Journalism educators, their students, and local media practitioners: A case study exploration

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ABSTRACT

Journalism educators must make critical decisions about their undergraduate curricula, determining how to best prepare their students for professional careers. Present scholarship indicates that a disconnect exists in what journalism students think they ought to know and/or be able to do upon graduation, what educators think they must teach their students, and what current practitioners identify and value in entry-level journalists.

This case study addresses a void in scholarship, as it explores what constitutes adequate preparation in a local context: via perceptions of journalism students and educators at a public university in the Mountain West as well as journalism practitioners who work in the nearby media market.

Multiple methods—focused interviews, descriptive surveys, and direct observations—illuminated students', educators', and practitioners' perceptions of preparation and revealed, contrary to other researchers' findings, overall agreement among these three communities.

Entry-level journalists, according to the data, must have stellar reporting and writing skills, exercise critical-thinking skills, remain curious about the world around them, understand basic governmental processes and protocols, and practice their craft—on their own and in professional opportunities as they emerge.

Specific suggestions resulted from the data that may improve the existing undergraduate journalism curriculum at the university studied. Additionally, this study offers a methodological template that other scholars can emulate to explore the triangulation (or lack thereof) among educators, students, and practitioners in their own communities.

Keywords: journalism, pedagogy, undergraduate, preparation, case study

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INTRODUCTION

Barbara Hines, director of Howard University's graduate program in mass communication and media studies and former president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, succinctly summarized the problem that current journalism educators face: "Journalism professors are struggling to integrate constantly changing multimedia skills into already jammed curricula without sacrificing attention to the nuts and bolts of good journalism" (Mangan, 2009, para. 26).

Preparation Predicament

This struggle manifests itself in the type of journalism preparation undergraduate students receive in their programs of study (Cassidy, 2010). Educators and scholars may have their own ideas of what types of skills and concepts their students should possess and comprehend, but do these ideas align with those who work in the field? And where do students' expectations of what they believe they need to know enter this conversation? Varying ideas may emerge about what constitutes adequate preparation for journalism students who wish to pursue a career in this field, as exemplified by this statement:

> University-based journalism programs are the subject of competing, and often conflicting, pressures—from the push for journalism schools to impart the ideals of journalism as a public service-oriented profession, to industry pressures for practical training, to the demands of the academic institutions that host journalism programs. (Macdonald, 2006, p. 747)

Such pressures make it difficult to determine and enact curricular changes in undergraduate journalism programs.

Purpose of the Study

An exploration is necessary that investigates the triangulation among journalism students, their educators, and the practitioners who hire them: "The relationships between contemporary journalism education programs and media industries are significant" (Macdonald, 2006, p. 759). Thus, it is crucial to illuminate students', educators', and practitioners' perspectives within this particular discipline in order to discern (1) what journalism skills educators think they need to teach their students, (2) what students believe they should know and/or be able to do upon graduation, and (3) what skills local practitioners identify as imperative. What does it mean to be "prepared" for a journalism career? How does the definition of "preparation" vary among these population groups?

As evidenced by the aforementioned struggle and preparation predicament, this exploration needed to occur, and it was done in this study via qualitative methods as such studies examine meaning-making (Pauly, 1991). The complex meaning of "preparation" gleaned from the combined perspectives of journalism students, educators, and practitioners can contribute to curricular modification and improvement, and it can potentially bolster the relationship among these groups through refined understanding of needs and values related to the profession. The journalism curriculum at a large public university in the Intermountain West and the journalism practitioners who worked in close proximity provided a case study to explore this struggle in a local context. (Note: Nine tenured/tenure-track faculty, 10 graduate students, and 19 adjunct

instructors have taught courses within the journalism curriculum at this university. As of the 2010-2011 academic year, 1,017 undergraduate students declared mass communication as their major, and 200-300 of those pursued the journalism track sequence, according to records kept in the advising office. Professional lists indicated that 57 media firms operated within a 20-mile radius of the university.)

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The present study utilized a case-study approach because no one has done such a local investigation; rather, numerous national studies have consulted practitioners and students about preparation (e.g., Adams, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2008; Fahmy, 2008; Huang et al., 2006; Kraeplin & Criado, 2005; Peterson, 1996). However, not all media markets are the same, and while numbers may provide broad trends, they cannot provide intimate details (Claussen, 2010). Research from Pierce & Miller (2007) found "differences in what editors from different sizes of newspapers want from new journalists" (p. 118). This study thus researched multiple constructed realities of what constituted adequate preparation, and it studied them holistically, a strength of qualitative methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

As there is no universal definition of journalism preparation from which to test or hypothesize, this study's research questions explored this idea of preparation, providing details that should inductively illuminate and explicate it in a local context.

