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## Training for community journalism in the USA

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# Training For Community Journalism In The U.S.A.

The assumption among print journalism educators in the United States seems to be that graduates who take newspaper jobs likely will begin at a small daily, so-called community journalism, and that young journalists will move on to higher-paying jobs in larger markets as they hone their skills. Thus, a major point in the debate among journalism educators has been whether students should be prepared only for these entry-level jobs or also for future advancement in the field.

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Journalism educators, however, also insist that they need to do more than prepare graduates for newspaper careers. For example, the Curriculum Task Force of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, which I co-chaired, proposed five objectives for media education: (1) to provide students the competencies they need for successful careers in media-related professions; (2) to educate nonmajors about the role of the media in society; (3) to prepare students to become teachers or to undertake graduate education; (4) to prepare liberally educated graduates to become media analysts and critics; and (5) to provide mid-career education for media professionals (AEJMC Curriculum Task Force, 1996, p. 106).

Akin to the situation in Australia, debate in the US has not tended to focus on whether all entry-level journalism graduates need the same set of skills. Instead, the debate has focused on whether journalism education overall is too practical or too theoretical and whether graduates should be prepared for jobs in more than one media subfield.

Meanwhile, journalism education has come under attack at various times in the US for being ineffective and irrelevant to media realities. For example, in an article in *Quill*, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, Grimes (2001) concluded that many recent graduates have found themselves unprepared for the "real world." The biggest problem she found was meeting deadlines. She found that new journalists fell short in managing their workload, developing their reporting techniques, shouldering the responsibilities of a journalist, adapting to journalism as a business, and making the personal

commitment and sacrifices required of a journalist. All are things that are hard to teach in the classroom, however. As educator Charles Davis of the University of Missouri-Columbia noted: "We do a decent job teaching them skills. The hard part is teaching them the diplomacy" (Grimes, 2001, p. 46).

Some in the media industry have concluded that journalism education has overlooked its basic mission, that of preparing journalists for community journalism; that is, small-city or suburban daily or weekly newspapers, which usually do not offer the type of position and pay that journalism graduates aspire. To fill that gap, Connecticut-based Thomson Newspapers ([www.thomson.com](http://www.thomson.com)) announced plans to establish a training center in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to provide 12 weeks of training in the basics of journalism to people interested in becoming entry-level reporters for its small dailies (Romell, 1999). The training center would be located in the building that houses the Oshkosh Northwestern.

Though most recruits were expected to be college graduates, some were expected not to have a college education. The training would include actual reporting for the Northwestern and seven other Wisconsin newspapers owned by Thomson. The company would recruit people who had ties to their community and who would stay at a small newspaper rather than use it as a stepping stone for a better-paying job at a larger newspaper.

The Thomson proposal was based on the British practice of training high school graduates for six months in shorthand and the basics of governmental operations before sending them to work as reporters. Trainees at the Oshkosh center would be paid minimum wage plus travel money and housing assistance. Stuart Garner, president and chief executive officer of Thomson Newspapers, stated that the center would ensure that "new journalists bring a passion for readers to their work, unencumbered by lofty preconceptions of what journalism is all about" (Romell, 1999).

In the United States, newspaper professionals have been insistent that journalism graduates have a strong liberal arts background. Likewise, newspaper professionals have long been a major force behind limits on the number of courses that accredited journalism and mass communication programs can offer their majors. The idea behind current journalism education is that graduates should have a limited number of skills courses and a larger number of liberal arts courses taken outside the major. Such a plan is supposed to ensure that graduates will succeed no matter what size of newspaper they find employment. Student media experience and media internships are helpful for providing students the practical experience that can't be found in the classroom, but they are limited.

Two issues seem most related to why journalism educators tend to conclude that their graduates are prepared for entry-level

jobs with community newspapers, and both are related to whether journalism education should be practical or theoretical. The first is the so-called “green eyeshades v. chi-squares” debate, which focuses on whether journalism educators should have practical experience or doctorates, and the other is over the role of the liberal arts vs. practical skills courses, which focuses on accreditation of journalism and mass communication programs.

US journalism education has long emphasized the importance of journalism educators having practical experience. In 1935 the American Association of Teachers of Journalism set five years of practical experience as the minimum acceptable for a journalism educator (Sloan, 1990). The fields of mass communication and communication studies had their beginnings in the US in the late 1940s, however, and with them came an emphasis on theoretical courses and the need for faculty to have doctorates.

