



# **Leadership Communication: The Current State and the Future of MBA Communication**

**Presented by  
Deborah J. Barrett, Ph.D.,  
Rice University  
Melinda Knight, Ph.D.,  
The George Washington University**

**Association for Business  
Communication Convention  
October 20 – 22, 2005  
Irvine, California**

**Contact [barrett@rice.edu](mailto:barrett@rice.edu) with questions.**

*Copyright Deborah J. Barrett & Melinda Knight, 2005*

---

# Discussion Topics

- ❑ **Research questions and methods**
- ❑ **The current state of MBA communication**
- ❑ **The communication proficiency of MBAs**
- ❑ **The future communication needs of MBAs**
- ❑ **The implications for MBA faculty and schools**

---

# Research Questions

- ❑ **What is the current state of MBA communication? Has it changed much since the BCQ article in 1999?**
- ❑ **How does today's course look (titles and course content)?**
- ❑ **What skills are entering students lacking?**
- ❑ **What should a core MBA communication course include?**
- ❑ **What are the implications of these needs on communication faculty and MBA programs?**

# Research Methods

- ❑ Reviewed Web sites and interviewed selected MBA communication faculty at a sample of 34 top-ranked schools.\*
- ❑ Surveyed and assessed entering MBAs
  - ❖ Survey is conducted on-line and includes all entering MBAs at Rice University.
  - ❖ The assessments consist of usage, writing, oral presentations, and PowerPoint capabilities.
- ❑ Surveyed MBAs again after completion of core course to measure improvement.
- ❑ Performed secondary research.

\* Schools appearing in top 30 lists of *Business Week* (2004) or *U.S. News and World Report* (2005) or both. See Appendix A for descriptions of courses.

---

## Schools Included in Survey (34)

<b>Babson</b>	<b>Stanford</b>
<b>Carnegie Mellon</b>	<b>UC Berkeley</b>
<b>Chicago</b>	<b>UCLA</b>
<b>Columbia</b>	<b>University of Illinois</b>
<b>Cornell</b>	<b>University of Maryland</b>
<b>Dartmouth</b>	<b>University of Michigan</b>
<b>Duke</b>	<b>University of Minnesota</b>
<b>Emory</b>	<b>University of North Carolina</b>
<b>Georgetown</b>	<b>University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)</b>
<b>Harvard</b>	<b>University of Rochester</b>
<b>Indiana</b>	<b>University of Southern California</b>
<b>MIT</b>	<b>University of Virginia</b>
<b>Northwestern</b>	<b>University of Washington</b>
<b>Notre Dame</b>	<b>UT Austin</b>
<b>NYU</b>	<b>Vanderbilt</b>
<b>Ohio State</b>	<b>Washington</b>
<b>Purdue</b>	<b>Yale</b>

---

# Discussion Topics

- Research questions and methods
- **The current state of MBA communication**
- The communication proficiency of MBAs
- The future communication needs of MBAs
- The implications for MBA faculty and schools

---

## Core MBA Communication Courses

- ❑ **Twenty-three schools require MBA communication courses.**
- ❑ **Courses most frequently occur in the fall of first year (18 schools).**
- ❑ **Required credit hours range from 1 to 12, although most are 2 or 3-credit hours (6 each).**
- ❑ **Course titles vary little:**
  1. **Management Communication (11 schools)**
  2. **Leadership Communication (2)**
  3. **Management Speaking/Writing (2)**
  4. **Communication for Managers (1)**
  5. **Other Leadership titles (3)**

---

# Typical MBA Communication Course Content

- ❑ **Strategy**
- ❑ **Presentations**
- ❑ **Managerial writing**
- ❑ **Plus most schools list one or several of the following topics in descriptions on the Internet:**
  - ❖ **Interpersonal communication**
  - ❖ **Conflict management**
  - ❖ **Audience analysis**
  - ❖ **Persuasion or Influencing people**
  - ❖ **Diversity or cross-cultural communication**
  - ❖ **Coaching and feedback**
  - ❖ **Listening**
  - ❖ **Negotiations**
  - ❖ **Leadership**



# Content Found in Popular Texts

Topic	Percentage containing topic
Strategy	100%
Writing	100%
Presentations	100%
Interpersonal skills	92%
Cross-cultural communication	92%
Meetings	92%
Graphics	83%
External Relations	83%
Teams	66%
Conflict Management	66%
Employee Communication	66%
Technology	50%
Case Analysis	50%
Ethics	42%

---

# Discussion Topics

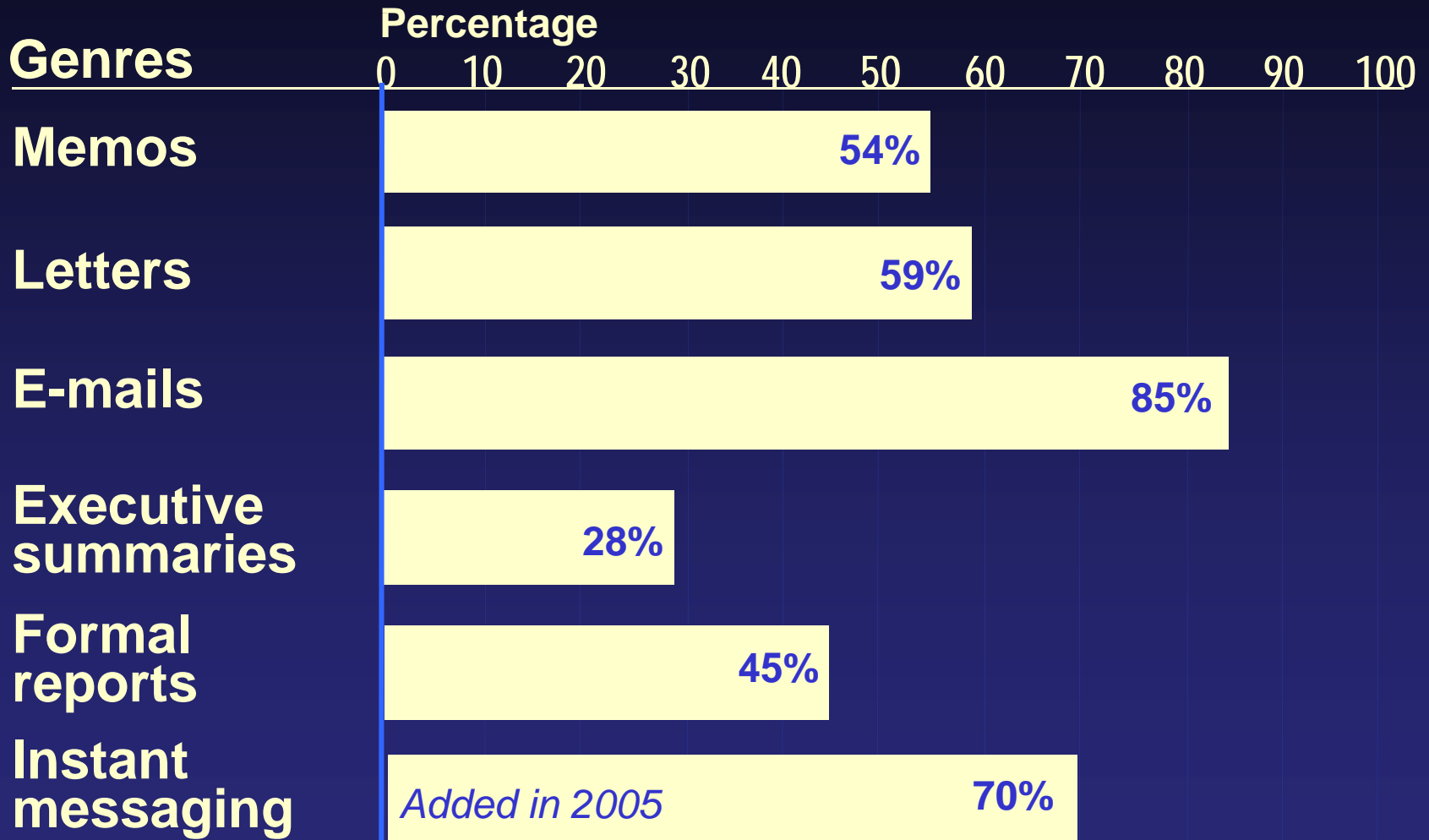
- Research questions and methods
- The current state of MBA communication
- **The communication proficiency of MBAs**
- The future communication needs of MBAs
- The implications for MBA faculty and schools

# The Level of Proficiency Entering First-Year MBAs Claim – 2000-2005\*

- ❑ Students see themselves as slightly more proficient at written correspondence – e-mails (85%), letters (59%), memos (54%) – than at individual (45%) or team presentations (48%).
- ❑ However, they claim less proficiency in writing formal reports (45%) or executive summaries (28%).
- ❑ Close to 50% claim proficiency in working on both project (45%) and problem solving teams (45%), yet only around one-third (35%) have proficiency in working in cross-cultural teams and only one-fourth (27%) have received training in team facilitation.
- ❑ Finally, their claimed proficiency in audience analysis (13%), case analysis (26%), and developing communication strategy (21%) is low relative to either writing or speaking proficiency.

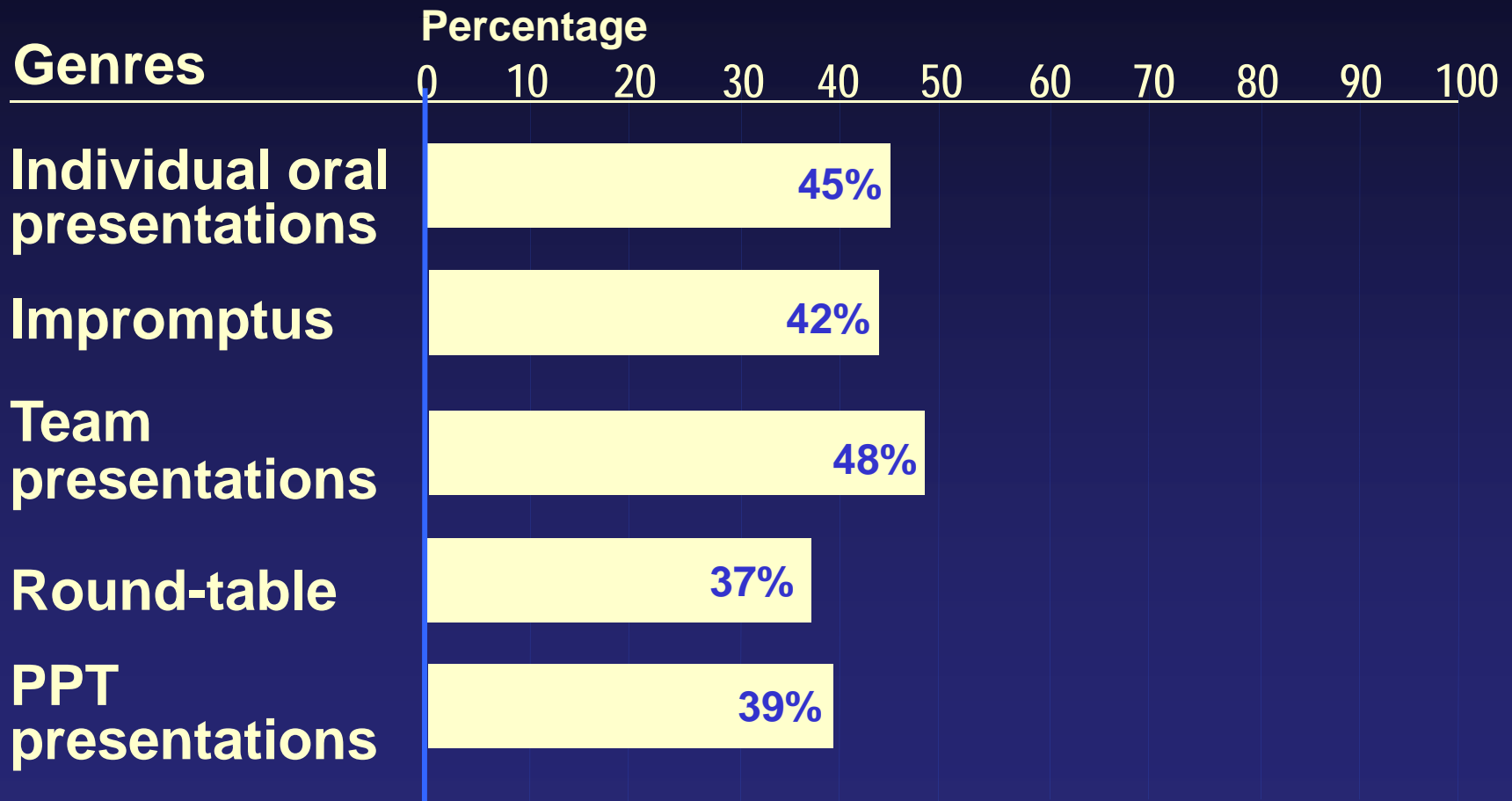
\* The survey sample includes all students entering the MBA program at Rice each fall 2000 - 2005 for a total of 978 students.

# Average Percentage of Students Selecting Moderately High to High Proficiency in Writing Genres – 2000-2005\*



\*For the year-by-year breakdown, see Appendix.

