Economic Downturn, Employer Dissatisfaction Survey and Media Convergence Suggest New Model of Higher Education

Ken Harvey, Ph.D,

College of Social Science**,**
Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics & Strategic Research
(KIMEP)
Ken@Virtual-Institute.us or
kharvey@kimep.kz

Abstract

This paper blends two lines of research I have been pursuing for nearly 30 years –

1) *Employer dissatisfaction with college graduates (specifically mass communication graduates) and their demand for more practical, hands-on education,*

and

2) *The rise of multimedia (thus multi-sensory) education, especially with the development of increasingly sophisticated personal computer and the enhancement of the World Wide Web.*

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1. Introduction

In previously published research, my colleagues and I found a high level of dissatisfaction on the part of newspaper[1], magazine[2] and broadcast[3] executives with the quality of mass communication graduates from America's universities. In a series of surveys, 35% of daily newspaper editors, 43% of weekly newspaper editors, 57% of magazine editors and 56% of broadcast news directors agreed or strongly agreed that graduates were unprepared or poorly prepared to assume a position with their respective organizations. And on a 5-point scale, with 5 representing "strongly agree" and 4 "agree," the media executives' overall median response was over 3.9 to the statement (varying slightly from medium to medium): "Journalism students need to serve a professional internship before entering the job market." My current survey, conducted in conjunction with Mathew Manweller, Ph.D, of Central Washington University in the United States, is still under way, but 340 responses so far suggest that media executives are becoming increasingly impatient with American higher education institutions. The results of this survey may be seen as part of the post-modernist movement that some so-called experts suggest is becoming an anti-institutional trend amplified by the failures of both business and government institutions in preventing or dealing with the current economic crisis.

The current survey is of a broader cross-section of media executives, including weekly newspaper, daily newspaper, and magazine executives; TV, radio and cable news executives; Internet-based "new media" news executives; and public relations executives. The survey results so far suggest that employers could force a dramatic change in mass communication education in American universities with the right catalyst.

A second "wave" that undoubtedly will have a dramatic impact on education over the next decade will be the convergence of media on an increasingly powerful Internet. My simultaneous exploratory research in Internet-based education suggests ways in which these two trends could merge with yet a third trend toward globalization and

allow Central Asian universities, such as KIMEP, to become competitors in the Western market.

2. Employers seek more practical education for future employees

In the current survey, a 5-point scale was again used, but with 1 representing "Strongly Agree," 2 "Agree," 3 "Neither Agree nor Disagree," 4 "Disagree," and 5 "Strongly Disagree." For the purposes of this paper, I will report primarily the current results of prompts yielding a mean score under 2, indicating relatively strong agreement.

Table 1 indicates strong desire by media executives for their future mass communication employees to come into a job with more experience in (a) basic reporting and interviewing; (b) gathering information from a variety of sources for in-depth stories; (c) writing basic news stories; (d) writing in-depth stories; (e) writing analytical stories; and (f) writing technical stories concerning science, economics or politics.

Table 1.   Mass Communication students need more EXPERIENCE in:

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
a. Basic reporting and interviewing.	188	121	16	6	0	1.52
b. Gathering information from a variety of sources for in-depth stories.	200	111	15	2	0	1.45
c. Writing basic news stories.	171	128	25	6	1	1.60
d. Writing in-depth stories.	159	126	37	7	0	1.67
e. Writing analytical stories.	154	115	51	8	1	1.74
f. Writing technical stories concerning science, economics, or politics.	114	127	81	8	0	1.95

Table 2.   Mass Communication EDUCATION would be improved with:

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
a. A required professional internship.	199	101	21	7	1	1.51
b. More practical mass communications classes and fewer theory classes.	145	119	46	17	2	1.82

Table 2 indicates a desire by mass communication executives for their future employees to be required to serve a professional internship first and to have more practical mass communication courses and fewer theory courses. Most American universities – despite similar support for internships 30 years ago – still do not require internships for mass communication students. But the support for internships by these executives is overwhelming. In this survey, 300 out of 329 executives responding to this specific question want internships to be required. That's over 91%.

In Table 3, Response A shows there is still support for a "broad, general education," but Response B shows even stronger support for "more hands-on experience."

Responses C-E did not have a mean score of below 2, but we did not anticipate they would. In fact, we anticipated that D and E would draw negative rather than positive responses. And Question C was such a strong statement that we presumed most executives would not go quite that far in expressing their discontent. However, the responses to all three prompts indicate that universities should consider the need for major reforms in mass communication education.

Table 3. Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
a. University mass communication students need a broad, general education in addition to a mass communication degree.	97	186	34	14	0	1.89
b. Mass communication students need more hands-on experience.	160	151	17	2	1	1.59
c. University mass communication education needs to be totally revamped.	44	81	138	62	5	2.71
d. University mass communication education needs only minor reforms.	5	103	117	71	33	3.07
e. Recent university mass communication graduates are better prepared than mass communication graduates 10 years ago.	6	48	142	108	27	3.31

While a plurality of 42% were neutral in their response to Question C that "University mass communication education needs to be totally revamped," 25% agreed with the statement and 13% strongly agreed. Only 19% disagreed and fewer than 2% strongly disagreed. If nearly 40% of your students' future employers agree or strongly agree that your program needs to be totally revamped, you should take notice.

With Item D we gave the mass communication executives a chance to backtrack on their response by considering a milder statement that "University mass communication education needs only minor reforms." We anticipated considerable disagreement with that statement. A plurality of 36% remained neutral to this question, too, but 22% disagreed with the statement, and 10% strongly disagreed, amounting to about one-third of the respondents.

