Are They Really *That* Different? Comparing Nontraditional versus Traditional Students' Motives for Communicating with Instructors

Nicole Blau
Ohio University Lancaster

Candice E. Thomas-Maddox
Ohio University Lancaster

A review of past research, as well as classroom experience, informs us that traditional (typically 18-22 years old who enroll in college immediately after high school) and nontraditiona (those whose age is 23 years or higher) students differ in many ways. Nontraditional students typically earn higher grades than traditional students (Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009) and report higher levels of both trait and state motivation (Houser, 2006). Past research, however, has not investigated the differences between these two groups (nontraditional v. traditional) with regard to their motives to communicate with their instructors. Survey data was collected via SurveyMonkey from 184 (114 traditional; 70 nontraditional) undergraduate students. Results of this study indicate a significant difference based on student type (nontraditional v. traditional) with respect to participatory and sycophancy motives to communicate with an instructor. No significant differences were found for relational, functional, or excuse-making motives. The second research question examined differences in perceived solidarity between the two student types. Results revealed no statistically significant difference in perceptions of instructional solidarity between traditional and nontraditional students.

Adult students are the fastest growing demographic in higher education, with students age 25 and over comprising nearly 47% of new and returning college students. Between 1999 and 2009, traditional age student enrollment increased by 27% compared with a 43% increase in nontraditional age students during that same time period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). This changing demographic points to new issues and opportunities for teachers and scholars. For instance, a nontraditional student may have several years of management experience

that may be shared in the college classroom as opposed to a recent high school graduate entering the second or third semester of college. Identifying the classroom communication preferences and expectations for each of these students is an essential task for enhancing college retention and maximizing student learning.

For decades, instructional scholars have documented the positive implications of engaging in communication that promotes constructive, effective teacher-student relationships (Blau, 2011; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Hurt, Scott & McÇroskey, 1978). Numerous studies have focused on the traditional college student population in attempts to identify expectations for communication within the teacher-student relationship. Extending this investigation to identify unique preferences of nontraditional students is essential to ensure that instructors and trainers have an understanding of the implications and perceptions of their interactions with students.

The purpose of this study is to examine potential differences between traditional and nontraditional student motives to communicate with instructors. Further, the level of perceived solidarity with the instructor of these two student groups will be examined to identify possible differences that may influence communication in the classroom.

Andragogy versus Pedagogy

For nearly 200 years, differences in the learning preferences of learners of different ages have been debated. Knowles's (1980) theory of andragogy addressed key issues posed by organizational development professionals by identifying key distinctions between the learning that begins in childhood compared to the unique needs of adult learners. Pedagogy, or the more traditional approach to teaching and learning, focuses on various approaches or styles of classroom instruction. Whereas andragogy specifically focuses on strategies for adult learners, pedagogy tends to focus more specifically on the role of the teacher in the learning process. Thus, pedagogy traditionally addresses the classroom experience as being primarily teacher-centered.

Adult learners bring extensive life and work experience to the classroom. Andragogy addresses the needs of adult learners and recognizes the valuable contributions of the student's examples and life/work experience. This perspective cultivates an environment that encourages a "shared" learning experience where students are encouraged to apply information and engage in a collaborative analysis of their shared examples

(Knowles, 1980). As a result, learners tend to ask more questions, solicit feedback on assignments, and seek additional clarification and information that enables them to better prepare for class sessions and assignments. This shared, active learning pedagogy has been shown to be quite effective (Michael, 2006; Prince, 2004). An increased awareness of the distinctions in each of these approaches to teaching and learning is the first step to identifying potential differences in the classroom experiences for this shifting demographic of college students.

Classroom Experiences of Traditional and Nontraditional Students

In terms of overall academic performance, adult students tend to earn higher grades than their traditional counterparts (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009), yet the rate of attrition for adult nontraditional students tends to be higher (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Headden, 2009; McClenney, 2011). Nontraditional students are seemingly more influenced by external and environmental factors than traditional students who are often more affected by social variables. In fact, Metzner and Bean (1987) found that many nontraditional students dropout of college due to low GPAs, as well as the efficacy of their academics on future employment, fulfillment in their role as "student." This indicates that most reasons for leaving college are not related to social factors.

