Are We What We Enroll?

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Most of the readers of this journal are professional educators, and we operate in a culture that supports, promotes, and in many ways defines our work. Despite the fact that we spend our days and lives working in that culture, it is a struggle for us to see and understand its key features. Of course, this only supports the general observation that one of the most difficult things for any of us to do is critically analyze what we do.

For the last twenty years, I have consciously tried to understand at least some aspects of what I do as a professor by drawing on the literatures of labor force economics, the sociology of work and occupations, and the sociology of education.

Working with a group of student and faculty colleagues, including Jerry Kosicki, Tudor Vlad, and Wilson Lowrey, I have tried to understand journalism and mass communication educational institutions as the provider of labor for a specific labor market. As such, it is influenced by feedback from that labor market, but also is influenced by broader forces in society that affect higher education and labor markets generally and by forces within the university.

In other words, the culture that surrounds journalism and mass communication education is a product, at least in part, of broad forces in society. We may think we develop our curricula and include content in specific courses...
because we are clever people with good ideas. We may be. We also develop our curricula and fashion our courses in response to the labor market, as a result of educational trends in society, and because of competition within the university.

This is not to say that strong leaders and innovative faculty members do not matter. It only is to argue that all individuals are constrained by forces that have great impact on the organizations for which they work. This point is illustrated well through a discussion of enrollments and their influence on the culture of our organizations. By culture I mean the broad set of values and orientations that surround and define our work.

Within the university, two distinct types of academic subunits can be identified. The first type gains and maintains resources by virtue of its responsibility for and control of the general curriculum of the university. Examples are the English department, the Sociology department, the Math department, and the Biology department.

Because, as a result of negotiations in the past, these units were able to place their course offerings in the general curriculum of the university, they get resources to hire faculty and staff in their departments regardless of how much general interest there is on the part of students in their course offerings. They are, as the language goes, “central to the core mission of the university,” and are to be given resources and protected accordingly.

The second type of unit gains resources because of student interest, that is, because students choose to specialize, or “major,” in the offering of the department. Journalism and mass communication units are examples of this second type of university academic subunit. So too, generally, are business schools, law schools, and other units, many of which are often identified as professional in nature, that is, educate (and train) people for specific careers.

It is possible and reasonable to argue that the media are central to society, that a well-educated person ought to know about them, and that the experts on campus about the media are housed in journalism and mass communication units. Despite that, journalism and mass communication administrators and faculties have not done a very good job of arguing the case. Often they find that they can make case one (that the media are central) and case two (that students should know about them), but not case three (that journalism and mass communication educators are the experts). Sometimes the “experts” in political science or sociology are better positioned in terms of research activities and tradition to make the case that they are the “experts” on the media. Speech communication units—now much more commonly simply called “communication” units—also have been better at making the case, perhaps also because of their stronger involvement in research.

Journalism and mass communication unit leaders and faculties also are trapped—and constrained in the ability to argue their case for centrality—by their reliance on “majors” as their means of gaining support. Having done it this way for so long, having accepted the role as “professional” as opposed to “liberal arts” educators, and having devoted limited resources toward entrepreneurial activity, they simply
agree to survive based on the number of majors they can attract.

So what do we know about the forces that drive enrollments in journalism and mass communication programs?

First, Tudor Vlad and I have shown, journalism and mass communication enrollments are greatly shaped by broad social trends that influence university enrollments generally, though there are some particular factors, such as the labor market, that affect this field differently than others. Second, journalism and mass communication enrollments are shaped by our ability to provide curricular offerings that allow us to compete with other units in the university also seeking majors as the means of garnering resources.

In general, undergraduate enrollments in journalism and mass communication mirror the growth pattern for enrollments in higher education generally. More students have come to the university across the years because more students are graduating from high school, because a university degree continues to be rewarded in the economy, and because higher proportions of female students across time have found university studies attractive.

