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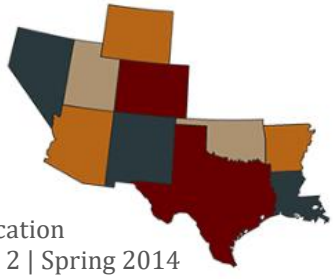

Would You Say The Process Was Contentious or Smooth Sailing? Administrators' Views On Revising The Mass Communication Curriculum

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Would You Say The Process Was Contentious or Smooth Sailing?

Administrators' Views On Revising The Mass Communication Curriculum

Submission to the SWECJMC 2013 Conference, Tulsa, Oklahoma

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Abstract

This study seeks to build upon our earlier investigation of how mass communication programs across the country are altering their curricula in order to accommodate the major changes in our field brought on by the Internet. While our earlier study looked at how degree plans are changing and what educators in the field think is important, this study again examines the how and the what, but expands to include: What has been your biggest challenge regarding your program's curriculum? How have you deal with that challenge? Why did you make the changes you made? Beyond that, what philosophical beliefs underlie the changes? We also look at how the process played out: smooth sailing, a few minor skirmishes or downright contentious.

"Dealing with media convergence in journalism education is an urgent necessity."
– Huang et al. (2006, 222)

"[I]f we teach all of the skills required for working in a variety of media, the students 'won't learn to use any of the tools very well.' "
– Sudhoff and Donnelly, quoting Jody Strauch, assistant professor of mass communication, Northwest Missouri State University (2002, 62)

"Curriculum should be sensitive to important theoretical and conceptual matters, not just the latest technical trend."
– Sudhoff and Donnelly, quoting Fred Lamer, professor of mass communication, Northwest Missouri State University (2002, 63)

"[E]ducators have been searching for decades for the ultimate curriculum to serve their undergraduates, but they are mainly struggling to find the right formula to implement skills and theory courses, among other studies of the liberal arts."
– Blom and Davenport (2010, para. 1)

"[E]ntry-level practitioners were judged by employees to lack writing skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as comprehension of business practices."
– Todd (2009, 71)

"I've read that journalism programs should make sure students learn statistics and survey methodology. We should work with computer science departments to develop cross-disciplinary courses and make entrepreneurship a vital part of our programs. Furthermore, we should make blogging part of nearly every writing course, not to mention Twitter. The list goes on. While these are all excellent ideas, I wonder how do we incorporate them all into our courses and programs, especially when you throw in the fact that many students–at least at the three universities where I've taught–are lacking in some of the basic journalistic writing skills? My head hurts just thinking about it."
– Cassidy (2010, 16)

Mass communication faculty across the country are struggling to stay current with the fast-changing industries their students are about to enter, and these statements indicate just how much we as educators lack a consensus on how–or whether–we need

to alter our curricula to address the changing media world. The Internet, new technologies and, especially, the recent failings of the newspaper industry have created a revolution in the way our society communicates, and in turn, how mass communication educators deliver the curriculum. We are now faced with questions of how much training we offer specific to the new technology, as opposed to basic skills that haven't changed, such as solid writing, editing and public speaking skills. In addition, we continue to face the challenge of balancing skills training with the larger issues of theory/concept courses that address context and critical thinking.

This study examines how selected programs have approached these dilemmas.

Until about 15 years ago, educators had to make choices in two ways. First, was the curriculum to stress hands-on acquisition of skills such as writing, graphic design and television/radio production, or was it to emphasize the theoretical/conceptual side with courses such as Media Ethics, Media History and Media Law? In addition, the degree plans tended to follow one of two strategies: 1) an all-encompassing mass communication degree that gave students a little bit of everything, including courses as diverse as newspaper writing, advertising, television production, film and public relations; or 2) a narrow focus on one of the sub-fields such as journalism, broadcasting or advertising.

