

SJMC UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

*An Extensive Look into SJMC's
Philosophy, Curriculum and
Performance*



Disclosure: The authors of this article were students in SJMC at the time of publication.

Story by:
Preston Schmitt
Mike Schuerman
Xiumei Dong

A Short-Lived Controversy

"Today, just over 100 UW students are going to start something obnoxious, uninspiring, rushed and unfocused."

The previous sentence was the first of many critical lines used by Kevin Bargnes, former editor in chief of the *Badger Herald*, in his 2010 column, "UW Journalism School Classes Should Be Updated, Revamped."

Bargnes was referring to students entering the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, or SJMC, and their first scholarly task following admittance – J202: Mass Communication Practices, the school's signature six-credit course. He went on to criticize the overall curriculum and philosophy of his journalism school. The *Badger Herald*, an independent student newspaper on UW's campus, ran Bargnes' controver-

sial opinion piece in January 2010. A public quarrel between SJMC and the *Badger Herald* ensued.

Greg Downey, the director of SJMC, defended the school just a day later with a letter to the *Badger Herald*, which ran on its website. Downey's statement, titled "Bargnes' Bitter Bashing Barely Bearable," said SJMC encourages "civil and constructive student discussion, critique and suggestions," but doesn't "welcome mean-spirited attacks on our work as presented in Bargnes' opinion piece."

The following day, another *Badger Herald* writer, Becky Vevea, published her own response online. In the article, "Journalism School Needs Open Discourse," Vevea noted the background research Bargnes conducted prior to writing his column, though she disagreed with his harsh criticism of J202. Furthermore, she applauded Bargnes' willingness to write the piece and urged for the conversation to continue.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say, perhaps this is exactly what we needed," Vevea wrote. "A conversation about how we educate and are being educated to be journalists."

And then the conversation petered out, ending a promising public discourse between the J-School and its students. The following should serve as an extension of this discussion and a deeper look into SJMC's philosophy, curriculum and performance.



Vilas Hall, where SJMC is housed

An Emerging Philosophy



Willard G. Bleyer.

The current philosophy of SJMC can be traced back to the initial principles set forth by its founder, Willard G. Bleyer, according to Carolyn Bronstein and Stephen Vaughn, who wrote the article “Willard G. Bleyer and the Relevance of

Journalism Education.” While attending UW, Bleyer formed the university’s oldest student-run newspaper, *The Daily Cardinal*. After obtaining his undergraduate English degree, and then a PhD, Bleyer became a professor at UW in 1904.

Bleyer applied his progressive political attitudes to his vision of education. Seeing journalism as a way to promote democratic ideals in America, he thought the university needed a program that trained students in how to provide the public with accurate and timely information. In 1905, he got his wish, as the university formed a journalism program within the English department. Bleyer thought students in this new program should be well-rounded scholars. Thus, students had to maintain a ratio of one journalism class to three liberal arts classes, in order to cultivate minds capable of understanding a wide variety of subjects. Finally, the board of regents officially approved the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in 1927 and elected Bleyer to be the first director. Even to this day, SJMC tries to uphold his set of ideas.

Current Philosophy

In accordance with the Wisconsin Idea, students can’t apply to SJMC -- which is housed in the College of Letters and Science -- until they’ve already taken at least 40 credits. The university believes students should explore a variety of options before deciding on a specific major.

“Once you become exposed to the riches of what’s available on campus, you might change your mind,” says Susan Brandscheid, senior program administrator for SJMC. “The university thinks it’s important

for you to have a year, at least, to think about what appeals to you in terms of what your major is going to be.”

SJMC accepts a maximum of 120 students into the school every semester. The number of applicants has ranged from 160 to 225 each semester over the last couple years, according to Dustin McGuinness, undergraduate program coordinator. Admission is based on student portfolios, which consist of a transcript, resume, personal statement and writing samples.

SJMC implements a unique, strategic approach to journalism education. Rather than focusing on applied skills, the school combines practice with theory -- providing necessary training in journalism and mass communication, while teaching critical thinking skills needed to succeed in any situation.

