



37 Years, Two Books, One Standard: How the University of Tennessee Built a Custom Publishing Program That Scales— and Proves It Works

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When John Haas became department head of Communication Studies at the University of Tennessee in the mid-1990s, the public speaking program had two instructors and no campus-wide requirement for oral communication. Today, 19 instructors each teach four sections per semester, and public speaking is a general education requirement for every student at a 40,000-student research university that receives more than 50,000 applications for admission annually.

That growth didn't happen by accident. A central piece of it was the decision, early in Haas's tenure as department head, to develop fully original custom textbooks in partnership with Macmillan Learning rather than adopt off-the-shelf materials. The result was two books—one for public speaking, now in its fifth edition, and one for business and professional communication, now in its sixth—that are used across every section of both courses, available to students at roughly half the cost of comparable commercial texts, and backed by a royalty structure that returns all revenue to the department.

What makes the University of Tennessee case distinctive is not just the scale or the longevity—it's the measurement. The department runs pre- and post-assessments every semester, tracking speech anxiety, self-perceived communication competence, and content knowledge. Fifteen-plus years of consistent data show the program achieving its learning outcomes. That same data has also surfaced a meaningful trend: students entering public speaking courses today carry higher levels of speech anxiety than students did 12 years ago—a finding the department has published at conferences and used to adapt its curriculum.

This is a case study in what custom publishing looks like at full maturity.

At a Glance

Institution: University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Department: School of Communication Studies, College of Communication and Information

Courses: Public Speaking; Business and Professional Communication (both general education)

Content Type: Fully original faculty-authored textbooks (no third-party content)

Current Editions: *Public Speaking*, 5th edition; *Business & Professional Communication*, 6th edition

Delivery: E-book via Achieve, integrated with Canvas LMS; first-day access via registration

Scale: 19 instructors, 4 sections each per semester

Faculty Lead: Dr. John Haas, Department Head (retired August 2026), 37-year UT faculty member

Financial Model: All royalties assigned to department; student cost approximately half of comparable commercial texts





Background and Context

A Program Built for Scale

The University of Tennessee's School of Communication Studies serves one of the largest public university populations in the Southeast—approximately 40,000 students on the Knoxville campus, with more than 50,000 applicants for fall 2026 admission. Communication Studies courses, particularly public speaking and business and professional communication, are general education requirements, meaning students from every major—landscape architecture, zoology, nursing, engineering, fine arts—take these courses.

That breadth of enrollment creates a specific instructional challenge: learning outcomes must be consistent across dozens of sections taught by instructors with different backgrounds, preferences, and approaches. The materials those instructors use are not an incidental detail. They are the primary mechanism for ensuring that consistency.

Dr. John Haas: 37 Years at the Helm

John Haas joined the UT faculty in the fall of 1989 and became department head shortly after earning tenure—a role he held for 27 years. His academic background is in organizational communication, and from the beginning of his administrative tenure he has focused on curriculum coherence. He retired in August 2026, but the custom publishing program he built will continue without interruption. The partnership with Macmillan, in his words, “won’t change.”





The Challenge

Instructional Fragmentation at Scale

When Haas became department head, instructors teaching public speaking and business communication used whatever materials they personally preferred. With a small number of sections and no campus-wide general education requirement, the variation was manageable if not ideal. As the program grew and general education requirements formalized, the stakes changed entirely.

Instructors were walking away with different emphases, different sequencing, and different pedagogical priorities. One instructor was building courses around newly available tools like PowerPoint; others were organized around different frameworks entirely. The result, Haas observed, was students having “dramatically different kinds of experiences and different kinds of learning outcomes” depending on which section they happened to enroll in—an outcome the university’s general education commitments could not accommodate.

Off-the-Shelf Texts Didn’t Fit

The standard solution—adopt a shared commercial textbook—had a fundamental problem. Off-the-shelf public speaking texts tend to be comprehensive by design, covering far more material than a single semester course can address. A 400-page introductory textbook is built for a national market; students end up paying for a substantial portion of content they’ll never use, and instructors are left picking and choosing in ways that reintroduce the consistency problem.

Communication studies also occupies an unusual position in the undergraduate curriculum: unlike history or mathematics, it has no K–12 precedent. Most students arrive with no prior formal study of communication as an academic discipline. An introductory text for this course needs to do foundational work—establishing what communication is, where the field comes from, what rigorous study of it looks like—that general-purpose texts often shortchange in favor of breadth.

A Financial Case as Well as a Pedagogical One

The most widely used commercial public speaking textbook at the time was retailing at \$125 for a new copy. Haas saw an opportunity: if the department wrote its own book, it could price it far below market, assign all royalties to the department rather than an outside author, and direct that revenue back into the student experience. The financial logic was straightforward—every dollar students spent on a commercial text was a dollar leaving the university ecosystem entirely.



