



The Basic Communication Course and College Student Retention: A Longitudinal Analysis

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Abstract: This longitudinal study examined the relationship between two content formats of the basic communication course (BCC) and first-year college student retention over a 4-year period ($N = 5,653$). Chi-square and logistic regression models indicated students who completed the BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not complete the BCC. While completing the BCC was associated with retention for both formats, the hybrid BCC was more consistently related to retention than the public speaking BCC. Students from certain demographic groups who completed the hybrid BCC were retained more frequently than students from the same demographic who did not complete the hybrid BCC. Demographics for the public speaking BCC revealed a different retention profile. Implications and future directions concerning the BCC are discussed.

Introduction

Entering college is an exciting, challenging, and anxiety-provoking experience. According to the National Student Clearing House (2020), the average first-year student retention rate was 76% and dropped to 67% when measuring return by the institution of origin. A 67% retention rate is common as rates vary widely across institutions (Freshmen Retention Rate, 2022). Elite institutions tend to experience higher retention rates, above 90%, while students at most other institutions, especially community colleges, struggle to adjust.

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Long ago, Tinto (1975) articulated the complexity of retention, noting that students arrive with differing goals, backgrounds, aptitudes, and opportunities and that retention also appears to be influenced by institutional characteristics. Worth noting, institutional departures are frequently voluntary rather than being rooted in substandard academic performance. Using institutional data, the present study investigated the longitudinal relationship between first-year student retention and the basic communication course (BCC) at a 4-year public university. After reviewing some key retention literature as well as research on the BCC, 10 research questions were proposed and analyzed. The BCC was associated with improving first-year student retention. Implications, limitations, and future directions are examined.

Research literature on college student retention spans more than a century. Crede and Niehorster (2012) conducted a meta-analysis that accounted for 700 studies over 100 years. Demographics failed to predict retention, suggesting, to some degree, that college is an equal opportunity for all students. A consistent personality profile of success emerged: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, self-efficiency, internal locus of control, and positive self-esteem. Problem-solving coping skills, as opposed to students' emotional coping skills, were associated with success. Adjustment was academic and social. Institutional and faculty support along with secure parental attachment were moderately related to retention. All told, Crede and Niehorster found grades to be the single strongest retention predictor and institutional attachment to be the strongest link to grades and retention.

Tinto (1988) recognized college student retention as a socialization process. Accordingly, the need to establish a sense of belongingness among first-year students has become a focal point in retention literature (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Whitten et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). Belonging is a form of institutional identification. First-year students identify with their new school by establishing relationships with peers and with employees. Background or situational characteristics have been found to impede the development of belongingness. Minority students, for example, often face social adversity when entering a new campus environment (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Belongingness is more challenging for working-class students who lack campus-based social capital as compared to middle- and upper-class students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Moreover, commuter students are more likely to rely on faculty relationships to develop belongingness as access to peers is more limited and competing demands mean spending less time on campus (Whitten et al., 2020). Indeed, developing a sense of belonging is not a uniform process for students.

First-year experience courses (FYE) and affinity groups have been used as vehicles for developing belongingness. FYE courses involve developing cohorts, or smaller groups of students. Klatt and Ray (2014) found that students who completed an FYE seminar were more likely to be retained and were more likely to graduate. Likewise, Miller and Lesik (2014–15) found an increased retention rate for first-year students who completed an FYE and an increased likelihood to graduate; however, academic ability moderated this finding.

Retention, by definition, is longitudinal. It takes a year to know if students are retained. Wills et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal analysis using institutional data over a 6-year period (1998–2004) and found three retention predictors via regression analysis: academic preparation, grades, and merit or academic scholarship. Smaller class sizes were also correlated to retention. In a 4-year longitudinal study, Ting (2003) discovered noncognitive factors, such as coping with racism, leadership experience, and community service, to be stronger predictors of retention for first-generation students (FGCS) of color. Longitudinal studies help to identify patterns and to assess the effectiveness of treatments and programs.

In sum, college student retention is complex. Though essential, academic performance alone fails to improve retention. Institutional identification requires relationship development with peers, faculty, and staff. FYE courses have served to foster belongingness. As the basic communication course (BCC) is frequently taken by first-year students and offers socialization content relevancy, the relationship between the BCC and retention deserves exploration.

