



Research that Matters

When considering the content of their Communication Studies courses, students often reflect the practical aspects of the discipline and, in particular, how the study of human communication can make it possible for one to be a competent contributor to personal, professional, and civic life. Although practical applications are a key component of the information students learn in Communication Studies courses, it is also important to recognize the rigorous research that is completed in order to help students and scholars determine, for example, which forms of communication are going to be the most effective and ethical in a given circumstance. Understanding the breadth and depth of Communication Research helps us understand why some forms of communication can be so powerful.

In the stories featured on the following pages, Texas State's Communication Studies faculty were asked to discuss a research project that they were in the process of completing. Because the faculty at Texas State actively engage in research, the work they are doing will eventually inform the content being taught in courses at this institution. Our hope is that by examining these research projects in their early stages, it will be possible for those interested in the study of human communication to make some predictions about the future of the field. Often, faculty pursue these research ideas in collaboration with both graduate and undergraduate students, which prepares the next generation of scholars and teachers to conduct research of their own that extends our knowledge of the field even further.

We're excited to present these interviews and present some of the most cutting-edge research in the field of Communication Studies. If you are interested in learning more about a project, consider contacting the faculty member and/or registering for a course with them, declaring a major/minor, or even pursuing graduate school. We hope you enjoy learning more about the future of Communication research.

Dr. Kristen Farris

Students' Turbulent Experiences due to the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic: An Examination of the Relational Turbulence Model in the Teacher-Student Relationship

Dr. Kristen Farris is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies. She teaches large lecture sections of COMM 1310 and several other undergraduate courses including: Communication Theory, Empirical Research Methods, and Health Communication. At the graduate level, Dr. Farris teaches courses in Quantitative Research Methods, The Dark Side of Communication, and Instructional Communication. Finally, Dr. Farris co-leads an Education Abroad trip each summer where graduate and undergraduate students take communication coursework in London and Paris. Students can sign up for a course with Dr. Farris this summer and fall 2022.



We asked Kristen to talk about an ongoing research project that she describes as, “Students’ Turbulent Experiences due to the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic: An Examination of the Relational Turbulence Model in the Teacher-Student Relationship” As she explains, this project is designed to help us understand the challenges college students endure when their learning environment experiences a major disruption.

Question: In three sentences or less, what is the project about?

Dr. Farris:

1. This study explored the longitudinal experience of college students in the spring 2020 academic semester when the university these students attended transitioned from a face-to-face to a fully online classroom environment due to health concerns related to the novel coronavirus pandemic.
2. The study is guided by the relational turbulence theory and is investigating the impact of students’ perceptions of uncertainty and their instructors’ facilitation and interference with their academic goals on students’ experiences of stress and perceptions of relational turbulence, and in turn, how those factors predict students’ communication and relational satisfaction with their instructor and their intent to persist at the university.
3. Ultimately, my co-authors and I are interested in how this disruption to typical interactions with their instructor may have impacted students’ experiences and their perceptions of their relationships with their instructors.

What is the current status of the project—what are you working on right now to keep the project moving forward?

We are currently in the data analysis and manuscript preparation phase. We will be submitting to a journal in the fall 2020 semester.

Could you explain what this project is about in a few sentences that might be understood by an audience that is not very familiar with communication research?

We're exploring how a major disruption (like the coronavirus pandemic) to teaching and learning might impact how students feel about their communication with their instructor and how it might change the nature of the relationship with their instructor.

Please explain what it is that makes this research especially important.

We hope that this research can contribute to both our theoretical and practical understanding of teacher-student relationships and the communication that occurs within them. In terms of theoretical contributions, our hope is to demonstrate that the relational turbulence theory and model can be used in the teacher-student relationship. Previous research has only used this theory in close, relational partners (e.g., spouses, parent-child). We are also extending the theory's assumptions by exploring how the constructs might operate in an academic context.

In terms of practical contributions, we hope to provide evidence that instructors' communicative behaviors (as perceived by their students) may influence students' perceptions of their communication and relational satisfaction with their instructors and more importantly, students' intent to persist at the university. Ultimately, we hope to provide practical advice for faculty in the event that other disruptions (e.g., instructor illness, active shooter, natural disaster) occur.

What was it that prompted you to begin this project? Is there a story behind it, a challenge that you faced, an interesting observation, any connection to your own personal interests, another project, or some other inspiration?

I am a scholar who conducts a lot of "me" search – a term that describes research driven by personal connection to the topic. I was teaching during the spring 2020 semester when the novel coronavirus pandemic prompted the mass transition from face-to-face to online coursework with little notice/preparation. Dr. Erik Timmerman and I were discussing the difficulty of the transition and decided to collect data from both college students and faculty members to investigate their experiences during this time. We asked Dr. Marian Houser to join us as she has great expertise in the area of instructional communication.

Could you please complete this sentence: "I am most excited about this research project because..."

This study really excites me, because it truly combines all three of my interest areas (I am an interpersonal communication scholar who studies these theories and constructs in two contexts (health and instructional communication). I also think this study is timely and relevant as so many instructors are still trying to navigate this novel experience.

How would you respond if someone asked how the potential discoveries and conclusions from this project are going to matter ... either for my life or the lives of others?

If someone asked me this question, I would first direct them to two Facebook groups – Pandemic Pedagogy which currently has 32 thousand followers and Teaching in the Time of Corona which currently has around 12 thousand followers. These two sites are devoted to helping instructors

navigate this exact experience through crowdsurfing advice. It would be helpful to have some actual evidence that demonstrates what is helpful to students as opposed to relying on anecdotal evidence of individual instructors.

What do you plan to do with the project when it's complete?

The first goal is to present this research during the Spotlight Panel entitled, "Communication at the Crossroads Series: COVID-19 and Implications for the Instruction of Communication" at our National Communication Association's convention in November. We will also submit this manuscript for publication.

What is one question that you want someone to ask you about your research project (and what is the answer)?

One of my goals is to find creative and productive ways to share my research with others. The audience for this study is primarily college-level instructors who have access to peer-reviewed academic journals. However, I think sharing the results through presentations to faculty perhaps through the Organizational Development and Communications office would be helpful. In general, though, I would love to create a blog that presented my research using data visualization/infographics and easy-to-understand language that would be free to the public.

Thank you for your time, Dr. Farris!