Therefore, this study aimed to "inform practice by providing rich, elaborated descriptions of specific processes or concerns within a specified context" (Haverkamp & Young, 2007, p. 274). In this case, the "concern" was student preparation, the "context" was the local journalism profession, and the "rich, elaborated descriptions" came from journalism educators, practitioners, and the students themselves in order to "inform practice," or the existing academic curriculum. The study thus necessitated qualitative methods as a crucial part of the exploration, which included: in-depth interviews and descriptive surveys (with media practitioners, journalism educators, and current journalism students) and direct-observation field notes (from visits to media firms in close proximity, observing the skills/concepts at work in typical practitioners' daily routines). As McCracken (1988) wrote in his book: "Qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how the respondent sees the world" (p. 21).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Struggle Further Defined

King (2008) explained that "during the past several years in the United States, academics, many of whom are former practitioners themselves, often argued that the core knowledge that journalism students needed was primarily skills-oriented" (p.168). Macdonald (2006) made a similar, sweeping statement: "Journalism is referred to by many as a profession, which would justify a professional model of education" (p. 747). And in this time of economic turmoil and uncertainty, one can argue that technical, vocational skills have received newfound value and appreciation among employers (Brownstein, 2011; Mangan, 2009; Schudson & Downie, 2009).

Others, by contrast, believe students "should be learning more about world and American history, how the economy and business decisions affect social and political behavior, and media ethics and media law" (Folkerts, 2007, p. 74). These scholars believe educators should

revolutionize curricular models that currently associate journalism as a mere craft (Giles, 2007; Romano, 2009). Instead, a journalism curriculum "should promote teaching in the range of activities that mark the life of a working journalist" (Dates, 2006; p. 154). Students in a journalism program of study should thus establish a concentration in an area outside of journalism so as to build their knowledge base in that discipline that will ultimately prepare them for a career as informed reporters and writers for that "beat."

One study in particular by Lepre & Bleske (2005) stands out in the literature because it explored preparation perception among *two* groups: magazine editors and educators. They sent a survey to 263 magazine editors and 135 magazine educators; of those initially contacted, 79 editors and 60 educators responded. In the results, the educators ranked writing, reporting, students' clips of their work, editing, and proofing as the top-five skills they believed students needed to know and/or be able to do. Editors placed writing, interpersonal relations, proofing, editing, and reporting as their top-five skills they desire from students entering the profession. Thus, as the authors acknowledged, "there is agreement that writing, reporting, [proofing,] and editing count" (Lepre & Bleske, 2005, p. 199).

However, disagreements existed in the data too. For instance, editors "place[d] lower importance on almost all the characteristics" and skills they were asked to rank; instead, as the authors noted from the open-ended questions, "editors overwhelmingly talked about enthusiasm and eagerness to learn as desirable qualities: two things not mentioned by any of the professors" (Lepre & Bleske, 2005, p. 198). The authors surmised that educators who completed the survey in this study likely placed emphasis on clips because they "think that those experiences provide a good, well-rounded education and provide evidence of 'demonstrable skills' that the editors say they want" (Lepre & Bleske, 2005, p. 199). Based on the finding that practitioners valued interpersonal skills, especially certain personality traits, the authors concluded that educators should try to incorporate or at least encourage this type of development in their classrooms.

But that adds yet another element to an already crowded curriculum and further stresses the need to explore what currently constitutes adequate preparation for undergraduate journalism students.

The ensuing subsections highlight scholars' findings from studies conducted within each specific community.

Educators

In his New York Times editorial, Janeway (2002) said "the best journalism is timeless and involves skills in reporting, judgment, and critical thinking" (para. 6). Ironically, though, in 1996, Betsy Medsger analyzed questionnaire responses from 375 educators for her pedagogical study and found that they placed less emphasis on news reporting and writing in order to broaden the appeal of their programs with coursework in advertising and public relations (Peterson, 1996). Ten years later, Roush (2006) advocated for more business education in journalism curricula.

To summarize, at least in the past decade and a half, it appears that educators value myriad skills and broader conceptual knowledge in order to prepare entry-level journalists—that is, their students—for their careers, but they seem unsure of what may be most vital for the budding professional. Finucane (2006) noted that she and her colleagues unanimously agreed that "good journalism—good writing and editing—is just as important as ever" (p. 60).

