

J-schools in transition

In her freshman year of high school in Lake Forest, Il., Sarah Verschoor signed up for a journalism class simply because it fit into her schedule.

She liked it enough to take all the journalism classes offered in the next four years and joined her high school newspaper, rising to editor-in-chief in her senior year. She led the paper's move from a broadsheet to a news magazine.

Despite her initial love of journalism, after her junior year, her college choice and career path remained uncertain. That summer Verschoor attended the High School Journalism Institute at Indiana University, run by IU for the past 70 years. "Everything came together," said Verschoor, who began her freshman year at Indiana this fall as an honors student in the Media School. "I am so passionate about wanting to be a journalist."

This fall the journalism Class of 2020 began the four-year college march to graduation. When those students graduate, they will join the generation of media professionals whose work-life span carries into the last half of this century. These freshmen, said people involved in educating them, demand that journalism schools prepare them for a career in a profession that redefines itself at a rapid, non-stop pace. Even top-tier journalism schools, such as IU and the University of Missouri, have had to evolve to better prepare students for the unknown future of the profession.

Lynda Kraxberger, associate dean for undergraduate studies at the University of Missouri, said Missouri's School of Journalism continues to teach the enduring values and principles of the profession. "What has been done here since 1908 when newspaper and advertising were offered for the first time remains," Kraxberger said. "But what we also focus on now

is teaching students how to learn all throughout their professional careers.’’

It’s a learning strategy that has been given a name – the Missouri Method. Students have a choice of six different newsrooms from traditional print with the award-winning Columbia Missourian to the Global Journalist, a convergence show that looks at worldwide issues and challenges to a free press.

Of Missouri’s approximately 25,000 undergraduate students, some 1,850 are in the School of Journalism. The freshman class numbers from 350 to 400 students.

Students at all levels work with professionals, many of whom are Missouri alumni. That mixture of hands-on with people in the profession helps students understand what will be expected of them, said Suzette Heiman, professor of strategic communication and director of planning and communications.

“Students develop critical thinking and writing skills, learn how to do research,” Heiman said. “These skills are needed in all careers. They are the floor of the foundation to do anything. The coaching the students receive from faculty and alumni mimics what they will get in the real world.”

To strengthen that connection from students to professional newsrooms, faculty chairs meet routinely with alumni to evaluate student portfolios. “It’s an ongoing conversation,” Kraxberger said, “on making sure students are as prepared as possible.”

Students also compete to pit their ideas against those from students at other colleges. One group created a computer application for journalists using the Apple Watch called Recordly. Students traveled to Apple’s headquarters and gave a presentation on how the app would allow journalists to record and then download the transcript to their computers. The university has provided seed money to help bring the app to

market.

Working with the Hearst Company, another group developed software called Nearbuy, to help people identify real estate available in a community. And another group participated in a contest sponsored by Meredith in Des Moines to come up with a new, never done magazine.

Missouri students looked into online gaming, a growing hobby among people their age. According to Kraxberger, they realized all of the magazines on the topic were geared toward young men, missing the market for young women. "Fangirl" was pitched to Meredith's top level people, who bought the prototype on the spot. "Some schools are known for one program," Kraxberger stated. "We're good at everything."

Students this semester are working to create a policy on the use of drones in journalism. Missouri has six drones that students can use for various types of coverage.

"This is what we mean when we say they are taught to learn," Kraxberger said. "They can put their hands on new technology and figure out the best use with the enduring themes of journalism."

What is new at IU includes the concept of the Media School itself. In July 2014 IU merged its 100-year-old journalism program with other communication schools at the college and created the Media School. Of IU's approximately 37,000 undergraduates, some 700 are in the Media School, with the freshman class comprising about 250 students.

Anne Kibbler, director of communications and media relations for the school, said the change puts everything under one roof so students have greater flexibility with their curriculum choices. "It's a reflection of what's happening in the industry," she continued. "The media industry is merging platforms and technologies and so did we."

IU changed more than the name on the outside of the building, changing what happens inside as well. "We can no longer train students to write for print only," Kibbler said. "They need to do that as well as take video and photos."