Additionally, motivational differences have been identified as one potential force behind the discrepancy in academic achievement and the overall academic experience (Klein, 1990; Sheehan, McMenamin & McDevitt, 1992). Traditional students may view credit earned for an assignment or class attendance as the source of motivation, whereas nontraditional students are inspired by the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that enables them to share and apply their life experiences (Jinkins, 2009).

When comparing the classroom experiences of traditional and nontraditional students, several distinctions should be noted. Traditional students are reported to experience higher levels of communication apprehension in the classroom compared with nontraditional students (Elias, 1999). Moreover, Kasworm and Pike (1994) identified social interactions with peers as having a greater influence on satisfaction among traditional age students, while nontraditional students experienced greater satisfaction as a result of teacher-student interactions.

While research has identified distinctions among these two student populations, others have found that their experiences may be more similar than anticipated. No differences were discovered when comparing traditional and nontraditional student inclinations to initiate or engage in conversation with faculty, nor were there differences in the level of satisfaction resulting from these one-on-one encounters (Rosenthal, et al., 2000). Houser (2006) discovered that teachers may actually engage in communication behaviors that violate the expectations of both traditional and nontraditional students. Both groups indicated that teachers fail to meet their expectations for clarity in the classroom, thus impacting their state motivation. However, nontraditional students also reported higher levels of cognitive learning and state motivation, which is likely explained by their higher levels of trait motivation (Houser, 2005).

Understanding *why* students are motivated to attend classes and complete assignments and *how* teacher communication impacts their drive for success in the classroom is only half of the equation. Identifying the reasons behind students' decisions to communicate with instructors is the other segment that is required in order to more fully understand the overall instructional communication process.

Students' Motives for Communicating with Instructors

Our decision to approach or avoid interactions with others is best explained by the theory of interpersonal communication motives (Rubin & Martin, 1998). This theory posits that our choice to communicate is driven by specific needs. Distinctions between traditional and nontraditional student needs have been alluded to in research that focuses on their expectations for learning. Whereas nontraditional students tend to view learning as a collaborative effort in which they have knowledge and experiences to contribute, traditional students indicate a preference for a more teacher-focused learning experience.

Martin, Myers and Mottet (1999) identified the specific motives that guide student involvement in the teacher-learner interaction. Five motives offer insight as to why students communicate with instructors: relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophantic. Relational motives are guided by a student's desire to develop a personal relationship with an instructor. Students who wish to learn more about course requirements, assignments, and expectations are more likely to be influenced by functional motives. Participatory motives are used by

students who want to demonstrate their level of comprehension and understanding through sharing of experiences and examples. Students engage in excuse-making to offer explanations for why assignments are incomplete or of low quality. Sycophantic motives are employed when a student wants the make a favorable impression with the instructor.

Over the last decade, communication scholars have explored the relationship between student communication motives and a variety of classroom variables such as teacher expectancy violations (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2010), teacher communicator style (Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000), and information seeking (Myers, Martin & Mottet, 2002a). While Myers, Martin & Mottet (2002b) found gender differences in communication motives (e.g., female students are more likely to employ functional motives; males tend to cite relational and sycophantic goals), no studies have examined the distinctions between the communication motives of traditional and nontraditional students. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: Do traditional and nontraditional students differ in their motives for communicating with instructors?

Myers' (2006) application of leader-member exchange theory in understanding the needs that drive students to communicate provides insight into the impact of in-group versus out-group relational perceptions. These findings suggest a potential relationship between student communication motives and perceived solidarity.

Student-Teacher Solidarity

Given that nontraditional students are often closer in age to their instructors, they may perceive that they share similar life experiences. Interpersonal solidarity was originally defined as feelings of closeness between people that develops based on shared feelings, similarities, and intimate behaviors (Wheeless, 1976). Stewart and Wheeless first applied this construct to the teacher-student relationship in 1987 when they argued that the teacher-student relationship is a unique interpersonal relationship. Blau (2011) defines instructional solidarity as, "the perceived relationship between teacher and student developed as a result of shared feelings, similarities and intimate behaviors appropriate for such a relationship" (p. 18). Previous studies have examined how teacher-student solidarity is developed (Blau, 2011; Frymier & Houser, 2000) by focusing on factors such as teacher caring (Teven, 2001), teacher self-disclosure (Sorensen, 1989),

immediacy (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998), and student empowerment (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996). Unfortunately, no research has examined the difference in instructional solidarity between traditional and nontraditional students.

