

Measuring Finance Majors' Communications Abilities using AACSB Best Practices for AOL Processes

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ABSTRACT

AACSB accreditation of an undergraduate business degree program requires that the institution enumerate its learning goals and demonstrate the successful student's attainment thereof. AACSB mandates that learning goals be both consistent with the institution's mission statement and measurable. This study describes the AOL process for assuring oral and written communications abilities in the finance major curriculum. Among finance majors, the findings reveal an adequate level of oral communications skills but written communications skills below the appropriate level for the finance professional. The results reveal that lack of performance is a function of skill and not writing apprehension for this set of students.

Introduction

The most recent AACSB International *Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation* (Standards) (2007) extend the former continuous improvement and assessment process approach to accountability and evaluation of business school programs to AOL – a process and outcome-based approach. In general, the AOL process consists of three steps: (1) write learning goals which, among other activities, includes operationalizing the goals through measurement, (2) demonstrate that learning has occurred, and (3) utilize the results to improve courses and programs. Communications abilities, both oral and written, are skills deemed by AACSB that would normally be included.

Although the AACSB's AOL mandate currently applies to business programs and not separate majors or concentrations, the described process can easily transfer to each program within the degree. The purpose of this study was to (1) identify strengths and weaknesses in the finance majors' written and oral communications abilities and (2) where weaknesses exist, determine necessary revisions in the substance and delivery in the finance program. The determination of necessary revisions to the finance program requires the isolation of variables that affect performance. Performance (ability) on communications activities is a function of communication apprehension (CA)² and communications skills (CS).³ This study isolates the effects of CA and CS to identify the determinants of communication performance among finance majors. Subsequently, areas for improvement with respect to finance students' communications abilities can be identified.

The results indicate that students met or exceeded expectations in the objective relating to oral communications. More specifically, finance students exploited their lower than average overall oral communication apprehension to demonstrate an extremely high performance in oral communication skills; in fact, students that did not take a public

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² CA commonly refers to oral communication apprehension (OCA). However, some authors have used OCA to distinguish oral communication apprehension from writing apprehension. CA is used here to denote both forms of communication apprehension.

³ See Berger and McCroskey (1982).

speaking-related course performed equally to students that did. Deficiencies, however, were well documented in the writing component of the communications goal. The results reveal that writing apprehension does not factor into writing performance for this set of students. Any lack of performance is strictly a function of skill. Thus, each dimension of writing needs to be addressed with more focus on organizational skills and use of the English language (active voice, grammar, and appropriate language).

Data and Methodology

The sample in this study consists of 25 senior finance majors in a required, upper division Financial Institutions Management course at a medium-sized southeastern regional University.⁴ Students had completed three required basic English courses.⁵ Approximately 25 percent of these students also majored in accounting and eight percent double-majored in marketing. Males comprise 68 percent of the sample. The average age of the sample is 25 with a range of 21 to 43 years of age. Fifty-two percent of the sample took a non-required public speaking or human communications course. The average overall GPA entering the course was 3.09. By the end of the semester, 80 percent of the students had completed 67 percent of the finance curriculum with an average GPA in the finance curriculum of 3.00.

Oral communication skills were assessed via a comprehensive assignment embedded within the course: the students were required to complete a comprehensive loan application, evaluation, documentation, and closure assignment.⁶ The oral presentation accounted for 30 percent (oral portion) of the 100-point project; the project counted 30 percent of the overall course grade. Students received the oral communications' rubric utilized to grade the presentations simultaneously to receiving the assignment; in addition to an overall evaluation, the rubric includes an assessment of following individual criteria: organization, clarity, media, language, and delivery.⁷ At the completion of the assignment, Professor Roland graded each individual presentation using the oral communications' rubric, and the students completed the Personal Report of Communications Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24) survey; the survey evaluates the student's communication anxiety with others on an individual basis, in group settings, in public forums, and in meetings.⁸

Written communication skills were assessed via a subjective writing assignment. The same students that presented orally submitted written papers that required them to describe their five-year personal and/or professional goals and their plans for accomplishing these goals. Again, the students received the written rubric simultaneously to receiving the assignment; the written portion accounted for 15 percent of a 100 point assignment; the assignment accounted for 25% of the overall course grade; in addition to an overall evaluation, the rubric includes an assessment of the following individual criteria: organization, clarity, media, and language.⁹ At the completion of the assignment, Professor Roland graded each individual paper, and the students completed the writing apprehension test (WA) survey.¹⁰

Pearson's Product Moment Correlations provided insight to the associations between measures of performance, CA, and gender. Comparisons between finance students of the current study and those in the literature were made using t-tests. ANOVA was used to compare genders' oral and written communication performance and apprehension. ANOVA was also used to compare oral communications performance and apprehension between students that had taken a public speaking course to those that had not taken the equivalent course.