On top of trying to balance skills with theoretical/conceptual topics, educators are now trying to devise degree plans that serve the students and the industries they are

about to enter, but this is easier said than done.[1] Some of our colleagues across the country argue that the Internet is the way of the future, and we are obligated to give all students as many related skills as we can: web site design, multi-media design, computer-assisted reporting, graphic design, search engine optimization, using social media for various purposes, etc. Others argue that these technologies are only the instrument, while the basics of communication, i.e., delivering messages effectively, remain the same. Thus we are obligated to continue stressing the basics, such as solid writing and speaking skills. Still others argue that students need to be ready for anything, so it is our obligation to educate them across the board with a little of everything.

The authors' anecdotal evidence and a cursory look at degree plans from universities across the country show little agreement. Some programs have introduced entire majors based on digital media; others offer specific courses and/or sequences; others have stuck with traditional divisions such as journalism and advertising, insisting that students learn the new technologies to practice the existing professions.[2] Previous studies have looked at narrow areas such as magazine journalism degree plans or public relations degrees; some studies have examined what administrators

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[1] Our department overhauled the curriculum in Fall 2007, effective with the 2008-2010 catalog, and we are now considering another major overhaul that would become effective with the 2014-16 catalog.

[2] Citation omitted in order to preserve anonymity of the authors.

believe the curriculum should reflect; a considerable number of informal essays and case studies has documented what individual programs have done or are doing; and an equally large number of informal essays has been written by faculty and working professionals alike preaching about what the curriculum needs to cover.

This study seeks to build upon our earlier examination of how mass communication programs across the country are altering their curricula in order to accommodate the major changes in our field brought on by the Internet. While our earlier study looked at how degree plans are changing and what educators in the field think is important, this study again examines the how and the what, but expands to include: What has been your biggest challenge regarding your program's curriculum? How have you deal with that challenge? Why did you make the changes you made? Beyond that, what philosophical beliefs underlie the changes? We also look at how the process played out: smooth sailing, a few minor skirmishes or downright contentious.

Review of the Literature

Relevant studies can be divided into roughly three camps: those that examine what mass communication programs should be doing; those that examine what mass communication programs are doing; and those that examine both.[3] These studies help

[3] As noted earlier, a large number of personal essays cover these topics as well, some by leading scholars and industry leaders. Numerous conference panels have also addressed these topics. As these essays and discussions are not systematic studies, they will not be reviewed here.

provide the framework for the current research, but none attempts to accomplish what this study attempts.

What We Should Do *and* What We Do

Only one study attempted to address what educators should do as well as what is actually being done. Andrea H. Tanner and Sonya Forte Duhé (2005) surveyed television news directors across the country in markets of all sizes along with administrators at programs accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, which covers schools of all sizes. In response to questions about how media convergence should be taught, participants mostly seemed to agree in general that writing skills and other basics trumped all other concerns, including how to use the latest technology. All but 6 of the 170 news directors indicated that graduates must have good writing skills, while nearly as many (158) also mentioned basic computer skills. More than half mentioned being able to adapt a news story for multiple platforms as well as basic broadcast shooting and editing abilities. Other skills such as adapting to "an integrated media technology environment" (para. 40) were further down the list.

As to what was actually being done at the time, 71% said convergence was taught in lecture courses; 67% said it was taught in lower-level skills courses; and 84% said it was taught in upper-level skills courses. "Several" educators mentioned free-standing concentrations and student media that included convergence, while 38% of the

educators said convergence was taught in free-standing courses (para. 35). Educators also mentioned combining courses, such as print reporting and broadcast reporting, into single courses.

Interestingly, only 18% of the educators said their experience with media convergence had been positive, while 42% said "somewhat positive," and 40% said the "positives and negatives . . . balance each other out" (para. 38). In addition to citing budgetary and faculty challenges, some educators said convergence has forced "students to learn too many skills" without mastering any one content area (para. 40). They overwhelmingly responded that basic writing skills, which have always been a challenge, are getting lost in the rush to teach "the tools of the trade" (para. 48).

What We Should Do

Five studies examined the broader debate over skills instruction as opposed to theory, context and critical thinking, while one looked at which courses, specifically, educators believe should be part of the curriculum.