Following the Second World War, graduate education in the US expanded, causing a dramatic increase in the supply of Ph.D.s and the requirement that faculty do research. A survey by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer, 1990) found that from 1969 to 1989, the number of faculty at research institutions stating that research was essential for promotion increased from 44% to 83%. At comprehensive colleges (which have no doctoral programs) the percentage increased from 6% to 43%.

Since the rise of communication studies in the 1950s, some media professionals and media educators have charged that journalism professionals were losing out to Ph.D.s in job searches. Researchers concluded that by 1960 journalism schools were lowering their expectations and were decreasing the standard of five years of experience set in 1935 by the American Association of Teachers of Journalism (Sloan, 1990). The debate over the nature of journalism education in the US was particularly spirited in the 1960s as communication studies grew within journalism schools (Dickson, 2000). For example, Highton (1967) wrote: “Newspapering is becoming a sidelight, if not an afterthought, of many journalism schools” (p. 10).

As late as the mid-1960s, however, research showed that a Ph.D. still wasn’t necessarily required. An Association for Education in Journalism survey in 1967 found that 51 of 54 journalism schools stated they didn’t require the doctorate and that experience was more important (Highton, 1967).

A lightning rod for the practical versus theoretical debate arose in the mid-1980s. It was the so-called “Oregon Report,” a report by the Project on the Future of Journalism Education (Project, 1984). The project task force, headed by Everett Dennis, concluded then “the general state of journalism and mass communication

## Green eyeshades versus chi- squares

education is dismal" (Project, 1987, p. iii). It predicted that the rapid increase in changes in technology would push journalism and mass communication programs away from industry-oriented sequence programs toward what the report called "generic mass communication study." That move supposedly would eliminate barriers between the print and broadcast media and between the news and non-news side of media organizations.

Dennis (1987) proposed that media programs either add more courses about the changing media industries themselves or be seen as irrelevant. He argued that course titles and course descriptions in a 1928 journalism school catalogue were not noticeably different from those of the mid-1980s. He also stated that few schools were offering courses that went beyond the basics of professional practice.

Supporters of a practical approach to journalism education continued to attack the "chi-squares" or "communicologists" with fervor. They responded that the proposed generic curriculum enforced a false distinction between journalism craft courses and liberal arts-oriented mass communication courses. Mencher (1990) stated that the theoretical, research-oriented approach to media education perpetuated the "trade-school myth" and advanced another myth: that the trade-school curriculum was "simple-minded and anti-intellectual" (p. 5).

Journalism professionals have predicted dire consequences because of the perceived need for research and the increased number of media educators with a Ph.D. For example, Jerry Ceppos, managing editor of the San Jose Mercury News, questioned whether new faculty members with doctorates in mass communication would have strong enough backgrounds to teach most journalism courses. He questioned whether universities were refusing to recognize scholarly qualifications "in research, writing, critical thinking, clear expression and visual aesthetics" that journalism professionals bring to mass media education (Ceppos, 1990, p. 17). Robert Giles, then editor and publisher of the Detroit Press, wrote that what he saw as a trend toward hiring Ph.D.s in communications "further undermines the principle that distinguished experience as a journalist is the equivalent of a doctorate" (ASNE, 1990, p. 1).

Weinberg (1991) charged that many academics with doctorates in journalism have little or no newsroom experience, "which makes it difficult for them to teach students the skills they need to function in news operations." He stated that the situation would lead to students who were ill-equipped for writing "clear, meaningful, fair, and accurate stories" (p. B1). Similarly, Medsger (1996) wrote that "the question about degree is having a great impact on who teaches journalism – and probably on quality and basic content of journalism education" (p. 41).

The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Vision 2000 Task Force noted that the "evidence is that faculty members must – both to get jobs and earn

tenure, and for the sake of the field itself – now have doctorates” (AEJMC, 1994, p. 22).

Despite such conclusions, however, research has found that the rise in Ph.D.s has not resulted in faculty members without practical experience. Research by Weaver and Wilhoit (1988) found that fewer media faculty in 1980 held a doctorate as compared to college faculty overall – about half compared to 80% in some other fields. Seventy-one percent of media educators who were full professors had a doctorate and 54% of associate professors. They found that only 1.5% of media educators surveyed had no professional media experience. In addition, they found that faculty with Ph.D.s had an average of 6.5 years of media experience versus 12 years for faculty without a doctorate, a finding providing little support for the charge that media Ph.D.s have little or no media experience.

Wilhoit and Weaver (1988) also determined that just over one-fourth of media educators had never published an article as compared to 22% of all faculty at four-year institutions in 1985. Also, half of media faculty had never written or edited a book as compared to 55% of all US faculty. Media faculty were slightly more likely than faculty overall to prefer teaching to research – 66% vs. 63%.