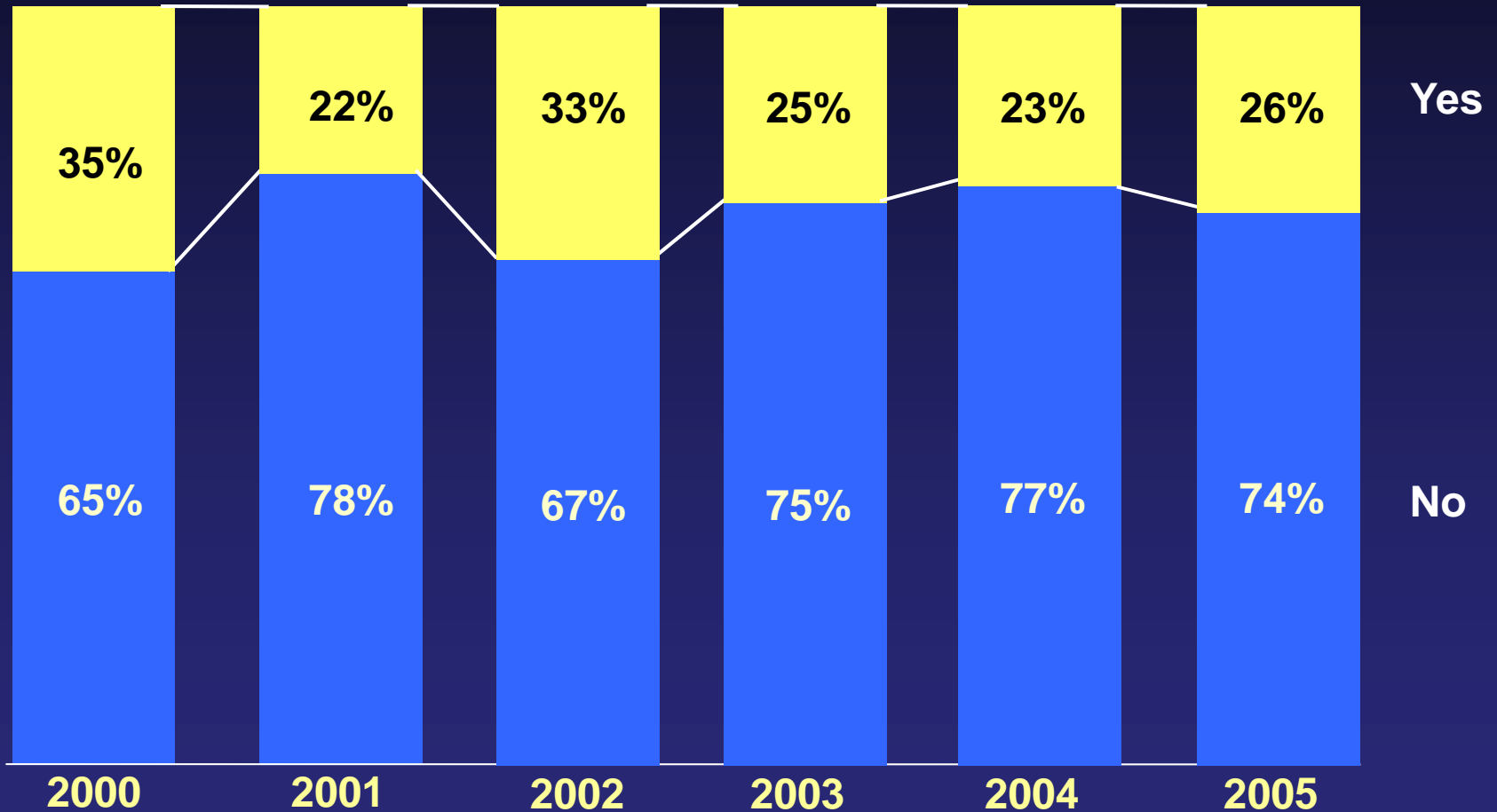
# Average Percentage of Students Selecting Moderately High to High Proficiency in Speaking Genres – 2000-2005\*



**N=978**

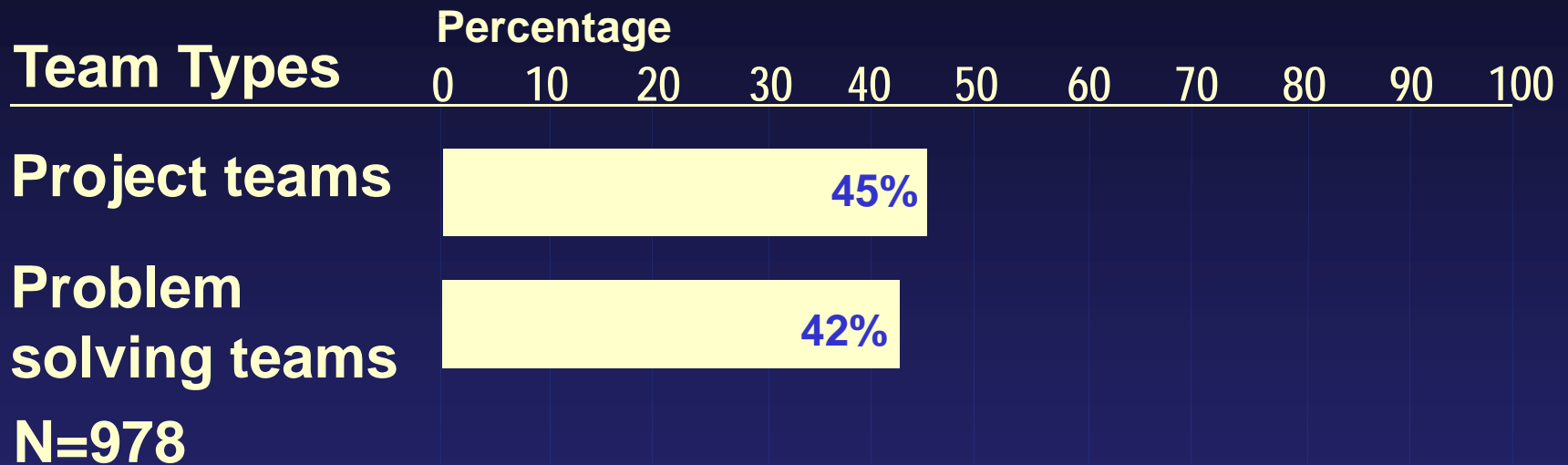
**\*For the year-by-year breakdown, see Appendix.**

# Percentage Having Received Training in Team Facilitation – 2000-2005



# Student Experience Working in Teams – 2000-2005\*

Selecting Moderately High to High Proficiency



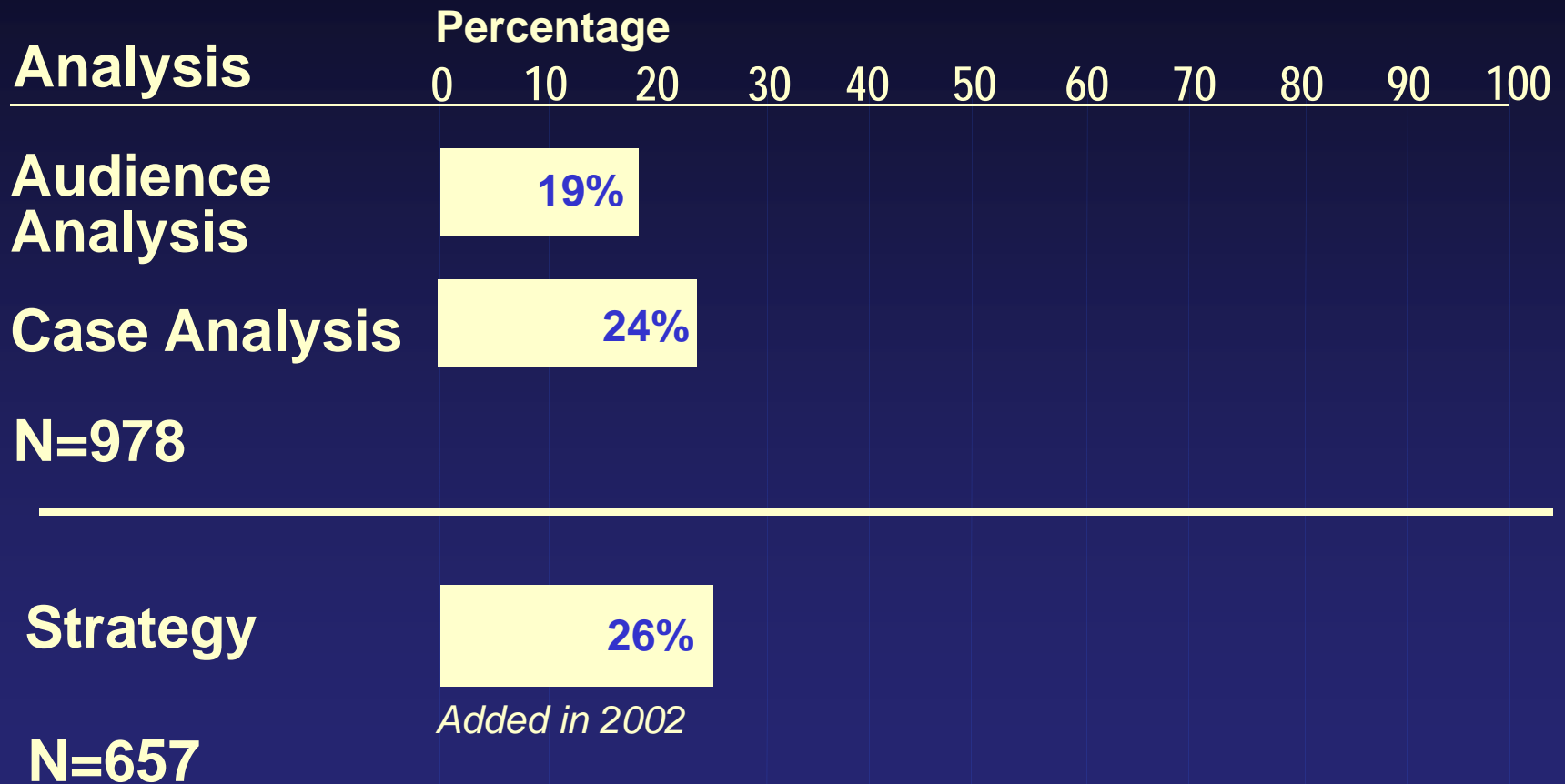
Selecting Significant Experience

Cross-cultural teams  
*Added in 2002* 35%

N=657

\*For the year by year breakdown, see Appendix.

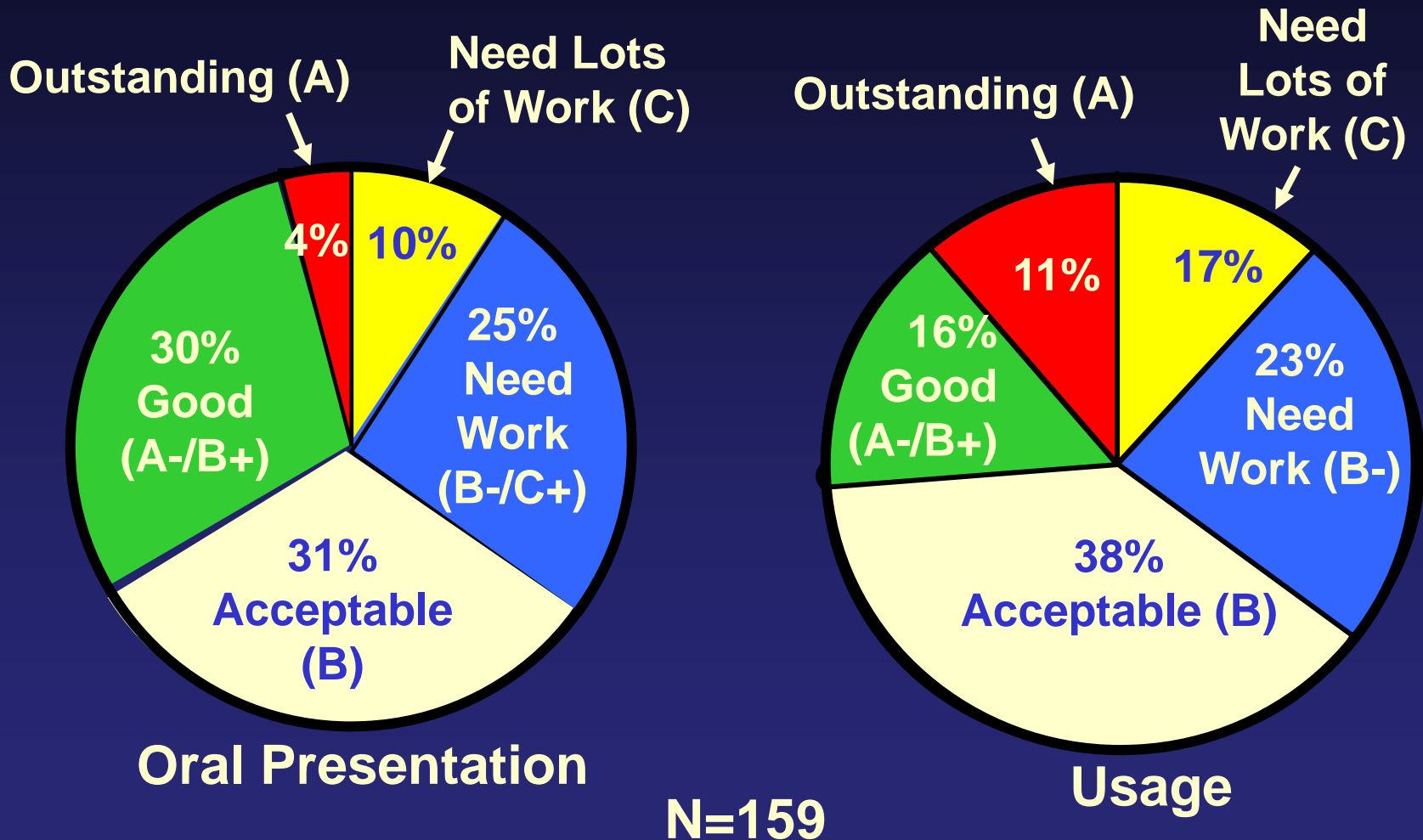
# Average Percentage of Students Selecting Moderately High to High Proficiency in Audience and Case Analysis and in Developing Strategy – 2000-2005\*



\*For the year-by-year breakdown, see Appendix.



# Faculty's Assessment of Basic Skills of Entering MBAs – Fall 2004



## Percentage of Students Reporting Improvement Needs In Broader Communication Activities – Fall 2004\*

Communication Activities	Improvement Need			
	Substantial	Some	Little	None
Communication Strategy	19	58	22	1
Written Communication	24	46	27	3
Oral Communication	32	40	26	2
Ethos/image	6	43	46	5
Skills at Dealing with Others	4	42	50	4
Observation and Feedback	4	40	50	6
Team Dynamics	3	47	48	4
Dealing with Your Own Feelings	6	39	46	9
Internal Corporate Communication	30	30	17	1
External Corporate Communication	42	42	3	1

\*Self-assessments as part of Communication Development Plans three weeks into semester and after faculty feedback on pre-term performance.

