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COM 101 helps freshmen connect with OU

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

For incoming freshmen, especially those who commute, becoming connected to a college environment isn't always easy. But Oakland University students who take Collegiate Communication (COM 101) are not only building friendships and becoming more exposed to university culture, they're also developing communications skills and begin to explore academic and career options.

The one-credit course, mainly offered in the fall semester, is designed to help new OU students learn strategies for success by applying communication techniques in an academic setting. Among the course objectives are learning the value of a college education, becoming aware of campus resources, developing relationships with classmates and career planning.

"In a school with a large commuter population like Oakland, it's a challenge for incoming freshmen to become connected on their own," said Tricia Westergaard, an academic adviser in the College of Arts and Sciences who's teaching a COM 101 section this fall. "Students may not know of campus resources or have the opportunity to get to know their classmates. We work on these things through journal writing, group projects and other assignments. As students work on these things, they get to know themselves better, too."

Doug Merriman, a Public Administration major who lives in Vandenberg Hall, said COM 101 has helped him make the transition from high school to college.

"I think being in this class with a group of freshmen helps us not feel isolated because we're all going through the same experiences," Merriman said. "I've learned that there may be ways I can better communicate with others. This class is about opening yourself up to ideas about other people. I think it's of value to a new student."

Lisa Anderson, a commuter student from Waterford who's majoring in Political Science and minoring in Communications, said COM 101 has helped her gain a greater understanding of college life.

"The classes aren't as overwhelming as they might have been," Anderson said. "I'd suggest that other freshmen take this class to get a feel for OU and to get to know yourself. This class can help you become more involved. A large proportion of OU students are commuters and taking this class can help you become more connected."

COM 101 began as an eight-week, non-credit program in 1993 under the title "Freshmen Success Seminar." In 1995, the **Office of New Student Programs** and **Department of Rhetoric, Communications and Journalism** offered COM 101 for the first time as a one-credit, 12-week course. The course is offered in sections organized by school or college with three separate sections for students who have yet to declare a major. Staff from the Office of Student Affairs and academic advisers serve as instructors. The workload is such that students can expect to handle the course as part of a full-time schedule of 12-16 credit hours. The course is graded on a pass/fail basis.

"We focus on careers and have information for them about their majors," Westergaard said. "But our main goals are to work on their communications skills and help them feel more connected to the university. By the end of the class, if students feel that they understand university resources better, that they know where to go for services, where to go to join an organization, and where to ask questions or share concerns, then we've succeeded."

Enrollment and retention figures indicate that the course has been successful. Students are informed of the course during freshmen orientation. Historically, many of those sections are filled before orientation concludes. Enrollment has grown from 133 students in nine sections in 1995 to 279 students in 17 sections this fall. On average, the sophomore year return rate for students participating in COM 101 is 5.8 percent higher than the return rate for the overall campus population.

For Westergaard, who first taught COM 101 three years ago, it's gratifying to see some of her former students preparing to graduate from OU this year.

"I'm glad to see some of my former students as seniors," Westergaard said. "It shows that they made a decision to get a college education at OU, they've stuck to it, and now they're close to reaching their goals."

One of Westergaard's former COM 101 students is senior Theatre Production major Jennifer Philp, who said the course helped her decide to stay with her chosen major.

"We did some career exploration in the class and it helped me decide that theatre production was what I wanted to do," Philp said. "The class is also beneficial for the more shy student who's not normally going to seek out student organizations or other activities – someone who's more likely to just do their classwork and go home."

For more information on COM 101, contact Dawn Aubry, Director of **New Student Programs**, 134 North Foundation Hall, at (248) 370-3260 or dmaubry@oakland.edu.

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