> We teach the same reporting skills today that my professors taught me years ago: What is news? How do journalists find information, ask questions, talk to real people, or talk to newsmakers and their professional handlers? And we teach the same writing skills: how to organize a story; how to make a story both fair and accurate; how to interest an audience through active language, compelling narrative, and precise details; how to avoid libel or copyright issues. We discuss the same issues, practical and philosophical, including news judgment, history, ethics and the importance of communication for individuals, community and culture. (Finucane, 2006, p. 60)

The curricular challenge is to develop "newer," or contemporary, skills such as multi-platform storytelling but not at the expense of traditional skills.

Practitioners

Part of the reason for educators' uncertainty of what to emphasize in the classroom to their students may stem from broadcast and print practitioners' confusion.

> Many newspapers cannot define what they want our journalism graduates to know or do. Do they want writers? Interviewers? Storytellers? Multimedia producers? Chat room monitors? Community developers? Podcast recorders? The newspapers don't know, and neither do we. (Finucane, 2006, p. 60).

Studies from scholars in recent years demonstrate this point. Kraeplin & Criado (2005) polled editors, and the results indicated the professionals desired broader knowledge bases in entry-level journalists. For adequate preparation, the editors in their study emphasized: 1) writing/reporting skills; 2) news judgment; 3) Internet researching skills; 4) knowledge of media law and ethics; and 5) broad liberal arts background (Kraeplin & Criado, 2005).

A year later, scholar Edgar Huang and a group of graduate students conducted a survey of 151 editors and asked them what skills professionals need most for this industry. The editors identified: 1) good writing; 2) multimedia production; 3) critical thinking; 4) new technology/computer skills; and 5) computer-assisted reporting (Huang et al., 2006). Most recently, Fahmy (2008) compiled survey responses from 245 online news professionals and found that the practitioners valued traditional journalism skills but also emphasized broader attributes. In this study, the professionals stressed: 1) ability to learn; 2) research; 3) teamwork; 4) reporting; and 5) photography as vital skills and abilities necessary for preparation (Fahmy, 2008). Table 1 (Appendix) portrays these studies' findings side-by-side in order to visually discern the variety of skills listed.

Reporting is the only skill common among the three.

Students

In his qualitative study, Neidobf (2008) conducted interviews with 16 students at three different universities who were about to complete their bachelor's degrees. From their responses, he deduced that experience gained through internships at media firms and contribution to their respective college newspapers—and not necessarily skills developed in the classroom—led to increased preparation for entry into the field. These findings support the apprentice-oriented argument, which holds that knowledge comes mostly from working in the journalism field.

A more recent study by Becker, Vlad, & Desnoes (2010) found that "only six in 10 of journalism graduates said their college experience adequately prepared them for the real-world

work experience" (p. 8). The researchers' 2009 questionnaire generated 2,945 responses, in which respondents said they "lacked even the basic skills required by the market" (p. 8). This suggests a discernible disconnect between the educators in academia (i.e., what they teach) and practitioners in industry (i.e., what they want).

In another study, Adams, Bruner, & Fitch-Hauser (2008) analyzed the results of a Web-based survey that asked 214 undergraduate print majors to rank the importance of specific skills pertinent to their entry-level jobs and to rank their personal preparation to utilize such skills. Interestingly, some of the same skills that students identified as unimportant also received the lowest averages for preparedness. On a five-point scale, where one meant unimportant and five indicated importance, the skills with the highest averages were: 1) written communication skills; 2) listening skills; 3) interviewing skills; 4) time-management skills; and 5) decision-making skills. Those with the lowest averages were: A) video production skills; B) photography skills; C) bilingual skills; and D) design/layout skills. These findings suggest that the print majors included in this study do not recognize the importance of multimedia skills.

Using a similar five-point scale, where one meant not prepared and five equated to very prepared, the skills with the highest averages were: 1) listening skills; 2) written communication skills; 3) oral communication skills; 4) time-management skills; and 5) decision-making skills (Adams, Brunner & Fitch-Hauser, 2008). Those with the lowest averages were the same as those with the lowest averages in terms of importance. Unfortunately, this study did not attempt to discover or posit why this result occurred: Why did students feel unprepared in these areas? How did they come to the conclusion that those skills were unimportant?

The authors did, however, issue a cautionary word of advice: "The respondents may want to increase their preparedness to practice the technology and Web-related skills" (Adams et al., 2008, p. 11). While it would be unwise to underestimate the importance of technological prowess in a conversation about journalism student preparation, the practitioners included in Huang et al.'s (2006) study and Kraeplin and Criado's (2005) study valued stellar writing and reporting skills even more.

