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# Ecology and Environment: They've Been Integrated into J-Education Thinking

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**171 schools and departments respond to comprehensive survey**

## **Ecology and the environment... They've been integrated into J-education thinking**

**By Clay Schoenfeld and Robert J. Griffin**

*Environmental concerns have measurably affected curricula, internships, public service programs and professional liaisons in journalism education.*

**T**o what extent is the 1970-80 environmental era, with its definition of "the ecology" as a matter of public affairs, reflected and integrated in the programs of schools and departments of journalism and mass communication?

Will tight budgets and the prospect of declining enrollments constrain the development or inclusion of specialized subject matter such as "environment?"

This article reports on the findings of a national survey designed to try to answer those two questions. The net result: The presence of environmental content in journalism programs across the country today is measurable. Furthermore, journalism educators see this content either holding its own in the future or expanding. Moreover, there is evidence that dedicated faculty have been instrumental in ushering the impact of the environmental era on journalism programs; the size of departmental enrollments, which might otherwise be expected to affect such specialization, bears no relationship.

### **Survey was broad**

We developed a questionnaire to measure various aspects of the inclusion of environmentally-related materials and activities in curriculum, internship and placement programs, public service, faculty interests, and institutional liaisons in journalism and mass communications programs at colleges and universities in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

On curriculum, respondents were asked whether environmental courses had been added to required or optional breadth courses outside of journalism, and whether a separate undergraduate course in environmental reporting had been added to the curriculum. We also employed a four-

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*For a discussion of the growth of environmental journalism as a "new profession," see: Clay Schoenfeld and John E. Ross, "Environmental communication programs 'come of age,'" Journalism Educator, Vol. 33, No. 2, July 1978, pp. 3-6, 61-64.*

point scale to assess the extent to which, in each respondent's estimation, the matter of the environmental era is regularly reflected in each of nine kinds of courses ranging from newswriting to public relations to press and society.

Programs offering graduate degrees were also asked whether a special master's sequence in environmental communication had been developed.

Respondents also indicated whether any internships are regularly arranged with environmental agencies or organizations, how many of their 1975-80 students are

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### **43% of J-schools say the environment is reflected 'frequently' in their regular academic programming.**

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employed at least in part on media environmental beats, and how many with environmental agencies or organizations. The respondents also noted whether environmental communication workshops had been arranged for working press or resource agency personnel.

The questionnaire also asked how many faculty are particularly interested in environmental communications research, how many are interested in teaching about environmental issues, and whether the department has developed formal or informal liaisons with any environmentally-related programs on campus.

Respondents also were asked openly what they thought the future held regarding the relationship between their schools and the matter of the environmental era.

The questionnaire was sent in fall of 1980 to 256 undergraduate departments of journalism and mass communication in the United States, with the request that the instrument be completed by the head of the department or unit. After a follow-up mailing was sent to non-respondents, 171 usable replies were received, a response rate of 67 percent.

Initial analysis demonstrated the need for additional information about enrollments and the frequency the various kinds

of journalism-related courses were offered. We designed a scale to help interpret the data previously gathered about the extent of inclusion of environmental content in journalism-related courses. Hence another questionnaire was sent in spring of 1981 to the same 256 schools, with again a response rate of 67 percent.

Comparison of results from the first survey with population parameters derived from the second survey and other sources indicates that respondents in the first survey are reasonably representative of the population in regard to distribution in the various regions of the country, although perhaps slightly weighted toward larger departments.

Unless otherwise noted, the conservative 95 percent confidence interval for proportions is plus or minus 8 percent. Only statistically significant results are reported from the various hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

### **Findings are significant**

Following are some of the significant findings, organized by curriculum, placement and service, faculty and departments' perceptions of future relationships between journalism education and the environmental era:

**Curriculum**—Asked whether "the matter of the environmental era (is) now reflected *regularly* in your regular course array," 43 percent of the respondents said "frequently" in reference to at least one course, 44 percent said "sometimes," and 11 percent said only "rarely" or "never." (The remainder gave no answer.) The results may be traceable to what has been called "the subtle influence of environmentalism on the warp and woof of traditional courses."

A separate course in environmental reporting has been added to the curriculum of 10 percent of the programs, and about one-fourth of the programs have offered such a course at one time or another. Otherwise, environmental content in journalism programs surfaces significantly more frequently in public affairs reporting courses than in the other courses often

offered in journalism curricula, based on the ratings given by respondents. It seems reasonable to suggest that one impact of the environmental era on journalism departments has been to define environmental issues as matters of public debate and policy as well as to make apparent the relationship between environmental issues and other public affairs such as inflation, energy, unemployment, and the issues of the cities. Thus would follow the inclusion of environmental matters in public affairs reporting courses rather than the setting up of separate environmental reporting courses.