A colleague and I (Dickson and Sellmeyer, 1992) found that administrators with a news-editorial background were least likely to favor research. Only 31% of them thought an emphasis on research was a priority versus 41% of administrators with a broadcast or public relations background and 65% of administrators with some other media specialty. We found that three-fourths of administrators of mass media academic units stated that having a high proportion of media professionals on the faculty should be a high or very high priority. On the other hand, just under half of them stated that having more doctorates on the faculty in relation to faculty without doctorates was a high or very high priority.

Medsker (1996) reported that only one-sixth of print and broadcast journalism faculty had never worked full-time as a journalist. She found that one-fifth of print and broadcast journalism educators with doctorates had no full-time professional experience as compared to one-ninth of journalism faculty without a doctorate. All but 6% of media faculty agreed that journalism faculties should include faculty with extensive journalistic experience.

Fedler, Santana, Counts and Carey (1997) concluded that faculty members who taught reporting/editing courses conducted less research than other media faculty members but were among media education’s “most experienced and successful” (p. 12). Faculty members who taught reporting and editing were most likely to do no research. They also found that the percentage of faculty with Ph.D.s differed considerably among specialties. Advertising/public relations faculty members had the fewest, two-thirds, followed by reporting/

editing with nearly 70% and radio/television with just over three-fourths. In contrast, more than four-fifths of faculty members in such areas as media ethics, mass communication and society, media law, theory and methodology, and international media had a Ph.D. They also concluded that the longer the faculty members had taught, the more likely they were to have a doctorate.

Thus, research shows that most educators who teach practical journalism courses have newspaper experience, though many have doctorates. As for myself, I worked on my college newspaper for four years, including a year as editor, was a reporter on a daily newspaper in an Arkansas city of around 20,000 residents while in college, and edited a Kansas City-area suburban daily before completing my doctorate and teaching college journalism.

Until 1989, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) – the organization that the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the US Department of Education recognizes as the accrediting body for journalism and mass communication – had a curriculum standard that stated that 75% of the media student's hours should be in the liberal arts and sciences and 25% in the professional major. Under the 75/25 standard, all media courses were seen as professional courses and could not count as liberal arts.

Hampton Smith III noted that the professional members of the ACEJMC were the ones who had been most supportive of the 25% limit on professional courses and a 10% limit on the hours in the major that could be used for internships. He wrote that if ACEJMC adhered to the standards promoted by large professional organizations "that are relatively unconcerned about professional training, it does a disservice to the smaller ones, which need entry-level employees ready to perform, and to the vast major of journalism school graduates, who expect to be employable." He also noted that the other extreme, "a trade-school mentality," would mean journalism programs would not be able to produce either the "well-rounded, literate citizens and employees everyone wants" or people who could be promoted or be successful in management positions ("Accreditation issues debated," 1984, p.10). Other critics charged that allowing students to have only about 25% of their courses in journalism suggested journalism education lacked content.

The debate over the 75/25 rule gave some media educators an opportunity to make their case that many of their courses were liberal arts courses and that media-related education was liberal education. Despite the lukewarm support for the 75/25 standard by media educators, studies continued to show journalism practitioners strongly supported the 75/25 standard. Also, the 1984 Oregon Report

supported the plan with almost no discussion.

In 1987, the Journalism Education Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) proposed withdrawing the organization's support for the ACEJMC because it perceived that the ACEJMC's support for the liberal arts component was waning. The ASNE board, however, changed the proposal to state that if the ACEJMC did not continue its "full and vigorous support" of the liberal arts curriculum standard, the ASNE would withdraw its support (Mabrey, 1988, p. 42).

Blanchard (1988) noted that the ACEJMC was dominated by professional organizations and argued that "it is up to the academic representatives of the council to tell the professional representatives that curriculum design and implementation" are the final judgment" of media educators (p. 50). Blanchard and Christ (1988) tied curriculum reform in media education to national developments in higher education and argued for the idea of an "enriched major" proposed by Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The authors argued that media education must become part of what Boyer called the "integrated core," the basic general education program.

Another view was taken by Davis (1991), who noted that accreditation was a matter of concern to programs in broadcasting, film and communication studies. He noted that there is no organization to accredit communication programs that have no professional components in journalism. Like other educators before him, he argued that the curriculum, policy and personnel matters should be the responsibility of faculty rather than an outside agency.

