

Integrating Communications Training into the Forestry Curriculum

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Abstract

How can forest resource programs better prepare graduates for successful job searches and careers in a challenging budget environment? In Spring 2003, the Warnell School of Forest Resources at the University of Georgia began offering a seminar course focused on introducing and practicing fundamental communication skills required for success in the workplace: public speaking, interviewing, negotiating, and addressing ethical dilemmas. The course addresses a specific skill set for interested students through the use of existing and available resources. I review the literature with respect to demand for strong communication skills in forest resource graduates, describe the approach used to develop and implement the seminar course, and summarize our responses to student feedback in the course over the past three years.

Key words: communication skills, education

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Introduction

In Spring 2003, the Warnell School of Forest Resources (WSFR) at the University of Georgia began offering a semester-long course focused on the communication skills needed by natural resource professionals. The course was designed in response to feedback from alumni and job recruiters regarding the desired skill sets for forestry and wildlife graduates. The course targets forest resource undergraduates and graduate students preparing to interview for jobs, internships, and assistantships.

The assumption behind developing this professional skills seminar course is that successful forestry and wildlife professionals must communicate well. Effective natural resource professionals inspire others, create cooperation between colleagues and members of different organizations, advocate ideas and proposals, educate students and members of the community, negotiate contracts, and conduct and participate in interviews. Therefore, through a properly structured professional skills course, forest resource students should be better able to:

- Effectively prepare and deliver a message to an audience.
- Efficiently prepare themselves for job and informational interviews.
- Develop an approach for difficult workplace situations and negotiations.

This effort presents one approach to dealing with a situation faced by forest resource programs nationwide: how to better prepare graduates for successful job searches and careers during periods of reduced budgets. The course implemented at WSFR addresses a specific skill set for interested students through the use of existing and available resources.

Literature Review

Recent research into the skills required by forestry graduates emphasize the importance of professional interactive skills, such as the abilities to work in teams, and to understand and respond to public questions (Thompson et al. 2003). Survey work by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that employers across all industries rank interpersonal skills first, followed by the ability to work in teams and verbal communications skills as the most preferred traits for new employees (NACE 2001).

However, cross industry research indicates opportunities for enhancing communication skills training within collegiate programs. Morgan (1997) studies the issue of communication skills training for accounting graduates in the United Kingdom, indicating the opportunity for

more explicit training and practice opportunities for students during their academic programs prior to entering the workforce. Peterson (1997), in surveying personnel interviewers at businesses in a Midwestern city, found that while 90% of the 253 respondents emphasized the importance of communication skills for success, only 60% agreed that current job applicants demonstrated adequate communication skills. Also, interview personnel identified the five most prevalent oral and nonverbal communication skill inadequacies as (1) eye contact, (2) topic relevance, (3) response organization, (4) listening skills, and (5) response clarity

Why do prospective employees lack the necessary oral communication skills? Experts point to a number of potential reasons. Learning had become too passive, effectively leaving few opportunities for students to actively develop communication skills (Garside 2002). In an Australia-based survey to evaluate undergraduate business curriculum, Crosling and Ward (2002) argue that formal classroom presentations alone provide insufficient training for workplace communicating. Respondents emphasize the informal nature of most workplace communications, indicating a need to practice in a range of settings. Also, communication course offerings are often limited to the college of business and, frequently, focus on writing skills rather than oral communication skills (Wardrope and Bayless 1999). Another issue: the tendency of communications courses to focus on solving communication “problems”, and failing to see the big picture of the discipline specific nature of communication”(Garside 2002).

In the forest industry, a 1994 survey by Brown and Lassoie (1998) found that more than 80 percent of entry-level forestry jobs required the ability to, among other things, “integrate” sound ethical principles, establish relationships and credibility within one’s organization, and provide responsive and effective client services. A 1998 survey of a range of forestry employers by Sample et al. (1999) highlighted the desire for new employees with strong skills in ethics, and written and oral communication, in addition to the requisite technical forestry skills. Employers also identified the importance of the abilities to work in teams, and to listen to and address public questions. Sample et al. identified gaps – specific areas for improvement for forestry graduates – in teamwork, communication skills, and managerial skills.