Basic Communication Course and Retention

BCC scholarship has been abundant. Anderson et al. (2021) completed a meta-synthesis of 98 BCC articles published in four key journals across the last decade and found that research focused on the BCC structure, student-teacher relationships, and academic assessment. In a meta-synthesis of 11 BCC surveys covering 60 years, LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020) found enrollment to be driven by participation in university-wide general education requirements as well as an emphatic trend toward public speaking as a basic course format (60%) followed by the hybrid format (28%). These findings are consistent with trends identified in a systematic review of the same 11 BCC surveys (Morreale, 2020) as well as the most recent survey of the basic course (Morreale et al., 2023). Altogether, scholars point to the need for transcending research that establishes the relevance of the BCC beyond the discipline (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020), for demonstrating connections to the institutional mission to garner administrative support (Morreale, 2020) and for longitudinal research that extends to constituents outside of communication (Anderson et al., 2021).

Although college student retention scholarship enjoys a rich history, research on the BCC and retention is sparse. Three specific studies merit review. First, McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2020) examined the hybrid BCC in conjunction with an FYE course related to retention over a 2-year period (cohorts). Students who took the BCC and who completed an FYE course were more likely to be retained than students who only took an FYE course. Further, students who took the BCC and FYE courses reported higher levels of emotional support and higher levels of classroom connectedness than students who only took the FYE course. There was no difference in emotional work (surface acting). Overall, however, emotional support, emotional work, and classroom connectedness were not related to retention.

Second, Farris and Burns (2022) focused on integrating the university value system in the BCC and examined the impact on student recall and retention. Three groups of BCC students were compared. One group took the BCC with the core messaging values of the institution integrated into the curriculum. Another group completed the BCC with the core institutional messages being integrated into the course along with an out-of-class core message group experience. The third group served as a control. Students in both experimental conditions demonstrated higher levels of recall with respect to messages reflecting the institution's core values. While neither experimental condition was associated with retention, Farris and Burns encouraged more exploration between the BCC and student retention.

Third, Sidelinger and Frisby (2019) studied the longitudinal impact of a one-credit FYE BCC in relation to social integration, proactivity, and academic outcomes. Self-report surveys revealed a relationship between the BCC and persistence (likelihood of returning for a second semester). As the first semester progressed, the BCC was associated with increases in student perceptions of classroom connectedness, self-regulation, peer learning and connectedness, participation, and proactivity.

Collectively, none of the three BCC studies reviewed above have researched the BCC as a stand-alone relationship with retention. Contributing to college student retention research literature meets

the call by Hess (2016) for communication programs to enhance our institutional value. First, and foremost, it would help more students to succeed. Given that retention is a socialization process (Tinto, 1988), the field of communication should be front and center in terms of contributing to the improvement of student retention. Second, retention influences institutional enrollment management, something that is likely to garner administrative support (Morreale, 2020). Third, identifying connections between the BCC and retention would also enhance our discipline's standing in general education programs, the source of enrollment growth for communication programs across the nation (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020).

Based on the literature review above, 10 research questions were advanced; the first question being straightforward. It would be useful to know the relationship between the BCC and retention, independent of an FYE course or some other contingency variable.

RQ1: Are students who complete the BCC retained at a higher rate than students who do not take the BCC during the first year of study?

Beyond RQ1, a set of research questions focused on the BCC format. While early BCC retention research points toward a significant relationship, the studies conducted by McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2020) and Farris and Burns (2022) were operationalized using the hybrid BCC format. The third BCC retention study reviewed above involved a tailored FYE one-credit course that was hybrid-like in nature in so far as it addressed interpersonal communication, conflict management, and mediated communication in the context of academic and personal success (Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019). While public speaking serves as the dominant BCC format at most institutions across the nation (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020; Morreale, 2020; Morreale et al., 2023), any relationship between retention and public speaking is unknown. Theoretically speaking, competencies developed in the hybrid course (interpersonal communication, small group communication, perception, listening) might be more immediately relevant to first-year students who enter institutions needing to form new human relationships. It is also plausible that skills developed in public speaking may be valuable in this regard (e.g., communication apprehension, verbal communication skills, improved self-confidence). Indeed, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) found an association between the basic course and improved mental health. Put simply, we do not really know if the BCC format plays a role in retention. Hence, research questions two, three, and four were posed:

RQ2: Are first-year students who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than those who do not take the hybrid BCC?

RQ3: Are first-year students who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than those who do not take the public speaking BCC?

RQ4: Is there a difference in retention rate between public speaking and the hybrid BCC?