The Solution: Original Faculty-Authored Texts with Full Achieve Integration

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Students are paying for materials they're not really going to end up using, and picking and choosing some materials over others is maybe not the best way to operate, especially when you have different people teaching the courses.”

— Dr. John Haas



Fully Original Content

The defining feature of the University of Tennessee's custom texts is that they contain no third-party content. Haas wrote both books himself, conducting original research and grounding each in the specific learning outcomes the department had collectively defined. This was a deliberate choice: the goal was not to curate the best available commercial content but to build materials that said exactly what the department needed to say, no more and no less.

The discipline challenge Haas describes—resisting the academic impulse to include everything—was one of the central lessons of the project. The standard for inclusion was straightforward: does this material help students achieve the course's defined learning outcomes? If not, it didn't go in. The result is a text students will actually use in its entirety, which changes the instructor's relationship to the book entirely.

“

You can't give people all your information. It's like trying to take a drink out of a fire hose. What do they need in order to achieve the learning outcomes we're interested in?”

— Dr. John Haas



Local Content & Global Context

Both texts incorporate local examples—organizations and contexts students in East Tennessee are likely to have direct experience with. The business and professional communication text, for instance, uses the Volkswagen plant near Chattanooga and local manufacturers with international supply chains as concrete examples of globalization at work. This localization makes abstract concepts more immediate without narrowing the scope of the material.

Video and Multimedia

As the program has evolved, the department has developed original video content to accompany the texts—a response to the increasingly visual orientation of students. Haas notes that video is particularly effective for modeling communication behaviors that don't translate cleanly to text: delivery techniques, nonverbal dimensions of presentation, and the dynamics of professional interaction.

Achieve Integration and Online Assessment

The custom texts are delivered as e-books through Achieve, integrated directly into the university's Canvas LMS. Students have first-day access through course registration—no separate purchase, no login friction, no “I couldn't find the book” excuses.

The program also runs its midterm and final exams through Achieve. Moving

assessments online had two significant effects. It addressed academic integrity concerns—the Macmillan team worked with the department on browser lockdown and other security measures—and it freed up class time that had previously been consumed by in-class testing.

That reclaimed time goes directly to practice: more opportunities for students to get in front of the room and deliver presentations, which is what the course is actually for.

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That freed up a couple of different class sessions each semester for each teacher. And so what we were able to do then is to make use of that class time getting them up in front of the class.”

– Dr. John Haas

Cost and Financial Model

The public speaking text launched at \$62—compared to \$125 for the leading commercial alternative at the time. Students save money; the department earns royalties that go directly back into the program. Those funds have been used to purchase equipment, support study abroad, and create networking and professional development opportunities for students. Because Haas retains print rights and copyright, the department can also provide PDF access to students with documented accessibility needs, handled through student disability services without additional cost or process overhead.



The Process: Building and Sustaining the Program

Starting with Collective Agreement on Outcomes

Before any content was written, Haas convened the instructors teaching both courses for a series of working sessions to define what every section needed to deliver—regardless of how individual instructors chose to sequence material or run their classrooms. That process of collective agreement was the foundation everything else was built on.

The lesson Haas draws from 27 years as department head is direct: you do not build a multi-instructor program without buy-in, and buy-in is not the same as compliance. Instructors who understand why the shared framework exists, and who had a hand in defining it, will use and defend it. Instructors who feel it was imposed on them will find ways around it.

“You do not fly solo. If you do not have buy-in for what’s going on, it will be a train wreck.” — Dr. John Haas

The Macmillan Partnership

The initial build took approximately 14 months—longer than Haas estimates it would take today, given the learning curve of a first custom project. The Macmillan team was flexible with deadlines throughout, accommodating the realities of academic administration where institutional demands can redirect time without warning.

The working relationship has deepened considerably over time. Macmillan representatives attend department meetings at the start of each term to review products, services, and any issues that have come up. The primary Macmillan contact has become, in Haas’s description, “something of a friend”—a working relationship built over many years of ongoing collaboration rather than a transactional vendor relationship. When asked what he would change about the process, Haas’s answer was essentially nothing.



Ongoing Revision and the AI Challenge

Both texts have gone through multiple editions—five for public speaking, six for business and professional communication. Keeping material current has generally been straightforward in the e-book format, which allows updates without the full production cycle of a print revision.

AI is the current exception. Haas is revising the business and professional communication text and has decided against attempting to write static AI content into the book—the field is moving too fast for any fixed treatment to remain accurate. His solution is to embed URL links throughout the text that point to regularly updated supplementary content, so students always have access to current information without requiring a full edition revision every year.