Course Development and Structure

The professional forest resource curriculum at WSFR graduates students with, one, a common set of technical forest resource skills and, two, sets of skills tailored to majors in

fisheries, forestry, or wildlife. All majors include labs and fieldwork, limiting opportunity or flexibility for additional coursework. Thus, course design centered on four objectives:

1. Minimize the impact of the course on the schedules and existing academic requirements of interested students.
2. Emphasize immediately transferable and usable skills.
3. Teach these skills in the context of natural resource professions.
4. Use currently available resources within WSFR and the University of Georgia.

The resulting course, taught for the first time in Spring 2003, met once per week for one hour for eleven weeks (Figure 1).² The specific set of skills addressed in the course was:

- Interviewing;
- Speaking publicly (and listening to and answering questions in public forums);
- Preparing for and participating in salary negotiations; and
- Approaching ethical situations in the workplace.

The course focuses on interview skills early in the semester, just as students began preparing for and participating in job interviews. The course received support and received feedback from the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and the WSFR Career Office, both of which interact directly with firms who interview and hire WSFR graduates. The practical and skill specific nature of the course was a direct result of the feedback received from hiring firms and agencies. In sum, the specific objective of the course was to help WSFR students prepare for interviews, obtain job offers, and communicate successfully in the workplace.

<u>Schedule:</u>	Weekly, one hour
<u>Format:</u>	Lecture – Exercise – Discussion
<u>Assignments:</u>	Readings or practicums
<u>Grading:</u>	Attendance 50% Participation 25% Assignments 25%

Figure 1: Communication course format and grading

² The preliminary course structure was based on a similar communications course for graduate business students at the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley, BA200C: Communicating as a Manager taught by Bill Sonnenschein. I had first participated in and then became the Head Graduate Student Instructor for this course, which taught 240 graduate business students annually.

Marketing the course included the use of flyers posted throughout the school; brief in-class visits at the beginning of core undergraduate courses; and talks at the forestry, wildlife and fisheries clubs meetings. These brief talks emphasized the practical and applied nature of the course, the emphasis on in-class participation and learning, and the limited homework load. Finally, the WSFR Career Office promoted the course through its email newsletter.

Each class session includes a brief introductory lecture followed by group exercises, presentations, or class discussion. We introduce a specific skill, explain and discuss why it is important, and practice the skill. Several sessions include the discussion of the skill after the exercise, because the exercises themselves generate questions and insights from the students. The skills in the class form a progression of skills applicable to job interview and presentation situations, as well as team and client-based interactions. In sum, we want to give students a clear understanding of how to develop the skill and follow with situations to practice and receive feedback. The four segments proceed as follows:

Interview skills. The interview skills module includes the review and improvement of student resumes, lectures on interview etiquette and structures, and exercises to practice participating in and conducting interviews (Figure 2). A central theme is that through understanding the purpose and role of the interview from the perspective of the hiring firm, we can better understand and prepare for participating in interviews. The primary outside assignment includes signing up for and participating in a mock interview at the University of Georgia Career Center, where a neutral professional conducts an interview, records the interview on a CD, and evaluates the performance of the student within the interview setting. The evaluations include whether or not the student arrived on schedule, what they are wearing, eye contact, quality of answers, etc. For approximately one out of three students in the class, this exercise represents their first “formal” interview experience. Additionally, we cover issues associated with participating in telephone interviews, which have become increasingly common as a screening interview for our students.

PREPARING TO INTERVIEW

Interviews may be the most important event in your job search, and successful interviews result from proper preparation. Preparation includes:

- Researching the job and company with which you plan to interview
- Practicing the questions you will likely be asked
- Understanding the needs and perspective of the interviewer
- Following through on expected interview etiquette and practices
- Preparing and delivering the appropriate documents (resumes, thank you notes)

Why is this work necessary? An interview is an opportunity to sell oneself face-to-face to a prospective employer; preparation builds the confidence and readies the tools necessary to make the most of it. As with any skill, interviewing requires learning what you need to do and practicing.

This handout can guide your interview preparation; it contains the following sections:

1. Before the interview
2. Dressing for the interview
3. During the interview
4. The interviewer's hidden agenda
5. After the interview
6. Common interview questions
7. Resume preparation
8. References

Figure 2: Introduction to “Preparing to Interview” handout

Public speaking. The public speaking module focuses on the ability to prepare brief impromptu comments in meetings and public settings, preparing and giving remarks for professional and workplace audiences, and the handling of questions and answers in public settings. Central lessons demonstrate the usefulness of basic frameworks to organize one's thoughts for real-time public comments and how a basic checklist can facilitate the preparation of speeches and presentations for a range of audiences. The primary assignment includes the preparation of a 5-minute persuasive speech, where the speaker is tasked with convincing the audience to take a given point of view and/or take a specific action.