Affinity groups are popular in retention research. Theoretically, the idea involves socializing students in smaller groups designed to foster belongingness. Accordingly, it would be valuable to know if the BCC helps to improve retention for first-year students who are members of affinity groups. Athletes, for example, enter the institution as team members who are engaged in enduring relationships (coaches, teammates). Another group of students at the institution used in this study include those admitted into a scholarship community. These Academic Scholars take two FYE courses together and are engaged in common social-professional activities as the year progresses. Resident scholars are encouraged to live

near the same residence hall. Interestingly, by definition, Academic Scholars remove the question of academic skills from the retention question; failure to retain these students would not be due to a lack of academic skills. Together, these two groups presented the opportunity to see if the BCC course plays a role in retention. Skills learned in the BCC may be readily applicable to managing positive human relationships within the affinity groups (team conflict, personality differences, small group roles). Thus, four additional research questions were formulated:

RQ5: Are college athletes who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than athletes who did not take the hybrid BCC?

RQ6: Are college athletes who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than athletes who did not take the public speaking BCC?

RQ7: Are Academic Scholars who complete the hybrid BCC more likely to be retained than Academic Scholars who did not complete the hybrid BCC?

RQ8: Are Academic Scholars who complete the public speaking BCC more likely to be retained than Academic Scholars who did not complete the public speaking BCC?

Finally, by definition, retention is longitudinal. Students need to return to school year after year until they graduate. Sidelinger and Frisby (2019) observed a longitudinal influence, within the scope of the same semester, of a one-credit FYE BCC experience in terms of social integration, proactivity, and academic outcomes with respect to persistence (likelihood of returning for the second semester). If the BCC is related to retention, does the timing of the course matter? Should students take the BCC in their first semester of study or is taking it in the second semester sufficient? Thus, the ninth and tenth research questions were posed:

RQ9: Is there a difference in the retention rate between students who take the hybrid BCC in the fall as compared to the spring semester?

RQ10: Is there a difference in retention rate between students who take the public speaking BCC in the fall as compared to the spring semester?

Method

Context

Data for this study was collected at a small public comprehensive university located in the Midwestern United States enrolling about 8,000 students. Over 95% of first-year students attend full-time, with about one-third living on campus. Institutional retention rates hover in the mid 70% range (74.14% in 2018–19, 77.37% in 2019–20, 73.33% 2020–21). Retention was measured based on the return rate of first-year students (including transfers) for the second year of study at the institution. Students take one of two BCC courses (hybrid or public speaking), among other choices, to fulfill a university general education requirement. Academic advisors encourage students to complete oral competency during their first year, but this is not always possible due to seat availability and other scheduling needs. The data includes some transfer students, who still qualify as first-year students at the institution for retention purposes. All BCC instructors work from a core syllabus and use a common textbook. A common subset of multiple-choice

questions within the scope of the instructor's larger comprehensive final exam are administered as related to program-wide cognitive assessment. The core syllabus includes the course description, identifies course goals and objectives, and specifies a range of assignments (e.g., tests, types and kinds of speeches, and class activities). Each instructor develops their own syllabus that comports with the core syllabus. The hybrid BCC addresses seven competencies: interpersonal, verbal, nonverbal, listening, perception & identity, small group dynamics, and public speaking. Six competencies are addressed in the public speaking BCC: argumentation and reasoning, types of evidence, audience analysis, verbal language, arrangement, and visual aids. Said competencies are in alignment with the recommendations of the National Communication Association.

Both the hybrid and public speaking BCC are mainly delivered in a traditional face-to-face format. During the middle year (2019–2020), due to the pandemic, a high flex model was employed to provide instruction (limited in-person class meetings, relaxed in-person attendance policies, synchronous and asynchronous experiences). BCC enrollment is capped at 25 students in each section.

Procedure

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), longitudinal data was collected from existing records covering four consecutive academic years (2017–2018, 2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021). Data was de-identified prior to being shared with the researchers, negating the need for participant consent.

Using SPSS, frequencies, chi-square, and logistic regression were conducted. The initial analysis of the data consisted of a series of chi-square tests to examine the association between various categorical variables (e.g., completion of a BCC) and retention (outcome variable). Two categories of retention were labeled as retained and not retained. Chi-square tests were run for the overall samples (4 years combined) as well as each year individually. Logistic regression, which is justified when attempting to predict the impact of a series of independent variables on a categorical dependent variable (Mertler et al., 2021), was used to further examine demographic variables as retention predictors.