After years of debate over the inflexibility of the fixed 75/25 percentage, the ACEJMC adopted the 90/65 rule in 1985 and made it mandatory in 1989. It required undergraduate students in accredited units at institutions requiring 120 semester hours for graduation to take a minimum of 90 semester hours in courses outside the major area of journalism and mass communications, with no fewer than 65 semester hours in the basic liberal arts and sciences. One major program, at the University of Wisconsin, decided not to seek reaccreditation because the new rule would reduce to 30 from 40 the number of hours that majors could take within the program (Leatherman, 1991).

The Task Force on Liberal Arts and Sciences of the AEJMC/ Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication's joint Task Force on the Future of Journalism and Mass Communication Education opposed "any dilution of the liberal arts emphasis in JMC education"; however, it objected to "classification of liberal arts and other courses based solely on the name of the course and the name of the administrative unit in the university offering them" (Mullins, 1987, p. 5).

The Task Force also urged that media units and ACEJMC accreditors become responsible for classifying "outside" courses in

departments such as communication, telecommunication, art and business that actually are communication skills courses. It mentioned that few guidelines existed for classifying courses. The task force also noted what was then a recent study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that described higher education in the 1980s as “driven by careerism and professional education” (Mullins, 1987, p. 6).

The task force report added that the Carnegie Foundation report made two points that were pertinent to its examination of the role of liberal arts in media programs. The first was that the Carnegie study cited a “disjointed” curriculum with fragmented disciplines unrelated to a student’s education as a whole. The second was that some traditional liberal arts departments had become “professionally oriented” so they could attract majors or they had narrowed their focus so they could carve out a research niche that was irrelevant to nonmajors. Ed Mullins, author of the task force’s report, concluded that the dominant view of the task force was that journalism and mass communication was a professional discipline allied with the liberal arts.

In its final report, the Liberal Arts Task Force concluded about its curriculum proposals concerning the liberal arts: “There will be some who view these recommendations as opening a pandora’s box leading to anarchy in JMC curricular matters. That’s a risk we may have to run in order to improve our curricula and accreditation procedures” (Task Force, 1989, p. A-8).

The curriculum standard was amended in September 1992 to allow units at institutions requiring between 120 and 124 semester hours to count up to six hours of media courses that are liberal arts in nature as part of the 90 outside hours but not the 65 liberal arts hours. Units at institutions requiring between 125 and 128 hours were allowed to count up to three hours of media liberal arts course toward the 90 outside hours. That rule was amended in 2001 to allow additional “inside” hours to count in programs with more total required hours.

Some research has looked at the extent to which journalists and educators agree concerning the practical-theoretical issue and concerning what skills and abilities journalism graduates should have. A study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE, 1990) found that 75% of editors stated that recent job candidates would have been better off if they had taken more work in other fields. Eighty one percent of editors thought that having a broad background in the arts and sciences was important or very important. Nearly two thirds of editors thought that the liberal arts and sciences education of entry-level hires during the previous five years was strong (5%) or somewhat strong (57%), and only 43% percent of editors thought it was important or very important for journalism schools to educate students in mass

communication concepts as well as the fundamental of journalism.

In my analysis of the ASNE survey (Dickson, 1996), I concluded that editors of small daily newspapers – that is, community newspapers – were significantly more likely to want graduates to have taken more journalism courses rather than more courses in fields such as history, the arts, the social sciences, and the physical sciences than were editors of medium-sized newspapers (48% vs. 26%) or editors of large newspapers (48% vs. 4%).

Editors of small newspapers were significantly less likely to want new hires to have a broad arts and sciences background than were editors at medium-sized newspaper (69% vs. 81%) and editors at large newspaper (69% vs. 89%). Editors of small newspapers were significantly less likely to rate their recent entry-level hires as strong or somewhat strong in the liberal arts and sciences than were editors medium-sized newspapers (51% vs. 55%) and large newspapers (51% vs. 78%). Also, editors at small newspapers were significantly less likely than editors at medium newspapers (82% vs. 93%) and at large newspapers (82% vs. 97%) to want journalism schools to provide a fundamental knowledge of journalism but keep the present level of commitment to the liberal arts and sciences.

I also surveyed media administrators at 380 institutions concerning the role of liberal arts in their program (Dickson, 1992). A majority of them (55%) favored the 90/65 curriculum rule as compared to 24% who liked the old 75/25 rule. Another 9% had no preference, and 12% disliked both rules. Administrators at accredited programs were significantly more likely than those at unaccredited programs to favor the 90/65 rule (69% vs. 49%) and significantly less likely to favor the 75/25 plan (13% vs. 28%). Overall, 64% of the programs required less than 27.5% of students' hours be in media courses, and 10% of programs required more than 32.5% of students' hours to be in media courses. Unaccredited programs were significantly more likely than accredited programs to require 36 or more media hours for a major (49% vs. 15%).

