FYS Oral Communication Assessment Project
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I. Introduction

Enhancing students' oral and written communication skills and improving their research and information literacy skills are among the primary goals of the FYP/FYS. Several years ago, the university conducted a program-wide assessment of the research papers students produced in the FYS. Until now, however, the university has not undertaken a program-wide assessment focused specifically on oral communication skills in the FYP/FYS. This project addresses this gap by assessing first-year students' formal oral presentation skills. While oral communication skill development in the FYP/FYS extends well beyond enhancing students' ability to successfully communicate ideas in formal oral presentations, developing this particular skill nevertheless remains an important program goal.

II. Method

This project assessed 96 formal oral presentations delivered by first-year students during the spring 2015 semester. This sample size represents 15% of the 636 students enrolled in on-campus FYS courses that semester. It includes 52 females (54%) & 44 males (46%), figures that correspond to the gender makeup of the class of 2018. The presentations assessed for this project emerged from 25 of 41 (or 61%) of on-campus FYS courses taught that semester. All presentations occurred during the last half of the semester, with the vast majority occurring during the final three weeks of the semester. Instructors recorded an entire day of presentations, four of which were randomly selected for inclusion in this project.[1]

Two raters scored each presentation using a 17-item rubric that assesses student performance in three broad areas using a four-point scale. Nine rubric items focus on structure, with five of these focusing on the introduction, two on the body, and two on the conclusion. Four rubric items focus on the speaker's thesis, use of evidence, and source citations. The final four rubric items focus on language/style and delivery. Copies of the rubric and the rationale underlying its 17 criteria were distributed to all FYS instructors as part of a program-wide faculty-development session conducted late in the fall 2014 semester. These are included as Appendices A & B respectively.

I initially developed the rubric during the 2013 fall semester. That same semester, members of the University Assessment Committee tested it for inter-rater reliability using a small sample of student speeches. The following semester, I tested the rubric again in a small pilot project, this one aimed at determining whether having students' FYS instructors serve as one of the raters would skew the results. Because differences between instructors' scores and "outside" raters' scores were not significant and in order to reduce the labor demands of this project, students' instructors served as one of the raters.

Instructors submitted rubrics for 80 of the 96 presentations. I served as a rater for all 96, and, Randall Hill (Associate Professor, PCA) served as a rater for the remaining 16. The overall student mean for these 16 presentations was identical to the overall student mean for the other 80, reinforcing the pilot project finding that instructor bias was not an issue.

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[1] Because of student absences and problems with the recording equipment, the sample includes only three presentations from four sections.

III. Results

Structure

<u>Introduction</u>   <u>All</u>   <u>F</u>   <u>M</u>

	All	F	M
(1) The opening moments entice the audience to continue listening:	2.4	2.6	2.2

      1: ineffectively
      2: in a somewhat effective manner
      3: in a generally effective manner
      4: very effectively

	All	F	M
(2) Introduces the presenter's topic & purpose*:*	3.0	3.1	2.9

      1: ineffectively
      2: in a somewhat effective manner
      3: in a generally effective manner
      4: very effectively

	All	F	M
(3) Relates the topic to him/herself:	2.1	2.2	2.0

      1: with no success or no attempt to do so
      2: with limited success
      3: in a manner that is generally successful
      4: in a clear and compelling manner

	All	F	M
(4) Relates the topic to his/her audience:	2.1	2.2	2.1

      1: with no success or no attempt to do so
      2: with limited success
      3: in a manner that is generally successful
      4: in a clear and compelling manner

	All	F	M
(5) Previews what is to follow:	2.6	2.7	2.5

      1: provides little or no sense of what is to follow
      2: provides some sense of what is to follow
      3: pretty clearly
      4: very clearly

<u>Body</u>

	All	F	M
(6) The organizational structure deployed by the speaker:	2.7	2.8	2.6

      1: does not serve his/her rhetorical aims or
         no choice of organizational pattern is made
      2: serves his/her rhetorical aims at time
      3: generally advances his/her rhetorical aims
      4: clearly & consistently advances his/her rhetorical aims

