

Assessment Report Year 2010

Prepared April 2011

Graduate Program in Journalism School of Mass Communication

Overview of 2010 Activities

Efforts to diversify the number of teachers and curricular offerings continued in 2010. This effort is in response to student feedback from a 2008 survey and continued informal feedback students have had with the graduate coordinator.

All full-time graduate faculty members taught a graduate course of some type during 2010, except Mark Giese who is scheduled to teach one in fall 2011. In the past, only about half of the SMC's graduate faculty actually taught in the journalism graduate program or participated in student research projects.

Two 100-percent online courses were taught in the summer of 2010, the first time ever an entire term was offered in the Journalism MA program online. Unfortunately, a glitch in student evaluations has prevented either faculty member from receiving student evaluations on these courses. But the online classes did seem to allow more students to take summer classes. Instructors for any graduate courses in summer are being encouraged to teach them at least partially online. The inability or unwillingness for MA students to come to campus for three nights of classes is the biggest hindrance to summer enrollment.

SMC Director Jamie Byrne continued the appointment of a Graduate Committee consisting of the coordinator, Dale Zacher, and graduate faculty members Mark Giese and Amy Barnes, to help develop policies and procedures for the graduate program.

The faculty continues to discuss an expanded focus of its MA program in journalism with the goal of possibly converting it to a MA program in mass communication. The change to an MA in mass communication will broaden the program's appeal to students and allow more SMC faculty to become stakeholders in the program. An MA program in Mass Communication also better complements the SMC's undergraduate offerings. But funding for GA positions that will appeal to mass communication students (such as GAs to help University Television or student media) is also needed to insure its success.

Assessment plan changes. The Graduate Coordinator and the Graduate Committee continue to work on a new assessment plan for the Journalism MA program. The existing assessment plan for the MA program in journalism is unclear in how some goals are worded; many duplicate; it also is unclear as to which assessment methods target which goals. The existing "graduate program goals" and "central learning objectives" of the journalism MA program are included at the end of this document. In the fall of 2009 the graduate coordinators researched best practices in assessment among competing Journalism and Mass Communication programs, especially their goals of student learning. The Committee hopes to have new goals and a new assessment

protocol in place by fall 2012. The effort is being put on the slow track as feedback from the new capstones continues to come in and as plans for an expanded MA are discussed.

Capstones. Beginning in fall 2009 students in the Journalism MA program had new options for a capstone to complete their program of study. Students new to the program in fall 2009 and later are no longer able to do a “comprehensive project” for the program’s non-thesis option. Instead, students will do coursework and comprehensive exams to complete the degree. The remaining two capstones for the thesis option and the professional option remain, but students who chose these or the non-thesis capstones must also complete certain newly required courses. 2010 was the first year in which students from the thesis and non-thesis option graduated.

Student reaction to the current mix of capstone options has been positive, and the confusion over what the difference is between a “comprehensive project” and a “thesis” is now moot. Student interest in the thesis option is strong because it allows them to conduct independent research and build an area of expertise during their program of study. Students in the non-thesis option are interested in it because it offers a predictable time to degree and it has continual deadlines to motivate the busy student-worker. For these students, the thesis is too undefined and lacks regular accountability. Also many students do not plan to get a PhD, so a thesis seems less important.

The third capstone option, the professional project, has not been used in decades. Because a professional project option is a common alternative capstone in many journalism-MA programs, the Graduate Committee feels it should stay in the catalog, although this should be re-evaluated as program needs change.

Retention and Recruitment

The Graduate Coordinator continues to work with outside UALR agencies to find GA positions for Journalism MA students. In 2010-2011 three journalism MA students were working outside of the School of Mass Communication in GA positions—usually public relations-type activities. Two were working as research GAs within MCOM in positions funded by the Graduate School. Student aid for GAs is vitally important for attracting and retaining quality graduate students in the program.

Assessment Data For 2010

Eight students graduated in calendar year 2010. Six graduated using the now-defunct comprehensive project option. One graduated with a thesis and one with the non-thesis (comprehensive exam option). Those capstone projects were examined and discussed as part of the Graduate Committee’s duties, especially for their integration of theory and findings and their ability to break “new ground” in journalism/mass communication.

During the three classes he teaches each year, the graduate coordinator also routinely asks students about their experiences in the graduate program and makes it a part of class discussions. This feedback is used to assess various aspects of the program and its curriculum.

The Graduate Coordinator also informally discusses student performance with faculty members to get their ongoing and immediate feedback on student performance and curricular needs.

Findings from the review of capstones and informal feedback sessions are noted below in italics under each “learning objective.”

Addendum: Existing goals and learning objectives as stated in the Journalism program’s existing assessment plan.

1. JOURNALISM GRADUATE PROGRAM GOALS

The goals of the Journalism Graduate Program are to 1) develop in students the ability to think critically about and evaluate media-related issues and 2) prepare students to perform capably in professional settings. These goals clearly relate to the School of Mass Communication mission in that by teaching students to critically analyze media-related issues and to perform capably in professional settings, the students will be successful in their chosen media fields. These goals relate to the UALR mission in that the path to reaching the goals involves developing intellect, enhancing awareness of technical and cultural arenas, and developing an understanding of interdependence.

2. CENTRAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

1. Understands economic, ethical, historical, legal, political, social, and technological forces that shape the roles and structures of the media.

The capstone projects show strong evidence that students understand and can place their topics in a wide context appropriate for their topics and for researchers in the field. Students often do not demonstrate sufficient knowledge of mass media theory (evidenced by faculty feedback and some research papers) or how to interrogate it within their methodology or findings.

2. Can think critically about media content and its effects.

Although some students needed help in assessing the importance of some findings (which is normal for MA students), for the most part students were able to make critical judgments about their projects or exam questions.

3. Can teach journalistic concepts and skills.

This aspect of the learning objectives is not appropriate to assess with capstones. Most students do a good job in presenting their work or reviews in class seminars (faculty feedback), although some faculty express frustration with the unprofessional and casual attitudes some students take with class presentations intended to be more formal.

To help address this and to give students more opportunities to present their work, Dr. Dale Zacher worked with Arkansas Press Women to create and publicize the first “Best Brains” Research Colloquium for graduate students to present mass media research at APW’s annual awards conference, June 5, 2010. Five students were chosen to present research papers; three were from the journalism MA program. This is an annual event open to all Arkansas graduate programs.

4. Understands methodology used in areas such as historical, legal, and quantitative research.
Student feedback and their performance in the capstones show students are knowledgeable and satisfied with the core methodology courses.

5. Can conduct original research that contributes to knowledge in the field.
As noted, the capstones were acceptable. The introduction of the Proseminar course in the fall of 2008 continues to make students think about research and its importance earlier in their program. For some, it shows them that a degree in Journalism is not what they want. Three students decided after taking Proseminar in 2010 that they should major in another MA area.

One UALR Journalism MA student from Jour 7340 in 2009 had her paper published in the Southwestern Mass Communication Journal in the spring of 2010. The same student had two refereed conference presentations from the same general topic (different methodology used) in 2009.

6. Can communicate, orally and in writing, research methodology and results.
As mentioned earlier, in general, most students are solid at presenting their own work. Students do struggle with basic grammar and writing clarity on occasion, however. (faculty feedback). GPA standards for incoming students are being scrutinized because of this. Students with lower GPAs in non-journalism major courses often seem to struggle the most in writing (grad coordinator observation) and in finding research topics. If writing concerns continue to be an issue, a portfolio or writing sample requirement might need to be imposed.

7. Can place research results in perspective.
This objective seems to duplicate objective #1 and the findings would be the same.