Thus, current research indicates a disconnect exists between and among journalism students, educators, and practitioners about what constitutes adequate preparation for the profession.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions—asked of students, educators, and practitioners—should help generate local insights into and triangulated perceptions of what constitutes adequate preparation:

1. What journalism skills/concepts should students know and/or be able to do upon entry into the profession?
2. In what other areas/subjects outside of journalism should students (have) take(n) coursework in order to be prepared for their careers?

METHOD

Hall & Rist (1999) posited that triangulation guards against unreliable results: "Triangulation is like using a three-legged stool. Remove one leg, and the stool is much less

reliable. So it is with qualitative research" (p. 295). Stake (2005) and Yin (2003) also recommended triangulation for case study research. This study utilized methodological and data-source triangulation to deepen the understanding of the inquiry, the former of which "refers to the use of multiple methods to gain the most complete and detailed data possible on the phenomenon," and the latter "refers to the gathering of data at different points in time and from different sources" (Hall & Rist, 1999, p. 296). Methodologically, this study included interviews, direct observations, and surveys for data collection. Multiple sources of information came from each method, which generated data-source triangulation.

Sample Size and Recruitment Procedure

Sandelowski (1995) noted that different methods of data collection necessitate a different number of participants:

> An adequate sample size in qualitative research is one that permits—by virtue of not being too large—the deep, case-oriented analysis that is a hallmark of all qualitative inquiry, and that results in—by virtue of not being too small—a new and richly textured understanding of experience. (p. 183)

The following subsections reveal details about sample sizes specific to each method and how the author sought interviewees, survey respondents, and observation locations.

Interviews

Those selected via criterion and/or snowball sampling techniques were contacted through e-mail and asked to participate in an interview at a neutral venue of their choice. As the name denotes, a criterion sample "includes all [people] that meet some criterion" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 71). For example, the primary criterion for participants from the practitioner community was their title: Only those listed as managing editors (if print) or news directors (if broadcast) were initially contacted for an interview. Managing editors typically supervise writers and reporters in a print publication, fact-checking and producing news stories. Often having senior status and ranking at or near the top of command, they also oversee student interns. Similarly, but for broadcast operations, news directors determine what is news and how it is produced, editing and reviewing all scripts. They also rank very high within their organization.

A snowball sample for this study adds "people who know people [whose perspectives] are information rich" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 71). Dukes (1984) recommended "studying 3 to 10 subjects" in each population group for this type of study (p. 199). McCracken (1988) agreed with this range. He posited that the respondents should remain "few in number (i.e., no more than eight)" (p. 37). Therefore, while these sample numbers for each community served as a guideline, participants were recruited and data collected until the data analysis yielded saturation of themes. From scholar and qualitative researcher Michael Patton (1987): "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 184). Nineteen interviews—six current students, six educators, and seven practitioners—resulted from this method of data collection.

In order to provide a more informed opinion about what they needed to know and/or be able to do, journalism students (1) needed to be of at least junior or senior classification. They

also (2) needed to be enrolled in at least one of three capstone courses: a professional internship, the editorial conference for the student newspaper, and/or convergence journalism. The author of this study visited all courses early in the Spring 2011 semester in order to explain the study and recruit participants. The first respondents who offered possible days/times to meet ultimately comprised the student interviewee sample.

Criteria also contributed to the educator sample. For this community, participants (1) had to have taught in the department from Spring 2007 to Fall 2010, and they (2) needed to have taught at least one course in the journalism curriculum. Viewing the number of courses taught in conjunction with the number of times taught, the author was able to identify those who might provide the most informed opinion of what educators need to teach their students. As a result, the six educator interviewees came from those who have taught at least two journalism courses in the department for a minimum of three semesters in that four-year duration.

Recommendations from the author's colleagues boosted interview participation among practitioners, specifically news directors and managing editors, which was the primary criterion. Those were the only titles considered for this convenience sample of seven, as it was believed these practitioners could provide the best expert opinion about skills and concepts imperative for the entry-level professional.

All interviewees were first asked to state the single most-important quality/skill/ characteristic that entry-level journalists should possess. They were then asked to rate the importance of categorized journalistic skills and concepts, as shown in Table 2 (Appendix). The author utilized a categorization scheme in accordance to rationale articulated by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009):

> Categorization thus reduces and structures large interview texts into a few tables and figures. The categories can be developed in advance or they can arise ad hoc during the analysis; they may be taken from theory or from the vernacular, as well as from the interviewees' own idioms. Categorizing the interviews of an investigation can provide an overview of large amounts of transcripts, and facilitate comparisons and hypothesis testing. (p. 203)

Finally, interviewees were asked to list any coursework outside journalism that students should take.

