

Quality Enhancement Plan: Learning to Speak—Speaking to Learn

University of the South

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The primary goal of “Learning to Speak—Speaking to Learn” is to improve students’ speaking skills through the practice of public speaking and listening in disciplines across the curriculum. A secondary goal of this QEP is to enhance students’ ability to speak in public through the process of learning and developing better oral communication skills and to develop their appreciation of the spoken word as a force across all aspects of civic life.

The QEP Task Force engaged in extensive discussion with faculty in a variety of disciplines across the College. The overarching intent was to develop student learning outcomes that encompassed the core aspects of good public speaking in the liberal arts tradition while also remaining flexible enough to apply across a broad range of disciplines and forms of public speaking. With feedback from faculty, the Task Force identified five key student learning outcomes:

1. Students will deliver original oral presentations that demonstrate understanding of the topic by explaining, analyzing, or arguing specific concepts, ideas, images, music, or texts.
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to support their spoken explanations, analyses, or arguments with appropriate evidence and examples.
3. Students will use communication techniques (such as eye contact, language, voice, and effective use of media) tailored to the topic, setting, and audience.
4. Students will design and deliver well-organized speeches of appropriate length.
5. Student presenters will respond in fitting and meaningful ways to questions, comments, and nonverbal cues from the audience.

The VALUE rubric (developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities) and two other college-tested rubrics were adapted and molded into a new assessment rubric that is specifically tailored to Sewanee’s “Learning to Speak—Speaking to Learn” student learning outcomes. During the QEP implementation process, departments and programs will be assisted with adapting these learning outcomes to meet specific disciplinary goals.

The key actions planned for the QEP include the following:

- develop five new “Speaking” designated courses across the curriculum in each of the five years of the QEP. Existing courses will be retooled with a more conscious effort to teach public speaking in the context of the course. There will also be new courses, such as public speaking courses, that will be taught by a new professor of rhetoric.
- establish a Center for Speaking and Listening in duPont Library, directed by the new professor of rhetoric, with equipment to record and play back presentations, space for student tutors, and resources for both faculty and students.
- equip satellite speaking practice areas in buildings across campus where students can practice, record, review, and improve their speaking skills.
- provide faculty with workshops and training in the teaching and assessment of public speaking and other oral communication skills.
- enhance co-curricular opportunities for students to engage in activities that will showcase and improve their public speaking abilities, (e.g., hosting an annual student speech competition and involving students in introducing speakers at public lectures, as well as an on-campus debate society).
- using the lessons learned from the QEP to develop a broad speaking-across-the-curriculum program proposal on which faculty will vote during the final year of the QEP.

We have high and achievable aspirations for this QEP. We believe it will clearly promote enhanced student learning. Moreover, it supports an even stronger academic community that in turn will provide our students both an improved learning environment and route to a successful life beyond Sewanee. As noted by one student, a successful speaking and listening initiative could “change the way we talk about important issues on campus and live life at Sewanee, with a deeper sense of respect for others and what they have to say.”