The charge of our task force was to focus on students’ capacity to communicate effectively, across different media and for a variety of purposes; on innovative and conventional ways of expressing, convincing, listening, and contributing; and on collaborating with others. More specifically, we considered (1) What are the best ways (courses, experiences, etc.) to teach written and oral communication, both in general and in domain-specific areas? (2) What are the best ways to ensure communication skills (oral, written, and digital) are integrated into general education? (3) What are the best ways to encourage collaboration in learning, innovation, communication, and creativity?

The committee included faculty members Misha Becker (Linguistics), Jane Danielewicz (English and Comparative Literature), Richard Goldberg (Biomedical Engineering), Rahsaan Maxwell (Political Science), Steve May (Communication), and Elizabeth Olson (Geography) as well as student member Caroline Bass, and coordinating liaison Christian Lundberg (Communication), and was chaired by Keith Payne (Psychology and Neuroscience).

Communication and collaboration, including writing, oral communication, and teamwork, are among the most critical skills that graduates entering the world as citizens, scholars, and workers, can master. In the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ 2016 survey of employers, verbal communication was rated as the single most important skill employers look for in job candidates. Altogether, communication and collaboration (including verbal communication, written communication, and ability to collaborate in teams) comprised three of the top ten skills. Our goal is to offer a curriculum that enables all UNC graduates to communicate and collaborate effectively in groups. Here we report the outcomes of our deliberations about how to reach this goal, organized around the questions posed to all task forces by the curriculum committee.

What outcomes or capacities might be listed for students in your area?

The critical capacities our task force aims to foster are written communication, oral communication, and collaboration in groups. In written communication, the goals are for students to be able to communicate ideas, build arguments, and use evidence as appropriate for communicating with multiple audiences and across multiple areas of inquiry (e.g., humanities, social sciences, natural sciences) and across different mediums. In oral communication, goals include the learning how to effectively contribute to person-to-person discussions, small group discussions, organizational communication, public speaking, and citizen-oriented deliberation. This includes learning strategies for speaking up as well as editing oneself, how to tailor messages for specific audiences, and how to translate written ideas into formats that work well in oral communication. Goals for collaboration in groups include building on the communication skills above while gaining competency in working with others. This requires an understanding of how to establish and work toward group goals, apportion responsibility and accountability in speech and in action, resolve collective or individual
problems, and manage groups in ways that create inclusive and engaging environments for better outcomes. It can also mean working at the cutting edge of collaborative tools and strategies.

What is working well in the existing curriculum in your area?

The university currently devotes resources to training written communication, including required composition courses (ENG 105, 105i), the requirement for ten pages of writing in general education courses, and the Writing Center. Currently, however, the university does not have curriculum-wide courses in oral communication or collaboration. We believe that the combination of some required courses, together with efforts to integrate communication into the regular general education curriculum, and support for university resources such as the Writing Center are all valuable approaches. However, the Task Force believes that these resources should be extended to support training in oral communication and collaboration as well as writing. The existing foreign language requirement is seen as an important and effective part of broadening students’ communication capabilities. Overall, the task force noted that we do not have a clear sense of how well UNC undergraduates are developing communication and collaboration skills because we currently have few metrics to measure these outcomes.

What are the best ways to incorporate and sequence these goals into a four-year general education curriculum, integrating with students' intellectual development, major study, and other experiences?

The task force considered multiple approaches for integrating these goals into the overall curriculum. First, the task force suggests that the current requirement that general education classes include 10 pages of writing should be replaced by a requirement for communication, including written, oral, and collaboration. The formats for these assignments would vary so much from one discipline to another that it would be better for instructors to design their specific parameters, with guidance and/or support, where appropriate, from experts in written communication, oral communication, and collaboration. Regardless of the format, however, communication assignments should include opportunities for feedback and revisions in order to be effective learning opportunities.

Second, the task force recommends communication- and collaboration-intensive courses (and building capacity for departments to offer courses) designed to teach collaborative skills in project-based work. These could take several forms. The ENG 105 composition courses already constitute a common “onboarding” opportunity for incoming students to establish a basic level of writing expertise in genres across the disciplines. One option is to replicate this existing structure. To meet our goals, however, introductory level classes across the disciplines would have to be expanded to cover oral communication and collaboration, which would require separate additional courses.
Another form in which communication- and collaboration-intensive courses could be integrated into the curriculum is through junior-level communication intensive courses. We envision these courses as project-based seminars focused within disciplines. Because communication is disciplinary specific, all departments should be offering these communication-intensive and team-based courses as part of their major.