Surveys

Survey participants also came from each of the aforementioned communities. As this study primarily explored the idea of "preparedness" via qualitative means, inferential statistics were not utilized to analyze the data; instead, descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, mean, etc.) resulted from the compiled data. To facilitate methodological triangulation, all survey respondents, like the interviewees, were first asked to state the single most-important quality/skill/characteristic that entry-level journalists should possess. They were then asked to rate the importance of categorized journalistic skills and concepts via the same scheme, as depicted in Table 2 (Appendix). Respondents also indicated potentially beneficial coursework outside of journalism.

Additionally, like the interview samples, participants for this method satisfied certain criteria. Based on the same criteria used for the interview sample, 53 students expressed an interest to take the survey. All received an electronic invitation. Similarly, for educator respondents, based on the two aforementioned criteria for interviews, 38 qualified for the survey,

and 30 received an electronic invitation to participate, as eight potential respondents had either invalid or no contact information available. For practitioners, in order to broaden the possible number of respondents, the author expanded viable titles to the editorial and directorial realm. For example, in the print sector, assistant editors and editors of specific aspects—e.g., sports editor or digital editor—were included, as one usually must have considerable experience in order to attain those positions. In the broadcast field, such expansion incorporated assistant news directors as potential participants. This led to 46 journalism practitioners as possible survey respondents, and 27 ultimately received an electronic invitation. (Note: It was discovered in the creation of the practitioner database that the membership lists (including personnel contacts) currently available from the local Press Association and the local Broadcasters Association were outdated. The size of the media market along with a possibly high turnover rate in the industry may have led to this occurrence. As a result, the author visited the websites of each broadcast-or print-affiliated member in order to generate the most accurate information; however, in some instances, credible contact information could not be found and/or inquiries to locate certain practitioners went unanswered.)

The response rates for students, educators, and practitioners were 96 percent (51 out of 53 completed it), 57 percent (17 out of 30 completed), and 37 percent (10 out of 27 completed), respectively.

Direct Observations

The media sites selected for direct observations satisfied two criteria: (1) it was listed in either the local Press Association or Broadcasters Association membership lists; and (2) it currently employed a recently graduated (i.e., within the past five years or less) journalism student from the university studied. That duration was chosen based on the general premise that it sometimes takes a year or two for graduates to secure an entry-level position. The second criterion was particularly important to this method and the study in general because, unlike with interview participants who had significant experience in the field, these practitioners had just started their careers. Moreover, these entry-level professionals could connect their experience with the journalism curriculum at the university studied with the skills and knowledge currently required of them in the industry. This augmented the construct validity of the case study, confirming evidence of certain skills and knowledge imperative for entry-level journalists. In other words, it made sense to observe entry-level practitioners in order to determine what skills and knowledge they utilized in their typical day. Second, it tied directly into the localized nature of the case study, which has been previously noted as a void in present scholarship.

Four direct observations—one videographer/photographer, one radio reporter, one assignment editor, and one studio operator—offered insight into the journalism skills and knowledge exercised in the workplace. Table 3 (Appendix) reveals an abbreviated version of the template utilized to document skills/knowledge observed during each professional's daily routine.

Data Analysis

Iterative explanation building, or "the gradual building of an explanation" that is "similar to the process of refining a set of ideas," served as the data analysis process (Yin, 2003, p. 122). It is comprised of certain protocols: 1) making an initial theoretical statement or initial

proposition; 2) comparing the findings in favor of and against the initial statement; 3) revising/modifying the initial statement; 4) comparing the findings in favor of and against the modified statement; 5) repeating steps (3) and (4) as often as necessary (Yin, 2003). This iterative process forced immersion in the data, a crucial element in qualitative data analysis, and it encouraged contemplation of other plausible or rival explanations.

LeCompte (2000) offered a five-step analysis process to guide iterative explanation building: 1) tidy-up the data; 2) find items in the data; 3) create stable sets of items; 4) create patterns as a result of the sets; and 5) assemble structures that provide meaning. In the first step, "tidying up permits researchers to make a preliminary assessment of the data set" (p. 148). Then one searches for "specific things in the data set [to] code, count, and assemble into research results" (p. 148) before they "clump together items that are similar or go together," which becomes the third step (p. 149). After this part of the process, "locating patterns involves re-assembling [sets of items] in ways that begin to resemble a coherent explanation or description" (p. 150) The researcher finally builds an "overall description" to help people "see more clearly how to solve problems, improve programs, assess their effectiveness, or develop theories" (p. 151).