Environmentally-related breadth courses are required or, primarily, optional in 28 percent of the programs, with about 68 percent of those programs requiring or recommending traditional, natural science-oriented environmental courses, and 45 percent including those with social science orientation, perhaps reflecting the social overtones of environmental problems made salient by the environmental era.

Interestingly, multiple regression indicates that the size of the department, based on student enrollment, bears no significant relationship to the integration of environmental material into journalism curricula, given what might be considered its specialized nature. Instead, faculty interested in teaching about environment seem to play a key role in (1) the frequency that environmental reporting courses are offered in their departments, and (2) the inclusion of required or recommended breadth courses with environmental substance. For example, it seems no accident that the two universities which pioneered specialized programs in environmental communication were universities that happened to have former newspaper outdoor writers on their faculties in 1967-68. There certainly was no pressure from the press at that time. *The New York Times* was not to designate the nation's first environmental specialist until late 1969.

Graduate-level environmental communications training also contributes to departmental favoring of environmental studies courses.

#### **Placement and Service—Journalism**

internships are arranged by 94 percent of the programs. More than one-third (37%) of them arrange at least one regularly with an environmental agency or organization. Multiple regression analyses indicate that faculty interested in environmental teaching again seem instrumental in developing or maintaining these internships, which in turn may be leading to placement of graduates in environmental agencies. Graduate-level environmental communication programs also seem to influence the placement of graduates into environmental media beats, as does the presence of Ph.D. programs and an atmosphere of environmental communication liaison, although programs more strongly oriented toward environmental communications research may be less likely to place students in these reportorial positions.

Thirteen percent of the responding departments have arranged environmental communication workshops for the working press or for resource management agency personnel. Multiple regressions indicate that such workshops have occurred more frequently among schools

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### **Faculty interested in teaching about the environment are present on 29% of J-school staffs.**

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with master's degree programs, schools with graduate-level environmental communications programs, schools with environmentally-related interactions with faculty from other departments, and more commonly among smaller schools. Teacher interested in environment once again seem to play a key role in the sponsorship of these workshops.

**Faculty**—Faculty particularly interested in teaching about environmental matters are present on 29 percent of the staffs, and those interested in environmental communications research inhabit 17 percent. (Some faculty, of course, can be interested in both.) Based on multiple regressions, the size of the department does not bear a significant relationship to the presence of these specialists, nor do mas-

ter's degree and doctorate programs per se, nor the prevalence (or lack of it) of science, mathematics and statistics in student programs—indicative of a math-science slant to the curriculum. Related to the presence of environmental communications researchers, however, is graduate-level environmental communications education. Related to both environmental

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### **Size of J-school or enrollment seems to have little bearing on the incidence of environmental interests.**

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researchers and environmental teachers on a staff are ongoing relationships, formal and informal, with faculty and other specialists in environmentally-related departments.

**The Future**—Of the 171 respondents, 103 answered the question concerning their perceptions of future relationships between their departments and the matter of the environmental era. Only one of these 103 respondents was coded as anticipating divergence in the years to come. Half of the remainder (51%,  $\pm 10\%$ ) believed that the status quo, such as it may be, would be maintained, and half (49%,  $\pm 10\%$ ) foresaw greater inclusion of environmental materials in department activities. Multiple regression indicates a strong relationship between ongoing interfaculty liaisons and the perception of greater inclusion of environmental materials in the future.

### **What it all means**

This study provides evidence to suggest that faculty interested in environmental communications can affect the inclusion of environmental materials in the curriculum, the sponsoring of environmental activities such as workshops for professionals and

the maintenance of internships with environmental agencies and organizations which may lead to placement of graduates in such professions. Of particular interest is the repeated finding that such activity does not require a department with large student enrollment, potentially an important indicator that environmental programs may still grow in an era of tight budgets, given dedicated faculty.

The analysis also shows that graduate-level activity, particularly an environmental communications program, could affect the inclusion of environmental materials in the curriculum and the placement of graduates.

It also appears that the maintenance of formal or informal faculty liaisons with others in environmentally-related departments—such as joint projects, guest lecturing—is an important element in the presence and work of environmental communications researchers and teachers on a journalism or communications staff. Perhaps such activity maintains the interdisciplinary stimulation and input particularly necessary to the cross-cutting nature of both environmental problems and communications research.

If the available evidence is accurate, does the environmental impact on journalism education represent some deliberate speed, some significant scope of adaption, or relative resistance?

It is hard to say. We know of no comparable formal study of the rate of adoption of broad issues in university curricula. In addition, lack of time-series data before and after Earth Day seriously inhibits inferences of process, growth, or decline. The data do suggest, however, that schools and departments of journalism and mass communication have not been immune from one of the pressing public issues of the era, in keeping with Alexander Meikeljohn's observation that American colleges and universities are not something apart from the social order to which they belong. "They are that order."

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**EDUCATORS HAVE VOICE:** An Educator Academy, established in 1981, is a section of the International Association of Business Communicators.