“What’s fundamentally good journalism still comes back to fundamentally good reporting and fundamen-



University of Wisconsin Madison

tally clear communication skills -- no matter what platform of communication,” says Professor Robert Drechsel, the chair of the SJMC’s Curriculum Committee.

In accordance with this philosophy, internships are heavily encouraged as a means to apply the skills learned in the classroom. Other journalism programs, however, place more emphasis on applied skills directly in the classroom. The University of Missouri-Columbia’s School of Journalism calls this technique the “Missouri Method.”

“[It] provides practical hands-on training in real-world news media and a strategic communication agency,” a statement on the program’s website reads. “Top editors, reporters and other executives say Missouri graduates are among the best prepared to work and contribute to the organization from their first day on the job.”

Brandscheid thinks the “Missouri Method” and SJMC’s philosophy – though quite different – are the two mainstream approaches to journalism education.

“You’ve got the UW-Madison model, which is a combination of theory and professional practice,” Brandscheid says. “And you’ve got the Missouri approach, which has much more emphasis on the applied training. Those programs spend a lot more time giving you the newsroom experience or the agency experience or the corporate experience and so forth.”

Last year, over 80 percent of recent journalism graduates nationwide said they participated in internships while on campus, according to an annual survey conducted by the James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Communication Training and Research. Clearly, there is becoming a greater need for real-world experience prior to starting a career.

“It gives you experience, and you decide if that interests you or not,” Brandscheid says. “If you hate working in a newsroom, it’s good to know that before you graduate college.”

SJMC’s overall goal is to provide students with enhanced communication skills to ensure success in any related field. Skills such as creative writing, critical thinking, and clear, effective communication are focal

“We need to make sure that what we’re giving students -- both substantively and technologically -- the



kinds of foundations that they need to have a chance in the professional world they want to enter,” Drechsel says.

Curriculum Overhaul

SJMC conducted an extensive evaluation of their curriculum and the journalism industry as a whole in 2000, according to Brandscheid. Prior to that time, the curriculum was divided into four career paths: journalism, broadcast, public relations and advertising. Students were supposed to take a course in one of those particular sections and then go on to choose either a reporting or strategic communication “track,” or focus.

The school’s evaluation in 2000 showed that students had begun to take more courses across the four sections and that journalism and strategic communication practices were beginning to merge in the professional world. Thus, SJMC created new courses, such as J202, to combine emerging new media and the separate sections -- journalism, broadcast, public relations and advertising.

“Students who were doing writing and reporting needed to know more about how to deal with the multimedia platform,” Brandscheid says. “We moved away from a curriculum where you started almost immediately taking professional classes -- then worked your way through a series of elementary, intermediate and advanced lessons -- to a course framework that began to reflect the industry.”



points in all SJMC courses.

Current Curriculum

SJMC's new focus is evident among the courses offered in the current curriculum. Prior to applying to the school, students must take J201: Introduction to Mass Communication. The introductory class focuses on how mass media organize and function in today's world. After admittance into the school, students take an intensive, all-encompassing course: J202. The class covers many aspects of the journalism and mass communication world -- such as writing for news, creating press releases and constructing audio pieces -- while introducing skills needed for future journalism classes and the field itself. It's SJMC's "converging curriculum," highlighted by J202, that separates SJMC from other journalism programs, according to Drechsel.

"It's something we've done for a long time without publicly bragging about it or making a big deal about it," he says.

Following J202, students choose between the school's two tracks: strategic communication and reporting. Although students begin to take courses that hone their skills in either path, SJMC still attempts to create a sense of convergence. Drechsel sees this as the main shift in the recent curriculum.

"We try to decide how to deliver a curriculum that offers the two tracks of journalism and strategic communication, but one that continues to integrate them," he says.

The school accomplishes this, in part, by offering courses in magazine development and electronic news broadcasting.