RESULTS

Summary of Direct Observations

All four practitioners—recently graduated and currently employed in the local media market—utilized their skills in journalism positions that require different forms and degrees of procedural knowledge, or knowledge of how to do something. The videographer/photographer and radio reporter, for instance, needed to know how to write their own stories from the information they gathered. The assignment editor and studio operator have positions, on the other hand, where they needed to know how to write stories, but they did not compose them on a regular basis. The assignment editor also needed to know how to structure television news programs, a form of procedural knowledge that none of the others needed to possess. The videographer/photographer and radio reporter needed to know how to conduct concise interviews, as evidenced by their daily routines. This observation supports the idea that students must enter the workplace with versatile skills, especially those associated with reporting and writing. Once in their entry-level positions, however, they may not have to exercise all of them on a consistent basis.

All had to know how to operate equipment, but in some instances such as the videographer/photographer's need to use editing software like Adobe Premiere Pro and the radio reporter's use of a Marantz recorder, the equipment utilized was not the same as what the university studied had offered its students (as of Spring 2011). This speaks to the notion that technological skills, while important in entry-level journalists' preparation, are not paramount. Instead, students' familiarity with such devices via the classroom should provide them with enough exposure and practice to learn how to use something similar if their first job requires it.

All had to work with people: co-workers, supervisors, and people outside the journalism sector. While the assignment editor and studio operator dealt with people internally, that is, within their news organizations, the other two had more contact with people at the events they covered. This supports the importance of interpersonal skills, which entry-level journalists can

develop in academic environments through group assignments and exercises that take them outside the classroom.

Finally, all had to exercise news judgment in various ways. The assignment editor's position revealed the most apparent need for critical thinking, as she had to investigate each broadcast story lead and determine which ones comprised each newscast. But the other three also experienced situations that required them to assess the scenarios and use their judgment—often at a moment's notice. The studio operator had to choose which stories to omit in one television newscast in order to get back "on track." The videographer/photographer had to select several vantage points from which to take his pictures. With only a few minutes to assess the layout of the environment, he had to find a place to insert himself among the people and select the best shots to visually depict the event. That involves judgment: How many wide shots (where one zooms out)? How many close-ups (where one zooms in)? What to capture: action? Faces? Similarly, the radio reporter showed her judgment skills when she chose to conduct another interview while waiting for her key source to arrive. She also had to think about alternative angles for one of her stories when it appeared that her primary source might not be available. Although these situations are not mind-bending ethical dilemmas, they nevertheless required quick judgment calls. This supports the value of critical-thinking skills as part of entry-level journalists' preparation for the profession.

Research Question #1: Skills and Knowledge Students Need Most

Students who plan to pursue a career in this field must possess exemplary reporting and writing skills above all else. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Pierce & Miller (2007). In their quantitative study of news editors, Pierce & Miller (2007) deduced that "computer skills and online writing had risen in their level of importance among editors but still remained below the basic writing skills" (p. 59). This finding is also congruent with studies by Kraeplin & Criado (2005), Fahmy (2008), and Huang et al. (2006), who discovered in their research that practitioners identified reporting as imperative (refer to Table 1 (Appendix)).

Table 4 (Appendix) demonstrates that students, educators, and practitioners who took the survey and completed an interview were overall in agreement. All three communities also agreed that interpersonal skills augment students' preparation. Educators and practitioners specifically named curiosity as the most imperative *quality* among entry-level journalists. In Lepre & Bleske's (2005) study, practitioners did identify interpersonal skills as important; however, no recent studies mentioned curiosity outright. Perhaps in some media environments, curiosity goes without saying or is implied through other attributes. For instance, practitioners in this study repeatedly indicated that students must express an interest and follow events in the world around them. From one current practitioner: "You always wanna know not only what's happening but why it's happening and what it means." To understand why implies that one must be curious enough to investigate in the first place.

However, students listed confidence as the most important interpersonal skill to them, and they said they gained confidence in their skills from practical experience. The four recently graduated students who were observed at their respective media outlets also emphasized to their up-and-coming peers to practice their journalism skills often. From one: "You've got to do it and experience it." Another recommended multiple internships because they "help a lot to know what to expect."

This finding resonates with the results found in Neidobf's (2008) qualitative study. He deduced that experience gained through internships and media firms and contributions to their respective college newspapers led to increased student preparation.