Participants

Our sample included 5,653 first-year students. A demographic profile of those students appears in Table 1 on the following page. Some of the participants in the sample belonged to affinity groups including athletes and Academic Scholars. Retention is a key aspect of student athlete recruitment at the university. Between two thirds and three fourths of the athletes are on scholarship (mostly partial scholarships). Athletes participate in NCAA Division II level of competition across a range of sports. There were 567 athletes in our sample (10%). Academic Scholars are admitted as a cohort each year on a select basis (entrance exam scores, high school GPA, and interviews). They take two general education classes together (FYE) and are invited to certain social–professional activities across the year. Academic Scholars composed 2.9% of the sample ($N = 165$).

Participation in the BCC was measured based on enrollment numbers for the hybrid and public speaking BCC courses. In total, 3,634 students (64.3%) took at least one BCC with 82 students (1.5%) who took both BCCs. The hybrid BCC was the more popular course with 2,858 students (50.7%) enrolled. A total of 930 students (16.5%) took the public speaking BCC. There were 1,937 students who did not take either BCC. Retention was measured based on return rates for each fall (beginning of the academic

TABLE 1		
Demographics of Sample Participants (n = 5653)		
Demographics	n	%
Sex		
Male	2056	36.4
Female	3597	63.6
Race		
White	4364	77.2
Black	503	8.9
Hispanic	284	5.0
Other	502	8.8
First Generation		
First generation	2388	42.2
Non-First generation	3265	57.8
Residential Status		
Commuter	2205	39.0
On-campus	3448	61.0

year). The overall retention rate for our sample was 75.2% (4,249 students). Retention rates per year remained consistent throughout the 4 years of data collection (77.3%, 74.1%, 77.3%, 72.2%).

Results

RQ1 asked if students who take a BCC are more likely to be retained than those who do not take a BCC. A three-way chi-square test was conducted crossing the variables BCC (completed both hybrid and public speaking BCC, completed one BCC, did not complete a BCC) with Retained (yes, no). Results indicated a statistically significant difference in retention rates, $\chi^2(2) = 1.91.14, p < .001, \Phi = .18$. Students who took at least one BCC (either hybrid or public speaking) were more likely to be retained (80.4%) than those who did not take a BCC (64.4%). Students who took both BCCs were most likely to be retained (95.1%).

RQ2 explored the hybrid BCC format in relation to retention. Results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the hybrid BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not take it, $\chi^2(1) = 120.54, p < .001, \Phi = .15$ with 81.4% of students who took the hybrid BCC being retained compared to 68.8% of students who did *not* take the hybrid BCC. Results for individual years were also significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2(1) = 50.29, p < .001$; 2018–19: $\chi^2(1) = 69.05, p < .001$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2(1) = 32.93, p < .001$; 2020–21: $\chi^2(1) = 36.32, p < .001$.

RQ3 examined the public speaking BCC format. Results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the public speaking course were more likely to be retained $\chi^2(1) = 14.57, p < .001, \Phi = .05$ with 80.1% of students who took public speaking being retained while 74.2% of students who did *not* take public speaking. Results for individual years were not all significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2(1) = 5.96, p = .02$; 2018–19: $\chi^2(1) = 2.55, p = .11$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2(1) = 2.37, p = .12$; 2020–21: $\chi^2(1) = 3.38, p = .07$.

TABLE 2
Retention Rates Based on Completion of BCCs

	N	Retention %				Overall Institution
		Both	Public Speaking	Hybrid	Neither	
All	5653	95.1	80.1	81.4	64.4	75.2
2017–18	1225	97.3	83.5	83.0	64.8	77.3
2018–19	1576	96.0	78.1	81.1	60.7	74.1
2019–20	1470	88.2	80.9	81.9	68.2	77.3
2020–21	1382	100	77.8	79.1	64.3	72.2

RQ4 asked if differences in likelihood of being retained existed between students who took public speaking versus the hybrid course. To address this question, a chi-square test comparing type of BCC (public speaking, hybrid) with retention (yes, no) was conducted. Interestingly, a higher percentage of students who completed the hybrid BCC were retained (81.0%) than those who took the public speaking BCC (78.7%). However, this difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 2.23, p < .14, \Phi = .03$.

Retention rates based on the completion of BCCs appear in Table 2 above. The table accounts for all 4 years. In each year, students who completed both BCCs were retained at a higher rate than any other category including the overall institutional retention rate.

RQ5 and RQ6 focused on student athletes. For RQ5, results of a two-way chi-square test indicated a statistically significant difference in retention among athletes who took the hybrid course, $\chi^2(1) = 6.77, p = .01, \Phi = .11$ with 80.5% of athletes taking the hybrid course being retained compared to 70.7% of athletes who did *not* take the hybrid course being retained. For RQ6, the difference in retention rates for athletes who took the public speaking course (77.8%) and those who did *not* (77.2%) was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = .01, p = .91, \Phi = .01$.

