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ACA  
BULLETIN

# THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION ON STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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In recent years, the decline of student enrollment has become a major concern for most college and university administrators. Understandably, much of the decline may be attributable to the concomitant decline of college-aged persons available to fill the institutions of higher learning in the United States. Consequently, it is imperative that these administrators develop a better understanding of those variables that would facilitate the retention and success of the declining numbers of incoming students who are being recruited by their institutions.

In the instructional communication literature, scholars have endeavored to assess the impact of individuals' communication orientations upon their behavior in the educational environment. One such orientation that has been the subject of more than 800 articles, books, and book chapters over the last fifteen years (Payne and Richmond, 1984) is communication apprehension and avoidance. Communication apprehension refers to *an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons*, (McCroskey, 1982b, 1984a). Richmond (1984), in her review of the communication apprehension literature in the educational context, has suggested that such fears or anxieties impact students' course choices, seating preferences, classroom participation, and selection of majors.

Although much speculation has arisen with regard to the impact that communication apprehension (CA) may have upon a student's retention and success in his/her academic pursuits, there has been no direct longitudinal analysis investigating such questions and hypotheses. However, cross-sectional analyses would appear to lend support to the contention that CA does predict academic achievement and success. McCroskey and Andersen (1976), for example, found that low communication apprehensive college students had significantly higher grade-point-averages at graduation than did high apprehensives. Further, Scott and Wheelless (1977) reported that low apprehensives attained higher achievement scores in normal sized classroom settings than did low apprehensives.

Although CA has not been directly related to drop-out rates, it is reasonable to suggest that success or failure in school should impact the decisions of students to leave or remain in college. Since CA has been related in cross-sectional research to students' grade-point-average, it is reasonable to assume that CA and retention also are related. Moreover, loneliness (Zakahi and Duran, 1982) and lack of friendships (McCroskey and Sheahan, 1978) have been shown to be partially a function of CA. Theoretically, the high apprehensive may feel compelled to withdraw from situations that continually magnify his/her psychological experience of loneliness. The social climate facilitated by the college or university campus may in fact be a constant reminder to the high apprehensive that he/she has few, if any, close friendships. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that CA may have a dual impact on student retention: first, student achievement as determined by grade-point-average is in part a function of CA; and second,

CA encourages tendencies toward loneliness and lack of friendships which, consequently, increase tendencies to withdraw and avoid situations that would magnify the psychological discomfort.

In light of the preceding discussion, the present study was conducted in order to investigate two hypothesized effects of CA upon students' retention and success in college. Specifically:

- H1: Students with high communication apprehension will attain lower grade-point-averages than students with low communication apprehension.
- H2: The drop-out rate among students with high communication apprehension will be larger than that among students with low communication apprehension.

## Method

The following analysis involves an investigation that spans the course of four academic semesters at West Virginia University. Just prior to the beginning of the Fall semester, 1982, the researchers collected data from incoming students during the week of freshman orientation. For each semester during the two years that followed, the official grade-point-averages and retention/drop-out behavior of the students were made available to the investigators by the University Office of Admissions and Records. In order to more accurately study the impact of communication apprehension (CA) upon

success and retention, a longitudinal approach was undertaken. The analyses reported here represent the first two years of one class of freshmen. The complete project will involve two freshman classes over a four-year period.

**Subjects:** The subjects for this study were 1884 incoming college freshman at West Virginia University at the beginning of the Fall semester, 1982. This sample represented the portion of the freshman class that attended the orientation session prior to the start of classes. A highly representative sample was obtained, 56% were male and 44% were female. These percentages were precisely those reported for the entire freshman group by the West Virginia University Office of Admissions and Records.

**Instrumentation and Procedure:** The 24-item version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982a) was utilized to assess subjects' levels of communication apprehension. This instrument was administered to all 1884 subjects during the orientation session. Reliabilities for the PRCA-24 have consistently exceeded .90 (McCroskey, 1984b). For the present study, the split-half (odd-even) reliability estimate was .94 ( $X = 65.6$ ;  $sd = 15.69$ ).