Research Question #2: Complementary Coursework Students Should Take

Survey and interview participants in all three communities answered this question. Table 5 (Appendix) compares the specific survey responses from students, educators, and practitioners. Each group identified political science, history, business, and economics among the most important disciplines to study. In fact, political science and economics were mentioned in all six facets of data collection: student, educator, and practitioner surveys *and* interviews.

Interestingly, educators and practitioners placed foreign language higher than students, although 30 percent of the student survey respondents did indicate its importance. The fact that all but two practitioners recommended this suggests that students could find themselves at an advantage—at least in the local media market—if they can communicate in two or more languages but especially Spanish. In fact, students who have already had experience working in the field remarked that understanding and speaking Spanish helped them.

Also noteworthy is that all three communities recommended a form of diversity-appreciation coursework. After that, several recommendations came from interviewees in two of the three groups. For instance, practitioners and students suggested additional coursework in current events, English, and computer science/programming; students and educators mentioned supplemental classes in photography and web design; educators and practitioners said students should take more courses in history, ethics, business, and statistics.

This wide array of suggestions beyond political science and economics indicate that all participants in this study know that students need "something else." According to practitioners, students need only to find "something else" that interests them and dig into it. From one: "Get something on the side, and get into it. Learn...learn about it, and it could make you a more valuable prospect to the publication you're hoping to get hired by." Another said, "Everybody's got something they're passionate about. I wanna see that on your résumé. Something that says to me you have a capacity to delve into something deeply and to master that."

DISCUSSION

Why This Study Matters

Certain skill sets and personal attributes identified in this study for students' preparation echoed those valued in other quantitative research. Students, educators, and practitioners interviewed and surveyed for this study placed reporting and writing skills at a premium above all else. This finding corresponded to results discovered in recent research by several scholars [Fahmy (2008); Huang et al. (2006); Adams, Bruner, & Fitch-Hauser (2008); Pierce & Miller (2007); and Kraeplin & Criado (2005)]. Additionally, sources approached for this study identified the importance of interpersonal skills for student preparation, especially curiosity. This resonates with research from Lepre & Bleske (2005). In his qualitative study with students, Neidobf (2008) discovered that they valued practical, hands-on experience in order to build confidence in their skills. Students consulted in this study repeated that sentiment.

Thus, this case study, which utilized qualitative methods to collect data, generated several results that coincide with other studies. This suggests that local contexts may not vary as much as might be assumed. How these results are implemented and reinforced in the classroom, though, will surely differ from one university setting to the next due to different existing courses and the number of educators available to teach.

That point represents this study's strength. A local case study like this presents an ideal setup to explore and consider unique factors such as resources, personnel, accreditation status, and the university's proximity to the media market. From this, the curricular changes are more intimate and specific to the academic environment under investigation.

Two subsequent curricular suggestions for the university studied may work well due to its surrounding city's size and demographics. For instance, in response to the greater need for curiosity and interpersonal skills, educators at the university studied could adopt an activity where students visit coffeehouses and other public venues such as parks as places to find stories and an opportunity to build their interpersonal and interviewing skills in the process as they meet people (Tenore, 2010). With this university situated in an urban setting, students would have several options to pursue and likely many customers to approach. An activity like this may not be as successful for students who attend a more rural university in a less-populated setting. That does not mean it would not work—just that it might not be the best-suited activity to build these skill sets. In another example, educators at the university studied might recommend that their students take (more) Spanish courses. The demographics of the local environment ultimately lead to this suggestion, as census statistics confirm that more Spanish-speaking residents live in the area than in past years. At a different university, perhaps another foreign language might be more fitting for that community.

Thus, the general results from this case study establish consistency with prior research in the student "formula" or definition for career preparation, but this study differs from past scholarship in that it achieved overall agreement in its triangulation among students, educators, and practitioners. Moreover, from the localized nature of the data, the author was able to develop specific ideas such as the two previously mentioned for educators to try at the university studied. Others could replicate this study albeit with less methods of data collection. Given the overall congruence between the survey and interview data in this study, it may not be necessary to conduct both elsewhere. However, direct observations would augment either method, as seeing current practitioners at work provides evidence of what they do, which can confirm or contradict what they say in interviews or surveys.

