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Media Blitz: A New Communication and Media School at MSU

As Journalism adapts to the digital age, Montclair State hopes to be a headliner.

Montclair State University has spent the past school year rolling out an ambitious plan to become a major center for media education—at the same time defining what that might mean in the digital age.

The university launched its School of Communication and Media in September by combining its existing film, television, communication studies, digital media, public relations and organizational communications programs under a single umbrella.

“We’re ambitious,” says Merrill Brown, the communication school’s inaugural director. Brown, a veteran of journalism and media management, wants to see MSU gain parity with top-flight communications programs such as Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communications, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York.

It won’t be easy. Those schools and others with longstanding communications programs have built their reputations over many decades and have placed their graduates in key media jobs throughout the country.

What’s more, media is in flux. Communications schools must provide students with a range of skills to tackle the changing mix of Internet, print, television, radio and social media that are tangled up in today’s media landscape.

“You have to wear a lot of hats. Reporters today are not only reporters, they are photographers and videographers, multitaskers,” says John O’Brien, director of the New Jersey Press Foundation, which provides scholarships and internships for high school and college students.

MSU’s new consolidated communication school has about the same staff as before, with about 25 full-time instructors serving 750 students majoring within the school and about 3,000 students taking courses each semester. Oddly, journalism remains a minor in the English department, something Brown expects to change.

Brown, whose experience spans MSNBC, the Washington Post, Court TV and numerous consulting positions in the news industry, has grander plans than just moving programs around.

“I didn’t come here to tread water,” he says. “I would want to be one of the best in the country

and one of the best in the state, and if we haven't done that in 5 or 10 years, it will be disappointing. I think we are on that path."

An early landmark along that path is MSU's new Center for Cooperative Media, which is bringing professional journalists to campus from various New Jersey media outlets to share resources, coverage and outreach to students.

Walk around the third floor of the university's Schmitt Hall, where the Center for Cooperative Media is based, and you might think you are in the statehouse press corridor.

Along one hallway are offices for the Record of Bergen County; NJTV; Patch.com; Newark-based WBGO radio; Star-Ledger website nj.com; New Jersey Public Radio; and NJ Spotlight, a grant-supported news service. The global news service Reuters has a shared space. NJTV is using its space for full-time personnel; other participants are setting up satellite offices for use as needed. Some of the office space is provided free by MSU.

The center also comprises classrooms, a new studio for campus radio station WMSC and a newsroom for NJTV, the state's public television network, which broadcasts a nightly news program from the campus's DuMont Television Center.

"Just talking to each other produces stories, ideas and results," says Doug Doyle, news director of WBGO. "This is going to be something that is really exciting to tap into." WBGO is already using student interns as volunteers.

Also based on Schmitt Hall's third floor is NJ News Commons, headed by Debbie Galant, founder of Baristanet, the highly regarded Montclair hyperlocal website. Galant left Baristanet to become director of the News Commons last July. Her new challenge involves compiling and redistributing news on a daily basis from multiple state and local news sources.

"I think we are adding value and making people rethink journalism," Galant said recently as she led a tour of the center. "The idea that this is going on right down the hall from where you are taking classes can show students what the opportunities are."

Substantial funding for the News Commons and the media center comes from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation; the former provided an \$800,000 grant. MSU is committed to raising \$1.6 million to meet the Knight Foundation's matching grant requirement, according to MSU President Susan Cole.

MSU launched the communications school and the media center "to promote media cooperation throughout the state," says Brown. "The challenge is to build a great school, quite obviously, and to bring to it lots of contemporary thinking."

Brown's pedigree fits the challenge. He worked with the Carnegie Knight Initiative on News21, a graduate program launched in 2005 that initially involved the University of Southern California, the University of California-Berkeley, Harvard University, Columbia and Northwestern. He also helped create the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism.

Can Montclair State's nascent program rival academia's media heavyweights?

“A school like that, I’m guessing, is going to have a much higher tuition for out-of-state students than in-state students, so it will be a more attractive program to in-state students,” says Nicholas Lemann, outgoing dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. “If the goal is to become the preeminent school in New Jersey, that is possible.”

MSU’s in-state tuition for the school year just ended was \$11,057; out-of-state students paid \$20,135. Numerous New Jersey colleges already offer communications or journalism degrees. The largest program, Rutgers University’s School of Communication and Information in New Brunswick, boasts 60 full-time staff and more than 1,700 undergraduates majoring within the department.

Jorge Reina Schement, dean of the Rutgers program, welcomes the competition from Montclair State. “I applaud them for being bold,” he says. Schement adds that more choices for media students can help reduce the number of high school graduates who leave the Garden State each year for out-of-state colleges—some 30,000 according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the most in the nation.

Schement shies away from comparing media education at Rutgers to the new MSU program. At Rutgers, he says, the emphasis is on “diffused Internet”—meaning information drawn from many sources is delivered on multiple platforms, such as web, broadcast and print. Rather than relying on “big studio” methods, future journalists are taught to work in small teams using portable technology for audio and video.

In building its communications program, MSU hopes to recruit big names, including top journalists from the New York Times and the Associated Press. Location helps. The township of Montclair is known as a bedroom community for Manhattan media professionals.

Still to come at MSU is a planned \$59 million, 60,000-square-foot media center that will include at least two television studios, classrooms, auditoriums, labs and research facilities. The DuMont Television Center will also be expanded.

Cole says the university has applied for state grants of \$29.5 million for the construction project and is seeking additional support from industry and private sources. “We are at the beginning of the fundraising,” says Cole. “This isn’t something that happens in a second; it is a process.”

MSU hopes to break ground for the new building before the end of 2013; the project will take an estimated two years to complete.

“Resources are obviously a hurdle,” Brown says of his overall ambitions. “We’ve got to attract a bigger pool of students from around the state and the region and the country than we do today. That’s a hurdle. It’s a university that isn’t well known toward the West and even in the South. We’ve got to get its reputation up as a leading school of communication.”

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