	All	F	M
(7) Speaker uses transitions/signposting to mark division into main points	2.5	2.7	2.4

      1: seldom or not at all
      2: sometimes
      3: usually
      4: clearly and consistently

Conclusion	All	F	M

(8) Review of main points: **2.6   2.7   2.5**
       1: speaker fails to include any sort of review
       2: speaker includes a summary, but its effectiveness is limited
       3: generally effective but suffers a bit in clarity, fullness, or concision
       4: clearly & fully (yet concisely) reviews main points

(9) Closure   **2.2   2.4   2.0**
       1: speaker just trails off OR resorts to verbally signaling that speech
          is done
       2: final moments are largely ineffective, but speaker doesn't just trail
          off or resort to verbally signaling that the speech is done
       3: final moments are generally effective at providing closure
       4: final moments provide clear and effective closure

Thesis, Evidence, and Citations

(10) The speaker's thesis/central idea is: **2.7   2.8   2.6**
       1: both insufficiently focused and inadequately supported
       2: either insufficiently focused or inadequately focused
       3: sufficiently focused and adequately supported
       4: sufficiently focused, adequately supported, and appropriate
          consideration is afforded alternative points of view

(11) Choices re: types of supporting material (e.g., examples, statistics,
quotations) on which to draw: **2.9   2.9   2.8**
       1: seldom or never serve his/her rhetorical aims
       2: sometimes serve his/her rhetorical aims
       3: usually serve his/her rhetorical aims
       4: clearly and consistently serve his/her rhetorical aims

(12) The speaker _____ draws on an appropriate variety of sources
to support the claims s/he advances.   **2.5   2.6   2.4**
       1: seldom or never
       2: sometimes
       3: generally
       4: clearly and consistently

(13) The speaker _____ cites his/her sources such that it is clear
to audience what information came from which source(s).   **2.4   2.5   2.2**
       1: seldom or never
       2: sometimes
       3: generally
       4: clearly and consistently

Language/Style and Delivery

(14) Speaker's language & stylistic choices result in a presentation that: **2.4   2.4   2.3**
       1: suffers from a frequent lack of clarity and is generally
          unimaginative, not memorable, &/or not compelling
       2: is usually clear but seldom (if ever) imaginative, memorable, &/or compelling

3: is consistently clear and occasionally imaginative, memorable,
&/or compelling
4: is consistently clear & imaginative, memorable, &/or compelling

	All	F	M
(15) The speaker's execution of the chosen/assigned delivery style (i.e., impromptu, extemporaneous, manuscript, memorized) is:	2.6	2.7	2.5

1: consistently weak to the point of distraction
2: variable
3: generally strong
4: clearly and consistently excellent

	All	F	M
(16) Vocal aspects of delivery (e.g., pace, volume, vocal energy) are:	2.5	2.6	2.5

1: consistently weak to the point of distraction
2: variable
3: generally strong
4: clearly and consistently excellent

	All	F	M
(17) Physical aspects of delivery (e.g., eye contact, gesture, movement) are:	2.5	2.6	2.5

1: consistently weak to the point of distraction
2: variable
3: generally strong
4: clearly and consistently excellent