# Student's Self-Reported Improvement in Selected Skill Areas After Course – Fall 2004

- ❑ In fall 2004, the overall improvement score was 98 percent (152 respondents) of the students reporting their communication skills had improved as a result of the communication instruction.
- ❑ Their improvement in specific skill areas from pre-term to post-course was as follows\*:

Skill area	Improvement – From/to
Writing memos	20 percent to 78 percent
Writing letters	28 percent to 78 percent
Writing e-mails	43 percent to 87 percent
Team/individual presentations	17 percent to 89 percent
Audience analysis proficiency	22 percent to 76 percent
Communication strategy	11 percent to 73 percent

\* High and moderately high categories are combined.

---

## Discussion Topics

- Research questions and methods
- The current state of MBA communication
- The communication proficiency of MBAs
- The future communication needs of MBAs
  - The implications for MBA faculty and schools

---

# What does Today's MBA Communication Course Need to Be?

- ❑ A course designed to develop the MBA's basic communication skills while preparing them to assume organizational leadership roles.
- ❑ A course built on the theoretical excellence of the communication and leadership scholars balanced with practical knowledge and experience.
- ❑ A course focused on providing the foundational, managerial, and corporate communication capabilities needed by all future organizational leaders.



**A course with a leadership communication focus.**

Barrett, D.J. Leadership communication: A definition and defense, ABC Convention, 2002. Also, see definition of leadership communication in *Leadership Communication* (McGraw-Hill).

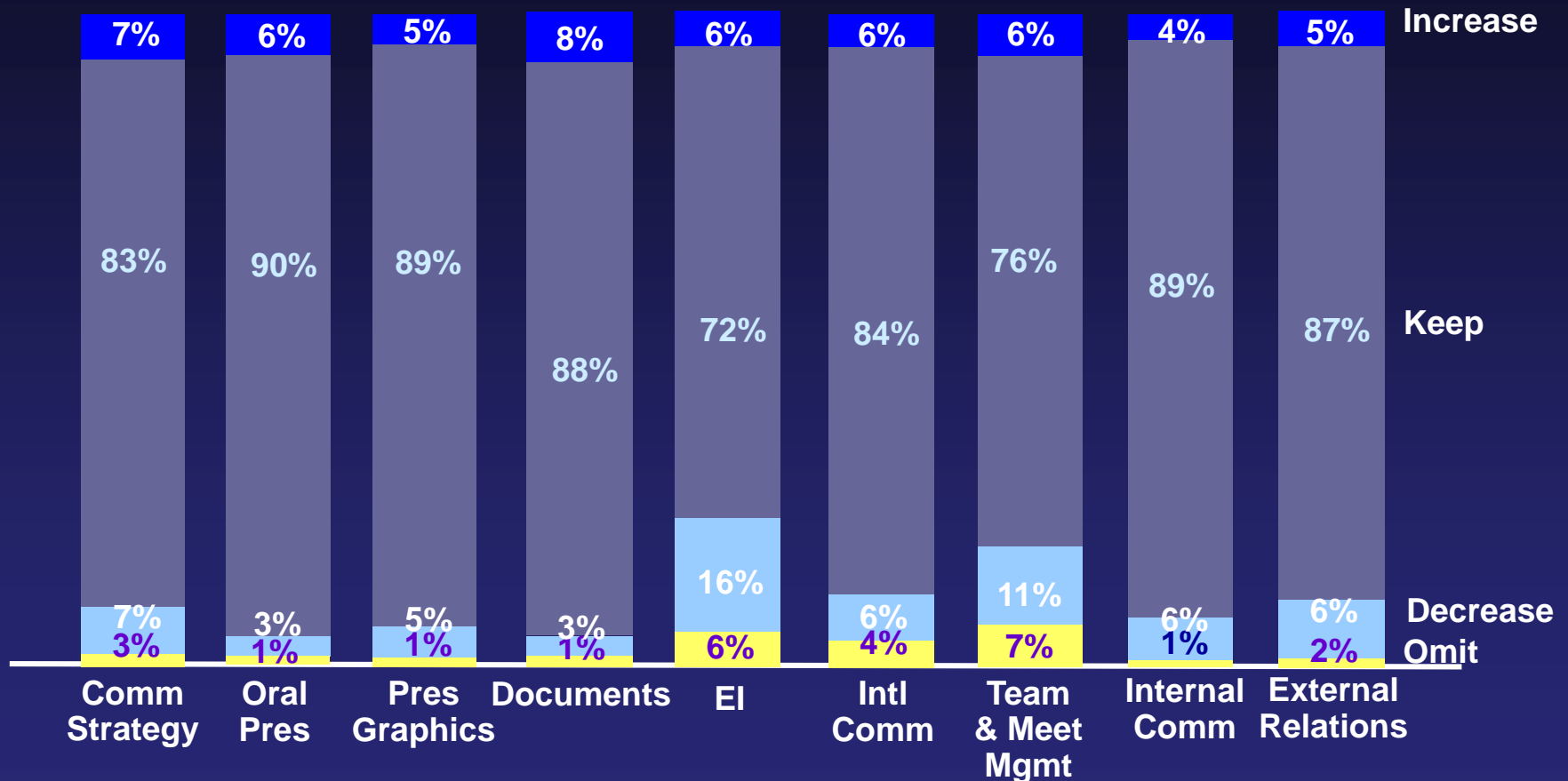
---

# What Topics Should a Core MBA Communication Course Include?\*

1. Relationship of leadership and communication (ethos, image, emotional intelligence)
2. Audience analysis and communication strategy
3. Logical structuring for writing and presentations
4. Style and usage
5. Writing genres – correspondence as well as proposals and reports
6. Presentations (impromptu, individual, and team)
7. Graphics and PowerPoint
8. Meeting management
9. Team communication and collaboration
10. Emotional Intelligence/interpersonal skills
11. Cross-cultural communication
12. Communication ethics
13. Corporate communication (employee communication, change communication, external relations)

\*Based on secondary research. Bibliography available upon request.

# The Value of Communication Topics from the MBA Student's Point of View – Fall 2004\*



\*Students were asked which topics to keep, increase, decrease, or omit.

# Where Leadership Communication Intersects with the Traditional MBA Communication Course Focus of the Past



Original diagram minus leadership communication is from Shelby, A.N. (1993), Organizational, business, management, and corporate communication: An analysis of boundaries and relationships, *The Journal of Business Communication*, 30(3), 241-267.

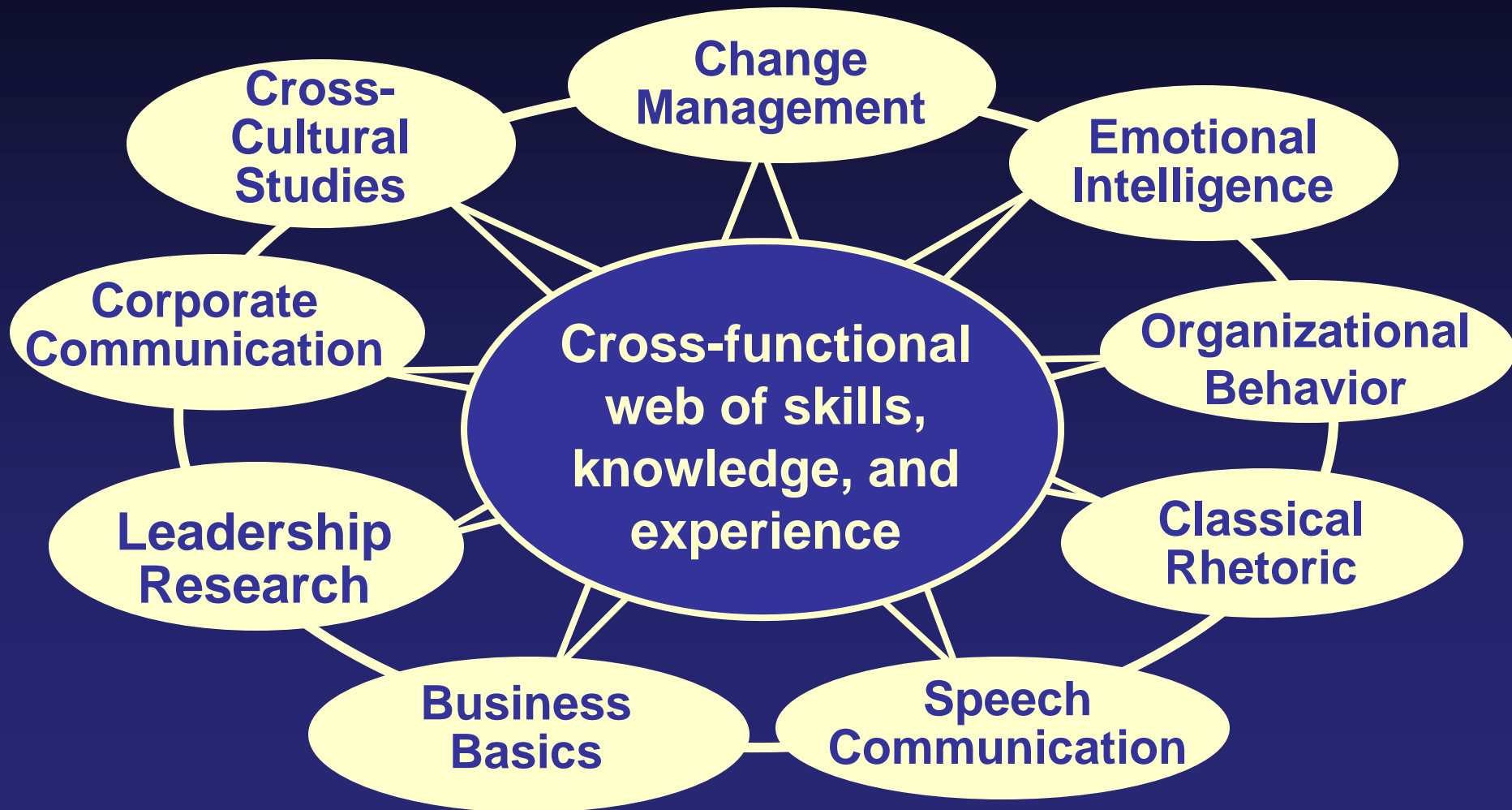


---

## Discussion Topics

- Research questions and methods
- The current state of MBA communication
- The communication proficiency of MBAs
- The future communication needs of MBAs
- The implications for MBA faculty and schools

# The Implications for MBA Communication Faculty



---

# Summary

- ❑ **The state of MBA communication is in flux, with very promising findings, given the number of top-ranked schools with required communication courses.**
- ❑ **Assessments of MBAs indicate they need basic as well as more advanced communication instruction and practice and that across-the-board improvement is possible.**
- ❑ **The MBA communication of the future needs to focus on leadership capabilities, including ethos, emotional intelligence, advanced interpersonal skills, cross-cultural communication, and corporate communication.**
- ❑ **We as a profession need to help business schools understand the range of abilities communication faculty need and how essential we are to the success of business school graduates.**

---

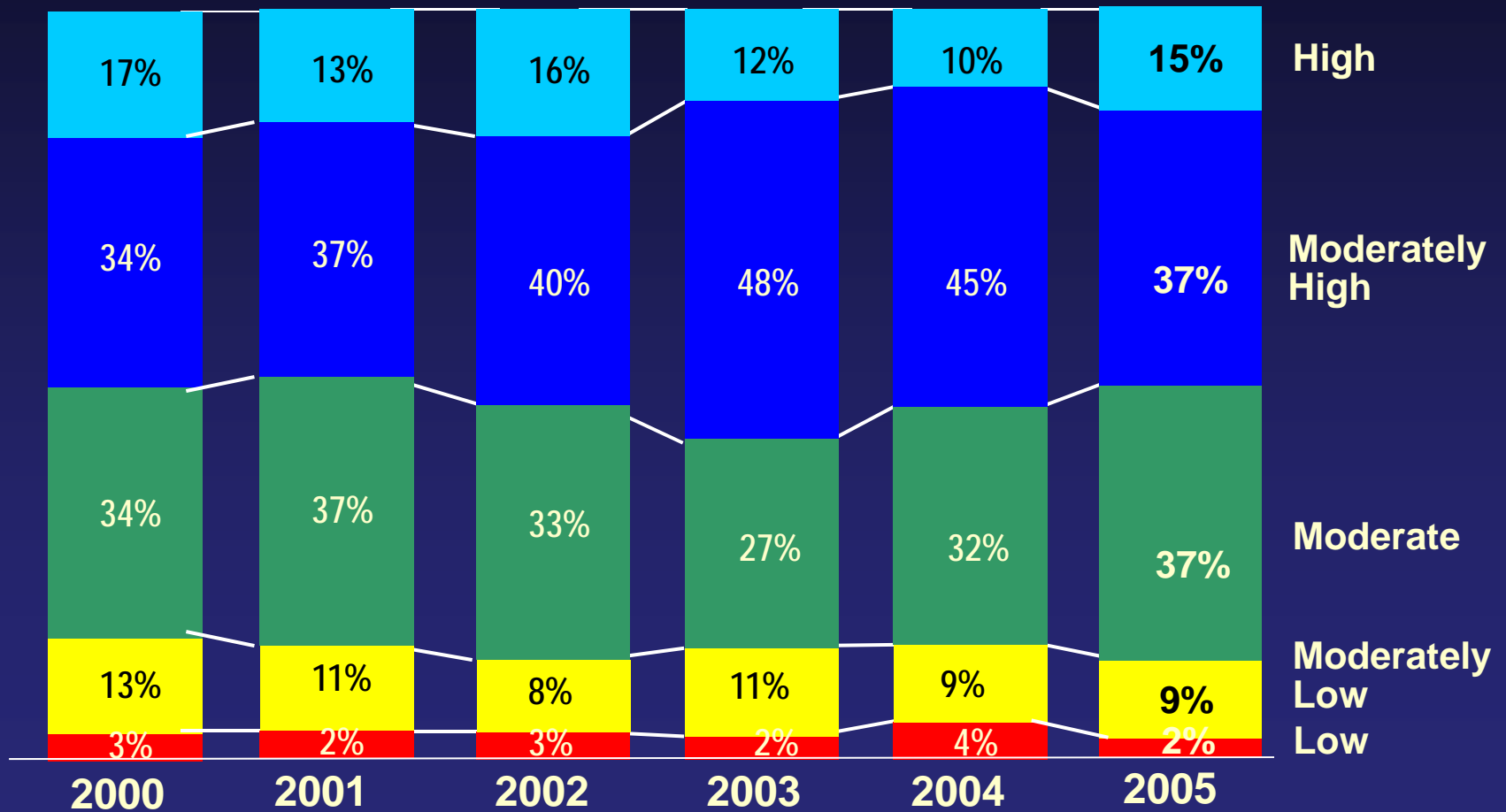
**Appendix – Year-by-Year  
Self-Assessment Data 2000 – 2005 and  
Improvement by Topic 2000 – 2004**