Michael Ryan and Les Switzer (2001) examined the criticism that many programs, as one study found, "were little more than industry-oriented trade schools" (p. 56). They surveyed administrators at 50 ACEJMC-accredited programs and 50 administrators at non-accredited programs and found that most educators believe our programs must prepare students for careers while also training them to serve the larger society. In response to a related question, 91.3% of administrators said they have tried

to achieve an appropriate balance between skills courses and theory/conceptual courses. Almost all of the administrators agreed that offering specialties in every narrow area of mass communication was impossible and stretched resources too much. Ryan and Switzer quoted one survey respondent who summarized the contradictions:

> The industry says it wants well-rounded workers. But in practice it usually hires graduates who can write, edit, shoot video, etc. We try to balance the practical skills and industry demands, while offering a broad enough sense of the world, its joys and problems, as we can in four years. (p. 66)

A study comparing attitudes of industry professionals and educators found solid agreements as well as major disagreements concerning what students need. Camille Kraeplin and Carrie Anna Criado (2005) surveyed managers in television and newspapers, as well as journalism educators. Areas of agreement included the need for solid writing/reporting skills (100% of television managers, 98.6% of newspaper managers and 100% of educators); news judgment (100% of television managers, 98.6% of newspaper managers and 100% of educators); knowledge of media law and ethics (98% of television managers, 92.8% of newspaper managers and 97.7% of educators); and a liberal arts background (92.2% of television managers, 92.8% of newspaper managers and 95.5% of educators). Areas of disagreement included ability to write across media (80% of television managers, 59.4% of newspaper managers and 79.6% of educators) and web design skills (30.6% of television managers, 31.9% of newspaper managers, and 65.9% of educators).

A similar study, comparing magazine editors and educators, revealed major differences. While Carolyn Lepre and Glen L. Bleske (2005) found that editors agreed with educators on the importance of writing, reporting, editing and interpersonal skills, they found disagreements on the importance of courses in media law, courses in media ethics and an internship.

Edgar Huang et al. (2006) examined whether educators should collapse concentrations such as broadcasting and newspaper "or still teach all such courses as if they were unrelated media" (p. 225) as well as whether "long-standing staples such as ethics, law and theory" should remain in the curriculum (p. 229). Their goal was to address "how college professors should prepare students to cope with media convergence" (p. 237), and their survey of 516 faculty and news professionals concluded that both groups see the need for skills training as well as critical thinking. Key findings included the following: 84% agreeing or strongly agreeing that writing across platforms is important; 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing that students with a visual emphasis should learn to produce and edit visual messages; and 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing that all journalism majors should learn skills across media including writing, TV production, newspaper design, web publishing and photography. As to organization of the degree, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that students should specialize in a narrow concentration such as broadcasting or digital media. At the same

time, 56% of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that sequences should be reorganized to mirror convergence in the industry, while 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The authors found more agreement on the broader questions regarding the technical skills v. theory/context debate, with 93% agreeing or strongly agreeing that students should be solid in both categories. While the questions on how to divide limited classroom time between the context and skills work produced slightly more disagreement, the authors concluded that most faculty and professionals see the ability to think critically as more important than any specific skill.

In a similar examination of the public relations fields, Vicki Todd (2009) found that public relations practitioners were more likely to favor hands-on experience over conceptual/theoretical concerns. Arguing that professionals have integrated digital media into their work through web sites, social media, YouTube and other devices, Todd surveyed 35 public relations professionals who serve as advisors for the Public Relations Student Society of America and 83 faculty members who advise student chapters of the PRSSA. Although both groups rated professional ethics and management as the most valuable topics for students, the professional groups' scores on a 7-point Likert scale were lower. Professionals rated the need for internships, a portfolio, ability with new media technologies (e.g., blogging, designing a web site), and solid writing higher than did faculty. For both groups, public relations theories and principles, as well as critical thinking skills, ranked near the bottom.

A 2009 online survey of 134 journalism program directors attempted to determine the most important courses in the education of journalism bachelor's degree program students (Blom and Davenport, 2010). Respondents were asked to select the seven courses they would include in a journalism degree preparing students for careers in any news organization (i.e., they did not make the distinctions among print, broadcast, online, etc.). The authors acknowledged that course titles alone carried many connotations and meant something different to each respondent. Even within the narrow concentration of journalism, responses varied widely.