While solidarity has been identified as playing an important role in student affective and cognitive learning (Nussbaum & Scott, 1981), understanding perceptions of solidarity in the teacher-student relationship is essential identifying preferred classroom communication behaviors. Thus, the following research question was advanced:

RQ: Do traditional and nontraditional students differ in levels of perceived solidarity?

Methods

Research Participants

Participants consisted of 184 undergraduate students enrolled in one of several communication courses at a medium-sized Midwestern university. A total of 120 females and 65 males completed the survey instruments. One hundred fourteen (114) participants were self-identified as traditional undergraduate students, while 70 identified themselves as nontraditional undergraduate students. Seventy-six (76) females identified as traditional students, and 44 females identified as non-traditional students. Of the 65 males that participated in this study, 39 identified as a traditional student and 26 self-identified as a non-traditional student. Ages of participants in this study ranged from 18-57 years with 75% of participants falling within the 18-25 age range. Nearly 90% (n=165) of the participants were Caucasian.

Procedure

Utilizing a convenience sample, participants were recruited in a variety of lower and upper-level communication studies classes. Participation was voluntary, and students were provided with directions (both in-class and via email) on how to access the on-line survey. Utilizing the methodology advanced by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), participants completed all measures in reference to the instructor and course they attended immediately prior to the course in which they received participatory credit for completing the survey.

Students were provided with a SurveyMonkey link that included demographic questions, as well as items measuring their motives for communicating with their instructor and their perceived relationship with their instructor. Participants were instructed to read the consent form on the first page of the survey and click “continue” to indicate their consent to participate.

Measurement

Student communication motives. Student motives were operationalized using the 30-item Student Communication Motives scale developed by Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999). Items ask students to indicate reasons for communicating with their instructor. Specifically, reasons include relational, functional, excuse-making, participatory, and sycophancy. Statements representing each of these motives include items such as:

- “I talk to my instructor to learn about him/her personally (relational)”
- “I talk to my instructor to learn how I can improve in the class (functional)”
- “I talk to my instructor to explain why I do not have my work done (excuse-making)”
- “I talk to my instructor to demonstrate my intelligence (participatory)”
- “I talk to my instructor to give the impression that I’m learning a lot from the instructor (sycophancy)”

The scale employs a 5-point Likert-type response format (1=not at all like me to 5=exactly like me). Prior studies report strong reliability for each of the 5 subscales: .91 for relational; .89 for functional; .88 for participatory; .90 for excuse-making; and .88 for sycophancy (Goodboy & Myers, 2008). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the motives ranged from .84 to .91 (relational: M = 14.97, SD = 5.47, α = .90; functional: M = 24.18, SD = 5.00, α = .90; participatory: M = 17.33, SD = 5.67, α = .84; excuse-making: M = 10.93, SD = 5.57, α = .91; and sycophancy: M = 10.04, SD = 4.52, α = .84).

Teacher-student solidarity. Solidarity was operationalized using a revised version of Wheeless’ (1976) Interpersonal Solidarity Scale. Specifically, revisions included re-wording of the items to apply to the

teacher-student relationship. Some of the items on the scale include, “My teacher and I are very close to each other”, “I feel very close to my teacher”, “I trust my teacher completely”, and “My teacher and I share a lot in common.” Prior studies report alpha reliability as .92 [*M* = 53.69, *SD* = 12.74] (Dobransky, 2011). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was .84 [*M* = 58.09, *SD* = 9.96].

Results

The first research question explored the potential difference in students’ motives to communicate with an instructor based on student type (traditional or nontraditional). A t-test was employed to investigate statistical differences for each student communication motive measured (relational, functional, excuse-making, participatory, sycophancy). Results indicate a statistically significant difference between traditional and nontraditional undergraduates on motives to communicate based on participatory reasons (t = 2.062, df = 179, p = .041). In addition, a statistically significant difference was found between traditional and nontraditional undergraduate student with regard to sycophancy (t = 3.473, df = 179, p < .001). Traditional students reported that they were more motived (M = 15.04) to communicate with an instructor for participatory reasons compared with their nontraditional counterparts (M = 13.46). Further, traditional students also reported that they were more motived to communicate with instructors for sycophancy (M = 9.64) compared with nontraditional students (M = 7.56). No significant differences were found for relational (t = -.105, df = 179, p = .917), functional (t = .320, df = 179, p = .749), or excuse-making (t = -.211, df = 179, p = .833) motives to communicate.