⁴ The finance program at Langdale College is relatively small with only 33 students from fall 2005 through summer 2006. Thus while the sample is relatively small in absolute number, proportionally it represents the vast majority of graduating senior finance majors at the Langdale College.

⁵ Composition I, Composition II, and Business Writing courses.

⁶ Students self-select a particular type of loan and obtained information. Students were given the option of completing the assignment individually or within self-selected groups; however, no duplication of loans were allowed. For example, if one student chose an auto loan, that student would visit a new car dealer, find the model desired, and copy the information (including price) from the invoice on the window. If another student chose a mortgage loan, that student would find a home for sale and get all relevant information including location, size, and asking price. Students then interviewed appropriate bank officers, real estate agents, insurance agents, lawyers, accountants and/or any other business professional whose services were necessary to obtain the specified loans. The research culminated by each individual student giving an informative speech that summarizes the activities and insights generated by their loan assignments.

⁷ The oral communications rubric developed by VSU faculty is available upon request.

⁸ See McCroskey (1982) and McCroskey et al. (1985).

⁹ The oral communications rubric developed by VSU faculty is available upon request.

¹⁰ See Daly and Miller (1975).

Results

Writing

The average course grades for English composition I and II and the Business Writing courses were 3.16, 3.24, and 3.32, respectively. Significant correlations do not exist between these grades and the grades earned on the finance writing assignment in this study (see Table 1). Based on the grades earned in the core writing courses, the finance majors were adequately prepared for written communications as they entered their senior year. Interestingly, significant relationships between writing performance as defined in the finance curriculum and performance in the basic composition and business writing courses do not exist. This might suggest the writing skills required of finance students (and in turn required of finance faculty) and those developed in the core courses differ.

Table 1
Person Product Moment Correlation Matrix - Writing Variables

| | Comp I | Comp II | Business Writing | Organization | Clarity | Language | Overall Writing Grade | WA |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|------------------|--------------|---------|----------|-----------------------|-------|
| Comp I | 1.000 | | | | | | | |
| Comp II | 0.509 | 1.000 | | | | | | |
| Business Writing | 0.153 | 0.409 | 1.000 | | | | | |
| Organization | -0.250 | -0.129 | 0.297 | 1.000 | | | | |
| Clarity | 0.228 | 0.539 | 0.149 | 0.905 | 1.000 | | | |
| Language | -0.225 | -0.214 | 0.332 | 0.270 | 0.305 | 1.000 | | |
| Overall Writing Grade | 0.279 | 0.303 | 0.105 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 1.000 | |
| WA | 0.110 | -0.055 | 0.262 | 0.270 | 0.305 | 0.138 | -0.212 | 1.000 |
| | 0.600 | 0.794 | 0.206 | 0.191 | 0.138 | | 0.308 | |
| | -0.131 | -0.161 | 0.370 | 0.875 | 0.891 | 0.673 | | |
| | 0.532 | 0.442 | 0.069 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 | | |
| | -0.188 | -0.310 | -0.420 | -0.165 | -0.077 | -0.259 | -0.212 | 1.000 |
| | 0.369 | 0.131 | 0.306 | 0.430 | 0.716 | 0.211 | 0.308 | |

The students produced an overall average score of 74 percent on their writing assignment (see Table 2). They scored highest on clarity with an approximate score of 77 percent and lowest on the language dimension with an average score of 72 percent. However, eleven of the 25 students, or 44 percent of the sample, did not meet the threshold criteria of effective written communication. These students did not receive the minimum overall score of 70 percent score. They did not earn the required acceptable grade on at least two of the three criteria. Only 48, 56 and 48 percent of the students earned an acceptable level of performance on each of the separate written communications dimensions of organization, clarity, and language, respectively.

ANOVA results indicate that males and females perform equally on each dimension with the exception of the language dimension. Females performed significantly higher than males on the language dimension (p-value = 0.027) with scores of about 81 and 68 percent, respectively. Writing skills development does not appear to be gender-specific, with the exception of the language dimension. Females scored a significant 13 points higher than males on the language dimension. Females seem to use less jargon and sentence fragments; while also using appropriate subjects and verbs.

