Acquired
1	Villanova	Business and Professional Speaking	Yes
2	Notre Dame (Mendoza)	Management Communication	Yes
3	Boston College (Carroll)	Business Writing and Communication	Yes
4	Indiana (Kelley)	Business Presentations & Business Communication	Yes
5	UVA (McIntire)		No
6	Texas at Austin (McCombs)	Business Communication	Yes
7	North Carolina (Kenan-Flagler)	Management and Corporate Communication	Yes
8	Michigan - Ann Arbor (Ross)	Introduction to Business Communication & Professional Communication Strategies	Yes
9	NYU (Stern)	Organizational Communication and Its Social Context	Yes
10	Bentley University	Managerial Communication	Yes
11	Cornell (Dyson)		No
12	William & Mary (Mason)		No
13	Wake Forest	(note: course no longer offered)	No
14	Ohio State (Fisher)	Business & Professional Speaking	Yes
15	Emory (Goizueta)	Communication and Professional Development	Yes
16	Pennsylvania (Wharton)		No
17	Georgetown (McDonough)		No
18	Brigham Young (Marriott)	Advanced Writing in Professional Contexts	Yes
19	Penn State (Smeal)	Individual and Interpersonal Effectiveness for the Business Professional	Yes
20	Michigan State (Broad)	Business Communication	Yes
21	Southern Methodist (Cox)	Business Communications and Leader Development	Yes
22	Northeastern (D'Amore-McKim)	Advanced Writing in the Disciplines	Yes
23	Syracuse (Whitman)	Professional Writing	Yes
24	Texas Christian (Neeley)	Market Analysis	Yes
25	Washington in St. Louis (Olin)		No
26	Carnegie Mellon (Tepper)	Business Presentations	Yes
27	Fordham (Gabelli)	Business Communication I	Yes
28	Wisconsin	Professional Communication	Yes

29	Boston University (Questrom)		No
30	John Carroll (Boler)	Business Communication	Yes
31	University of Miami	Critical Thinking & Persuasion for Business	Yes