---

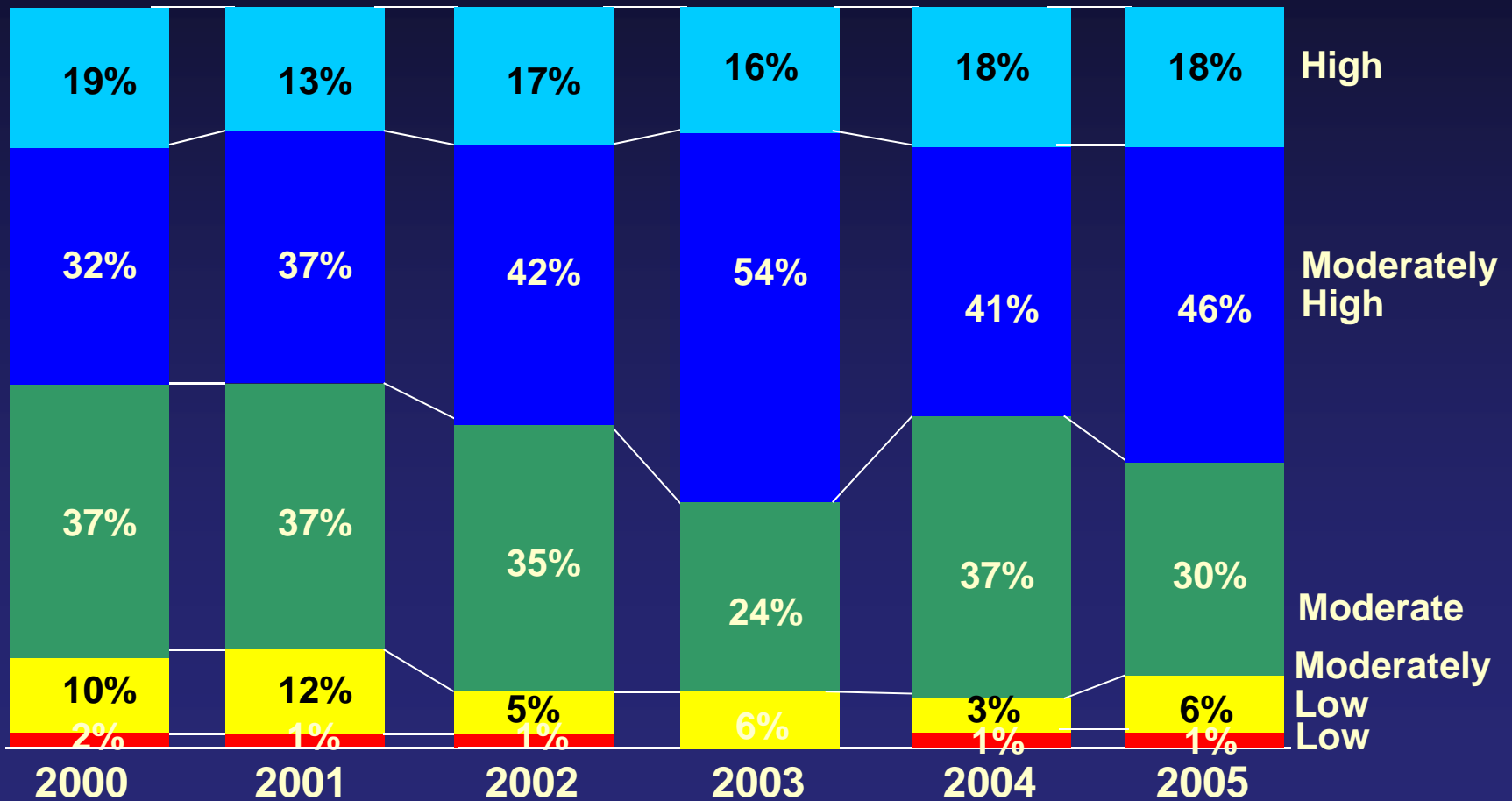
# Preface to Profile Data 2000 - 2005

- ❑ Since the fall of 1998, the communication faculty at Rice University has required all incoming MBA students to profile their communication, team, and relevant computer proficiency. The students complete the profile on-line and submit it electronically.
- ❑ The profile is part of the individual component of the communication program and is designed to help the communication faculty to tailor the instruction to the student's individual level of experience. In addition, it helps the faculty determine the communication areas they need to cover with the class as a group.
- ❑ The profile data is also used for comparison with the students' assessment of their proficiency at the end of the fall semester to determine how much their communication experience and skills have improved from their perspective.
- ❑ Each entering student completed the profile for all years; thus, the sample for each year corresponds to the starting enrollment: 2000 = 148; 2001 = 173; 2002 = 186; 2003 = 176; 2004 = 159; 2005 = 136.

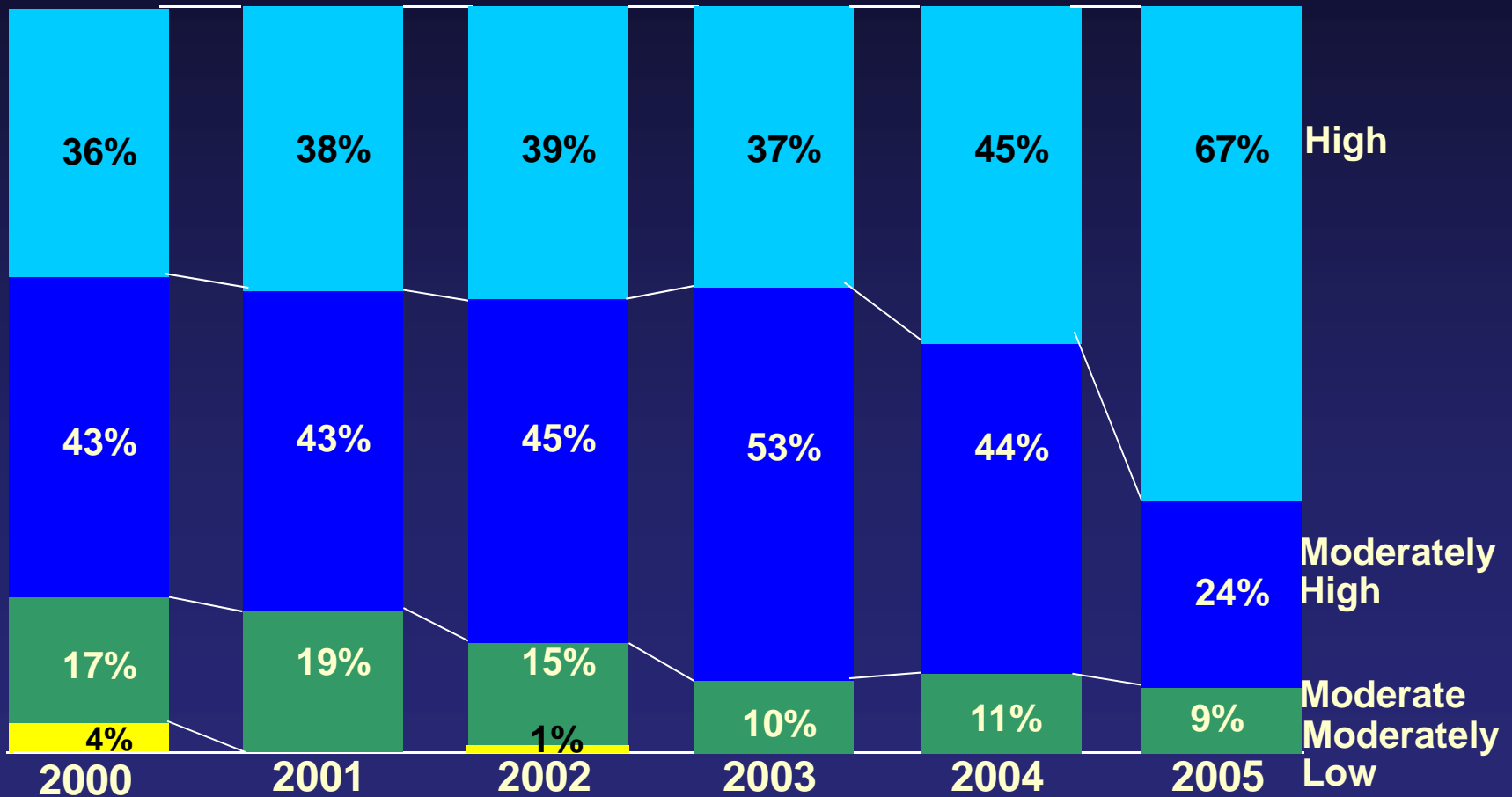
# Communication Proficiency – Writing Memos