Table 2
Gender Comparisons: Writing Performance and Writing Apprehension (WA)
Averages (Std. Dev.) and ANOVAs

| | Average (Std. Dev.) | | | | ANOVA | | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Combined n = 25 | Males n = 17 | Females n = 8 | | SS | df | MS | F | p-val |
| Performance: | | | | | | | | | |
| Overall | 74.12 (10.42) | 71.88 (10.12) | 78.88 (10.00) | Betw. W/in | 266.00 2338.64 | 1 23 | 266.00 101.68 | 2.616 | 0.119 |
| Organization | 73.92 (12.43) | 72.88 (11.69) | 76.13 (14.47) | Betw. W/in | 57.20 3650.64 | 1 23 | 57.20 158.72 | 0.360 | 0.554 |
| Clarity | 76.68 (12.33) | 75.06 (12.71) | 80.13 (11.48) | Betw. W/in | 139.62 3505.82 | 1 23 | 139.62 152.43 | 0.916 | 0.348 |
| Language | 72.00 (13.69) | 67.94 (12.00) | 80.63 (13.74) | Betw. W/in | 875.18 3624.82 | 1 23 | 875.18 157.60 | 5.553 | 0.027 |
| WA | 74.48 (5.03) | 74.53 (5.08) | 74.38 (5.26) | Betw. W/in | 0.13 608.11 | 1 23 | 0.13 26.44 | 0.005 | 0.945 |

The average writing apprehension (WA) score (74.483 on a scale of 26 to 130 from lowest to highest anxiety, respectively) appears to align with the average scores reported by Faris et al., ($X = 68.05$) for finance majors. Correlations between WA and the writing performance measures produced signs in the predicted negative direction; however, these correlations were not significant (see Table 2). The results reveal that writing apprehension does not factor into writing performance for this set of students. Any lack of performance is strictly a function of skill. Performance on writing activities appears to result from the ability or inability to apply writing concepts or worse, the lack of basic writing knowledge. Each dimension of writing needs to be addressed with more focus on organizational skills and use of the English language (active voice, grammar, and appropriate language).

Oral

The results indicate the students performed quite well on the oral presentations with an overall average score of 93 percent (see Table 3). Average scores on four of the five dimensions exceeded 90 percent. The delivery dimension is the only dimension that scored below 90 percent, but was at an acceptable level of 86 percent. All of the students, or 100 percent of the sample, met the threshold criterion for effective communications in oral form. All of the students received at least 80 percent on at least four of the five oral communications dimensions. With the exception of the clarity dimension, females scored slightly higher on each oral communication dimension, as well as overall. However, these differences are not significant.

The OCA scores for finance majors in this study compare equally to finance majors in other studies (Simons et al., 1995; Stanga & Ladd, 1990) (see Table 4). Finance majors of this study have slightly lower OCA levels than the general college student population (McCroskey, 1982), with average scores of 65.6 and 60.04, respectively (p-value = 0.069). The overall OCA scores indicate a lack of apprehension with respect to oral communications. The individual dimensions of oral apprehension also indicate a lack of fear when orally communicating. Analysis of the individual OCA dimensions reveals that the finance majors in this study have lower OCA on the meetings dimension in comparisons to finance majors of other studies, as well as the general college student population. The current finance majors compare equally to finance majors at other institutions and to the general college student population on the remaining dimensions. However, females produced significantly higher public speaking apprehension than males (p-value = 0.035; see Table 3). Although females produced higher OCA scores than males on the remaining OCA dimensions, these differences were not significant.

Table 3
Gender Comparisons: Oral Performance and Oral Apprehension (OCA)
Averages (Std. Dev.) and ANOVAs