Finally, departments could offer communication-intensive senior capstone courses that are project-based and group-based throughout the full term. Although both junior seminars and senior capstones are resource-intensive, such intensive upper-level project-based courses would have the important advantage of providing the time needed across the semester to provide multiple iterations of feedback with revisions for written assignments, oral presentations, and team-based work. Some task force members supported expanding these upper-level (junior seminars or senior capstone) communication/collaboration-intensive courses in the disciplines. Other members noted that some departments already support these kinds of classes, which could be strengthened with further guidance on how to maximize student learning of collaboration skills.

What difficulties do you foresee in trying to implement these recommendations or integrate them with other elements of a Carolina education?

Each approach has its own obstacles. Regarding requirements distributed throughout the general education curriculum, the main difficulties are (1) instructor awareness and compliance; (2) lack of guidelines for how to design project-based writing assignments integral to the course; (3) resources to design and implement communication or collaborative assignments well, including building the assignments into the course structure (not just “tacking on” extra work), scaffolding assignments to include revision, and considering a range of methods for giving feedback. The task force noted that many instructors are unaware of the current ten page writing requirement for general education courses. Any requirements that expand the breadth or depth of requirements will need to be advertised, not only during the initial roll-out of the revised curriculum, but in years following so that instructors understand requirements even if they join the faculty/staff after the curriculum is implemented. Moreover, departments and faculty will need to see the value of these requirements and be comfortable and enthusiastic about teaching them since the ability to monitor whether requirements are being implemented is limited. Resources should be spent on faculty development and support and not on monitoring.

If communication requirements are expanded, it will place a greater burden on departments and instructors to reconceive of their courses with integrated communication-rich assignments that require feedback for multiple drafts, among other factors. To be successful, departments and their faculty would need extra resources, including, but not limited to, support for teaching assistants. For these reasons, expanding requirements across the general education curriculum
may not be the most feasible approach and, as a result, stand-alone courses are preferred. Much like current writing courses, experts in oral communication and collaboration can build the required capacities in those areas.

The resources needed to implement communication-intensive upper level courses would be more targeted, and therefore more central to the disciplines and the work of the faculty. We considered (1) what incentives there are for instructors to offer these courses and (2) what additional teaching assistant / grading support is available. Additional TA support may address both of these issues, because having support in grading and administrative aspects of teaching may provide incentive for instructors to develop new communication-intensive courses. However, this solution is not possible for many departments (who have no budget or available or sufficient graduate students), nor would it address the need for incentives, commitment, and resources (e.g. models, professional development, project-based learning, etc.) on the part of all departments and faculty to insure these courses were regularly taught.

What might be done in your area to simplify navigation?

Our recommendations are likely to have only a small effect on students’ ability to navigate the curriculum. If general requirements are expanded in general education courses it would not change navigability for students. And, if the communication-intensive upper level courses were added, it would add a relatively modest additional set of criteria to ensure that students have completed at least one communication/collaboration-intensive course.

How can we best assess (measure) students' success in these areas, both during their college careers and in the years after they graduate?

Upper-level communication-rich collaborative courses could be integral to the majors in the disciplines. If communication-intensive upper level courses are adopted as part of their majors, then grades in those courses are expected to reflect, in substantial part, students' mastery of competencies related to communication and collaboration. If more granular assessments are desired, instructors of communication-intensive courses could be requested to report grades for sub-components of courses separately (e.g., communication, teamwork, mastery of course subject material). Departments would be invested in teaching, assessing, fostering, and showcasing these skills in their majors.

The big question is how? One answer is “publication,” or having a tangible product that is delivered, presented, shown to an audience, and/or has value outside the institution (and is not just submitted to the instructor for a grade). Publication could take many forms, some of which are already happening, for instance, presenting at the Celebration for Undergraduate Research, organizing a group show at the Ackland, publishing in a disciplinary journal etc.