# Communication Proficiency – Writing Letters

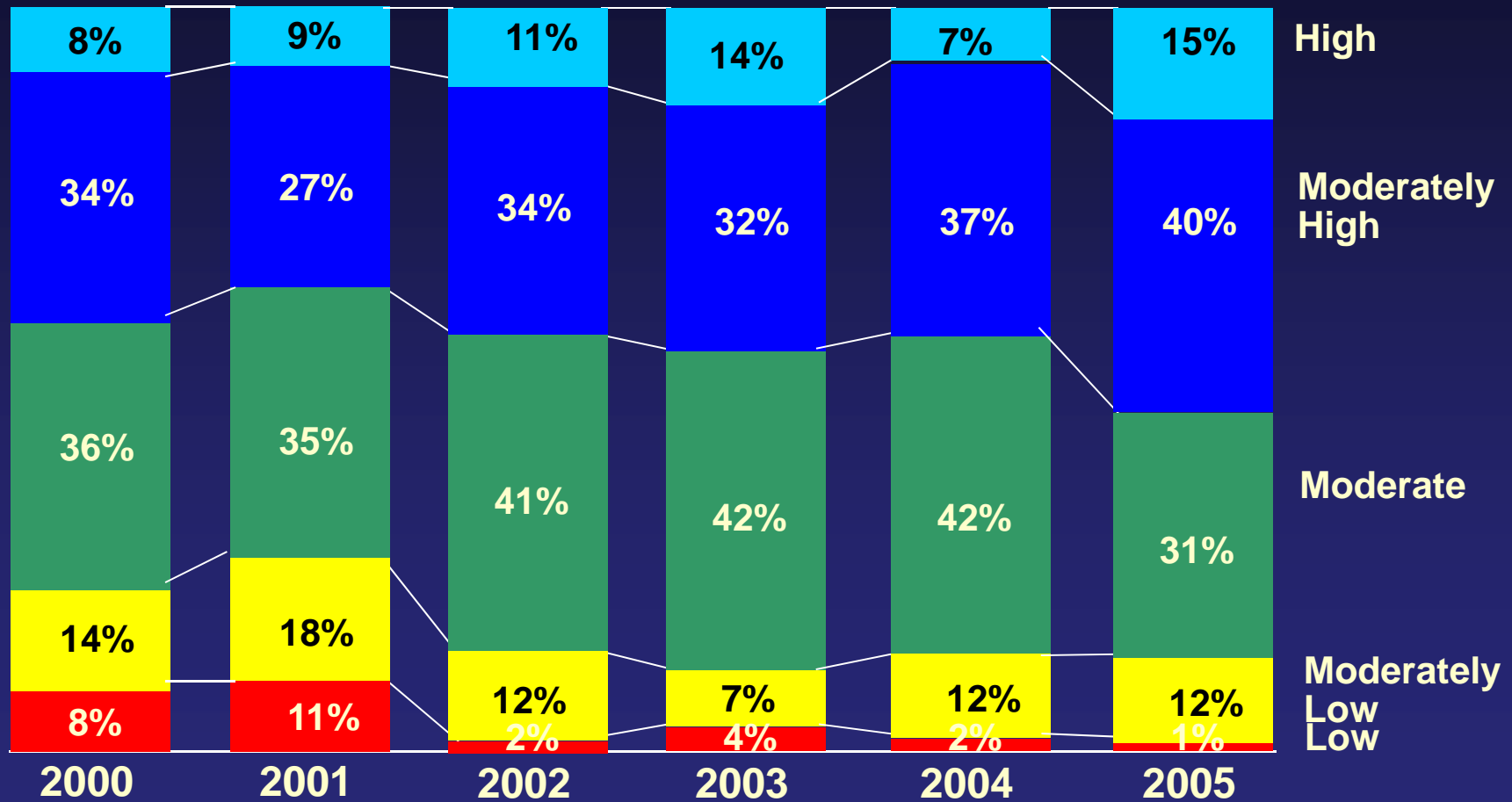


# Communication Proficiency – Composing E-Mail

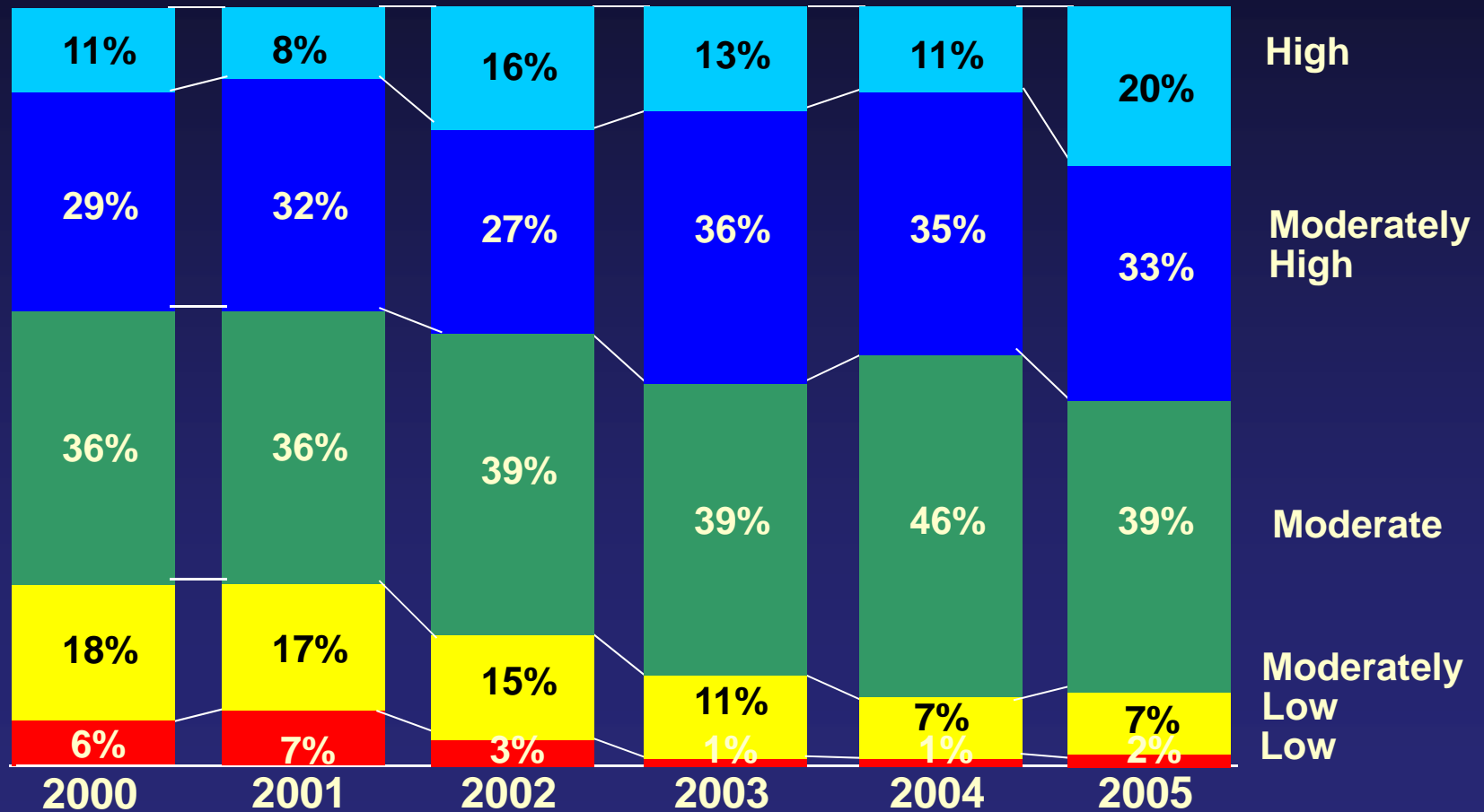




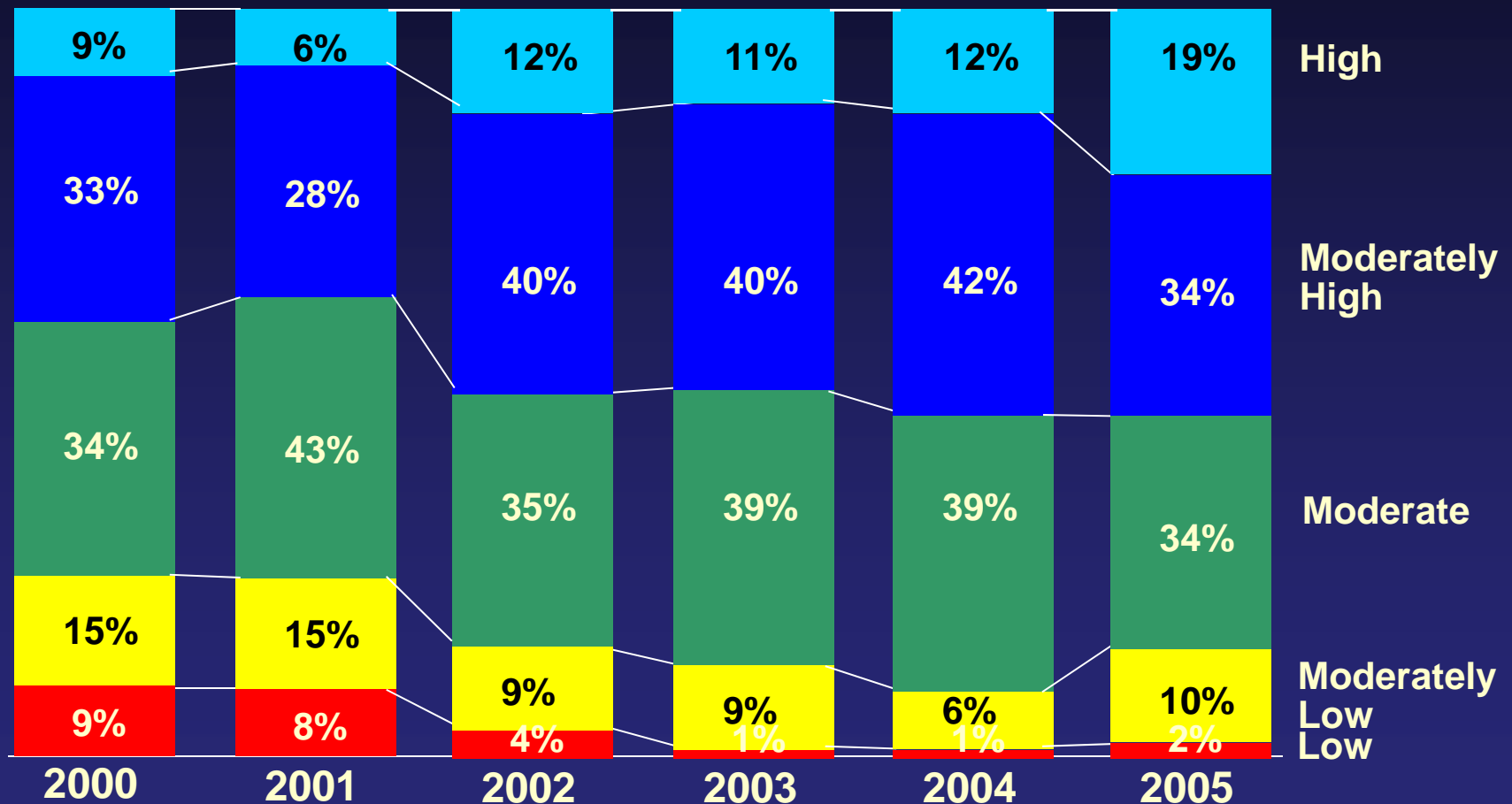
# Communication Proficiency – Creating Formal Written Reports



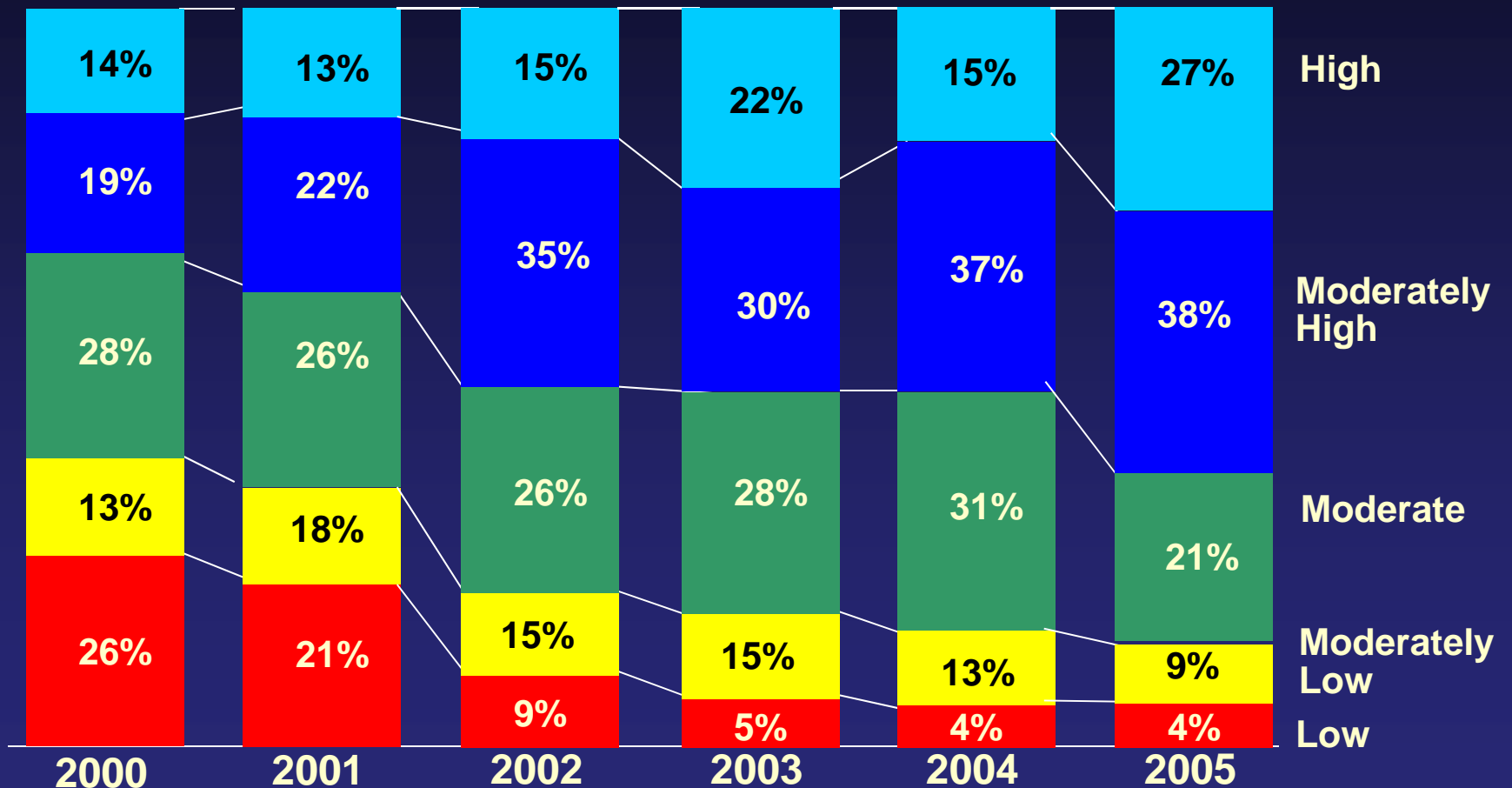
# Communication Proficiency – Delivering Individual Oral Presentations



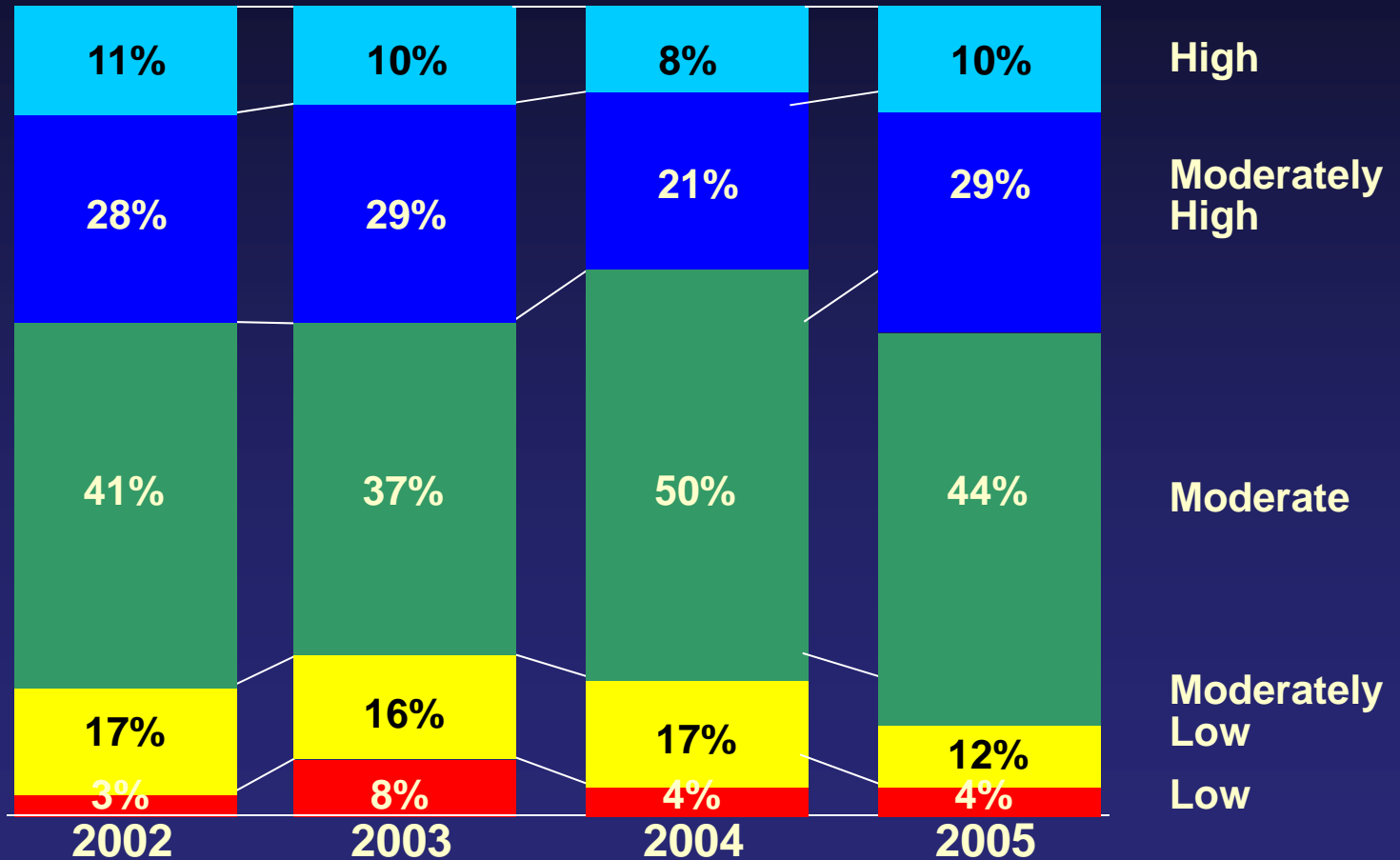
# Communication Proficiency – Delivering Team Presentations