Beyond these courses, students have the option of taking a wide variety of classes. As the accompanying chart demonstrates, these range from Law of Mass Communication to Communication Research Methods. In total, SJMC is a 30-credit program with five levels of classes, which students usually complete in three to five semesters following admission. This flexibility, according to Drechsel, allows SJMC to utilize theory-based – not just skill-based – classes.

"The more requirements you impose on students, the less flexibility you have in your curriculum," he says.



Students are required to take one class in each of the first four levels and three classes combined in Group B and C.

“The Elephant in the Room”: Funding

In Vevea’s response to Downey in the *Badger Herald*, she emphasized SJMC’s budget as an impediment to further curriculum changes.

“The issue *does* come down to funding, the elephant in everyone’s room,” Vevea wrote.

Brandscheid, Drechsel and Robert Schwoch, SJMC’s undergraduate adviser, all cite the cuts in UW’s budget as a limitation for the journalism program. In the 2010 and 2011 Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Enrollments, SJMC answered that resources and budget cuts were the biggest challenges facing their program.

“Any difference between our school and other journalism schools could probably be a function of the university’s funding,” Schwoch says.

The limited budget hinders SJMC in several ways. For one, the school can only accommodate 120 additional students per semester, which means dozens of prospective journalism students are turned away every few months. The size of the school -- and, in turn, its funding -- pales in comparison to other journalism programs.

“There are other places, let’s say the University of Texas-Austin, where they have a separate college of communication,” Brandscheid says. “These tend to be much bigger programs.”

In addition, journalism and mass communication technologies are expensive and always changing, so it can be struggle for SJMC to keep up.

“We try as much as the budget will allow to keep up with technology and whatnot, although it’s tough to do that because the College of Letters and Science is by no means wealthy,” Brandscheid says.

As a result, SJMC relies on fundamental lessons to compensate for whatever financial means it lacks.

“Technology always changes – but being a good thinker and a good write, those skills will serve you for the rest of your life,” Brandscheid says.

The cost of curriculum changes is another concern when considering the funding limitations. Although the school made significant changes to their curriculum in 2000, there’s still a constant pressure to adapt to the changing communication landscape. A recent survey found that nearly 80 percent of journalism programs nationwide have altered their curricula within the last two years, according to the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication.

In the 2010 Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Enrollments, SJMC faculty answered that they had “not made curricular changes in the last two years in response in landscape.” In the 2011 survey, however, they indicated that there had been some changes -- developing classes encompassing digital media, for instance.

In the same 2011 survey, SJMC faculty checked off 18 of 23 listed communication skills, which indicated what skills were being taught in the curriculum. While skills such as “writing for the web,” “using slide shows on the web,” “using social media,” and “optimizing websites for search engines” were checked off, skills like “creating content for mobile devices” and “using animation on the web” were left unchecked.

While limited funding might prevent SJMC from teaching all communication skills and adding new courses, Schwoch notes there are other factors to keep in mind when evaluating a journalism program.

“If we have more money, we can do more,” he says. “But the most important thing, I think, is the human element. We have the best faculty. The qualities of the teaching here are the second to none.”

There could be some room for some optimism in regards to the school’s budget, however. SJMC suffered a significant 8.82 percent decrease in its operating budget for the 2009-10 academic year, but it saw an increase in its budget the following two academic years -- by 5.4 and 4.0 percent, respectively.

National Rankings and Accreditation

Schwoch believes SJMC -- despite any funding limitations -- has established a reputation among undergraduate journalism and mass communication programs.

"It's top 10 in most rankings, but probably borderline top five," he says. "Missouri is first and still the best in almost every ranking you see. Northwestern [with Medill, their journalism school,] is next. Then there are eight or 10 schools that go up down, and we are in that tier. A lot of Big Ten schools are in there -- Michigan State, Indiana, Iowa and Ohio State."

However, in a 2011 survey conducted by *NewsPro* magazine, SJMC didn't make a list of the top 25 undergraduate, master's and doctoral journalism programs in the country. The school also doesn't show up on several recent online rankings, which could be a result of the SJMC's decision to forgo official accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, or ACEJMC.

