

Preparing Students for the Changing Media Landscape

During my 34 years in journalism education, I've seen many changes. But I am as excited about what we do today as I was when I took my first teaching job at Nebraska-Omaha in 1977; when I moved to Arizona State in 1979; and when I assumed my current position at Penn State in 1999.

After 10 years of full time in the classroom – where I taught media law, press freedom theory, in-depth reporting and editing – and 24 years in administration at two major universities, I still feel good about how we prepare our students for the changing media landscape.

As I have noted on many occasions, we might look at faculty composition and our curriculum differently than we did three decades ago, but the mission of a journalism program remains the same: to educate and prepare students for citizenship in a society in which communication and information are major commodities that constitute the heart of the democratic process.

At a time of profound change in structure, content and dissemination patterns of media, the fundamental skills of investigation, analysis and communications through written and visual media remain.

The news business has changed at warp speed over the past decade or so. Changes ultimately create opportunity – and students continue to see journalism as an attractive academic major and career.

We have more than 3,300 undergraduates in our College of Communications at Penn State – and with more than 700 junior-senior majors, journalism remains our largest program. Advertising/public relations is a close second, followed by

telecommunications, media studies and film-video.

I consistently contend – and firmly believe – that journalism is one of the best undergraduate majors at universities because it helps prepare students to work in the ever-expanding array of media outlets, as well as to find success in multiple fields.

When students take technique classes such as news writing, reporting, editing and convergence journalism along with conceptual courses such as media ethics, media history and media law – combined with extensive coursework deeply rooted in the traditional liberal arts and sciences – they are equipped to gather information, exercise judgment, write and possess a broad understanding of society.

This is one reason journalism is the seventh largest undergraduate major, of nearly 200, on the 42,000-student University Park campus of Penn State.

Yes, I feel optimistic about the future of journalism education – although, like the media industries we prepare our students to enter, we face challenges.

Then again, we always have.

I noted in a speech 15 years ago: “Indeed, the late 1980s and the 1990s, in many respects, have not been the best of times for journalism-mass communication education. Mandated shotgun reconfigurations of mass communication units and attacks from within and outside the academy on the relevance of our field have provided fodder for countless meetings, discussions, studies and published articles.

“I am not among the doomsday forecasters, though. Our students are getting jobs in traditional media as well as in new, interactive media – areas not dreamed about a few years ago. Clearly, these are exciting times, an era filled with

unique challenges. I like our chances of succeeding.”

Today, the greatest challenge facing journalism education – as it was 15 years ago – is funding, particularly at public universities. As is the case in most sectors, we must do more with less. States are facing massive budget shortfalls – and the foundations and media outlets that, since the 1980s have contributed to our financial well being, have cut back. All of our revenue streams have slowed at a time when our instructional hardware and software needs have never been greater.

We continue, though, to hire superb faculty members – many of whom have significant journalism experience and wonderful new-media expertise – and to draw first-rate students who arrive on campus with a thirst for knowledge, savvy technological skills and a desire to be journalists.

We continue to be recognized – and appreciated – on our campuses for our commitment to sound undergraduate education; for the role we play in offering media literacy courses to non-majors who, more than ever, given the multiplicity of voices in the marketplace, need to be informed news consumers; and for preparing our students to contribute intelligently to the discourse that powers our democracy.

We have our hands full, but it is an exciting time to be adjusting our curricula to respond to the needs of media industries, the marketplace and our students – all the while remaining true to the rock-solid fundamentals upon which our programs have been built.

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