Negotiations. The negotiations module focuses on the preparation for participating in salary discussions for entry-level jobs with forest resource firms and natural resource governmental agencies (Figure 3). We focus on how to locate and summarize the relevant job market and benefits information required to properly prepare oneself for a professional and cooperative negotiation with one's potential employer. The primary outside exercise, added to the course in 2004, is the negotiation of something – anything – outside of class, and sharing this negotiating

experience through a facilitated classroom discussion. This sharing of key learnings generates insights that help demonstrate what is possible by being prepared and asking basic questions.

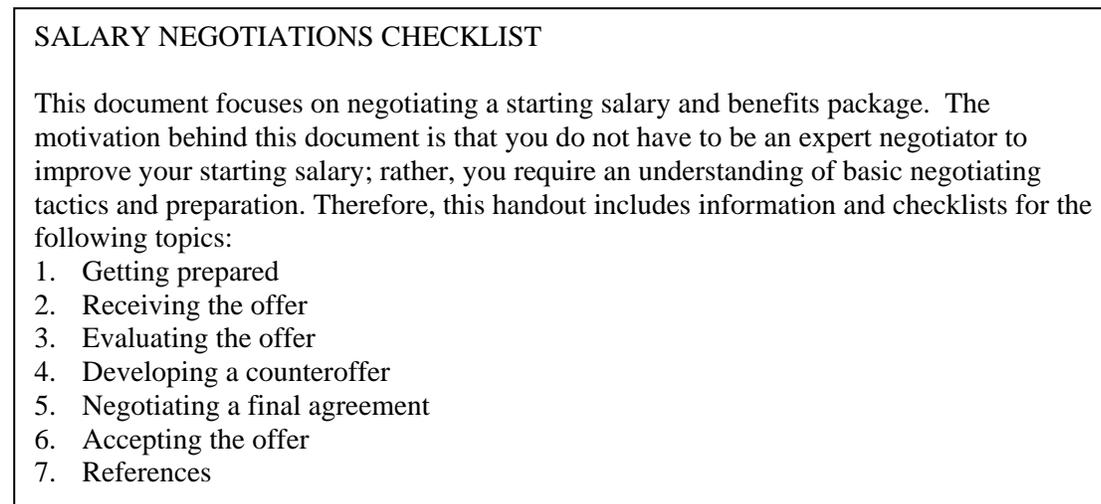


Figure 3: Introduction to “Salary Negotiations” handout

Ethics. The class focused on ethics in the workplace uses case studies based on actual workplace situations to help students recognize ethical dilemmas and then develop approaches for dealing with these situations. These case discussions generate energetic debates regarding the role of the individual with respect to their professional responsibilities and employers. Central realizations included the ideas that legal actions are not necessarily ethical actions, and the role of a strong set of values in guiding subjective decision-making.

Student Data and Feedback

The demographics within the class changed significantly between 2003 and 2005, seeming to indicate broader awareness of the course across majors. In 2003, all 15 registered students in the course were males, and most were forestry majors. In 2004, 6 of the 16 registered students were female, and the class included representation from all WSFR majors and two students from outside of the school. In 2005, the 12-person class was evenly split between male and female students, with wildlife majors representing 50% of the class.

Student feedback on class evaluation forms placed the course in the top quartile of WSFR courses, as measured by numerical scores. In response to written comments from students, we now provide summary materials and discussion on the proper methods for submitting on-line

resumes and how to prepare for telephone based job interviews. In Spring 2004, to explore further the topic of negotiations, we added a twelfth class session. In Spring 2005, we included materials addressing the format and preparation of cover letters. In Spring 2006, we will use a draft manuscript by Mendell (2005) that further develops the materials and insights generated through this course, and provides substantive reference materials for the students following graduation.

Conclusions

Oral communication skills currently are and will continue to be in demand by professionals hiring recent graduates for forest resource positions. To prepare better students, forest resource programs can help with focused instruction on the fundamental communication skills being demanded. The unknowns in this situation are few: Employers and previous research identify specifically the skills in demand; communication courses in other curriculums and our experience at WSFR indicate the ability to offer value added instruction with few added resources without overhauling existing programs; and participating students responded positively to the practical, hands-on instructional approach.

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