RQ7 and RQ8 examined Academic Scholars. For RQ7, results of two-way chi-square tests indicate that although a higher percentage of Academic Scholars who took the hybrid BCC were retained (98.6%) than those who did not take the hybrid BCC (94.7%), the difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 1.77, p = .18, \Phi = .10$. Concerning RQ8, the difference in retention rates for Academic Scholars who took the public speaking course (93.9%) and those who did *not* (97.0%) was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = .69, p = .41, \Phi = -.07$.

RQ9 and RQ10 compared fall and spring semester BCC retention rates. For RQ9, results of the two-way chi-square test indicated students who took the hybrid BCC in the spring had a higher rate of retention (83.2%) than students who took the BCC in the fall semester (80.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 4.38, p = .04, \Phi = .04$. Results for each year individually are not all statistically significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2(1) = 1.18, p = .28$; 2018–19: $\chi^2(1) = 3.68, p = .06$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2(1) = .41, p = .53$; 2020–21: $\chi^2(1) = .31, p = .5$. As for RQ10, results of a two-way chi-square test for data across all 4 years indicated students who took the public speaking BCC in the spring had a higher rate of retention (85.2%) than students who took the BCC in the fall semester (77.81%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.78, p = .01, \Phi = .09$. Results for each year individually are not all statistically significant, 2017–18: $\chi^2(1) = 2.91, p = .09$; 2018–19: $\chi^2(1) = .50, p = .48$; 2019–2020: $\chi^2(1) = .70, p = .40$; 2020–21: $\chi^2(1) = 5.29, p = .02$.

TABLE 3
Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Being Retained

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Odds ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio
BCC Hybrid	0.96	0.08	160.64	1	<.001	2.6***	[2.24, 3.01]
BCC public speaking	0.66	0.1	42.54	1	<.001	1.93***	[1.59, 2.36]
Sex	-0.44	0.07	35.62	1	<.001	0.65***	[0.56, 0.75]
Race	0.44	0.11	17.13	1	<.001	1.56***	[1.26, 1.92]
Academic scholar	2.16	0.46	22.15	1	<.001	8.66***	[3.52, 21.26]
Athlete	0.14	0.13	1.18	1	0.28	1.15	[0.9, 1.47]
First Generation	0.46	0.07	41.97	1	<.001	1.58***	[1.78, 1.81]
Residential status	0.18	0.07	6.57	1	0.1	1.2	[1.04, 1.38]
Constant	-0.02	0.13	0.03	1	0.86	0.98	
Note. *** p < .001.							

Existing research indicates BCC's impact on retention works with additional student demographic factors. In addition to addressing our research questions, a binary logistical regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of the BCC along with other variables relevant to retention research on the likelihood of students being retained. The model included six independent variables (Academic Scholar (y/n), athlete (y/n), gender, race, residential status, and first-generation status). The full model containing all predictors was statistically significant, indicating the model was able to distinguish between respondents who were retained and those who were not retained, $\chi^2(8, N = 5653) = 322.19, p < .001$. Overall, the model explained between 6.4% (Cox and Snell R square) and 9.6% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variances in retention and correctly classified 76.5% of the cases. As shown in Table 3 above, six of the eight independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The strongest predictor of retention was being an Academic Scholar, recording an odds ratio of 8.66. The next two strongest predictors were completion of the BCC courses. Students who completed the hybrid BCC were 2.56 times more likely to be retained while students who completed the public speaking BCC were 1.93 times more likely to be retained.

Additional chi-square tests were conducted to examine differences in retention rates based on BCC completion for each demographic variable. Chi-square values appear in Tables 4 and 5.

Finally, researchers investigated if differences in the likelihood of being retained based on completion of a BCC were influenced during the pandemic as Covid dramatically influenced course delivery and structure. Hence, comparisons were made between pre-Covid years (AY17-18/AY18-19) versus pandemic years (AY19-20/AY20-21). The likelihood of being retained did not differ for students who took a BCC during pre-Covid years (hybrid, 82%; public speaking, 80.6%) versus those who took a BCC during Covid years (hybrid, 80.7%; public speaking, 79.6%).

