RESEARCH IN ACTION

by Nincy Mathew

The changing job market demands a new hire who has mastered the hard skills and the soft skills. Baylor's business professors saw the limits in their students' communication skills and found two solutions involving collaboration between students and faculty.
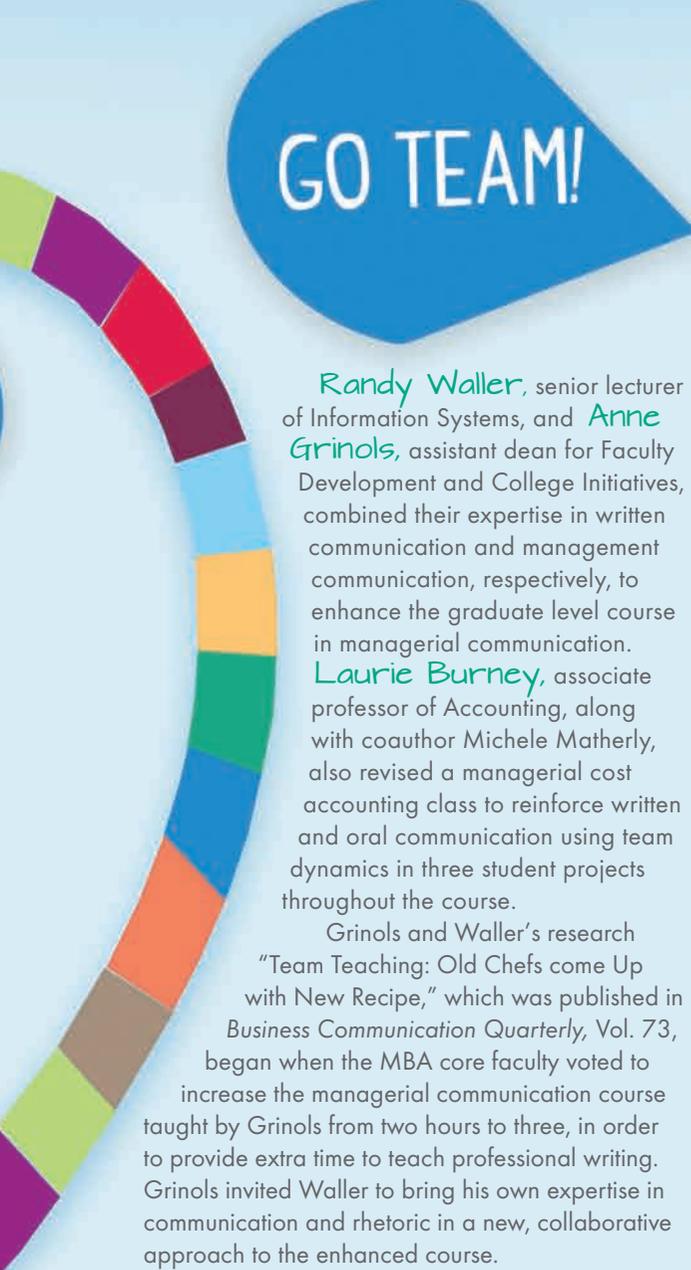
COLLABORATIVE TEACHING and LEARNING STRATEGIES

Randy Waller, senior lecturer of Information Systems, and **Anne Grinols**, assistant dean for Faculty Development and College Initiatives, combined their expertise in written communication and management communication, respectively, to enhance the graduate level course in managerial communication.

Laurie Burney, associate professor of Accounting, along with coauthor Michele Matherly, also revised a managerial cost accounting class to reinforce written and oral communication using team dynamics in three student projects throughout the course.

Grinols and Waller's research "Team Teaching: Old Chefs come Up with New Recipe," which was published in *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 73, began when the MBA core faculty voted to increase the managerial communication course taught by Grinols from two hours to three, in order to provide extra time to teach professional writing. Grinols invited Waller to bring his own expertise in communication and rhetoric in a new, collaborative approach to the enhanced course.

"It's a new recipe because he and I have taught communication courses for a long time but not together," Grinols said. **"Our collaboration enabled us to do things we hadn't done before."**

Both professors worked together to tie new objectives in professional writing to the existing objectives in oral, interpersonal and strategic communication. Everything culminated in a new, multi-faceted team web analysis project with a sustainability theme.

"Team teaching has impacted curriculum and teaching by making it more interdisciplinary," Waller said.

"With more information available in the world, both teachers and students tend to specialize, which can inhibit understanding of how everything fits together," Grinols said. "Collaboration offers us the opportunity to demonstrate how our subject areas interact."

Waller said the course puts an emphasis on depth of analysis and thinking skills, forcing students to develop their proficiency in research and writing. The collaborative effort immediately saw results.

"Now when students approach an assignment, they are more analytical about it," Waller said. "They drill down into the subject matter. Students also became more careful writers. Their sentences are now more concise. They also approach writing in a more methodical and structured way."

After their third semester of team teaching, the professors have tweaked and improved the recipe.

"In a schedule change, Dr. Waller now teaches several classes consecutively rather than intermittently throughout the course," Grinols said. "This allows students to get a more concentrated dose of writing time, allowing for more focus. We've seen students retain the information better and improve their work because of it."

Team teaching has allowed both professors to provide students with a strong foundation in strategic communication as well as oral and written communication skills. **"As professors, we want to provide students with the potential for growth so they can go as far as they can in their careers,"** Waller said.

Using the concept of teams, Burney also revised her class to improve and practice students' communication and leadership skills. In her research, "Increasing the Competency Focus Using a Project-Driven Strategy," which was published in *Advances in Accounting Education: Teaching and Curriculum Innovations,* No. 11, Burney and her coauthor responded to the call for change in accounting classes coming from practitioners and academic literature.

"We wanted to take on a revision of the [managerial cost accounting] class, addressing the issues in accounting professions while maintaining the integrity of the content in the class," Burney said.

The class was assigned three team projects addressing the main concerns from recruiters: teamwork and leadership, technical skills and creativity. For the first project, team members took turns as the leader.

"Leadership is something you have to do to learn," Burney said. "The leader facilitated communication, agenda and made sure projects were completed."

The next project was an assignment to help students use Microsoft Excel to their advantage.

"We put emphasis on knowing how to properly use the tool within the discipline," Burney said. "It helped them not to just memorize formulas but to understand the power of Excel in decision-making."

For the final assignment, student teams developed a creative project that would improve the class and ultimately be added to the curriculum.

Team projects can lead to a "free rider" dynamic, which Burney and her colleague tried to avoid by implementing incentives and consequences. One example is "the right of eviction." In the case that a group member is not pulling his or her weight after a number of warnings, the group has the right to remove the free rider.

Burney also used online peer evaluation and saw more honest and richer comments.

"I'm not sure if they were more comfortable with the online format, but the questions lead them to think in more depth about the group experience," Burney said.

Burney said the most direct impact overall has been seen in the feedback from recruiters. **"Students have better interviews and they also say that it helped them land a job and present better during the behavioral interview process,"** Burney said. **"It gave them the confidence and assurance to be a true leader in a group."**

Burney said faculty have done a great job at training technicians, but they are missing the soft skills training.

"Hopefully this kind of teaching will spread across curriculum," she said.