Chart 1 offers a snapshot view of the mean for all presenters on each rubric item.
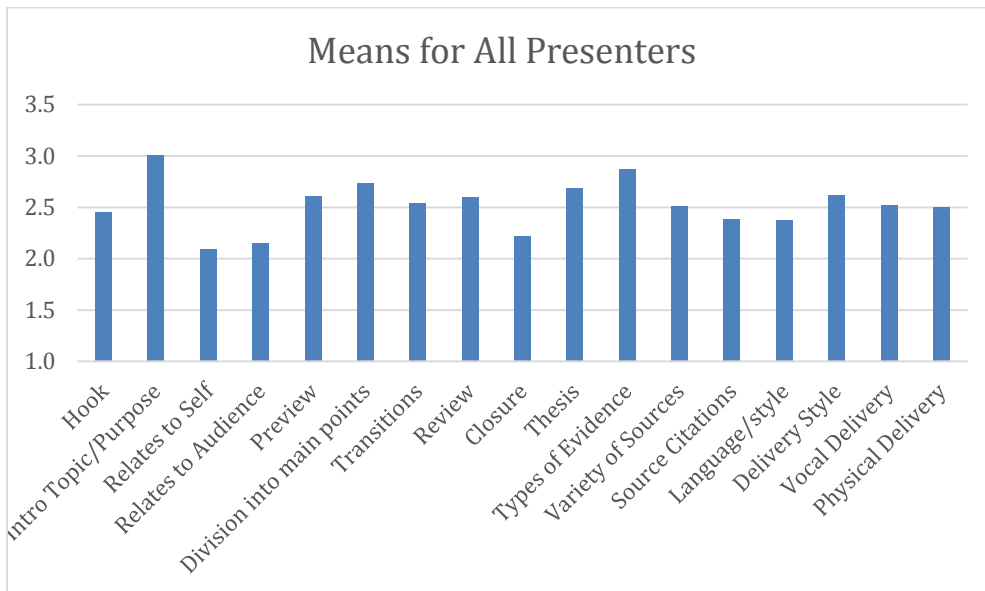

Means for All Presenters

Table 1 aggregates individual rubric items into related clusters, offering a more "birds-eye" view of the data.

Table 1: Summary Means Across Clustered Items

Focus of Clustered Items	Rubric Items	All	Female	Male
Structural Components	1-9	2.5	2.6	2.4
introduction	1-5	2.5	2.6	2.3
body	6-7	2.6	2.8	2.5
conclusion	8-9	2.4	2.5	2.3
Thesis, Evidence, & Citations	10-13	2.6	2.7	2.5
Language/Style & Delivery	14-17	2.5	2.6	2.4
overall mean	**1-17**	**2.5**	**2.6**	**2.5**

IV. Analysis

Analysis: All Presenters

In what follows, I use the 2.5 overall mean of all students across all 17 rubric items as the baseline for identifying aspects on which students performed better and worse.