TABLE 4

Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Hybrid BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

	N	df	χ^2	p	Φ	Retention %	
						BCC	No BCC
Males							
Overall	2056	1	73.11***	<.001	0.19	78.4	61
2017–2018	452	1	24.35***	<.001	0.23	81	59.8
2018–2019	592	1	30.52***	<.001	0.23	76.9	55.3
2019–2020	543	1	14.41***	<.001	0.16	78.8	64.1
2020–2021	469	1	8.25**	0.004	0.13	76.7	64.6
Females							
Overall	3597	1	65.34***	<.001	0.13	83.5	72.3
2017–2018	773	1	9.94**	0.002	0.11	84.4	75.3
2018–2019	984	1	26.04***	<.001	0.16	84.2	70.6
2019–2020	827	1	9.86**	0.002	0.1	84.3	76
2020–2021	913	1	16.09***	<.001	0.13	80.6	68.5
Commuters							
Overall	2205	1	57.05***	<.001	0.16	79.5	65
2017–2018	766	1	22.88***	<.001	0.17	74.2	57.9
2018–2019	546	1	11.66***	<.001	0.15	84	72
2019–2020	442	1	7.48**	0.006	0.13	84.3	73.5
2020–2021	451	1	17.62***	<.001	0.2	78.9	60.2
Residential							
Overall	3448	1	60.91***	<.001	0.13	82.5	71.3
2017–2018	459	1	0.49	0.48	0.03	96	74.6
2018–2019	1030	1	38.84***	<.001	0.19	79.7	62.1
2019–2020	1028	1	12.58***	<.001	0.11	81.1	71.7
2020–2021	931	1	8.45**	0.004	0.1	79.2	70.8
First Generation							
Overall	2388	1	50.1***	<.001	0.15	77.4	64.2
2017–2018	494	1	11.12***	<.001	0.15	82.1	69.2
2018–2019	684	1	19.22***	<.001	0.17	75.9	60.2
2019–2020	652	1	4.53*	0.03	0.08	76.2	68.8
2020–2021	558	1	14.26***	<.001	0.16	76	60.7

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4 (continued)
Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Hybrid BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

	<i>N</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Φ	Retention %	
						BCC	No BCC
Non-First Generation							
Overall	3265	1	69.6***	<.001	0.15	84.2	72.2
2017–2018	731	1	17.01***	<.001	0.15	83.7	70.9
2018–2019	892	1	26.67***	<.001	0.17	84.8	70.5
2019–2020	818	1	17.54***	<.001	0.15	86.6	85.1
2020–2021	824	1	9.31**	0.002	0.11	81.1	71.9
White							
Overall	4364	1	92.14***	<.001	0.15	83.2	71
2017–2018	937	1	16.79***	<.001	0.13	83.8	72.8
2018–2019	1240	1	39.44***	<.001	0.18	83.2	68
2019–2020	1144	1	20.55***	<.001	0.13	84.1	73.1
2020–2021	1043	1	15.41***	<.001	0.12	81.4	70.7
Black							
Overall	503	1	28.9***	<.001	0.23	77.6	55.9
2017–2018	109	1	4.45*	0.04	0.2	77.6	58.8
2018–2019	143	1	16.89***	<.001	0.34	78.9	45.3
2019–2020	122	1	2.27	0.13	0.14	79.5	67.3
2020–2021	129	1	5.34*	0.02	0.2	73.3	53.6

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 5
Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Public Speaking BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

	<i>N</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Φ	Retention %	
						BCC	No BCC
Males							
Overall	2056	1	2.57	0.11	0.04	75.3	70.4
2017–2018	452	1	0.41	0.52	0.03	75.7	72
2018–2019	592	1	0.68	0.4	-0.03	64.3	69.2
2019–2020	543	1	1.52	0.22	0.05	79.7	72.1
2020–2021	469	1	5.95*	0.02	0.11	85.4	68.4
Females							
Overall	3597	1	8.88**	0.003	0.05	81.8	76.6
2017–2018	773	1	5.80*	0.02	0.09	87	78.4
2018–2019	984	1	4.41*	0.04	0.07	93.2	76.1
2019–2020	827	1	0.35	0.56	0.02	91.3	79.4
2020–2021	913	1	0.31	0.58	0.02	75.2	72.9

TABLE 5 (continued)
Chi-Square Analysis Between Completion of Public Speaking BCC and Retention per Demographic Group

