COMPRESSING THE CAMPUS/ INDUSTRY CHASM

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For decades, electronic media educators have struggled with how to conscientiously orient their students to the demands of the industry while convincing prospective employers that this orientation is indeed, taking place. As former news director and then Northwestern University professor Lou Prato wrote in *Broadcasting* magazine twenty years ago: "The prime criticism has been that recent graduates have unrealistic expectations and have not been trained in the fundamental needs of the business. Critics charge that too many new employees lack the basic skills required to meet minimum standards."[1] Today, most BEA-member campuses are considerably more adept in dealing with business fundamentals as well as providing high level skill instruction. However, influencing students to understand the veracity of these fundamentals and the necessity for perfecting these skills, and then validating for employers that this mindset has been achieved remain elusive goals.

The fundamental question is how is to create avenues through which students come to comprehend the industry and their options within it—without the curriculum and its activities becoming shackled to vested economic interests. Electronic media departments need the freedom to expose students to both the pleasures and the perils of media careers so they can either mesh with employer expectations or divert to other career paths before they and their hiring supervisors are mutually disappointed.

Central Michigan University's School of Broadcast & Cinematic Arts has developed seven mechanisms that provide outreach to the industry to help students clarify their career goals without compromising curricular independence. Some of these mechanisms are fairly common. Others are a bit more rarefied. But all possess key attributes that facilitate student exploration of the profession in an honest, even unvarnished, manner.

Just as important, these mechanisms assist the profession in understanding what our school is all about. You can't narrow the campus/industry chasm by only building from one side. If you focus solely on what the students are learning about the industry and not on what the industry is learning about the students and their training, you won't bridge the chasm in a durable way.

ters the rigors of the full-time workplace. The short-term grade pain can be alleviated by compiling and curving final grade averages so that students are compared to students in the grade sent to the Registrar. Meanwhile, each class member has benefited from application of continuous industry expectations throughout the course. The same bi-leveled evaluative system may be used in production, performance, and other courses as well.

3. OFFER INDUSTRY-MIRRORING COCURRICULARS

When well conceived and supervised campus production units provide smooth segues into professional placements. But when conceived as student extra curricular clubs, they distort what our industry is all about and practice behaviors that will be anathema in professional settings. The department's radio station is not the student station. It is a professional training ground that happens to be staffed by students. Your television news show does not just cover campus events, it surveys community events beyond realm of campus. The prime goal of the web unit is not to foster unbridled individual creative impulses, but to harness these impulses in an agreed-upon design that fosters department (client) goals and image.

In addition, students are not selected for on-air, executive staff, and other higher level positions based on seniority. Like the industry, they advance on the basis of their skill and craft rather than on how many years they have walked the earth. Each group of seniors should be looking at the incoming class of freshmen as both colleagues and potential competitors. Audition and other selection processes should take into account each student's capabilities rather than current class standing. Rigorous cocurricular experiences can do much to make for a seamless student transition from campus to the profession. They also demonstrate to industry professionals that we know what we, and they, are doing.

4. NURTURE ACTIVE ALUMNI ADVISORY BOARDS

Advisory boards can weave continuous linkages with the industry. They supply real-world advice to faculty while simultaneously providing media professionals with insights into current curricular, research, and campus budgetary issues. To be fully effective, these boards need to meet on campus at least twice a year at set times, have specified and staggered membership terms, and receive continuous communication from the department including all meeting minutes and general-circulation memos of importance.

Advisory boards can be of two types. *Industry* boards are drawn from the ranks of professionals without regard to alma mater. Often, their membership is recruited from the immediate locality. *Alumni* boards, on the other hand, are made up exclusively of graduates of the school who may now be working in a number of markets. If carefully constituted, either type of group can be effective. Alumni groups have the advantage of a prior emotional connection to the campus that often makes for more active and multi-faceted participation. Smaller and younger academic programs often begin with the industry model and then evolve to an alumni configuration once they accrue enough seasoned graduates.

Board members become an active support network for new graduates, who in turn, become a valuable resource pool for board members' companies. After all it is the

members who, through their advice, have fashioned and refined the education these students received.