Students performed above the 2.5 baseline on seven of the 17 rubric items, although on three of these they exceeded the baseline by .1 of a point. These three items are: their preview statement, their review statement, and overall execution of chosen/assigned delivery style. Students exceeded the 2.5 baseline by .2 of a point on two other items: thesis and structuring of body of the presentations. Students' scored highest in choice of types of supporting material (2.9) and introducing topic and purpose (3.0).
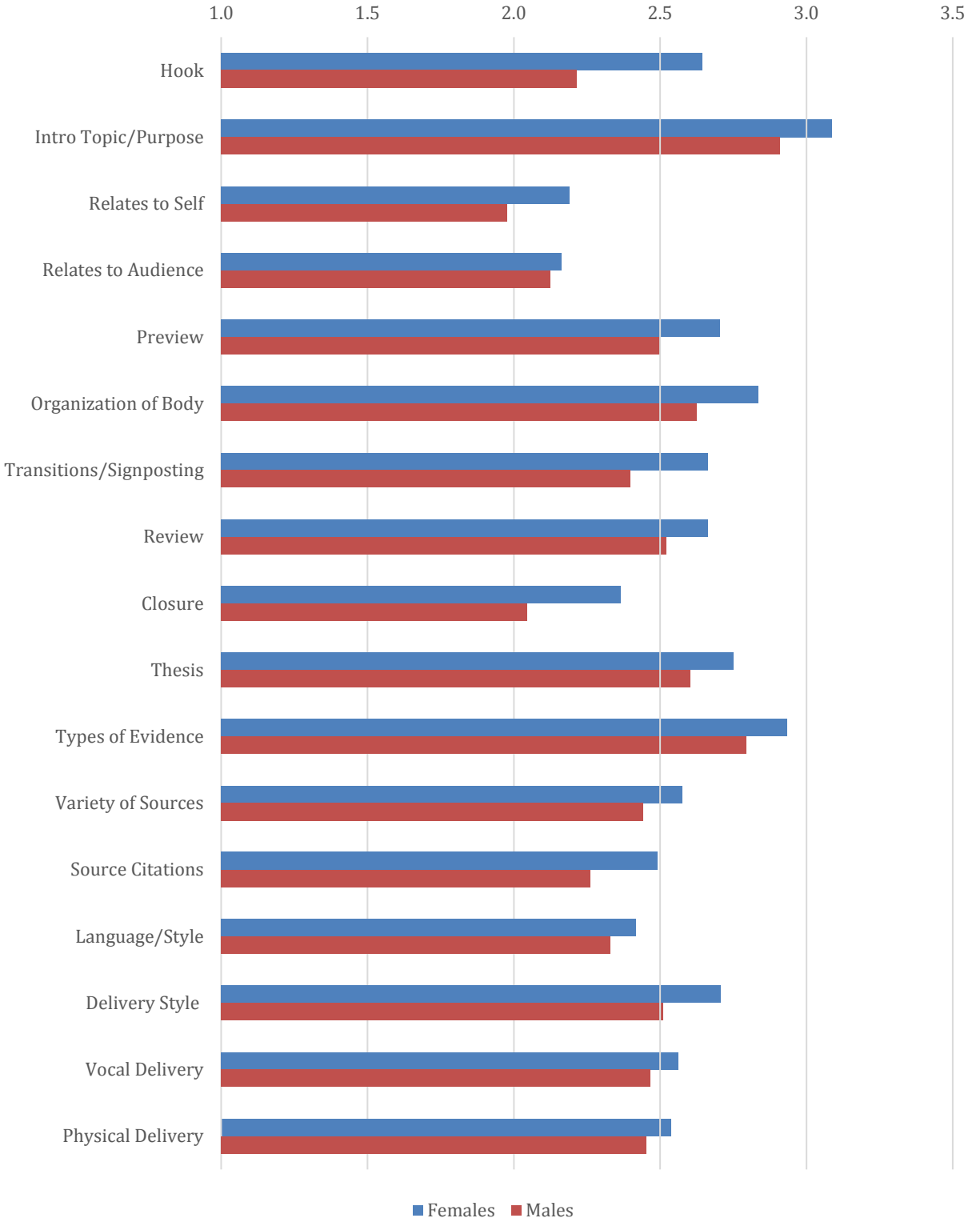
Students matched the 2.5 baseline on four rubric items: transitions/signposting, variety of sources, and the vocal and physical aspects of delivery.

Students performed below the 2.5 baseline on six rubric items. On three of these—attention-getter, source citations, and language/style—they lagged behind the baseline by only .1 of a point. Their scores dipped more markedly below the baseline on providing closure (2.2), relating topic to audience in the introduction (2.1) and relating topic to self in the introduction (2.1). Four of the six items on which student scores dipped beneath the baseline and all three items on which student scores were lowest appear in the structure section of the rubric.

Analysis: Gender

Chart 2 shows differences in the means for male and female presenters on each of the 17 items measured by the rubric.

Means on Rubric Items by Gender

Categories (top to bottom): Hook, Intro Topic/Purpose, Relates to Self, Relates to Audience, Preview, Organization of Body, Transitions/Signposting, Review, Closure, Thesis, Types of Evidence, Variety of Sources, Source Citations, Language/Style, Delivery Style, Vocal Delivery, Physical Delivery

Legend: ■ Females ■ Males

Female presenters outperformed their male counterparts on 16 of 17 rubric items, with the size of the gap varying from .1 to .4.

Females outscored males by .1 on four rubric items: relating the topic to audience, choice of types of supporting material, language/verbal style, and both the vocal aspects of delivery.