| | Average (Std. Dev.) | | | | ANOVA | | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Combined n = 25 | Males n = 17 | Females n = 8 | | SS | df | MS | F | p-val |
| Performance: | | | | | | | | | |
| Overall | 93.28 (6.19) | 92.71 (6.40) | 94.50 (5.93) | Betw. W/in | 17.51 901.53 | 1 23 | 17.51 39.20 | 0.447 | 0.511 |
| Organization | 94.00 (9.13) | 92.35 (9.70) | 97.50 (7.07) | Betw. W/in | 144.12 1855.88 | 1 23 | 144.12 80.69 | 1.786 | 0.194 |
| Clarity | 96.00 (11.55) | 96.47 (10.57) | 95.00 (14.14) | Betw. W/in | 11.77 3188.24 | 1 23 | 11.77 138.62 | 0.085 | 0.773 |
| Media | 98.40 (5.54) | 97.65 (6.64) | 100.00 (0.00) | Betw. W/in | 30.12 705.88 | 1 23 | 30.12 30.69 | 0.981 | 0.332 |
| Language | 91.60 (9.87) | 91.18 (9.93) | 92.50 (10.35) | Betw. W/in | 9.53 2326.47 | 1 23 | 9.53 101.15 | 0.094 | 0.762 |
| Delivery | 86.40 (10.76) | 85.88 (11.76) | 87.50 (8.86) | Betw. W/in | 14.24 2761.77 | 1 23 | 14.24 120.08 | 0.119 | 0.734 |
| OCA: | | | | | | | | | |
| Overall | 60.04 (15.48) | 56.82 (16.00) | 66.88 (12.58) | Betw. W/in | 549.61 5203.35 | 1 23 | 549.61 226.23 | 2.429 | 0.133 |
| Group | 13.92 (4.77) | 13.59 (4.90) | 14.63 (4.72) | Betw. W/in | 5.85 539.99 | 1 23 | 5.85 23.48 | 0.249 | 0.622 |
| Meeting | 13.60 (4.10) | 13.12 (4.41) | 14.63 (3.38) | Betw. W/in | 12.36 391.64 | 1 23 | 12.36 17.03 | 0.726 | 0.403 |
| Interpersonal | 14.08 (4.02) | 13.35 (4.18) | 15.63 (3.38) | Betw. W/in | 28.08 359.76 | 1 23 | 28.08 15.64 | 1.795 | 0.193 |
| Public Speaking | 18.44 (5.87) | 16.76 (5.52) | 22.00 (5.24) | Betw. W/in | 149.10 679.06 | 1 23 | 149.10 29.52 | 5.050 | 0.035 |

Table 4
OCA: t-test Comparisons
Finance Majors in Current Study to Other Studies
Average scores (standard deviations)

| Study: | Current Study | Simons et al. | Stanga & Ladd | McCroskey |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| Sample Size: | n = 25 | n = 95 | n = 97 | n = 40,000 |
| Major: | Finance | Finance | Finance | General |
| Overall | 60.04 (15.48) | 62.21 (16.31) | 63.3 (17.6) | 65.6 (15.3) |
| p-values | | 0.55 | 0.40 | 0.07 |
| Public Speaking | 18.44 (5.87) | 18.31 (5.85) | 18.4 (5.8) | 19.3 (5.1) |
| p-values | | 0.92 | 0.98 | 0.40 |
| Group | 13.92 (4.77) | 14.37 (5.06) | 15.2 (5.1) | 15.4 (4.8) |
| p-values | | 0.69 | 0.26 | 0.12 |
| Meeting | 13.60 (4.10) | 15.80 (4.79) | 15.8 (4.9) | 16.4 (4.2) |
| p-values | | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.00 |
| Interpersonal | 14.08 (4.02) | 13.73 (4.13) | 13.9 (4.1) | 14.2 (3.9) |
| p-values | | 0.71 | 0.85 | 0.88 |

Table 5
ANOVA: OCA and Oral Communications Performance
Public Speaking vs. No Public Speaking Course
Mean (Standard Deviation)

| | Public Speaking Course (n = 13) | No Public Speaking Course (n = 12) | ANOVA p-values |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Performance pct scores: | | | |
| Organization | 93 (9.47) | 95 (9.05) | 0.609 |
| Clarity | 95 (11.98) | 97 (11.58) | 0.788 |
| Media | 97 (7.51) | 100 (0.00) | 0.170 |
| Language | 92 (9.87) | 92 (10.30) | 0.975 |
| Delivery | 88 (13.01) | 85 (7.98) | 0.543 |
| Total | 93 (6.61) | 94 (5.96) | 0.771 |
| OCA scores: | | | |
| Group | 15.23 (5.59) | 12.50 (3.37) | 0.157 |
| Meeting | 13.31 (4.96) | 13.92 (3.12) | 0.719 |
| Interpersonal | 14.77 (4.32) | 13.33 (3.70) | 0.384 |
| Public Speaking | 16.54 (5.92) | 20.50 (5.32) | 0.092 |
| Overall | 59.85 (18.43) | 60.25 (12.34) | 0.950 |

The sample was also separated into groups that had a public speaking or human communications course and those that had not (see Table 5). Comparisons of the total OCA and individual dimensions of OCA revealed only one potential significant difference. The public speaking dimensions produced a p-value of 0.092, which indicates a public speaking-type course might serve to produce lower OCA levels on the public speaking dimension (see Table 6). However, comparisons of these two groups on oral communications performance indicate no significant differences. The two groups performed equally well on each performance measure, as well as overall.