I found that three fourths of the programs required 65 or more hours in liberal arts and sciences (65 hours being the minimum number for accreditation), with 52% stating that 70 or more hours were required in the liberal arts and sciences and 24% stating that 65-69 hours were required. A larger percentage of unaccredited programs than accredited programs (54% vs. 48%) required 70 or more hours in liberal arts. Administrators at 71% of the institutions stated that the media unit had some controls over what liberal arts courses students took. Nearly two thirds of the respondents (63%) stated that some media non-skills courses should be allowed to count toward the 65 hours of liberal arts. I concluded the issue might be the source of continued conflict and stated: "The curriculum Pandora's box has been opened, but it is too early to tell if it will lead to anarchy or just be a

## What editors and educators want in graduates

can of worms for journalism educators" (p. 14).

The Associated Press Managing Editors developed an "Agenda for Journalism Education," which it presented to journalism educators in December 1993. The organization asked members to rank 11 skills that today's journalists need in addition to the fundamentals of journalism. Several were in professional skills areas. Others were broader, liberal arts concepts. Topping the editors' list was "thinking analytically" (Ceppos, 1994).

Iorio and Williamson (1995) investigated what liberal arts courses and components were being taught across the curriculum at accredited media programs, unaccredited media programs and programs that combined instruction in mass communication and speech communication programs. They looked specifically at history, theory and philosophy courses and components. The authors found the three liberal arts components throughout the curricula of all three types of the communication programs with combined programs having a higher percentage of all three types of courses than the two straight media programs. Iorio and Williamson concluded that the curricula were "infused with liberal arts and sciences components," but they also found a "fragmented curricula that may be more reflective of the vestiges of separate traditions than the evolution of liberal arts studies" (pp. 24-25).

The Task Force on Missions and Purposes of Journalism and Mass Communication Education (AEJMC/ASJMC, 1996) concluded that 36% of the mission statements of media units they received and analyzed noted that the program was designed to impart critical thinking or analytical skills as compared to 44% that listed practical skills. Forty five percent mentioned such things as the role of media in society and rights and responsibilities of the media. Though 89% of the mission statements indicated that part of the unit's mission was to prepare students for jobs in media industries, the task force concluded that it may have overlooked some references to that purpose because of the level of abstraction of some statements. Nearly half stated that they offered a fairly equal balance between professional preparation and a liberal arts and sciences background. About one in five listed a liberal arts orientation as their primary focus, and one in nine noted that a liberal arts and sciences background was a secondary mission. Only 16% did not mention a liberal arts and sciences role.

The practical-theoretical debate, both in qualifications for faculty and what the best journalism curriculum should be, has major implications for how journalism education in the US is treating the community/suburban journalism issue even though that issue has not directly been the focus of much attention. First, despite the worst fears of critics, nearly all journalism faculty members who teach

practical courses have professional experience, though many also have a doctorate. Professional journalists who want to teach tend to realize that an advanced degree is useful if not necessary. Second, the present accreditation system forces journalism programs to pay considerably more attention to their practical courses than to their more-theoretical courses. That focus is even more acute at the graduate level, in which only practical programs can be accredited. However, the accreditation system – supported by newspaper professionals – also limits the number of practical courses journalism graduates can obtain.

The ramification for community/suburban journalism of the emphasis on “outside” liberal arts is that graduates at accredited programs should be minimally able to handle such entry-level positions. Non-accredited programs have a greater flexibility to build both more practical and more theoretical courses into their major requirements. Most tend to follow the example set by accredited schools and focus on entry-level skills; however, they also are free to provide more skills training.

US journalism educators assume that the mix of practical skills courses and outside liberal arts courses will give graduates an adequate footing in journalistic skills and an ability to climb the career ladder to larger newspapers as well as an understanding of the role journalists play in a free society. However, journalism education can do only so much. Some skills can’t be taught in the classroom, and some graduates don’t have the desire or ability to succeed at a community newspaper, let alone a big-city one.

Another problem is salaries. The industry, particularly community newspapers, must do more to improve wages for young journalists so they can afford to stay in the field. If community newspapers don’t pay well enough to keep their journalism graduates, then they will have continual staff turnover. They then will have to hire liberal arts graduates without journalism skills and train them on the job or resort to a type of journalism basic training for non-college graduates envisioned by Thompson Newspapers. Both entail considerable expense. Journalism educators think those newspapers will be not as well served in either situation as they would be with graduates of journalism and mass communication programs.

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