Of the 36 choices, wherein respondents were given a course name only without a description or any room for commentary, Media Ethics and Law (one course, not two) was the top selection, indicated by 58%. Even so, significant numbers chose a free-standing ethics course, a free-standing law course, or both among their top seven choices. The top selections also included, in order, Reporting (Gathering and Storytelling), Multimedia and Storytelling, Writing Across the Media, Reporting (News Gathering), Visual Communication and Feature Writing. Acknowledging "no clear consensus" among respondents (p. 9), the authors noted that most opted for a mix of writing/reporting courses and theory/conceptual courses.

What We Do

Four studies are relevant. In addition, 14 older and by now outdated studies examined narrow slices of the field.

Tudor Vlad, Lee B. Becker, Holly Simpson and Konrad Kalpen (2013) found that a large majority of programs has updated course offerings to address the realities of the today's mass media, such as adding courses in social media and editing/writing for the web. While some reported merging traditional journalism and broadcasting programs or courses, others added specializations such as strategic communication. At the same time, more than half reported challenges in their efforts to adapt, including financial difficulties, elimination of programs, reluctance of faculty to change and lack of qualified faculty.

George J. Frangoulis (1993) surveyed 180 educators specifically selected for their ties to programs with magazine journalism programs and found that 54 programs offered full sequences or concentrations in magazine journalism. At least 50% of those programs were at large universities (enrollment above 15,000 students); 40% of the programs also had at least 500 undergraduate journalism majors. Specifically, 49% of the programs offered one or two separate courses related to magazine journalism; 38% offered between three and six such courses; and 13% offered at least seven such courses.

Frangoulis also found that the coursework divided into four areas: writing (299), editing/production (165), management/business (83) and conceptual or non-skills (33). Magazine Writing was by far the most frequently named individual course, followed by Feature Writing, Magazine Editing, Magazine Editing and Production and Advanced

Magazine Writing. He also noted that the number of student-produced magazines had increased from 10 to 63 between 1969 and 1993.

Sharon M. Friedman (1994) discovered several new courses and programs in environmental journalism. Many of the 25 educators surveyed said environmental journalism was not offered as a free-standing course nor discussed in any others courses. However, Friedman also found 80 courses in which the topic was addressed as well as two new degree programs, increased enrollments in some programs and two new endowed chairs.

Erin Kock, Jong G. Kang and David S. Allen (1999) examined the attempts to balance liberal arts education and skills training, finding that although some programs shared some characteristics, "little degree of standardization existed" (p. 10). The 2- and 4-year programs required between 2 and 21 courses in the major, with some requiring up to 75% of the courses in the liberal arts and others requiring as little as 10%. The balance between skills and theoretical/conceptual courses also varied considerably, as did the number of sequences, concentrations and minors.

This study attempts to add to the literature by looking at changes to degree plans and instead of simply surveying educators, interviewing them. This study also attempts to examine the whole field of mass communication and not a smaller niche.

Method

This study seeks to explore how mass communication programs across the country are altering their curricula in order to accommodate the major changes in our field brought on by the Internet. The most important educational organization in our field, the Association for Education in Mass Communication, includes more than 450 programs. For this study, a random sample from AEJMC's directory (AEJMC, 2012), an annual publication of the AEJMC, was chosen (see also, e.g., Vlad, Becker, Simpson and Kalpen (2013) and Blom and Davenport (2010) for similar uses of AEJMC directory information). Random selection was also chosen to avoid a sample with only ACEJMC-accredited schools and/or schools of similar sizes. The goal is to examine how everybody–large programs and small, public and private, accredited and non-accredited–is attempting to cope with the changing media world. These programs include full schools/colleges of mass communication with hundreds of majors and dozens of faculty, mid-size departments, small free-standing departments and even sequences within departments (e.g., English) with one faculty member who concentrates on journalism.