Students' academic success for each of the four semesters was represented as their cumulative grade-point-averages (GPA) on the commonly accepted 4-point scaling system. The GPA's were obtained from the official records of the Office of Admissions and Records.

Retention rate for each of the four semesters was represented as the number of subjects in the sample officially enrolled and completing each semester. Retained subjects for the four time frames are reported in Table 1.

**Data Analysis:** The independent variable for this investigation was the subject's level of CA. CA levels were computed using the mean and standard deviation of the PRCA-24 from a prior sample of over 20,000 subjects. Those subjects scoring below 52 were classified as low apprehensive while those scoring above 79 were classified as high apprehensive. Subjects with scores between 51 and 79 were considered moderately apprehensive.

Two-way analysis of variance procedures were computed for each of the four time frames representing each semester. These procedures used three levels of CA as the classification variable with GPA and credits earned as the dependent variables. Further AOV procedures were computed to test the interaction effects of CA and sex on GPA for each of the four time frames.

### Results

Table 1 reports the retention/drop-out rate by CA level for each of the four semesters (both totals and percentages reported). The overall cumulative drop-out rate for the entire sample across the two-year period was 29.5%. The West Virginia University Office of Institutional Research reported a drop-out rate of 29.4% for the entire 1982 freshman population during the same time period. This finding suggests that

the orientation sample was highly representative.

During their first semester of registration, only 6.2% of this student sample dropped out of school. Among high communication apprehensives the rate was 7.6%, while among low apprehensives the rate was 5.4%. Using the low apprehensives as a baseline referent, high apprehensives were approximately 29% more likely to leave school before the end of their first semester. While this appears to be a substantial difference, it is not statistically significant (Chi-square = 1.76,  $p > .05$ ).

By the end of their second year, as noted above, 29.5% of the sample dropped out of school. Among high communication apprehensives the rate was 32.7%, among lows 23.9%. This difference is statistically significant (Chi-square = 6.99,  $p < .05$ ). Again using the low apprehensive drop-out rate as the baseline, high communication apprehensives were approximately 37% more likely to drop out of school in their first two years.

Results of the AOV procedures showed a significant main effect for sex on GPA for all time frames: Fall 1982 ( $F = 15.89$ ,  $p < .0001$ , males = 2.66, females = 2.43); Spring 1983 ( $F = 21.92$ ,  $p < .0001$ , males = 2.72, females = 2.55); Fall 1983 ( $F = 27.59$ ,  $p < .0001$ , males = 2.82, females = 2.64); Spring 1984 ( $F = 19.59$ ,  $p < .0001$ , males = 2.83, females = 2.69). However, the interaction effect for CA level and sex was not significant for any time frame.

Results of the AOV procedures testing differences in GPA and credits earned by CA level are reported in Table 2. Means for all three levels of CA during the Fall, 1982, time frame were significantly different for both GPA and credits earned. For the Spring, 1983, period, GPA was significantly different between high and low apprehensives and between moderate and low apprehensives while all three levels differed from one another on credits earned. For Fall, 1983, the pattern of significant differences among the three CA levels for both GPA and credits earned was the same: high and low apprehensives were different and moderate and low apprehensives were different. In the Spring, 1984, time frame, GPA differs only between high and low apprehensives while credits earned for high apprehensives differ both from moderate and low apprehensives.

A supplementary analysis was conducted in which all subjects classified as either high or low apprehensives who dropped out of school during the two-year period were omitted. Analysis of the GPAs of these groups indicated some striking results. For each of the four semesters the GPAs of the two groups differed significantly, and the GPAs did not change over the four semesters. The low CAs had a GPA of 2.9 every semester and the high CAs had a GPA of 2.7 every semester. This suggests that the apparent improvement in GPA among students of all CA levels which is seen in Table 2 is purely an artifact of drop-outs. Thus, for every student whose GPA increased during their first two years, there was a student whose GPA declined. Cross-sectional data reported by universities consistently



show higher for student bodies from freshman through senior years. If our data are representative, such data may simply indicate that better students are more likely to stay in school, not that students achieve more in the later years of their college education.