A field of study that does not increase at the rate of growth in overall enrollments is likely to suffer in the competitive university environment, particularly if it depends on majors for resources, as journalism and mass communication does. Our analyses show that journalism and mass communication enrollments accounted for 1.22% of overall university enrollments in 1989. That figure dropped to 1.04 in 1993 and then began to recover in the 1996 to 1999 period. In 2000, the figure was 1.28, and in 2001, the last year for which national enrollment data are available, journalism and mass communication made up 1.25% of overall university enrollments. In other words, the field is growing, but only at a rate that allows it to keep up with overall enrollments and maintain its relative standing at the university.

Clearly the field has done this by changing dramatically over the years. While back in the 1930s, when journalism educators first began counting enrollments, a journalism student was in a curriculum that was designed to prepare the student for a career as a reporter and editor of a newspaper. Today’s journalism and mass communication programs include curricula not only linked to the broadcast media, but also to public relations, advertising, film studies, online industries, and other “communication” fields. It seems very unlikely that, had the field kept its narrow focus on print journalism, it would have been able to hold its own in the competitive mix of the university. Basic, newspaper journalism is not a growing field. Had journalism faculty focused only on print journalism, we probably would be attending career fairs with the various agricultural majors on campus, recruiting students of all stripes to fill our classes.

Our analyses of fields that have grown over the years also show that being attractive to female students is a key, since women make up a larger percentage of the recruitment pool now than ever before. Our analyses show that the field of journalism and mass communication actually lagged behind the university generally as recently as 1976 in attracting female students, but
since 1978 the field has outpaced university enrollments in its attractiveness to women. Overall, university undergraduate enrollments were 56% female in 1992 and have grown just slightly since that time. Journalism and mass communication enrollments were 56% female in 1979 and have grown to nearly 65% in 2003, the last year for which data are available.

Female students are disproportionately attracted to advertising and public relations, rather than either print or broadcast journalism. It is very unlikely that the field would have been able to maintain its growth patterns—and holds it place in the competitive university environment—had it not developed curricular offerings attractive to women.

Of course, having classrooms made up disproportionately of women has its own consequences on the culture of journalism and mass communication education. Often, I find myself facing a classroom of students who are rather unlike me in pronounced ways, gender being the most striking of them. Part of the culture of journalism and mass communication education is that we have faculty members who are most often male and white, while we have students who are female and considerably more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity.

While our field mirrors growth in undergraduate enrollments across all fields, it does not mirror growth in graduate enrollments. Graduate enrollments have grown across all fields in recent years, though the growth has been slight. In journalism and mass communication, graduate enrollments have bounced up and down during the time period. In fact, our analyses show that master’s degree enrollments—and most of our graduate students are studying for that degree—go down when the economy is good and up when it is bad. One statistic illustrates this nicely. The annual salary of journalism and mass communication graduates, adjusted for inflation, is positively related (Pearson r of .72) to undergraduate enrollments, but negatively related (.25) to master’s degree enrollments. When the market is good, potential master’s students stay in it. When it is bad, they have a tendency to seek master’s degrees.

This enrollment trend, too, has a striking impact on the culture of journalism and mass communication education. We are, for all intents and purposes, an undergraduate, rather than a graduate, field. In 2002, for example, 12% of the students at degree-granting universities were working toward a graduate degree. In the field of journalism and mass communication, that figure was half that. In the 2000-2001 academic year, just less than 70% of all degrees granted across all fields at the bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral levels were at the bachelor’s level. That same year, in journalism and mass communication, 92% of the degrees granted were at the bachelor’s level.

When our colleagues in English, psychology, and most of the fields of the social sciences go to their offices, they can expect to be dealing with graduate students much of the day. For most of us, our day is consumed with undergraduate students and their concerns. One is not better than the other. It is simply different. The difference is part of the culture of journalism and mass communication education.
Our work setting—our work culture—is shaped by a variety of forces coming from the labor market our students enter, from general social patterns, and from competitive forces within the university. It isn’t easy to understand those forces, since we are so close to them. I find it interesting, nonetheless, to try.