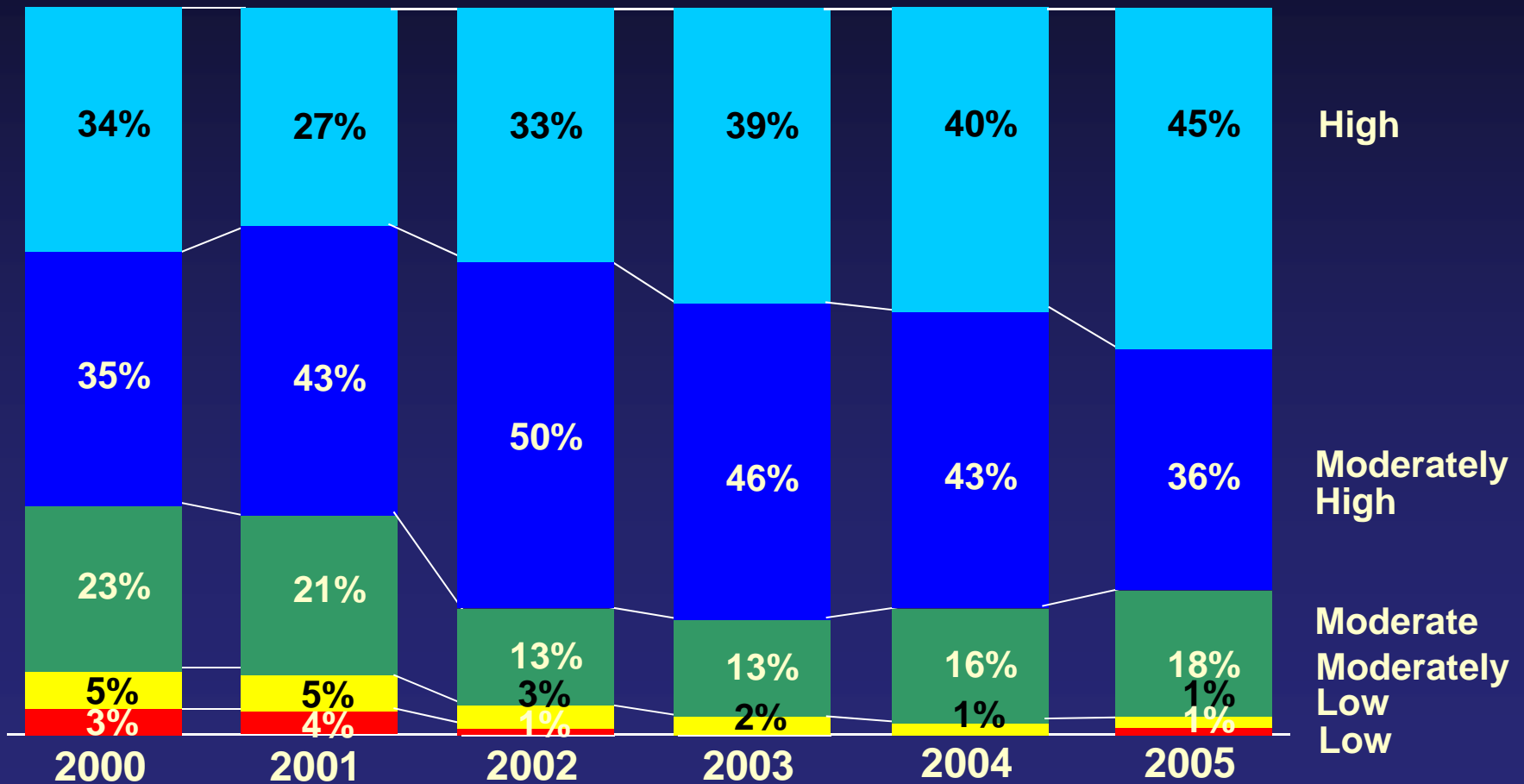
# Communication Proficiency – Creating a PowerPoint Presentation



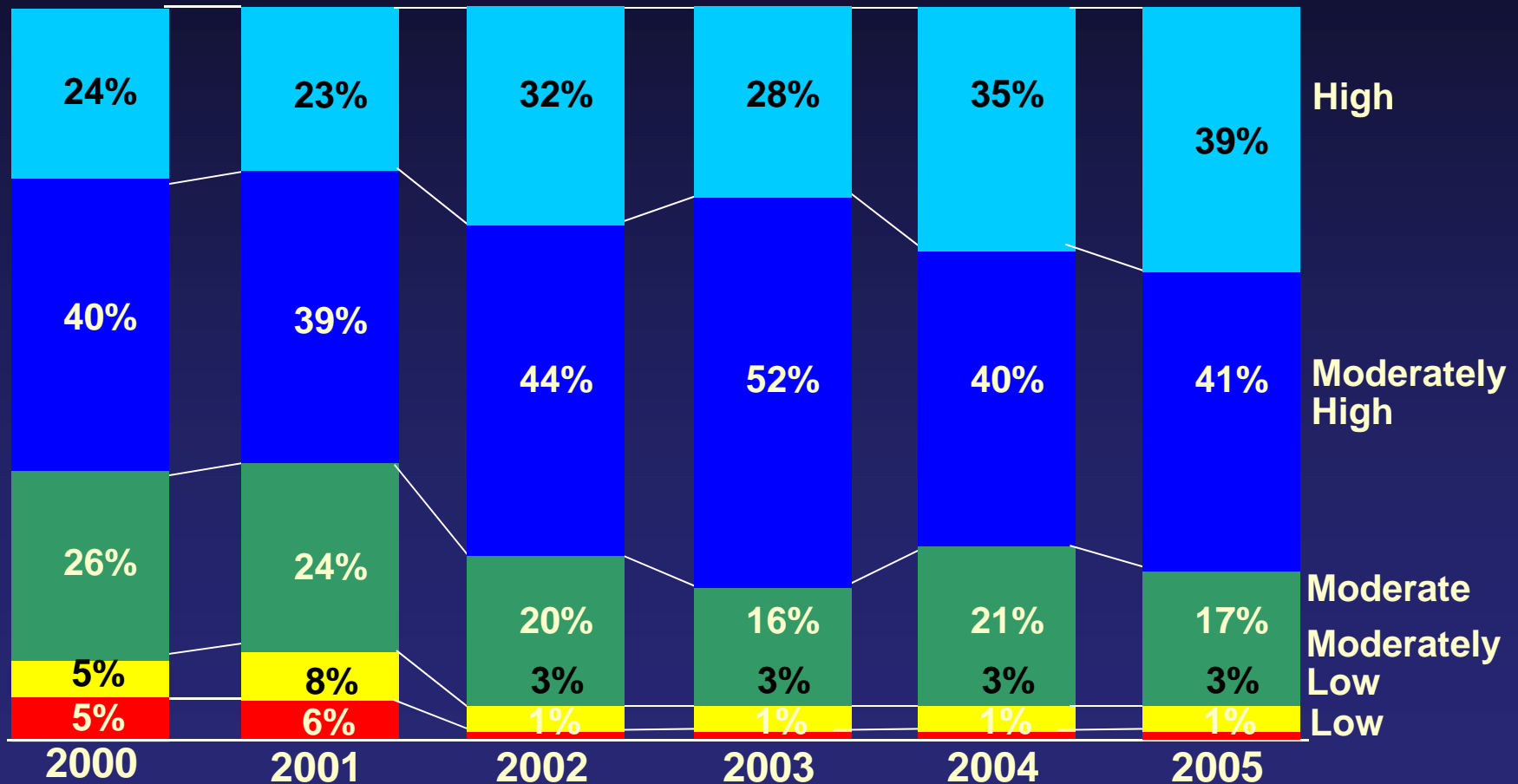
# Delivering Round-table Presentations (Added in 2002)



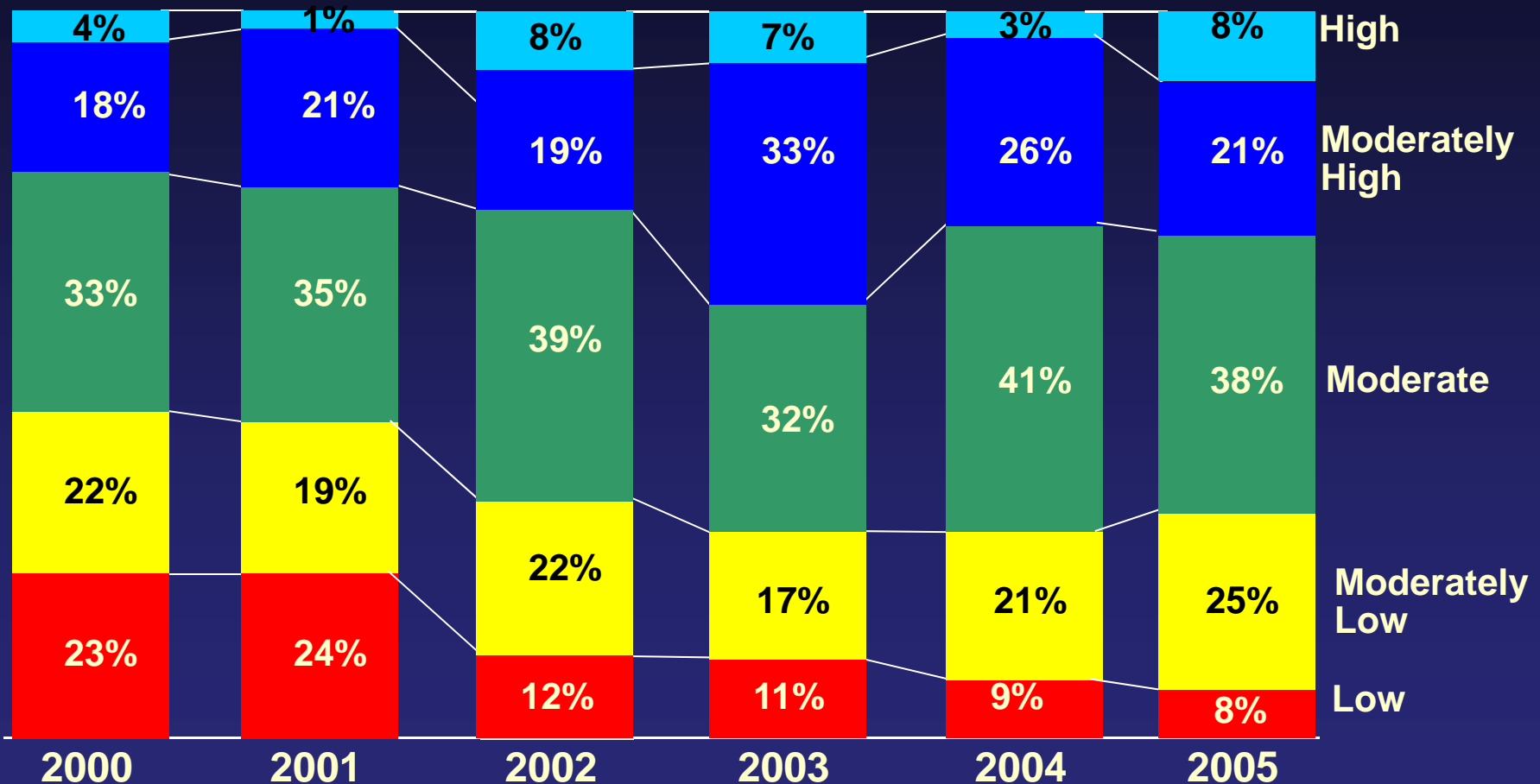
# Communication Proficiency – Working on a Project Team