The second research question inquired about the difference between traditional and nontraditional students’ perceptions of instructional solidarity. Results indicate no statistically significant difference in perceptions of instructional solidarity between traditional and nontraditional students (t = .302, df = 179, p = .763). Means and standard deviations for both research questions are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for all Research Questions

	STATUS	Mean	SD
RELATIONAL	TRADITIONAL	12.7336	4.79914
	NONTRADITIONAL	12.8092	4.59062
FUNCTIONAL	TRADITIONAL	21.0342	4.26776
	NONTRADITIONAL	20.8237	4.35101
EXCUSE	TRADITIONAL	9.1804	4.84342
	NONTRADITIONAL	9.3362	4.81987
PARTICIPATE	TRADITIONAL	15.0417	5.04194
	NONTRADITIONAL	13.4638	4.92997
SYCOPHANCY	TRADITIONAL	9.6446	3.99547
	NONTRADITIONAL	7.5594	3.80179
SOLIDARITY	TRADITIONAL	56.6906	9.74365
	NONTRADITIONAL	56.2406	9.73916

Discussion

Given that nontraditional students are the fastest growing demographic in higher education, comprising nearly 47% of new and returning college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), there is a need to expand our instructional communication research agenda to examine potential differences between this group and the traditional student population. The current study addresses this by investigating the potential differences in the motives of traditional and nontraditional students for communicating with their instructors. A secondary goal of this study was to examine differences between traditional and nontraditional students with respect to perceived teacher-student relationships. More specifically, do traditional and nontraditional students differ in their perceived level of solidarity with their instructor? Prior research indicates that there are, in fact, many differences between traditional and nontraditional students (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009;

Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012; Klein, 1990; Sheehan, McMenamin & McDevitt, 1992); thus, it seems plausible that these two student types could potentially differ in in their classroom communication preferences and perhaps they perceive the teacher-student relationship in unique ways.

The first research question inquired about the difference in motives to communicate based on student type. Results indicate that traditional and nontraditional students do differ in reports of communicating with instructors for participatory and sycophancy reasons. Houser (2005) reported that traditional and nontraditional students have dissimilar expectations for communication in the classroom. As a result, participation levels, or motives to communicate for participatory reasons, also differ. Consider the items used to measure participatory motives (Martin et al., 1999): “I talk to my teacher to appear involved in class”, “I talk to my teacher to demonstrate my intelligence” and “I talk to my teacher because my classmates value my contribution to class discussions.” Upon closer examination of the wording of these items, it is not surprising that a significant difference resulted. Talking to one’s teacher to appear involved is quite different than talking to the teacher to demonstrate intelligence. Though both may be described as participatory motives, the intentions for the communication are qualitatively different. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the results indicate traditional students communicate for participatory motives more than nontraditional students.

Participatory motives are used by students who want to demonstrate their level of comprehension and understanding through the sharing of experiences and examples. The non-traditional student is generally self-directed and often uses the classroom experience as a way to self-identify, whereas traditional students tend to rely primarily on the instructor for learning and take a limited role in their own learning experience. Based on this difference, one would expect the nontraditional student to communicate in an attempt to share their life experience as it relates to the course material more than the traditional student. It is possible that while nontraditional students do enjoy sharing life experiences and personal examples in class, their primary motive may not be to do so in an attempt to illustrate their understanding or comprehension. Rather, nontraditional students may simply want to participate and add their own perspective, while demonstrating their comprehension through other outlets (e.g., papers, exams). Given that many nontraditional students are apprehensive when they first return to the college classroom, they may

apprehensive to communicate with their instructors to fulfill a participatory function. Based on these results, nontraditional students appear to perceive the learning experience differently than traditional students, and consequently engage in distinct participatory motives.