"We already have our reputation made, so we tell the accreditors, 'no, thank you,'" Schwoch says.

ACEJMC accredits journalism programs based on their curriculum, budget, faculty and student records. SJMC last went through the accreditation process in 1986 before choosing to leave the association in 1988, according to Professor James Baughman.

"The accrediting council was getting increasingly intrusive about curriculum matters," Baughman says.

ACEJMC put significantly more emphasis on skill rather than theory, according to Baughman. Thus, the accrediting council would likely suggest alterations to the curricula in several of SJMC's core classes -- such as law, history and international communication.

"One thing I remember -- and I believe the accrediting group has gotten worse since we withdrew -- is that they were beginning to look at syllabi of individual courses, including my History of Mass Communication class," Baughman says. "They would be telling me that you're not teaching anything on 'blank,' and you should be. I thought that was none of their business."



Dean Scroggins honored at AEJMC symposium in 1985.

Most importantly, Baughman says there haven't been any noticeable repercussions for leaving ACEJMC.

"The quality of our students improved and our curriculum improved," he says. "What's happened that's really exciting is our graduates are becoming our accreditors in the sense they really impress their employer and the employer says, 'Do you have any more graduates?'"

Job Placement

While national rankings provide some context for the prestige of a journalism school, another indicator of a program's effectiveness is job placement. Journalism and mass communication graduates are often looking for employment right after graduation. According to UW data, 93 percent of 2010 and 2011 SJMC graduates planned to enter the job market, with just 4 percent set to attend graduate school full-time. By comparison, only two-thirds of all UW graduates were planning to enter the job market, with over one-quarter of them set to attend graduate school.

Among the SJMC graduates planning to enter the job market, 61 percent were considering a job offer or had already accepted a position offer shortly after graduation. That number translates to around 80 to 90 percent job placement within their first year, according to Schwoch.

"Compared to other majors in the College of Letters and Science, we have above-average placement," Schwoch says. "We are above-average in job placement percentage throughout the university as whole."

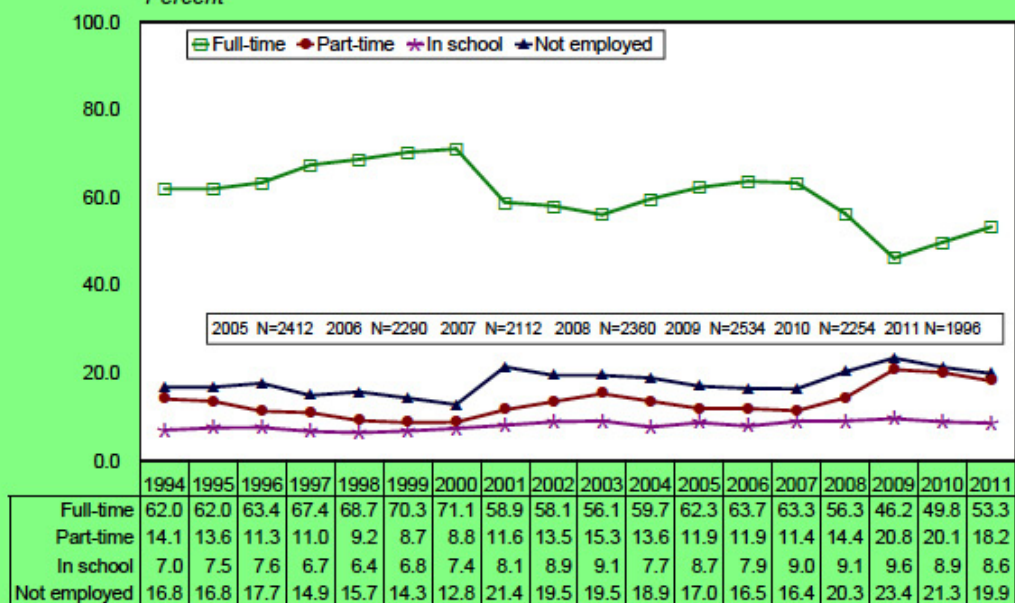
According to the Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Graduates, however, the percentage of journalism graduates nationwide with at least one job offer upon graduation in 2010 and 2011 was higher than SJMC's 61 percent job placement. In 2010, 68.5 percent of journalism and mass communication graduates had at least one job offer on graduation day in 2010, while the same was true of 72.5 percent of graduates in 2011.