# Communication Proficiency – Working on a Problem-Solving Team

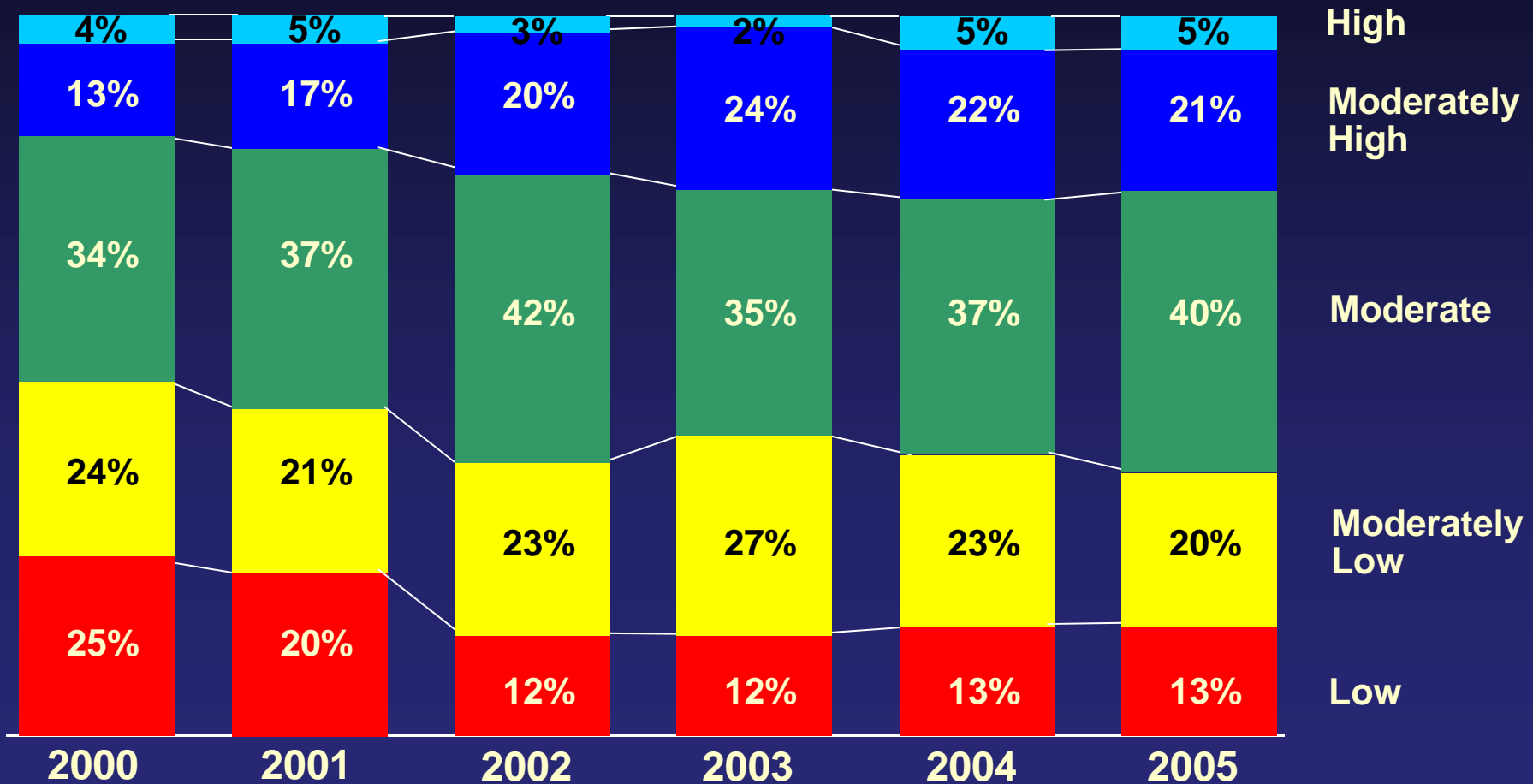


# Communication Proficiency – Writing Executive Summaries

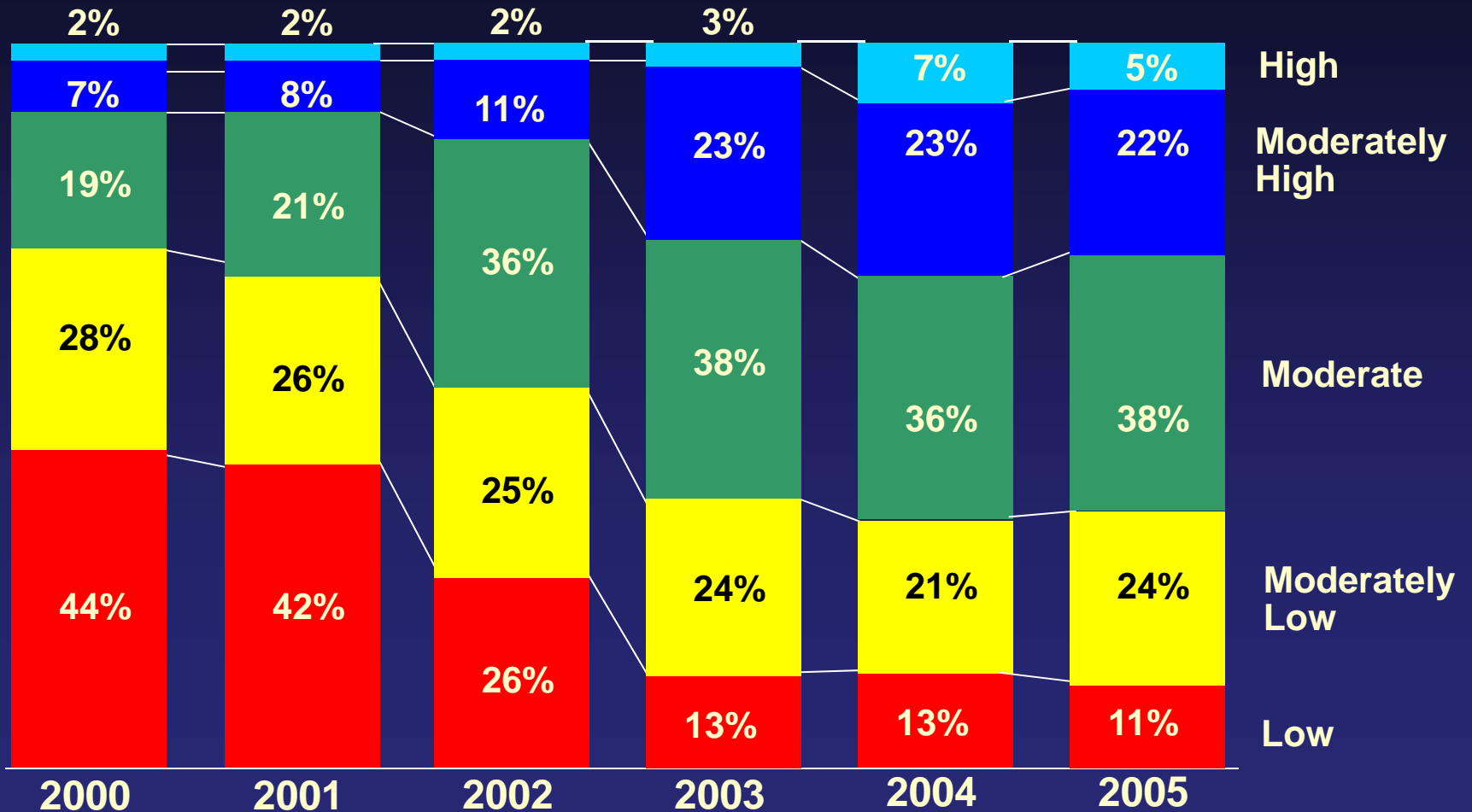




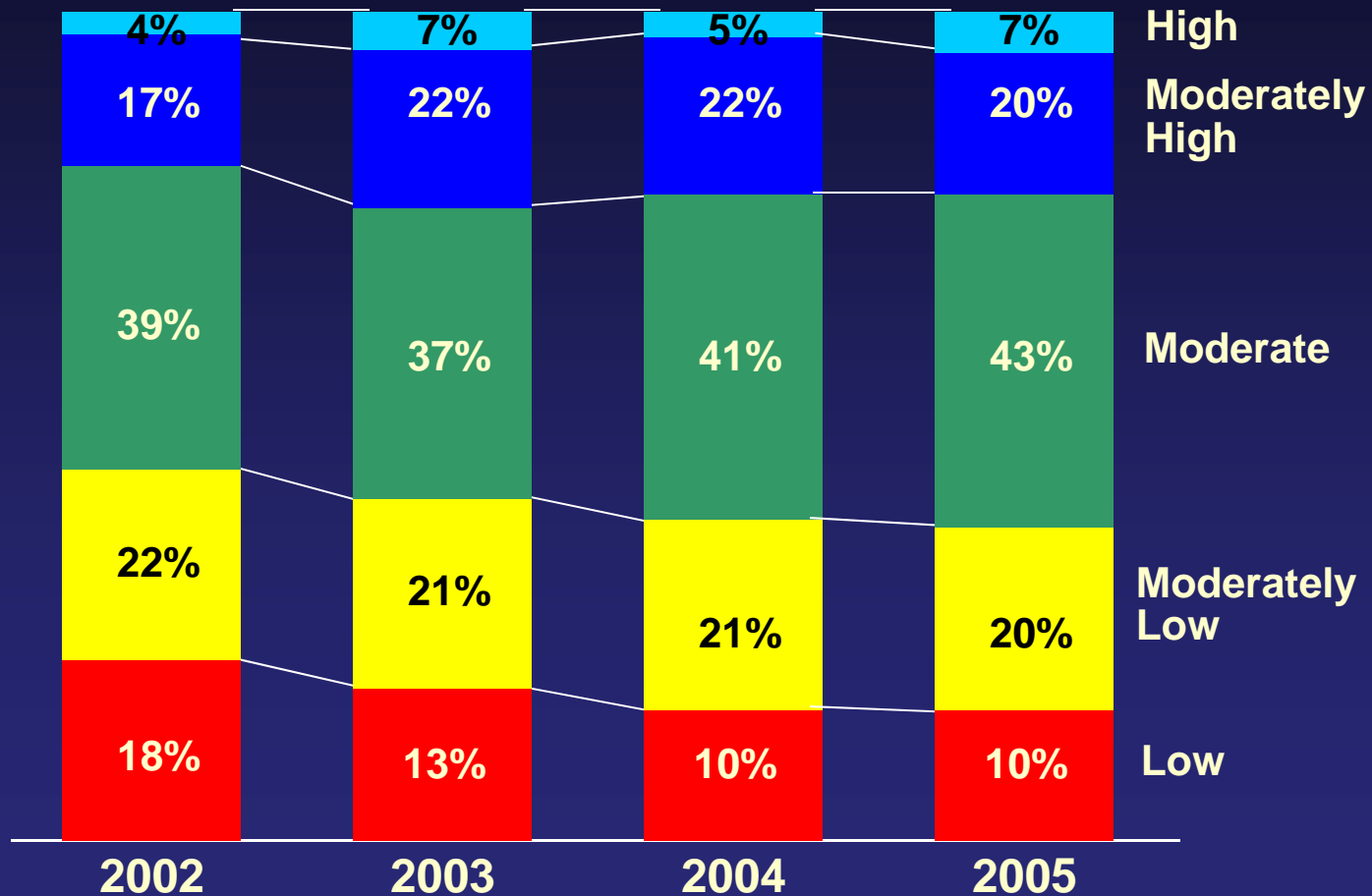
# Communication Proficiency – Performing Case Analysis or Case Reports



# Communication Proficiency – Conducting Audience Analysis



# Developing a Communication Strategy (Added in 2002)

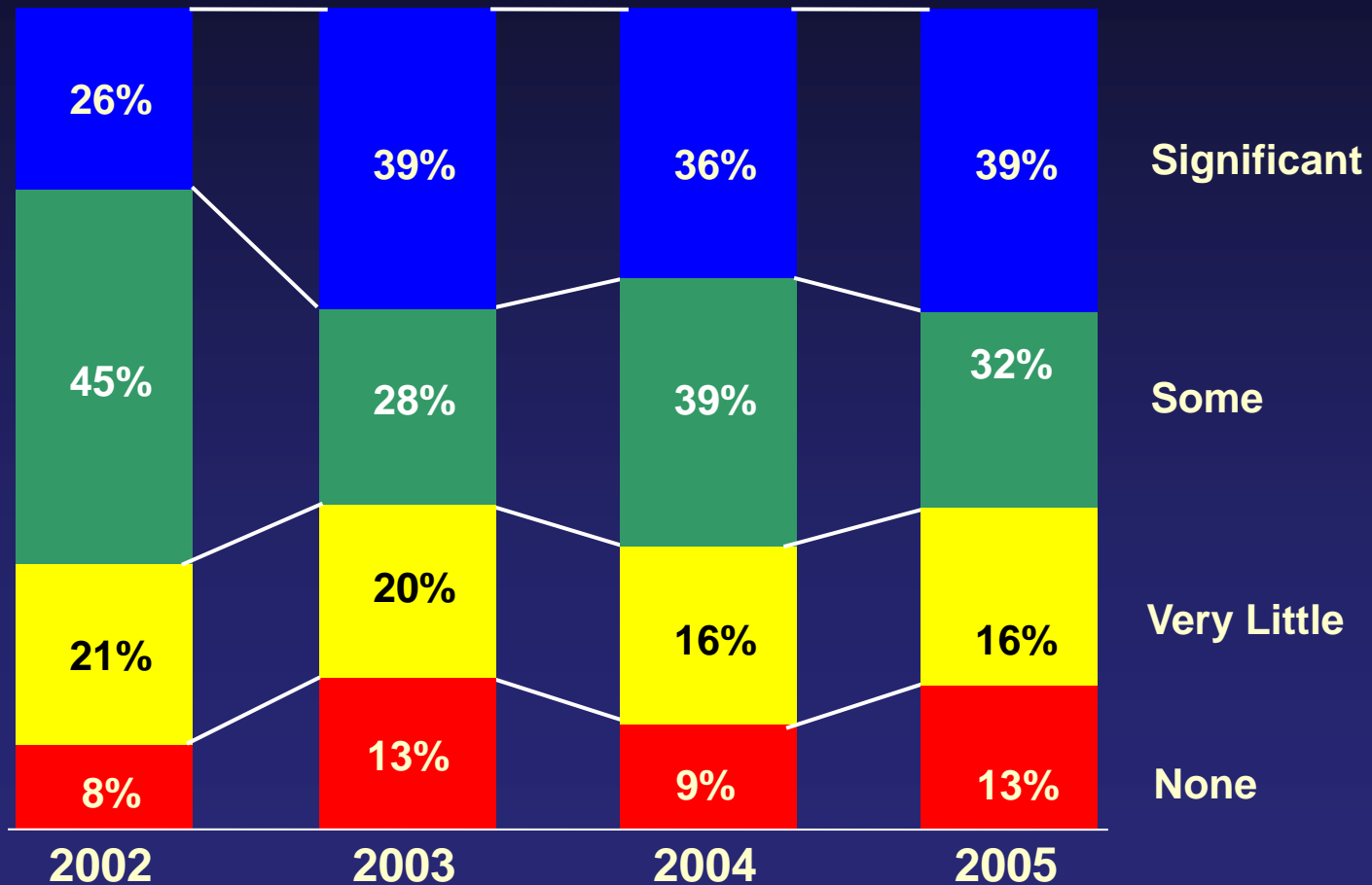


---

## Part Two – Team/Meeting Experiences

- ❑ In this section, we ask specific questions on teams and meetings.
- ❑ The questions are provided on each chart.