	<i>N</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>	Φ	Retention %	
						BCC	No BCC
Commuters							
Overall	2205	1	9.12**	0.003	0.064	78.9	70.8
2017–2018	766	1	2.87	0.09	0.06	72.9	65.1
2018–2019	546	1	0.89	0.34	0.04	82.4	77.5
2019–2020	442	1	2.7	0.1	0.08	85.7	76.9
2020–2021	451	1	3.81	0.051	0.09	80	66.3
Residential							
Overall	3448	1	5.27*	0.02	0.039	80.7	76.4
2017–2018	459	1	1.67	0.2	0.06	97.9	94.8
2018–2019	1030	1	2.18	0.14	0.05	76.3	71
2019–2020	1028	1	0.68	0.41	0.03	79.1	76.3
2020–2021	931	1	0.6	0.44	0.03	77	76.8
First Generation							
Overall	2388	1	3.02	0.082	0.04	74.4	70.1
2017–2018	494	1	1.06	0.3	0.05	80.4	75.4
2018–2019	684	1	1.63	0.2	0.05	73.6	67.3
2019–2020	652	1	0.66	0.42	0.03	75.6	72
2020–2021	558	1	0.001	0.97	0.002	66.7	66.9
Non-First Generation							
Overall	3265	1	14.12**	0.001	0.07	84.5	77.2
2017–2018	731	1	5.46*	0.02	0.09	85.6	76.3
2018–2019	892	1	0.74	0.39	0.03	71.2	78
2019–2020	818	1	2.73	0.09	0.06	86.2	79.9
2020–2021	824	1	7.15**	0.008	0.09	86.1	74.3
White							
Overall	4364	1	8.2***	0.004	0.043	81	76.2
2017–2018	937	1	6.16*	0.01	0.08	85.6	77.2
2018–2019	1240	1	1.66	0.19	0.04	79.5	75.4
2019–2020	1144	1	1.4	0.24	0.04	81.5	77.8
2020–2021	1043	1	0.4	0.53	0.02	77.1	74.7
Black							
Overall	503	1	0.07	0.8	0.01	68.2	67.8
2017–2018	109	1	0.003	0.96	0.005	69.2	68.7
2018–2019	143	1	1.36	0.24	-0.09	55	68.3
2019–2020	122	1	0.002	0.96	0.004	75	74.5
2020–2021	129	1	2.39	0.12	0.14	83.3	60.7

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Though retention is complicated, the answer to RQ1 is straightforward: Students who completed the BCC during their first year of college were retained at a higher rate than students who did not complete the course during the first year. Hence, the BCC was emphatically associated with retention. Other findings were encouraging, but more nuanced.

RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 addressed BCC format. While the collective 4-year retention rate for students who completed public speaking was significantly higher than students who did not complete public speaking during the first year, the breakdown for individual years is more revealing. In the first year of the present analysis, students who completed public speaking were retained at a significantly higher rate than students who did not complete public speaking. In years two, three, and four, the retention rate for public speaking students was higher than for students who did not complete public speaking; however, the difference was not statistically significant. In contrast, students who completed the hybrid BCC during their first year of college were more likely to be retained than students who did not complete the hybrid BCC for each year individually. Comparatively speaking, the hybrid BCC was more consistently aligned with retention than public speaking. Logistic regression bore this out further, as students who completed the hybrid BCC were 2.56 times more likely to be retained while students who completed the public speaking BCC were 1.93 times more likely to be retained. Most noteworthy, the overall retention rate for students who completed both BCCs (hybrid and public speaking) during the first year was 95%, which falls in the range of elite institutions wherein retention is not a problem.

RQ5 and RQ6 examined student athletes as an affinity group in relation to the BCC and retention. Athletes who completed the hybrid BCC during the first year were retained at a significantly higher rate than athletes who did not complete the hybrid BCC. Conversely, athletes who completed public speaking were not retained at a significantly higher rate than athletes who did not complete public speaking. This finding is consistent with results from the larger sample overall and held for each year over the 4 years.

Academic Scholars were also studied as an affinity group, accounting for RQ7 and RQ8. While scholars who completed the hybrid BCC were more likely to be retained than those who did not complete the hybrid BCC, the reverse was true for students who completed public speaking. Results should be considered in context. Findings related to Academic Scholars underscore what is known about retention in general: Students with higher GPAs and academic skills are more likely to succeed in college (Crede & Niehorster, 2012). In this study, the retention rate for Academic Scholars exceeded 93% for all conditions in all years (with logistic regression indicating 8.66 times more likely to be retained).

RQ9 and RQ10 explored BCC timing. The overall retention rate was higher for students completing the hybrid BCC in spring as compared to fall term. However, this finding did not hold for each individual year. Likewise, the overall retention rate for students who completed public speaking during the spring was higher than those who completed it in the fall. This finding held in one individual year. Although retention rates between spring and fall for both courses were not significant every year, findings consistently favored the spring. Persistence may explain this finding; students enrolled in the spring persisted from the fall (completed fall and returned for spring). Hence, the lower retention rate might be explained by fall term departures.