Nonetheless, it's hard to draw any concrete conclusions, as the annual survey wasn't conducted in the exact same manner as UW's, and job placement is hard to precisely measure. For instance, J-School Buzz – an independent blog covering the Missouri School of Journalism – ran an article in 2011 highlighting the program's poor job placement numbers, while citing the University of Missouri's "Destination Study." According to the research, only 53 percent of the journalism school's recent graduates were employed or enrolled in graduate programs within six months of graduation. The Missouri School of Journalism responded with a news release, citing a more extensive study, that stated nearly 90 percent of students who graduated from the program three years prior now held journalism, public relations or advertising jobs.

3. Employment status Oct. 31

Employment status of Bachelor's degree recipients

Percent



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates

Student Feedback

If you take a walk through Vilas Hall, where SJMC resides, there seems to be a genuine sense of community and pride within. Many students, such as senior Melissa Grau, are upbeat and prideful about their journalism education.



“I personally think the UW J-School is one of the top programs in the nation, especially for practical classes, expert professors and research,” she says.

Grau believes the curriculum successfully prepares students for their future careers.

“I am grateful new classes are constantly added to reflect current trends and issues, and even existing classes like J202 constantly evolve,” she says.

Although that might be a popular sentiment among SJMC students, it isn’t unanimous. Senior Casey Olbrantz, who is preparing to enter the job market in May, expresses many criticisms of the school. He says he’d like to see several changes to the curriculum.

“I’d like to see more fundamental courses in writing,” Olbrantz says. “I think more credits and media law, in particular, should be mandatory. They should give students the option to choose a more specialized curriculum, rather than waste 10 credits on J201 and J202, where it’s hard to legitimately gain satisfying new skills or competences.”

Although he thinks it’s hard to measure, Olbrantz ultimately doesn’t consider SJMC a top journalism school in the nation.

“I have a tough time thinking of legitimate skills I’ve gained in the J-School, and sadly I regret taking this path,” he says. “I’ve had many conversations with people who share this sentiment, and I highly doubt many Medill or Missouri students have these same feelings.”

Change in Perspective

As for Bargnes, the *Badger Herald* writer who sparked a public debate about SJMC in 2010, he graduated from UW in May 2011 and now works as a content editor for Sun-Times Media in Chicago. Since joining the job market, Bargnes has gained a new perspective about the article he wrote in 2010.

“I was probably too critical for the sake of being critical, and I regret that,” he says, nearly three years after publishing his critique of SJMC.

Bargnes still thinks some of the points in his article are relevant, but his view of the school has become more positive.

“It doesn’t mean the J-School couldn’t be better, but -- generally speaking -- UW has a very good journalism program,” he says. “It won’t ever have three or four or five cool, required, base-level courses like I suggested due to financial constraints. It can’t be Medill. Such is life.”

Set of Skills for Life

Indeed, SJMC doesn’t have the resources available to a program like Medill. And not everyone in the school, like Olbrantz, will be satisfied. Yet, SJMC will continue using its philosophy -- with reputation, rankings and job placement numbers to back it up -- to give students what it believes are the necessary skills to succeed.



“We want you to take away with you a set of skills that will allow you to be successful for the rest of your life,” Brand-scheid says. “One of our board of visitors

members used to describe communicators as ‘bottom-feeders’ -- you need to know a little bit about a whole lot of things.”

SJMC students can only hope their knowledge of a whole lot of things will eventually add up to meaningful careers.