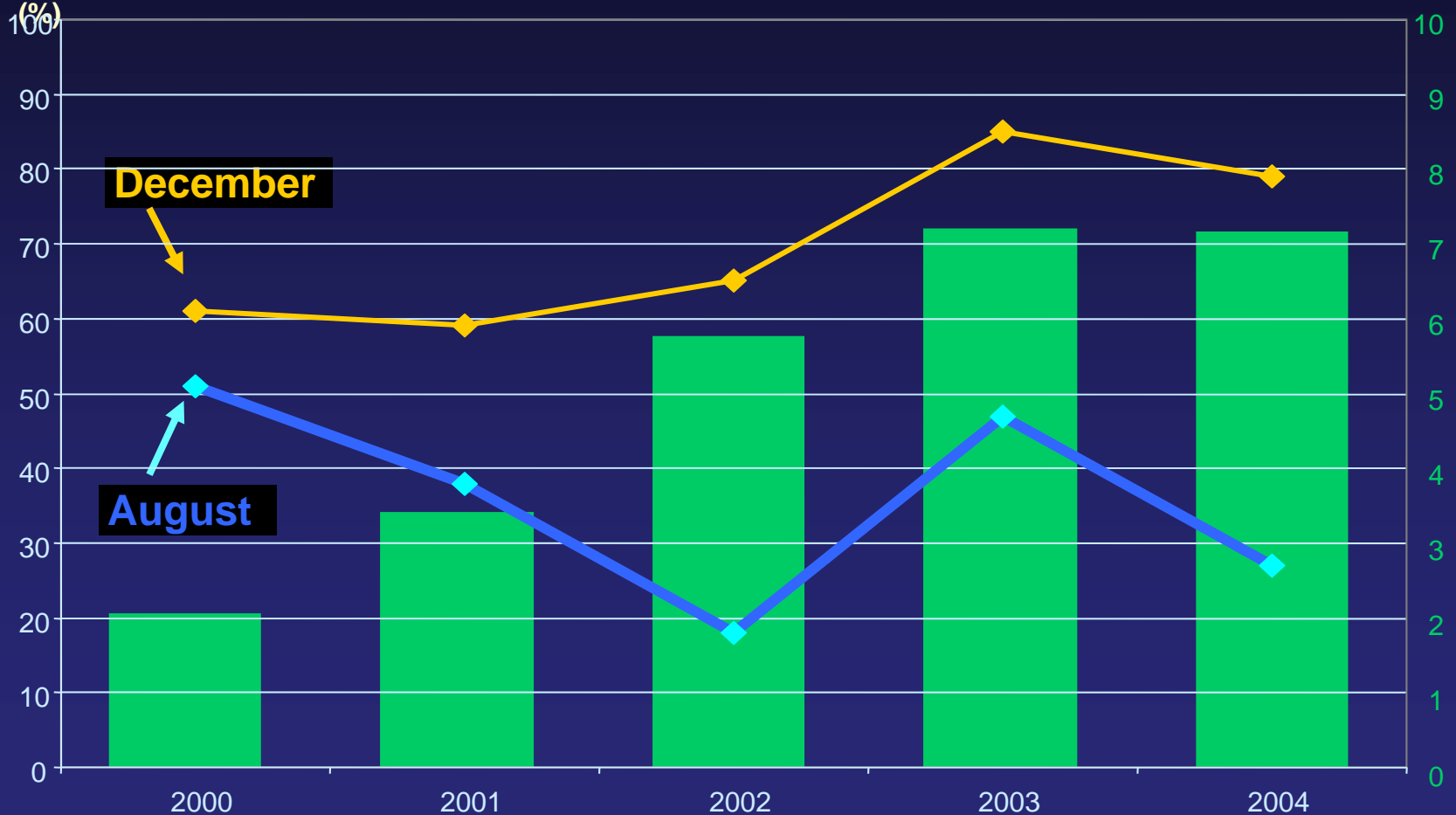
## How much experience do you have working on a cross-cultural or international team (Added 2002)



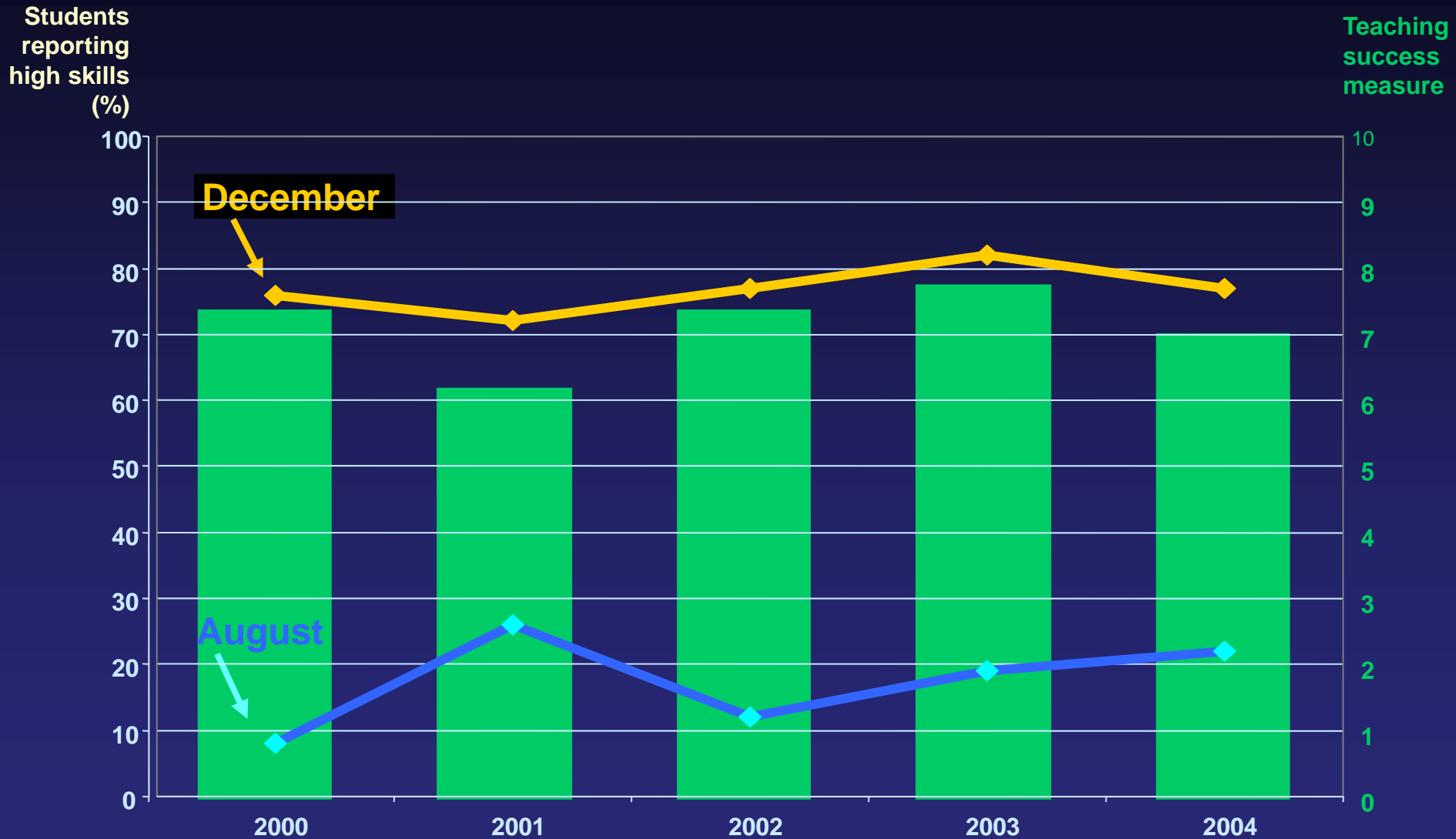
# Proficiency in Writing Letters and Memos

Students reporting high skills (%)

Teaching success measure



# Proficiency in Conducting Audience Analysis



# Proficiency in Delivering a Team Presentation

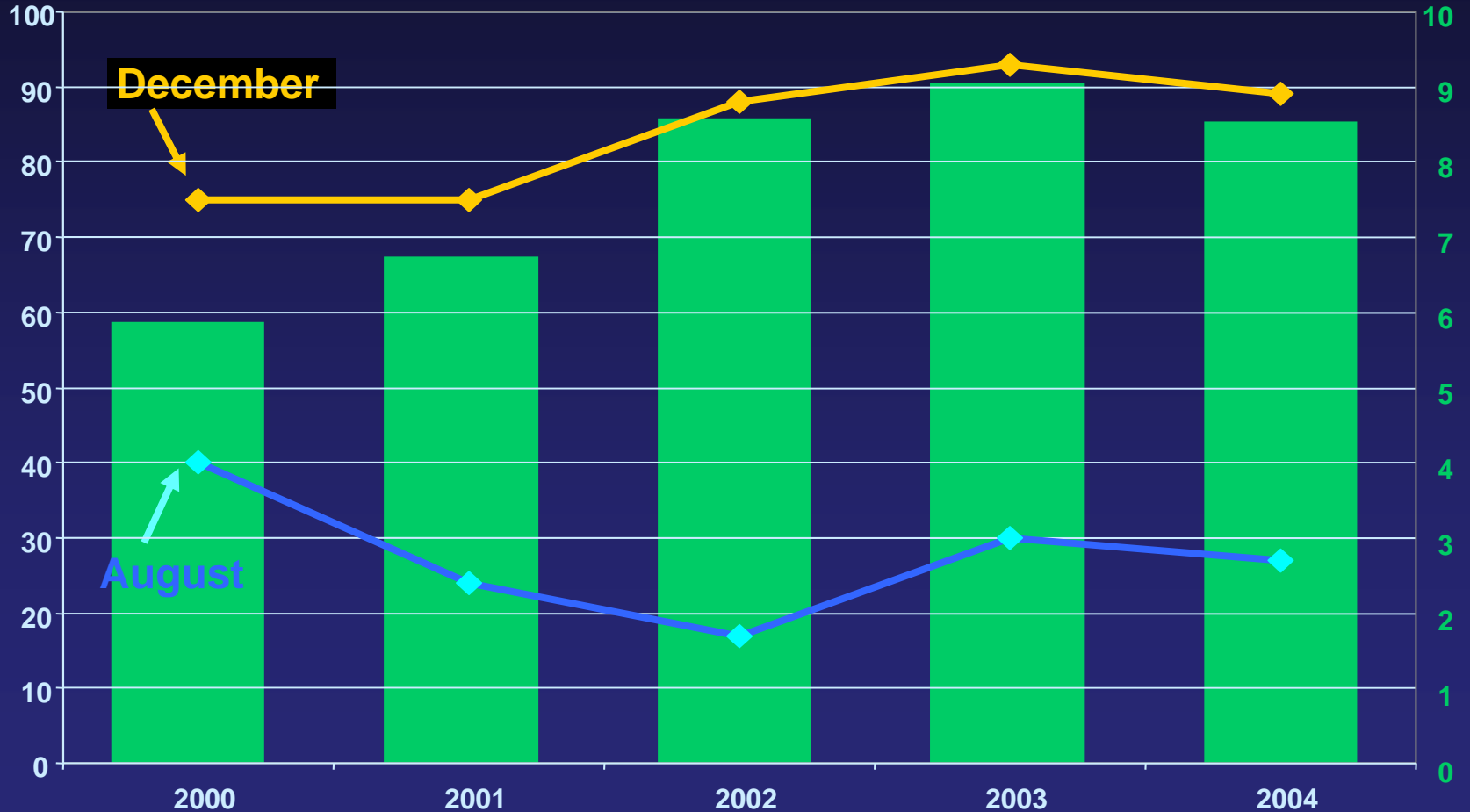




# Proficiency in Individual Presentation Delivery

Students reporting high skills (%)

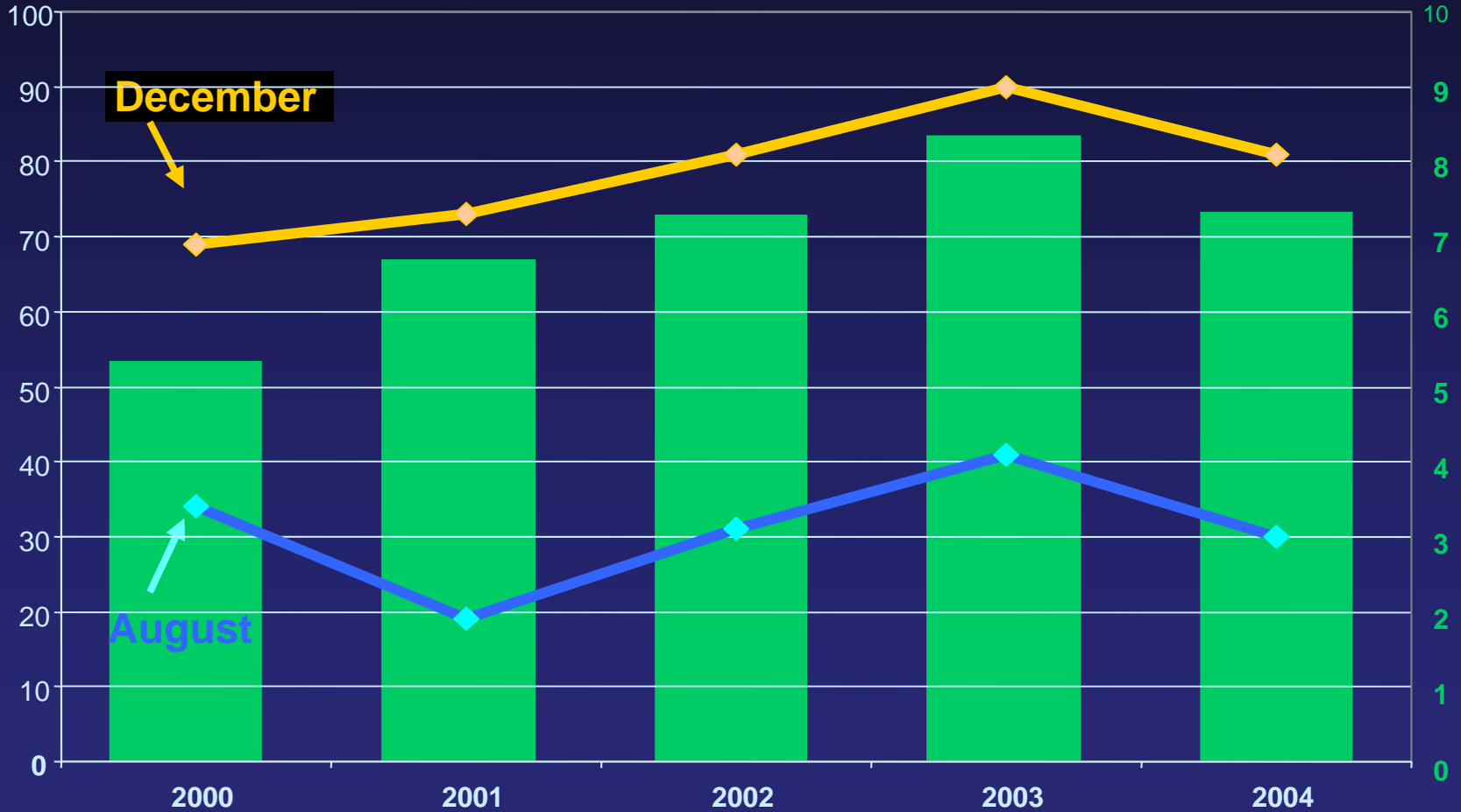
Teaching success measure



# Proficiency in Creating a PPT Presentation

Students reporting high skills (%)

Teaching success measure



# Proficiency in Working in Project Teams