Two results from the data in this study that surprised the author were the call for educators to push students to read and practitioners' overall indifference to technological skill competence. The former seemed like it would go without saying: Students who wish to begin a career informing others of current events need to know about such events in the first place. The fact that several practitioners made it a point to talk about this in the interviews or mention it in the surveys suggested that it may be overlooked. For the latter, technology appears to drive this industry, so it would have seemed logical for students to understand new functions and delivery mechanisms. Interestingly, practitioners indicated that technology is valued—but on their terms. They prefer to train entry-level journalists in this capacity and would like educators to instead focus a majority of their efforts building students' reporting and writing skills.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study emerged in the survey data, specifically in the number of practitioner respondents. Survey research can ideally generate voluminous data in comparison to interviews and direct observations, which should represent a wider scope of opinions, but in this study, the number of practitioner survey responses lacked. While the response rate may have been decent, the actual numbers could have been improved with more reliable contact information for journalism professionals employed in the local media market. No database existed that listed all practitioners, so the author created one based on predetermined criteria and searched for contact information, some of which was outdated or unavailable.

Moving forward, one could pursue a future study that investigates the perceived value of accreditation, which often has a direct impact on curricular reform. Because of its restrictions on credits toward the major, accreditation protocol often makes curricular changes occur within an academic straightjacket, impeding flexibility or even minor modifications. A tangential investigation into students', educators', and/or practitioners' perceived value of accredited journalism programs may have a significant impact on curricular decisions made down the line.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Skills identified as imperative by journalism professionals in recent studies.

Practitioner Perceptions		
Kraeplin and Criado (2005)	Huang et al. (2006)	Fahmy (2008)
-national poll of editors -skills most needed:	-surveyed 151 editors -skills most needed:	-surveyed 245 journalists -skills most needed:
• writing/reporting skills • news judgment • Internet researching skills • knowledge of media law/ethics • broad liberal arts background	• good writing • multimedia production • critical thinking • new technology/ computer skills • computer-assisted reporting	• ability to learn • research skills • teamwork • reporting skills • photography skills

Table 2. Students, educators, and practitioners rated categorized journalistic skill sets via this scheme in interviews and surveys.

Student, Educator, and Practitioner Perceptions of Importance

	1 relatively unimportant	**2** marginally important	**3** fairly important	**4** considerably important	**5** extremely important
- Technological *(i.e., hardware, software programs, equipment)*					
- Writing *(i.e., mechanics/style, lead construction, flow)*					
- Reporting *(i.e., interviewing, researching/sourcing, quoting/attributing)*					
- Editing *(i.e., proofreading, organizing—technological and written)*					
- Critical thinking *(i.e., ethics, judgment, justification of decisions)*					

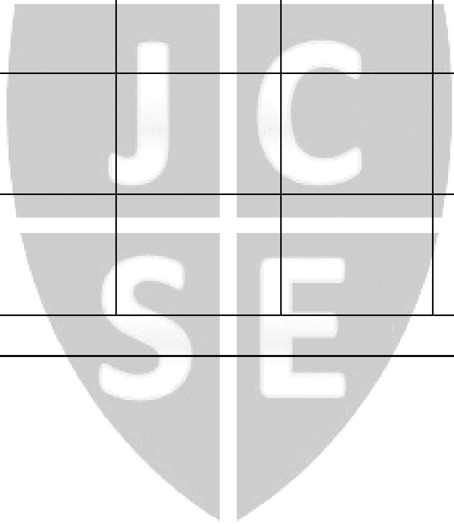

Table 3. The author utilized this template to record detailed observations of journalistic skills and knowledge exercised during practitioners' daily routines.

Direct Observation Notes

Date:								
Media Firm:								
Reporter(s) observed:								
TIME	Skill / Knowledge observed	Comment	Techno-logical	Writing	Reporting	Editing	Critical Thinking

Table 4. The top-three skill categories rated as "extremely important" by students, educators, and practitioners.

Student, Educator, and Practitioner Top Skill Categories from Interview and Survey Data

	Students	Educators	Practitioners
Interviews	1) Reporting 2) Writing 2) Critical Thinking	1) Writing 1) Reporting 3) Critical Thinking 3) Editing	1) Writing 2) Reporting 3) Critical Thinking
Surveys	1) Writing 2) Critical Thinking 3) Reporting	1) Writing 2) Reporting 3) Critical Thinking	1) Writing 2) Reporting 2) Critical Thinking

Table 5. The top five disciplines outside journalism where students should take supplemental coursework.

Student, Educator, and Practitioner Suggestions from Survey Data

Students	Educators	Practitioners
1) business 2) political science 3) history 4) marketing 5) economics	1) political science 2) history 3) statistics 4) foreign language 5) business 5) economics 5) sociology	1) history 1) political science 3) economics 4) business 5) foreign language