The authors e-mailed those selected to explain the project and request participation. Some potential interviewees did not respond; others agreed; others expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of being interviewed; and some referred us to colleagues who might be better suited to participate (e.g., the initial respondent was no

longer an administrator or another colleague was actually in charge of curriculum). Student assistants conducted the interviews.

To analyze the interviews, the researchers utilized thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Because the study was exploratory in nature, researchers took an inductive approach to identify themes that reflect the administrators' responses. They listened to the interviews, took notes on salient responses, identified patterns in those responses, then discussed together to determine emergent themes. Much of this was an iterative process.

Results

The administrators came from both public and private 4-year programs of varying sizes, ranging from 40 students to more than 1,200 students, in the United States. When asked "When was the last time your department/program underwent a major curriculum revision?" responses varied from currently in progress to as far back as 2008. One administrator stated "we haven't done a major one overall" but instead had undergone curricular revisions in the minor areas. Responses to the question "When was the last time your department/program tweaked its curriculum?" were more consistent, with most stating that these types of changes were ongoing. Administrators reported that all faculty were involved with curriculum decisions.

When administrators were asked what changes were made to their programs' curricula, responses fell into an overarching theme of providing a broad foundation. In some cases, this meant moving away from silos, as in the instances of two programs merging into one. More often, programs re-evaluated the core curriculum that all students were required to take. As one administrator expressed, "we very methodically worked through what were the key and what we called enduring concepts that would be necessary for all of our students to get, not just students in one area or another." Specializations were often still provided, with new specializations sometimes being added, such as the introduction of an undergraduate health communication certificate. These changes were reflected in how administrators described their current degree philosophy: two thirds chose the response "All students need to know at least a little bit about several areas of mass communication but also need a specialty in a more narrow area," one third chose "All students need to know at least a little bit about several areas of mass communication," and none chose "All students need to concentrate on one area specifically."

Rationale for program changes focused on reflecting changes in industry and, in some cases, student interests and faculty expertise. Multiple programs reported relying on advisory boards and feedback from recent graduates to understand industry changes. One chair noted that the advisory boards were "made up of people currently working in the industry, they [had] to be *successfully* working and they [had] to be

successful in *today's* industry, not the industry of 20 years ago" and recent grads were "pretty good at going 'Oh, I needed this or I needed that' or 'You all need more focus on this or more focus on that.'"

Administers were given the following options about what their programs stress:

(a) practical skills in traditional areas (e.g., writing, reporting, editing),

(b) practical skills in newer areas (e.g., web design, computer-assisted reporting, graphics),

(c) conceptual/theoretical classes (e.g., law, ethics, history),

(d) some combination of a, b, and/or c, or

(e) other.

They overwhelmingly chose option d. When asked which option was *most* important, some replied writing, some said all, and one mentioned critical thinking.

Administrators were also asked "What has been your biggest challenge regarding your program's curriculum? How have you dealt with that challenge?" Perhaps not surprisingly, not a single person stopped after listing just one challenge. Perhaps it is also not surprising that the number one challenge faced by programs is resources, including budget ("but that's true in any discipline"), equipment, software ("trying to keep up with this godforsaken Adobe creep"), enough faculty, and space (amount and configuration). Also mentioned were faculty consensus, convincing faculty that "now is the time," striking balance in the curriculum, and keeping up with

it all, both in knowing the latest trends and technology and fighting off fatigue. Another challenge related to the time involved. One administrator reported that the curriculum revision process took 5 years while another reported a 2-year process. Yet another cited 4.5-hour meetings where faculty ordered out for pizza to help keep the conversation going.

Other strategies to deal with the challenges included:

- offering electives so students can get a range of experiences,
- foregoing offering certain courses,
- combining practical and conceptual content in the same course,
- appointing a person to help keep up with technology and costs,
- offering faculty overloads,
- bringing in national experts–both professional and educational,
- educating everyone involved, discussing concerns, and compromising,
- reconfiguring space,
- seeking external funding, and
- realizing that "sometimes you can't [deal with the challenges] except to simply do what you can with what you have."