#### Conclusions

The present report is based on only the first two years of one sample of college students in a longitudinal study of two college samples which will not be completed until 1987. Consequently, any conclusions must be considered to be very tentative. With that caution in mind, let us consider what appears to be happening in this investigation.

To begin, it is clear that the drop-out pattern for high communication apprehensives is more severe than that for low communication apprehensives. Secondly, it is clear that high communication apprehensives achieve lower GPA's than do lows, from the first semester on. Moderate apprehensives fall in between highs and lows in terms of both retention and achievement.

The implications of these results for those of us concerned with the problem of student retention may be quite important. We have known for some time that high communication apprehensive students achieve lower GPAs than less apprehensive students (McCroskey and Andersen, 1976). The results of the present study suggest this may not be a simple function of the interaction of apprehension level and the college environment. High apprehensives do less well than others in their first semester, but the gap does not widen (over the first two years, at least). Thus, whatever impact communica-

tion apprehension has on college achievement may actually occur prior to the time the student enrolls in college. While treatment for communication apprehension may help to overcome this impact, it also must be considered possible that treatment at this point will come too late to improve the students' college achievement. College treatment programs, then, may not result in better students. To be effective with regard to improving college achievement, such programs may need to be implemented at lower academic levels.

Regardless of the relationship between communication apprehension and achievement, the data reported here indicate no meaningful association between retention and GPA, a finding also observed in some other studies. Good students were as likely to drop out as poor students. That communication apprehension was meaningfully related to drop out rate while achievement was not suggests those of us in the communication field may have a role to play in assisting our colleges and universities in improving student retention. The decision to drop out of college may be more of a social than an academic decision. We have long known that communication apprehension interferes with an individual's ability to function effectively in social environments. We also have methods available to us that are known to be effective in reducing communication apprehension. It would appear that those of us in administrative positions should give careful consideration to proposals to implement such programs. The already proven benefits that have been shown to individual students may accompany a previously hidden benefit to our institutions. Students who receive such help may be more likely to stay in school.

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Table 1  
Retention/Drop-Out Rate  
by CA Level

<u>Time</u> <u>Frame</u>	<u>CA Level</u>						
	<u>High</u>		<u>Moderate</u>		<u>Low</u>		<u>Total</u>
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
<u>Orientation</u>	352		1197		335		1884
<u>Fall, 1982</u>							
Drop	27	7.6	71	5.9	18	5.4	116
Retained	325	92.4	1126	94.1	317	94.6	1768
Cum. Drop	27	7.6	71	5.9	18	5.4	116
<u>Spring, 1983</u>							
Drop	17	5.2	57	5.1	14	4.4	88
Retained	308	94.8	1069	94.9	303	95.6	1680
Cum. Drop	44	12.5	128	10.7	32	9.5	204
<u>Fall, 1983</u>							
Drop	59	19.2	166	15.5	36	12.0	261
Retained	249	80.4	903	84.5	267	88.0	1419
Cum. Drop	103	29.3	294	24.6	68	20.3	465
<u>Spring, 1984</u>							
Drop	12	3.4	66	5.5	12	3.6	90
Retained	237	96.6	837	94.5	255	96.4	1329
Cum. Drop	115	32.7	360	30.1	80	23.9	555

Table 2  
Grade-Point-Averages and Credits Earned  
by CA Level

<u>Time Frame</u>	<u>CA Level</u>		
	<u>High</u>	<u>Moderate</u>	<u>Low</u>
<u>Fall, 1982</u>			
G.P.A.	2.46a	2.55a	2.67a
Credits Earned	13.20a	13.70a	14.10a
<u>Spring, 1983</u>			
G.P.A.	2.58a	2.64b	2.76ab
Credits Earned	27.10a	27.80a	28.70a
<u>Fall, 1983</u>			
G.P.A.	2.72a	2.73b	2.81ab
Credits Earned	42.90a	43.30b	44.30ab
<u>Spring, 1984</u>			
G.P.A.	2.74a	2.79	2.84a
Credits Earned	56.70ab	58.30b	58.90a

a - b: Means with the same subscript in the same row are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .