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The Hybrid Master's Degree: Combining Research with Practice

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THE faculty of small journalism and mass communication programs offering a master's degree face a dilemma. Should they attempt a "full-service" program, with a series of options which can attract a broad range of students? Or should they limit the program to a narrow focus or specialty which can draw attention to itself? The first option accommodates most students but is difficult, if not impossible, to staff adequately in a small program. The second, while easier to staff because fewer faculty are required, serves only a fraction of students in the university's service area who might be interested in pursuing graduate studies. The recent experience of the journalism faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno, might prove useful to those who wish to develop a new graduate program or to revise an existing graduate program. The master's program at the Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism was created — or, to be more precise, a long-standing traditional program was revised dramatically in 1987 — with keen awareness of a number of environmental factors. Graduate programs in journalism and mass communication tend to be either predominantly theoretical, of the "communication studies" type, or overtly professional, such as those at Columbia or Berkeley.

The "theoretical" programs usually have a strong emphasis in systematic research and in the study and testing of various theories of mass communication. Such programs typically culminate in a traditional thesis, often based on survey research, content analysis or field experimentation with quantifiable results. These programs place a high value on academic publication and are designed to prepare one for doctoral studies. The professionally oriented programs emphasize journalistic research and interviewing and de-emphasize systematic academic research and the quantification of results. Courses emphasize reporting and writing, and the "professional project" — usually an in-depth piece of journalism such as a long magazine article or a television documentary — takes the place of the traditional thesis.

These programs place a high value on publication in mass circulation newspapers or magazines and are considered to be the “terminal degree” for professional journalists. While some universities offer one or the other approach, others, primarily large universities, offer both, calling them the “thesis” or “project” options (or “A” and “B” options). The resultant diploma, however, seldom carries any indication of which track was taken. In heavily populated areas where students can choose from a number of graduate programs in the field, it can be advantageous for a school to choose one track or the other and attract students who are so inclined. The University of Nevada, Reno, offered (and still does) the only graduate program in journalism for a large area stretching across the rest of the state, Northern Arizona, Western Utah, Southern Oregon and Northern California except for the Bay Area. This placed an obligation on the program to try to meet the needs of a variety of students. Unlike a program in a “university-rich” environment, the Reynolds School did not have the luxury of developing a specialized curriculum.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

It was believed necessary to provide a curriculum to meet the needs of students wishing to obtain a “terminal professional degree” to advance their media careers, those with undergraduate degrees in other fields who wished to use the M.A. as a “skills” degree to provide entry into careers in journalism, and those who sought graduate education in journalism as a step toward a career in teaching and research, or toward doctoral studies. At the same time it was recognized that the faculty of the Reynolds School was too small, and insufficiently diverse, to offer even as many as two distinct tracks. Further, those planning the program rejected the idea of “A” and “B” (thesis and project) tracks on the grounds that “B” tracks are often perceived as less rigorous, and thus less legitimate, than “A” tracks. There was the concern that students choosing the “B” track might later find themselves wishing to pursue doctorates or teaching careers and discover that they lacked essential research skills and knowledge. These factors pointed the planners of the program in the direction of a “hybrid” degree: one that combined the rigor of systematic research with the practicality of professional practice. Further, the profession of journalism benefits from the application of sophisticated, systematic research techniques to the process of news gathering and news writing. In developing the curriculum and degree requirements, a number of considerations were at play. First, the entire faculty of the school, not just graduate faculty members, was consulted. In addition to making regular reports to faculty meetings, planners invited all interested faculty members to participate in the detailed discussions. Second, catalog copy from a dozen journalism and mass communication graduate programs was consulted. Particular attention was paid to programs similar to the Reynolds School in size, constituency and professional orientation. Third, members of the faculty engaged in widespread informal consultation with colleagues at other schools around the country, looking for advice on how to structure the program and in particular for creative approaches. Finally, the school hired two consultants — the dean of a prominent Midwestern journalism school and a senior professor from a respected Western journalism school — to come to Reno, “size up” the proposed graduate program and the university, and provide expert advice and critique.

CORE COURSES

In order to provide consistency and a common foundation for all students in the graduate program, planners focused on developing a core of required courses. These courses would become the central body of knowledge for the degree and the benchmark for writing skills. The process involved identifying elements considered essential to the core while keeping the

core small enough to allow a student flexibility in forming a course of study. The essential elements identified were: (1) Good writing skills. Not only are students required to have completed an undergraduate writing course and editing course, a writing proficiency examination is required and an advanced writing course is part of the core. At the heart of the course is development of the ability to find out what is going on and to write about it intelligently. The course focuses on writing methods that penetrate complexity and place information in context for a target audience. Students are also introduced to a systematic method of acquiring and appraising information. The process goes beyond the interview and involves using databases to develop a journalistic search strategy. The writing proficiency examination, administered during orientation day at the beginning of the program, determines the mechanical skills — grammar, syntax and logic — of each student. Initially, a low score meant the student was required to take a remedial course and then take the test again. Subsequently, the test has been made purely diagnostic, to assist the student and the adviser in planning the student's course of study. The main reasons for the change were the tensions created when professional journalists entering the program felt demeaned by the requirement (particularly when their scores on the exam directed them toward remedial courses) and the inherent difficulty of developing an examination that could be demonstrated to measure writing ability objectively. (2) Training in research methods. Considerable discussion took place regarding the nature of the research course. Should it be quantitative only, qualitative only, or both? Should the student only develop a proposal for a research project, or complete the project? The decision was made to have a single course that did all: taught both quantitative and qualitative methods, and had the student write a proposal and complete a research project. This approach proved too ambitious. Today the research methods course stops at the proposal writing stage. Faculty continue to believe, however, that the course should cover both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Due to this requirement, students are not expected to delve into statistics, only to understand the functions of some commonly used statistical measurements. In fact, the approach is to de-emphasize statistical procedures and to concentrate on how research methods work and what data they provide, with emphasis on rational analysis and interpretation of data. Students are introduced to major trends in mass communication research and prepared for the time in their careers when they will need knowledge about research methods. (3) A general knowledge of literature in the field. Included in the core curriculum is a course that analyzes the mass media and their dynamic relationship to American society in the context of communication theory and current intellectual thought. The emphasis is on the power and influence of the media, how they function and their impact on society. Press freedom and responsibility and criticism of media performance are included. A course providing an understanding of the roles that technology plays in public communication was originally part of the core but now is offered as an elective to allow students greater flexibility in their plan of study. The unique media technologies course helps students prepare for management roles in the field. Events of the past several years have demonstrated the increasing role of computers, satellites, fiber optics and the like in journalism, advertising and public relations. With the inception of digital communication between the School of Journalism and Nevada public schools, the course will be expanded. Graduate students will have the opportunity to develop and implement multimedia programs for use by public school students, particularly in the area of environmental studies.

Applied research

The most distinguishing feature of the hybrid master's degree program at Nevada is the Professional Research Project. The intent is to preserve the rigor and basic organization of a thesis, yet make the research relevant to "real world" problems. Although the project is based on independent inquiry which may be critical of media standards or performance, it follows the professional research paradigm: identify a "client," carry out research relevant

to the client's needs and report the results to the client. In addition to media outlets, the concept of client may include professional associations and organizations with interests such as the advancement of women and minorities. The report to the client might take the form of an oral report, a multimedia presentation or an extended interview. Additionally, the student researcher writes a formal report in thesis form with full annotation. The thesis component is more significant with respect to degree requirements. The Professional Research Project enables students to work on some of the focal issues in the field and to assist the media. They gain a firsthand understanding of media organizations, become acquainted with media leaders and gain recognition from the industry. For example, a graduate student conducted an analysis of the editorial content of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* before and after its purchase by Gannett. She spent a week at the newspaper in meetings with top news executives, including the executive editor and publisher. Management was so impressed with the value of the research that the publisher assigned the managing editor to work with her for the duration of the project. At the completion of the research, she made two presentations: one to the paper's management and the other to the newsroom staff. The next day she discussed her findings on a panel at the Society of Professional Journalists National Convention in Louisville.

Such applied research projects can involve undergraduates. A graduate student who conducted a readership study of a local daily newspaper, the *Nevada Appeal*, involved undergraduates enrolled in a public relations course. The instructor of that course and the students recognized that the project provided a useful learning experience and were enthusiastic about expanding the concept throughout our undergraduate curriculum. One student wrote: "The survey project was of 'real world' value. Unlike term papers that get thrown into the trash can at the end of the semester, it was a project from which I can expect the *Nevada Appeal* to benefit and use to bolster readership. It is seldom that a student can legitimately include a class achievement on a resume." *Nevada Appeal* publisher Dale Wetenkamp admitted that initially he was "a little bit skeptical" about the research aspect of our school's graduate program. But the readership study (and another conducted more recently for his paper) has made him one of the program's staunchest supporters among media people in the state and reinforced his belief in the value of a close relationship between media professionals and journalism educators. He arranged for the graduate student to appear before the Nevada Press Association to discuss the survey results. Wetenkamp's enthusiasm for the survey was apparent. "If I seemed excited and like a little boy with a new toy talking about the survey," he said, "then you were reading my emotions perfectly. I have wanted to do a survey like this for some time."

He said the survey helped the *Nevada Appeal's* management to be more knowledgeable about and responsive to what its readers like and do not like about the paper. He also pointed out that the demographic information was very useful to the paper's advertising sales department. Graduate students in our program may opt to do a traditional thesis to investigate topics that focus on more than a single media organization. Examples include a national survey of the professional values of women in newspaper newsrooms and the public relations aspects of the introduction of new weapons systems by the Defense Department. Having seen too many students drop out of graduate programs after completing course work but before completing the thesis, planners created a special course to assist students in writing their reports. In essence, the six credits traditionally accorded to thesis are divided into two parts: four credits for conducting the research and two credits for writing the report. During the research phase, the student is in regular contact with the chairperson of his or her committee, reporting on progress and receiving guidance. Then, when the analysis of data is substantially complete, the student attends the Project Development course along with other students who are also in the final phase of their degree program. They meet once a week for a semester with the instructor, sharing their progress with one another and getting help in organizing, writing

and editing their reports. The weekly sessions also provide regular stimulus, encouraging students to continue making progress on what otherwise is a lonely task. The result has been that significantly more of our graduate students complete their degree, and in less time, than the national average.

CONCLUSION

The Reynolds School of Journalism's experience has not been totally satisfactory, of course. With a small graduate faculty, we have not always been able to offer the range of courses that we would like. If students are to be able to make reasonable progress toward their degree, the core courses must be taught at least annually. Elective courses, which students use to pursue their special interests, have been too few, especially in conceptual areas — skills courses are more plentiful. However, despite these limitations students largely have been able to combine journalism courses with those from other disciplines in pursuit of their interests, and those completing the program have expressed satisfaction with the knowledge and skills they have acquired. Many graduates have obtained management-level jobs in media or related institutions, while others have gone on to seek doctorates. Faculty contemplating new or revised graduate programs will do well to assess such environmental factors as the nature of the undergraduate program, the strengths and weaknesses of the existing faculty, the characteristics and needs of potential students and the orientations of competing graduate programs, as well as the opportunities inherent in media markets in the region. Ironically, some smaller programs cannot afford the luxury of specializing, while some larger programs may find specialization to be the only way to distinguish themselves from others. In our case at Nevada, the hybrid master's degree enables us to accommodate a variety of students without developing a series of curriculum options that we cannot adequately staff, and it offers our students a degree that preserves their options for future career choices.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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