Females outscored males by .2 on eight rubric items: introducing topic/purpose, relating topic to self, offering a clear preview statement, structuring the body of the presentation, reviewing their main points in the conclusion, offering and supporting a viable thesis, backing this thesis up with an appropriate variety of sources, and effectively executing the chosen/assigned style of delivery.

Females outscored males by .3 on two rubric items: use of transitions/signposting and citing source material.

Females outscored males by .4 on two rubric item: opening the presentation with a "hook" that entices audience members to continue listening and providing closure.

The gap between female and male presenters was least pronounced for the four items related to language/style & delivery (.1, .2, .1, =). This gap widened somewhat for the two items related to the body of their presentations (.2, .3) and the four items related to thesis, evidence, & citations (.2, .1, .2, .3). The most pronounced gender gap occurred on the five items related to introductions (.4, .2, .2, .1, .2) and the two items related to conclusions (.2, .4).

When I shared a preliminary draft of this document with Christine Zimmerman (Director of Institutional Research), she was struck by the gender gap reported above, especially since female students enter SLU less confident about their public speaking skills than their male counterparts and remain so throughout their college careers. Chart 3, which Christine provided, is based on data from the CIRP Freshman survey. It reveals that, over the past 30 years, with the exception of a couple of anomalous years, a higher percentage of our incoming male students have assessed their public speaking skills as "above average" or "in the top 10%." It also reveals that this gendered confidence gap is not unique to SLU but is instead the norm in all private 4-yr colleges.

Chart 3:
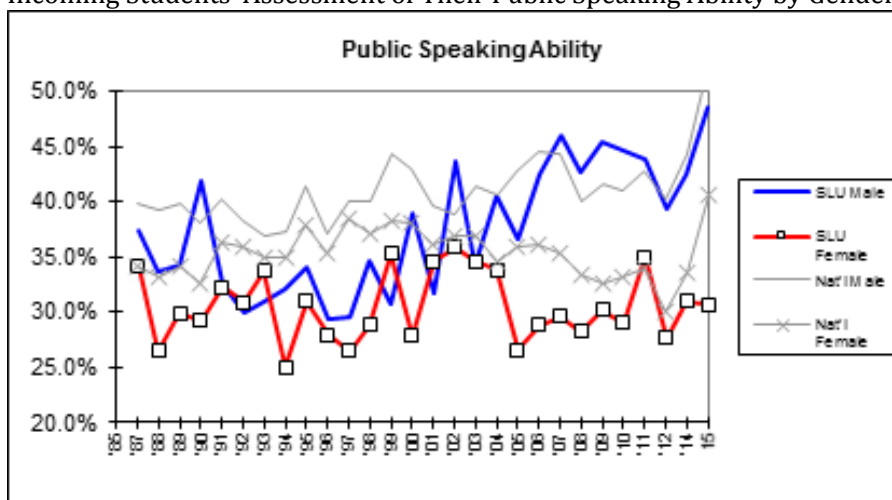Incoming Students' Assessment of Their Public Speaking Ability by Gender

Table 2, which Christine also provided, is based on data from the Spring 2016 CSQ. It reveals that rather than disappearing over the course of students' first year in college, this gap instead widens.

Table 2: Students' Incoming and End-of-Year Self-Assessment of Public Speaking Skills (by Gender)

	SLU			Nonsectarian 4-year colleges			All private 4-year colleges		
	incoming	end of 1st year	change	incoming	end of 1st year	change	incoming	end of 1st year	change
Men	3.3	3.5	0.2	3.5	3.6	0.1	3.4	3.5	0.1
Women	3.0	3.1	0.1	3.2	3.2	0.0	3.2	3.2	0.0

Viewed from one angle, Christine's data functions as a call for instructors to work to boost their female students' self-confidence as public speakers. Viewed from another angle, however, it's possible that female students outperformed their male counterparts on all 17 rubric items precisely *because,* lacking the self-confidence of their male counterparts, they devoted more time and effort to their presentations. If so, then perhaps her data functions instead as a call for instructors to take steps to convince male students that careful preparation, in addition to self-confidence, is required to maximize one's effectiveness as a public speaker.