Likewise, the present study suggests that nontraditional and traditional students differ with respect to sycophancy motives to communicate with the instructor. Results indicate that traditional students report higher levels of communicating with instructors for sycophancy reasons than do nontraditional students. Sycophancy motives are inspired by one's desire to make a favorable impression on the instructor through the use of compliments. These motives create the impression that the student is learning a lot from the instructor and is often used in an attempt to obtain special privileges not granted to all students (Martin et al., 1999). The current results indicate that nontraditional students may be more interested in the overall learning experience as opposed to being motivated to seek additional privileges or make an effort to create the perception that they like the teacher. It is possible that traditional students are motivated by external sources of motivation such as praise, grades, and the approval of others. Since these are the very factors that motivate them, they appear to be more likely to seek the approval of instructors through sycophancy. Nontraditional students, however, are more internally motivated (Houser, 2005). Therefore, they are less motivated to create an impression that they "like" the teacher, nor are they motivated to utilize compliments in order to earn a good grade. Rather, they desire success that may be based upon their own merit.

In addition to examining differences in participatory and sycophancy motives, functional, excuse-making, and relational motives were also examined. Interestingly, results of the current study revealed no significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students with respect to these three motives to communicate with instructors. In 2003, Houser found that traditional students are significantly more grade-oriented than are nontraditional students. For this reason, it may seem that traditional students would be more likely to communicate with instructors for functional reasons including seeking assistance on assignments and exams, asking questions about material (in order to succeed in the course), and to learn how to improve in the class. Because no differences with respect to functional motives were found in this study, it is possible that grade-orientation does not manifest itself in requests to clarify material and ask

for assistance. Rather, it appears that functional needs are important to both traditional and nontraditional students. These results support past research indicating there are several similarities between traditional and nontraditional students (Rosenthal et al., 2000). Pragmatically, instructors should realize that even though expectations differ based on student type, student motives to communicate for functional reasons are consistently important no matter the age or experience level of the student. Even if the reasons for academic success differ, asking for additional information and clarification are a means to that end.

Similar to functional motives, excuse-making motives did not significantly differ when comparing traditional and nontraditional students. As operationalized in the current research study, excuse-making motives include communicating with an instructor to explain why work is late, explaining absences from class, and challenging a grade. Often instructors expect excuse-making communication from traditional students, who are younger in age. For this reason, the results of the current study may be somewhat surprising. While there was no statistically significant difference between the two student groups, the mean reported for nontraditional students [with respect to excuse-making] was higher than that reported from traditional students. This points to the motivation for nontraditional students to engage in excuse-making more often compared to traditional students. For example, non-traditional students may view missed classes as sporadic and justifiable (due to family illness or work issues). Considering research indicating nontraditional students are more trait motivated (see Houser, 2005), however, we would not expect as many excuses. One interpretation of this result is that even though motivations, expectations, and perhaps learning styles may differ dependent upon student type, excuse-making communication remains the same. Perhaps the *type* of excuses provided by traditional or nontraditional students differ. Nontraditional students are often non-residential students and may need to miss class or submit a late assignment due to work or family obligations. As a result, they are motivated to share these reasons since they perceive them as justifiable. Traditional students who typically reside on or near campus, on the other hand, may have different excuses for missed class or work. Regardless of the types of excuses offered by each group, the tendency to engage in excuse-making is not unique to traditional students.

In tandem with the second research question, no significant difference was found between traditional and nontraditional students when

comparing their relational motives to communicate or perceptions of instructional solidarity between traditional and nontraditional students. Past research indicates that core relational dimensions (including control, trust, and intimacy) are positively related to student learning (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). For this reason, it may seem logical that being more learning-oriented, nontraditional students would engage in more relational communication and report increased perceptions of instructional solidarity. The current study does not support this claim. While increased perceptions of a teacher-student relationship *may* lend to greater reports of student learning, we cannot discriminate who will engage in relational communication with an instructor based on student type. Based on the findings from the current research study, several pragmatic implications may be advanced.