E-portfolios would be one way for students to “publish” their work and demonstrate their success in these areas. Faculty could design communication-rich assignments in disciplinary
genres, knowing that students will be including these projects in their portfolios. Students could begin building their e-portfolios when they arrive as first-year students and keep adding to these portfolios as they move into their majors. Departments and faculty could design project-based collaborative assignments that meet the special competencies, knowledge, expertise, etc. that students should demonstrate in their major. Assessment could occur at the course-level, the department level, or the college level. E-portfolios would serve as a way for students to demonstrate their competencies in college as well as pursuing careers etc. beyond college.

What resources would need to be found or generated in order to make these recommendations successful?

Most concretely, resources need to be devoted to support for instructors in grading, providing feedback, and coaching students through iterative drafts of whatever projects they use to learn oral communication, written communication, and group-based collaboration. This may mean additional teaching assistants in areas where stand-alone or communication-intensive courses are offered, or additional positions modeled on the current graduate research consultants employed in research-intensive courses.

Areas where the university is already investing resources to support writing should be re-tooled to support communication and collaboration more broadly. The Writing Center, for example, is a well-known and popular resource on campus. The task force recommends expanding this resource into a Communication and Collaboration Center. The goal is to offer support for oral communication and collaborative team projects similar to the ways the Writing Center currently supports writing activities. In order to expand the mission of the Writing Center, several faculty members with PhDs in the requisite fields would need to be hired in order to work with the faculty director. Hiring new faculty in appropriate disciplines with specialty areas in collaboration and oral communication would be critical to this expansion, especially if there will be an infusion of project-focused collaborative projects in students’ majors.

The Center for Faculty Excellence is a well-known and popular resource for faculty seeking support for their professional activities, especially teaching. This resource could be further leveraged to support faculty in implementing group-based collaborative projects, as well as techniques and materials for training how to develop, support, and evaluate oral and written communication genres. The Center for Faculty Excellence could provide training to faculty who will be teaching students things such as how to work across difference or resolve difficult relationships.

Some types of communication and collaboration require technical knowledge, such as designing web sites or using/adapting/designing social media platforms, or building digital portfolios. Resources for building technical skills are available in various forms across campus, including support for technical computing at the Odum Institute, multimedia equipment at the Media Resources Center, instruction in digital storytelling at the Health Sciences Library, and support
services at the Research Hub and the Digital Innovation Lab. The recent license for Adobe Creative Cloud means that all students have available tools for digital projects—including visual, oral, and design projects. As student become more immersed in oral communication and collaboration, these and other resources may need to be bound together in a more integrated and easily accessible communication infrastructure at UNC. (Instituting e-portfolios at the college level with a faculty director would be one possible way to coordinate these scattered resources.) Another piece of collaboration infrastructure that can be utilized more effectively is CATME (Comprehensive Assessment of Team Member Effectiveness; catme.org). This is an online platform for students to work in teams. It is widely used in some disciplines, especially in sciences and engineering. Some version of a digital platform may be useful at UNC more broadly to enable team collaboration.

Summary and conclusion.

We return to the overarching goal of the new curriculum: to educate citizen-scholars. Our task force developed strategies to enable all UNC graduates to communicate and collaborate effectively in groups in order to bring their education to bear on their lives as employees and entrepreneurs; citizens and leaders; and lifelong learners. Specifically, our task force addressed three main questions:

(1) What are the best ways to teach written communication, both in general and in domain-specific areas?

We already have a strong grounding in communication, given ENGL 105 and 105i (Writing in the Disciplines). Students should have the opportunity to build on, practice and develop these skills in other courses, especially in courses within their majors.

(2) What are the best ways to ensure communication skills (oral, written, and digital) are integrated into general education?

Develop an articulated program in communication and collaborative projects that faculty integrate into their disciplinary courses. The task force recommends stand-alone courses in written communication, oral communication, and collaboration respectively. Faculty would need guidelines (what do such projects look like across the disciplines) and other forms of support (e.g. professional development, TAs, training in assignment design and assessment, etc.). This would be an overarching vision of the general education curriculum, with all departments participating willingly.

(3) What are the best ways to encourage collaboration in learning, innovation, communication, and creativity?

Faculty in our working group spoke most enthusiastically about projects in their courses that had some connection to the professional worlds outside the classroom. Situating these projects in real-world situations, either actual or simulated (e.g. mock trials, presentations to corporate boards, etc.) engages students who feel they have something at stake beyond securing a grade.
The task force believes these are the best ways to encourage students to transfer their learning beyond the university to build successful careers, engagement in public life, and to continue lifelong learning.