V. Feedback Loop: Next Steps

Multiple options exist regarding how to approach the "next-steps" phase for a project such as this. One option is to pursue a course of action focused on program-wide results. Another option is to pursue a course of action focused on instructor-specific results. Under the former option, low program-wide scores on specific rubric items would be used to identify areas needing improvement, and strategies to enhance student learning in these areas would be devised and implemented across the program. In contrast, under the latter option, means for individual instructors' students on the various rubric items would drive the "next phase" step, with instructors whose students' scores were lower in different areas implementing different strategies to enhance student learning in these differing areas.

Both approaches have drawbacks. The program-wide approach risks paying insufficient attention to differences in where individual instructors' students are struggling. Additionally, even if unintentionally, it invites instructors whose students scored at or above the program means on rubric items flagged as "needing attention" to view the project as a justification for—perhaps even a call for—inaction on their part. The instructor-specific approach risks acting on the basis of too small a sample from each instructor. Given these concerns, the best course of action is perhaps to chart a middle course between the two approaches, with individual instructors assuming that their students conform more or less to the program-wide norms while also recognizing that their students almost certainly deviate from these norms in some areas.

Adopting this middle course can happen only when instructors have access both to program-wide and instructor-specific means. Instructors who participated in this project and want to know how their students scored can get this information by emailing a request to me.

Program-Wide Responses

Before identifying steps that individual instructors may want to implement to boost student performance on low-scoring rubric items, I first propose two program-wide responses.

Adjustments to the Guest "Presentation on Presentations" Shared with Many FYP/FYS Classes

Over the past several years, Randy Hill and I have made ourselves available to FYP/FYS classes for guest presentations that cover the fundamental principles of effective oral presentations. During most semesters, 50-60% of program instructors schedule one of these sessions. Because some students see this "Presentation on Presentations" in both their FYP and FYS and because of variation in students' learning styles and our teaching styles, in recent years, Randy and I have been alternating semesters, with one of us facilitating these sessions in the fall and the other in the spring. Both of us are aware of the findings of this project, and, moving forward, we plan to adjust our "Presentation on Presentations," giving added emphasis to five of the six items on which students' scores were lowest—namely, relating the topic to speaker (2.1), relating the topic to the audience (2.1), providing closure (2.2), the attention-getter (2.4), and oral source citations (2.4). Unfortunately, the amount of material covered in these 90-100 minute sessions prevents us from attending in a meaningful way to language/verbal style. Happily, on this rubric item, students' scores were only .1 of a point below the 2.5 baseline.

Faculty Development Sessions Focusing on "Best Practices in Oral Communication Pedagogy"

While most instructors' students performed above the program-wide mean in some areas and below it in others, several instructors' students scored above program-wide means in all or nearly all areas. Having some or all of these instructors share the nature of the oral presentations they assign, how they sequence these assignments, and the steps they undertake to enable students to succeed seems a promising way to spend some of the time the program regularly sets aside specifically for faculty-development work.

Instructor-Specific Responses

In a separate document ("Resources and Suggestions for Teaching Oral Presentation Skills"), I identify a range of resources instructors may wish to consult and offer a variety of suggestions they might consider implementing. I organize these according to the categories measured in the rubric (e.g., introductions, delivery). The suggestions and resources set forth in that document are by no means exhaustive, and I offer them primarily for their generative potential, hoping they will prompt individual instructors to devise their own creative ways to enhance students' presentation skills.

I urge instructors who participated in this project to focus both on areas where program-wide scores were lowest and where their students' scores were lowest. Newcomers to the program, as well program veterans who did not participate in this project, should focus on areas where program-wide scores were lowest, as well as on those presentation aspects on which their students have typically faltered in the past presentations.