The retention rate for students who completed the hybrid BCC was significantly higher than those who did not complete the hybrid BCC for every demographic subgroup: males, females, commuters, non-commuters, first-generation, non-first-generation, White, and Black. Retention rates increased as follows: Black students (22%), males (17%), commuters (15%), and first-generation students (13%). In contrast, the retention rate increase for students who completed the public speaking BCC was significantly higher than those who did not complete the public speaking BCC for select demographic variables: females, commuter, non-commuters, non-first-generation, White. Commuter students experienced the largest advantage (8%). Black students, first-generation students, and males did not experience a statistically significant advantage when completing public speaking. Clearly, students from all demographics fared better in the hybrid BCC. Perhaps the content of the hybrid BCC helps minority students to better understand issues related to social diversity (Walton & Cohen, 2011) and working-class students to see the need for developing campus-based capital (Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

Implications

It is encouraging to learn that the BCC was related to a higher rate of college student retention, independent from an FYE course or any other contingent variable. Indeed, communication research is central to understanding Tinto's (1988) theory of retention as a socialization process. Our findings represent an emphatic welcome mat to our BCC as a "front porch" (Beebe, 2013). These findings establish institutional value for administrators and stakeholders outside of our discipline (Anderson et al., 2021; Hess, 2016; Morreale, 2020).

At the same time, the findings of this study suggest the hybrid BCC was more consistently related to retention than public speaking. The only other BCC studies related to retention were operationalized using the hybrid BCC (Farris & Burns, 2022; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2020). If the hybrid BCC format is more aligned with higher retention rates, then institutions should examine their choice of BCC format. And, since 60% of our institutions employ the public speaking BCC (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020; Morreale, 2020; Morreale et al., 2023), we might be missing an opportunity to enhance the value and of our "front porch." Given that students who completed public speaking and the hybrid BCC experienced the highest rate of retention, institutions might consider expanding the general education requirements to include two communication courses in lieu of an FYE course.

Reasons behind the hybrid BCC's more consistent association with retention merit theoretical speculation. Content addressed in the hybrid course (perception, interpersonal communication, conflict management, coculture communication, listening skills, verbal communication, small group conflict, and role theory) offer immediate application for first-year students navigating relationships with classmates, roommates, teammates, student organization members, and new friendships. Though not related directly to retention, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) offer evidence associating basic instruction (hybrid and public speaking) with higher levels of well-being (belongingness, flourishing, and lower levels of loneliness) for students enrolled in the second semester of their first year of study. Interpersonal communication skills meet student needs; developing those skills in a timely manner may contribute to retention.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the present analysis is based on 4 years of historical data, additional studies are needed as our results are confined to a single institution. Both formats of the BCC were positively associated with retention, yet the hybrid format was more consistently related to retention than public speaking. Interestingly, Broeckelman-Post et al. (2023) found a similar consistency trend when comparing the hybrid BCC and public speaking BCC with respect to student well-being. Since previous BCC retention research has focused only on the hybrid format (Farris & Burns, 2022; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2020; Sidelinger & Frisby, 2019), more BCC format comparisons are needed. Does the hybrid course content affect retention? Also worth noting, chi-square and logistic regression analyze frequencies and are not cause-effect models. Moreover, the affinity groups (athletes and Academic Scholars) in this study were not operationalized as a treatment condition. Other affinity groups (e.g., band, choir, student government, residential life) in relation to the BCC and retention deserve examination. Some experimental research is in order.

Morreale et al. (2023) and LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020) identified consistency across sections as one of the most challenging issues for BCC delivery. Findings from the present study might, in part, be due to the use of a common core syllabus and common textbook. Small class size has also been associated with retention (Wills et al., 2018). Enrollment was capped at 25 for both formats (hybrid and public speaking) in this study.

Scholars concerned with communication pedagogy and with the BCC should focus more on college student retention. To summarize, the BCC is emphatically related to retention independent from any contingency variable. This finding enhances the value of our discipline to the wider academic community and to other stakeholders. Communication scholars and administrators should reconsider the content format of the BCC. Faculty and administrators in the discipline might advocate to have students complete two courses in communication instead of communication and an FYE course. Communication scholars contribute to the base of college student retention research where we have been largely absent (retention is social and academic). An established research base will enhance our value to the academic community.

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