Table 6
Person Product Moment Correlations - Oral Communication Variables

| | Busin. Writing | Public Speaking Course | Performance Variables – Finance Course | | | | | Overall Oral Grade |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|--|---------|--------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| | | | Organi- zation | Clarity | Media | Language | Delivery | |
| Business Writing | 1.000 | 0.281 | -0.015 | 0.069 | 0.154 | 0.251 | 0.054 | 0.148 |
| Public Speaking Course | 0.281 | 1.000 | 0.107 | 0.057 | 0.283 | 0.007 | -0.128 | 0.061 |
| Overall | -0.280 | 0.013 | 0.025 | -0.092 | -0.058 | -0.369 | -0.264 | -0.247 |
| OCA | 0.175 | 0.950 | 0.904 | 0.661 | 0.785 | 0.070 | 0.202 | 0.234 |
| Group | -0.372 | -0.292 | -0.232 | -0.233 | -0.131 | -0.343 | -0.241 | -0.372 |
| Meeting | 0.067 | 0.157 | 0.265 | 0.262 | 0.532 | 0.094 | 0.245 | 0.067 |
| Interpersonal | -0.304 | 0.076 | 0.022 | -0.018 | -0.029 | -0.220 | -0.336 | -0.192 |
| Public Speaking | 0.139 | 0.719 | 0.916 | 0.933 | 0.889 | 0.290 | 0.100 | 0.357 |
| | -0.225 | -0.182 | 0.286 | 0.061 | -0.106 | -0.245 | 0.123 | 0.053 |
| | 0.279 | 0.384 | 0.166 | 0.772 | 0.613 | 0.238 | 0.559 | 0.803 |
| | -0.062 | 0.344 | 0.044 | -0.084 | 0.048 | -0.372 | 0.350 | -0.250 |
| | 0.767 | 0.092 | 0.836 | 0.691 | 0.819 | 0.067 | 0.086 | 0.228 |

Conclusions

The faculty at VSU developed AOL processes that were deemed Best Practices by the AACSB Review Team in January 2007. These same processes were used at the major level to identify finance majors' strengths and weaknesses with respect to oral and written communications skills. The establishment of the learning goals and subsequent demonstration of learning provides the foundations for recommendations to implement change and thus, affect improvements in student learning. The three purposes stated by AACSB for the AOL activities were achieved. More specifically, the process provides evidence that lends itself to accountability. The results provide for improvements in finance courses and the finance program. Finally, the scoring rubric provides for student feedback and guidance.

Given the dismal results of the finance student's writing abilities and the apparent preparedness of our students entering their senior years, several questions arise:

- Does the English department adequately prepare the finance students?
- Do the grades earned in the basic writing courses adequately represent finance students' writing abilities?
- Is the rating instrument valid? Are there dimensions of writing that need to be added, revised or eliminated?
- Are the faculty too demanding?
- Should the measurement of writing be left to the experts in the English department?
- Do finance majors have different writing requirements than that of the English department?

Possibly students are adequately prepared as they enter the finance program but these skills are not reinforced in the finance curriculum. Although faculty will pose these same questions, it is the responsibility of the business faculty to prepare students for their business careers – and writing is part of it. It is the responsibility of the faculty to use this evidence (the final step in the AOL process) and institute revisions to the curriculum in an effort to achieve the written communications-learning objective.

The overall results indicate a lack of OCA among finance majors, implicating a lack of skill as the culprit of potential poor performance. Comparisons of finance majors OCA in the current study with finance majors of previous studies provides validity to the overall lower apprehension levels. The significantly higher public speaking OCA of females over males does not appear to affect performance; males and females perform equally well.

As with any study, several limitations exist. More specifically, the small sample size and the selected communications dimensions pose potential limitations to the results of this study. The small sample size prevents generalizing to other populations. Subsequent studies with larger samples sizes could serve to validate the results of this study. The study is void of other dimensions of oral communication performance (e.g. interpersonal, group, etc.) and may need to be added in follow-up studies. Finally, although the study utilized a relatively objective grading method that works toward minimizing grader bias, some grader bias may exist.

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