First, while the reasons students take a class or want to succeed in a course may differ, much of the reason students communicate with instructors does not differ with regard to traditional versus nontraditional students. A traditional student may be enrolled in a class because of parental expectations or due to directive from an authority figure while the nontraditional student is sitting in the same classroom with a strong desire to learn. No matter the desired outcome, both traditional and nontraditional students will communicate with instructors in attempt to meet their goal and much of this communication is similar in nature. With the exception of participatory motives and sycophancy, instructors should expect to be approached by students for similar reasons even though they may be trying to achieve a different goal. Perhaps instructors would be more successful in assisting students in the learning process if we took the time to ask *why* they are asking for clarification, or *why* they feel the need to challenge a grade. This may alter the approach with which we respond to student messages.

Next, we cannot assume that communicative responses will differ based on the age or experience level of the student. While nontraditional students are typically older and have more life experience, they too need direction and clarification from time to time. Even though we know from past research that nontraditional students do have different instructional expectations (Houser, 2005), this does not necessarily translate to differing motives to communicate with instructors. Many motives for communicating with an instructor transcends student age and other characteristics

indicating that the role of teacher and student remains constant and predictive.

Finally, students will make excuses. The excuses provided by traditional students and nontraditional students may be different, but nevertheless the need to communicate with instructors with respect to excuse-making remains consistent. Instructors should expect such communication from both types of students and be prepared with ways to address the situation.

As educators, it is our goal to enhance student learning. Learning is not limited to the confines of a lecture in a classroom context. Learning can, and does, occur through teacher-student communication in many forms illustrating the importance of examining student motives for communicating with instructors. While we know that several characteristics are unique to nontraditional students, the present study provides support that students of all ages and experience levels share several commonalities. As we continue to research the differences between traditional and nontraditional students, we should also remember to embrace the similarities.

Limitations

Although this research study adds to the existing body of literature surrounding nontraditional students, it is not without limitations. One limitation includes the subject pool. For practical purposes, the sample used in this study was selected entirely from one university, and, therefore, may reflect the cultural identity of that campus. Further, the sample used in the current study is relatively homogenous in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This, of course, potentially limits the external validity of this study.

An additional limitation of this study includes the cross-sectional design. It is possible that student motives to communicate with instructors will change over time. Moreover, relationships generally develop over time, and student-teacher relationships often are limited in duration. Data collection at more than one point over the course of a term may have allowed for a more accurate understanding of how student type (traditional v. nontraditional) impacts student perceptions of instructional solidarity and motives to communicate with an instructor.

Directions for Future Research

As a result of the current study, many opportunities for future research may be proposed. First, future research should examine the messages advanced by traditional and nontraditional students when communicating with instructors. For instance, *how* an excuse is presented to an instructor may differ between traditional and nontraditional students. Similarly, *how* a grade is challenged or a request for clarification may differ based on student type. The way in which a message is presented influences the instructor response and can have implications for the student and the learning process overall.

Next, future research should address the impact of teacher characteristics on student motives to communicate. It is possible that a student's motive for communicating with an instructor be influenced by the age, gender, or experience of the teacher. Considering the extensive use of graduate students in the college classroom, as well as young professors, it may be the case that some nontraditional students are older than the instructor. This age differential may have an impact on student excuse-making. Moreover, we know from past research that student motives to communicate are related to perceptions of teacher incompetency (Goodboy et al., 2010) and teacher self-disclosure (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009), but know less about the influence of other teacher attributes on student motives.

Finally, anticipated future interaction may influence student motives to communicate with instructors. For example, a student who is a Communication Studies major and knows s/he is likely to take another class from the same instructor may be motivated to communicate for functional reasons in hopes it will help with future classes. Likewise, the student who anticipates another course from the same instructor may be more motivated to communicate for relational reasons in hopes this will make future interactions more successful.

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Personal Biography

Nicole Blau (PhD - University of Kentucky) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University-Lancaster where she serves as faculty advisor for Lambda Pi Eta. She is the current editor for the Ohio Communication Journal and chair for the Instructional Communication Interest Group for the Eastern Communication Association.

Candice Thomas-Maddox (EdD - West Virginia University) is Professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University-Lancaster where she serves as the faculty advisor for Alpha Phi Omega, Phi Theta Kappa, and L.E.A.D. She is a former President for the Eastern Communication Association and the Ohio Communication Association, and she has co-authored several textbooks in communication studies.