Perhaps the question with the most heartening responses was "Would you describe the last time your department/program went through the process as smooth sailing, with a few minor skirmishes, or downright contentious?" Half of the

administrators characterized the process as smooth sailing and an additional 20% described some of the process as smooth sailing. One administrator noted "it's a very collegial group" and another that there was "discussion, not disagreement." Almost one third mentioned moments of contentiousness–described as part of a process with "peaks and valleys" by one administrator–that ranged from "absolute consensus" to "out and out war." These moments of contentiousness were characterized by another administrator as faculty being "passionately at odds" with each other. Skirmishes, which were mentioned by nearly half of the administrators, were characterized by another administrator as "all and all . . . very productive discussions."

Discussion

The most obvious conclusion is that there is no "one size fits all," in terms of how curricula are designed as well as how we arrive there. While it's true that media educators have been saying it for years, the results show that we are far from settling the debates over silos-or-no-silos and, importantly, skills-v.-theory with its sibling debate over which skills need the most attention. When analyzing the data, we found ourselves using phrases such as "some" and "roughly half" far more than "all," "none" or even "just a few."

The literature review revealed disagreements over whether to channel students into specialties in the first place, and even if we agree to do so, which specialties to offer. This study and our previous study confirm that administrators are still split.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the field's most important buzzword is "convergence," and that being the case, students need a little bit of everything so they can position themselves for a wide range of jobs. The move to get rid of silos and offer degrees in areas such as multimedia is evidence. Roughly half of the administrators in this study said students need to be ready for anything from shooting video to interviewing crime victims to designing an advertisement.

But conventional wisdom also tells us that each student will need a niche within this convergence, and, as the cliché goes, jacks-of-all-trades are also masters of none. So while no one said their students need to know a lot about just one area of our field, roughly half said that while the students need a broad education, they still need a specialty of some kind, whether it be advertising, print journalism, web design or any number of other subfields.

Even if we could agree on silos or no silos, what to do about reaching that goal is still far from clear. One group of administrators insisted that keeping up with the times meant pushing students into the cyber-frontier by developing specific skills such as web design and by offering courses specific to harvesting the power of social media. But another group insisted that basics such as good writing, story-telling and interviewing continue to trump anything else because they apply across media. One administrator was even more "old school" in explaining that she presided over a traditional communication program in which the students were schooled in rhetoric, public

speaking and persuasion as much as anything relating to mass communication. Arguing that her students came out better off because they were expected to have so many skills that maybe their competitors would not have, she insisted that the program was not "old school" at all but was keeping up with the times as well as anyone else.

The same administrator cited old favorites such as critical thinking and understanding the theory behind the communication process, again arguing that this solid understanding would take the students further. Roughly half of the other administrators said they continue to struggle with the skills-v.-theory debate, but no one dismisses theory entirely.

In the meantime, professionals cited in the literature review want us to teach the students to do it all, including those professionals who think skills trump theory, those who think students lack critical thinking skills, those who criticize the students' writing skills, those who think the students need to learn to write across platforms and those who don't think the students need to learn to write across platforms.

Educators are left to scratch their heads, wonder aloud what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to do it. It is worth repeating that administrators in this study were asked to identify their single biggest challenge, but not one–not one–stopped there. Where do we get the money to hire all of the faculty needed to offer all of these great courses? Where do get the money to buy all of the most modern equipment? How do we keep up with that equipment, or as noted earlier, "this godforsaken Adobe

creep"? Where do we find the qualified faculty to teach all of these great courses? What constitutes "qualified"? Where do we find the money to pay them what they're worth? Where do we house all of this great modern equipment?

All of that said, it is a wonder that "smooth sailing" trumped "outright contentious" when describing the process. Most administrators noted some disagreements but stated that faculty were united at least in their desire to do what's best for the students. Of course they did not always agree on what, exactly, is best for the students, but they largely agreed to try to come up with workable solutions, even if it meant sending out for pizza so a meeting could continue. Administrators seemed more convinced that the bigger problem was not contentiousness but fatigue. They cited the time required just to understand the issues as well as the additional time required to discuss it with one another.

Nonetheless, educators, at least as a collective, are probably faring as well as they can as all around them evolves. The best advice might be, as one interviewee said, "to simply do what you can with what you have."

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