The Media School breaks down walls for students that had existed between the three former communication schools. "Before, students were limited to the number of classes they could take in another school," Kibbler stated. "Now there is flexibility enough that each student is building their own degree."

Regardless of what specialization a student chooses, everyone receives training in the fundamentals, Kibbler said. She continued, "Reporting, writing, editing, ethics and media law remain part of the training. That was one of the questions alumni had when we approached them with the Media School plan. They did not want those fundamentals watered down."

All students are required to take a grammar test, something that was not done before, Kibbler said.

Alumni, and IU students who began their course work before the Media School's first classes in 2015-16, say they regret they cannot take part in the new approach, Kibbler said. She contended, "For the Class of 2020, technology they are using today will be different in five years. We can't teach them how to use that technology because we don't know what will be out there. We can teach them to adapt to a continually changing environment and to rely on the fundamental skills as a constant. To bridge that need for old-school and new-school teaching, the Media School will hire more faculty members."

As of mid-September IU advertised for six open positions. "We're looking for more people who can broaden our current offerings," Kibbler said. "A few years ago, for example, we would have advertised for a photojournalism professor. Now we're looking for people who can go beyond that, someone who

is a strong writer who can take photos and shoot video.”

Smaller universities also have switched their approaches. Associate Professor Gary Ford, chair of the Department of Communications and Journalism at Webster University in St. Louis, said the department has “evolved through the years to remain relevant in a world where delivery of news and information is rapidly changing.”

Webster admits some 3,000 students to its home campus, with about 475 students of all majors entering as the Class of 2020. Enrollment figures for those choosing the Department of Communications and Journalism were not available.

Webster also does what the programs at Missouri and Indiana are doing. “Our program emphasizes the underlying skill of basic storytelling using good writing and editing techniques,” Ford said. “We then provide training and experience on various delivery platforms. In addition to traditional print and electronic media, we also emphasize multimedia and social media delivery platforms.”

Broadening the definition of storytelling, Ford said, is not an option for schools that want to continue to succeed. “Journalism programs today must adapt to changing needs of the industry to better prepare students for jobs in a new information age.”

Student journalism organizations outside of colleges and universities also adapt to what students want. College Media Association – formerly College Media Advisers – runs conventions in the spring and fall that attract hundreds of college student media members and advisers.

CMA President Kelley Callaway, director of student media at Rice University, said the options offered for students at the conventions include more digital and mobile media techniques. “We have them use their own phones to shoot video on site,” Callaway said. “It’s not the traditional print-only anymore.

With convergence you do a little bit of everything. Gone are the days when you did the police beat and nothing else.”

Some new additions to conference topics include entertainment media and a film festival of student-made productions. Sessions about blogging also attract students.

Another topic student media want to discuss is diversity in newsrooms and television stations. “It’s a hot topic,” Callaway said.

At conventions, CMA has reduced, but not eliminated, the number of tracks offered for print-only topics. “Sessions on yearbook are now at 12, where 10 years ago we had 20,” she said. “We replace those with how to use your smartphone to edit video.” Keynote speakers who talk about their careers, dwindled in popularity in the last few years, Callaway said. “We’ve shifted to panel discussions of topical journalism,” she continued, describing how students reacted to a fall 2015 keynote talk in Houston that included a man wrongly incarcerated and the journalist whose work help free him.

“The line to meet them after was ridiculously long,” Callaway said. “The reviews from the students said we want more like this. The millennium generation wants to impact and change the world through journalism.” Heiman said that is what she hears repeatedly when she meets with prospective students and their parents. “By and large journalism today attracts students passionate about doing journalism. They have a sense of calling and want to serve people, however that story form takes.”

Heiman and Kraxberger told today’s journalism students come to college much like Verschoor, already with bylines earned and journalism classes taken. “They’ve already done well at this in high school and have high standards for themselves,” Heiman said.

Verschoor covers the IU Office of Multicultural Affairs as a

campus beat reporter for the Indiana Daily Student. She said she loves what she is doing, despite the reaction received from people when she described her chosen college major.

“It frustrates me, that tone of voice when they would say, oh, really, you’re interested in that?” Verschoor asked. “There will always be a place to tell those stories in any form, even if not always in print. I want to tell those stories that matter and relay them back to people to make a difference.”