5. UTILIZE TOP-FLIGHT ADJUNCT PROFESSORS AND GUEST LECTURERS

Who you bring on campus to talk to your students reflects much about your knowledge of the profession and the values you seek to instill. It lets both students and practitioners know where you stand and how you conceptualize the industry. If most of these visitors are knockabout deejays, low-level shooters, and war-story spouting executives, students will learn little. And the linkages with the industry these individuals provide are likely to be both superficial and fragile. Instead, choose guest lecturers as carefully as you would select tenure-track colleagues—on the basis of the expertise they bring, the skill with which they express it, and the integrity they evince. Your students will learn a great deal from visitors possessing these positive qualities while your link to the industry will be enhanced since electronic media departments are known by the company they keep.

If possible, go one step further. Cultivate relationships with a select few stellar industry professionals and secure them as adjunct professors. CMUs School of Broadcast & Cinematic Arts utilizes two such adjuncts: Edward Christian, CEO of Saga Communications, a group of more than100 stations, and Larry Patrick, CEO of the prominent media brokerage house, Patrick Communications. Though unpaid, both gentlemen make regular visits to campus to lecture for specifically selected classes. They hold official adjunct professor appointments conferred by the Provost so they may also direct independent studies and serve on graduate committees. This elevates the status of a guest lecturer to a higher level and signals a vibrant commitment to institution/industry linkage.

6. SPONSOR CAREER FAIRS

Certainly it is beneficial to have students attend state and national career expositions such as the National Association of Broadcasters annual fair held in conjunction with BEAs convention. But there are four special advantages to hosting career events on your campus as well.

First of all, not all students have the resources to attend national or regional fairs. A local event does not discriminate among students on the basis of available funds and insures that all have access to such a multi-employer forum.

Second, your own career fair brings electronic media companies to your campus. Not only will they talk to your students, but they will meet your faculty and see your facilities. They will get a taste of who you are and what you do. Also, you will get a sense of which companies to pursue as possible sites for interns, future sources of guest lecturers, and potential advisory board members.

Third, by hosting this fair, you provide broadcasters with the documentable recruitment outreach they need to meet their EEO requirements imposed by the FCC and other agencies. This is a valuable service provided to them at virtually no cost and demonstrates your awareness and support of their industry regulatory duties and initiatives.

Finally, student planning and executing of a career fair provides students with a firsthand opportunity to make industry contacts, service those contacts, and demonstrate

their professionalism. At Central Michigan our Student Broadcast Executive Council (SBEC), comprised of the heads of each cocurricular organization, is completely in charge of our March Career Fair and its success. Thereby, the most active members of their groups are showcased to industry representatives in a mutually beneficial enterprise.

7. PROVIDE/DEVELOP CAREER-REALISTIC READING MATTER

Students need to have access to printed material that accurately assesses what today's industry is all about. The process of preparing such material provides additional links to the industry. Two years ago, our Alumni Advisory Board embarked on an outreach project for the benefit of all incoming students. Realizing they could not speak directly with each of the program's incoming freshmen during orientation, a two-page handout entitled *14 Things You Should Know About an Electronic Media Career* was developed. This flier pooled and condensed the experiences of 16 top media professionals whose experience ranged from more than three decades in the business to only three or four years in the field. The process of creating the handout helped advisory board members bond more closely with the concerns and expectations of the newest aspirants to the field.

These seven mechanisms can prove effective in narrowing the campus/industry chasm because they are built on co-operation with the profession but not co-option by it. They preserve the independence of the academic program in its continuous exploration and analysis of the field while welcoming dialogue with those select practitioners who represent the best that the electronic media profession has to offer. Fifty years ago, British educational authority Sir Eric Ashby wrote, "The commitments which universities are willing to assume for society cannot remain implicit. Our patrons have the right to ask what universities stand for, and I think universities can give a clear answer. . ."[2] With well-considered outreach, electronic media educators can make clear what they stand for by sensitizing themselves to the legitimate needs of the profession and then signaling to that profession the commitments they are prepared to make in meeting those needs. This is not pandering but rather, well-informed support for considered industry improvement. Such a balanced approach to bridging the chasm enriches the electronic enterprise for everyone, most especially our students.

REFERENCES

[1] Prato, L. (april 6, 1987). Bringing Together Broadcasters and Educators. *Broadcasting*, 16.

[2] Ashby, E. (1966) *Technology and the Academics: An Essay on Universities and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 95.