Outcomes and Evidence

Fifteen-Plus Years of Pre/Post Learning Outcome Data

The University of Tennessee's custom publishing program is unusually well-documented. The department runs pre- and post-assessments every semester across multiple dimensions of the public speaking course, including:

- Speech anxiety levels (self-reported)
- Self-perceived communication competence
- Content knowledge (assessed via midterm and final exam performance)

Fifteen-plus years of consistent data show the program achieving its defined learning outcomes. Students who enter the course with measurable levels of speech anxiety leave with lower levels. Students who enter with a given self-assessment of their communication skills leave with a higher one. Content knowledge assessments show students acquiring and retaining the material the course is designed to teach.

The department has been presenting these research results at conferences and pursuing publication. Specific numerical data is subject to university review before external sharing, and that process was underway at the time of this interview.

A Trend the Data Revealed

The longitudinal dataset has done more than validate outcomes—it has surfaced a trend the department would not otherwise have detected. Over the past 12 years, incoming students have been arriving with higher baseline levels of speech anxiety than they did a decade ago. The department attributes this in part to the shift toward screen-mediated communication and, more recently, to the social disruptions of the COVID-19 period.

Because the trend was visible in the data, the department could respond to it. They have built additional class time into the curriculum specifically focused on speech anxiety management strategies—a curricular adaptation driven by evidence rather than intuition.

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We've noticed a trend over the past 12 years where students entering those classes are starting at a higher level of anxiety than they did 12 years ago. We build in now more class time talking about ways of managing speech anxiety. But we wouldn't know that unless we were able to track the data.” – Dr. John Haas



Faculty Onboarding and Instructor Confidence

With 19 instructors teaching four sections each, the program's ability to onboard new faculty efficiently is a meaningful operational advantage. New instructors inherit a complete package: a well-developed text, aligned assessments, evaluation rubrics, and a shared framework for course structure. They can add their own material, adjust sequencing, and bring their own pedagogical strengths—but they do not have to build from scratch.

Haas describes a recent instance where a colleague agreed to teach a January mini-term course they had never taught before, on short notice. The complete materials infrastructure made it workable. "Everything that I needed was there. It made everything so remarkably easy."

Student Cost Savings

Students in the public speaking course pay approximately half what they would for a comparable commercial text. Over the course of the program's history and across tens of thousands of students, the cumulative savings are substantial. Haas frames this not as a concession but as a point of pride: the department reduced cost without reducing quality, and directed the royalties that would have gone elsewhere back into the student experience.





Lessons for Institutions Considering Custom Publishing

Start with Learning Outcomes, Not Content

The first question is not “what should go in the book” but “what do we want students to be able to do?” Everything else follows from that. Haas’s advice to departments considering custom publishing: make the case for clear long-term advantages first. If you can’t articulate what the custom solution will achieve that an off-the-shelf text won’t, it may not be the right path.

Resist the Impulse to Include Everything

Faculty who write custom texts for their own students face a particular temptation: the material they know deeply feels important to share. The discipline of writing for a course—not for the field—requires cutting material that is intellectually interesting but not necessary for the defined learning outcomes. A book students will actually use entirely is more valuable than a comprehensive book they’ll use at 60%.

Build and Maintain Faculty Buy-In Continuously

Shared materials only solve the consistency problem if the people teaching the courses are genuinely committed to using them. That commitment requires ongoing cultivation—not just at launch but every semester. Haas’s model preserves meaningful instructor autonomy: sequencing, supplementary content, assignments, and classroom activities remain the instructor’s domain. What’s shared is the core text and the defined learning outcomes. That balance is what makes the program sustainable at scale.

Measure Outcomes from the Start

The University of Tennessee’s most significant advantage is not the books themselves—it’s the 15-year dataset those books made possible. Departments that build assessment into their custom programs from the beginning accumulate evidence that can guide curriculum adaptation, support accreditation, and make the case for the program’s value in ways that anecdote cannot. Haas recommends building in measurement infrastructure as a non-negotiable component, not an afterthought.

Consider the Financial Model

Assigning royalties to the department rather than to individual faculty authors creates a revenue stream that benefits the program without creating individual financial conflicts. It also gives instructors a reason to be invested in the book’s success: the program benefits when students buy in, not just the author. For departments with high-enrollment courses, the math is worth running.

About Macmillan Learning Custom Solutions

Macmillan Learning Custom Solutions partners with higher education institutions to develop course materials tailored to specific departmental needs—incorporating original content, curating existing resources, and delivering custom materials through digital platforms including Vital Source and Achieve. From individual chapter selections to fully original program-authored front matter, Custom Solutions supports the full production lifecycle: content curation and rights management, organizational design, platform integration, print and digital fulfillment, and ongoing support.

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