And in response to Item E that recent mass communication graduates are better prepared than graduates 10 years ago, 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while most of the rest (43% were neutral).

We then had the executives respond to three specific reform possibilities – all probably qualifying as a "totally revamping" of current programs, and none of which would be approved by the nation's mass communication education accrediting body under current guidelines. The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) requires accredited universities to keep their proportion of mass communication-related courses down around 25% of the overall graduation requirements.

So with Item A of Table 4 we asked executives to respond to the statement that the proportion of mass communication courses should be increased from 25% to 40%. Of the executives, 50% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and most of the rest – 37% -- were neutral.

Item B called for just one year of general education, followed by two years of intensive mass communication training and a one-year apprenticeship. That drew even greater support, with 59% agreeing or strongly agreeing and 33% neutral. Only 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

And Item C suggested a work-study program wherein students studied 6 hours a day and worked as a news apprentice 6 hours a day. About 66% of the executives said they would be interested in hiring graduates from such a program. Only 8% said they would not.

Table 4. Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
a. University mass communication education should require at least 40% mass communication coursework rather than the 25% most departments now require.	41	121	122	35	9	2.54
b. University mass communication education would do a better job by providing one year of general education, two years of intensive mass communication training, and a one-year professional apprenticeship.	48	144	109	24	3	2.36
c. If a university and a news organization teamed up to launch a 4-year work-study apprenticeship program where students would work about 6 hours a day as apprentices and then study 6 hours a day using journalism as a general education learning method, as well as a set of professional skills, I would be interested in hiring graduates from such program.	53	162	86	19	7	2.28

The final table, Table 5, simply illustrates that newspapers are willing to provide internships to help university students prepare for the real world. About 85% of the executives said their organizations are already offering or are willing to offer unpaid internships, and about 40% say they do now or are willing to offer paid internships.

Table 5. Simply respond by indicating whether your organization does or would be willing to participate in providing paid or unpaid internships.

Question	Yes	No	Mean
a. Our mass communication organization does or is willing to provide UNPAID internships.	275 85%	49 15%	1.15
b. Our mass communication organization does or is willing to provide PAID internships.	128 40%	192 60%	1.60

2.1 Education implications from current employer survey

What does this all mean to higher education in America and probably the rest of the world? There are certainly limitations on how to extrapolate from this data gathered exclusively from North America and totally from within the communications industry, but:

1) Certainly from Tables 1 and 3 we can conclude that U.S. mass communication executives are dissatisfied with the quality of university graduates seeking employment with their respective organizations.

2) Certainly from Tables 1 and 2 we can conclude that American mass communication executives want change, and they want higher education within their own field to be much more practical in nature. And one way they see to ensure that students learn what they need to know in order to go to work for their organizations is first to do a full-time professional internship. And the support for internships appears to be growing. In the surveys over 25 years ago, the average response was slightly below "agree" that an internship should be required. Now the response is midway between "agree" and "strongly agree."

3) And Table 4 suggests that if a university and/or a news media organization decided to defy the rigid accreditation rules set down by the AEJMC and set up a more practical program endorsed by the news media, it could capture the support of numerous news organizations and recruit thousands of mass communication students away from the traditional universities.

4) A similar study might find similar results in other fields where employers might prefer more practical, hands-on training than what is currently provided. Perhaps in business. Perhaps in political science and public administration. Perhaps in information technology.

3. How demand for practical, hands-on training may merge with new convergence capabilities

The second line of research I have pursued over the past three decades is multimedia, multi-sensory and computer-based education, which is increasingly inter-related. While still pedagogically controversial, computer- and Web-based education is increasingly successful commercially, and it is increasing in use in publicly funded schools in the U.S.

The most remarkable success story has been the rapid rise of the University of Phoenix (UPX), which has ridden the trends of adult and online education to grow from 0 to 343,000 students in 35 years as an investor-funded private university. It has been criticized for a low graduation rate (16% as calculated by the U.S. Department of Education standards, compared to a national average of 55%), but by its own calculations, refusing to discount non-traditional students who take longer to achieve their degrees, UPX claims a graduation rate of 59%. It has been accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and it receives over $2.5 billion a year in federal money to fund student financial aid programs – the most of any institution in America.[4,5,6]

Despite their remarkable economic success, neither UPX nor other online educational institutions are using the best tools available. My high-tech research has been a process of trial and error, pursuing the most powerful, practical and cost-effective tools for a school or university to utilize in providing online courses.

My own educational Web sites at http://Virtual-University.us and http://Virtual-School.us are experimental sites where I test a number of techniques. These include automated slideshows with audio; segmented video for faster download; interactive, self-grading quizzes; and live web-conferencing. Most of these can be experienced at these sites without a password currently by signing in as a GUEST. These are Model Learning Management sites. Model is an open-architecture learning management

system developed by technical personnel from numerous universities and other organizations to circumvent the high cost of Blackboard and WebCT. It works very similarly to those two popular commercial systems – perhaps even better because of the hundreds of add-ons being developed by its supporters. Detailed information, user forums and free software download are available at the related sites of Moodle.org and Moodle.com. Model allows me to link a variety of multimedia educational packages.

One of the most effective techniques I discovered in my experimentation is the linking of segmented video. If I split my video into segments of about 30 seconds, I can link them together, and with a good DSL connection or better, download time is 10 seconds or less apiece. Since there is also material visible to read and ponder during download, 10 seconds is far more tolerable than the 2-3 minutes that expanded videos often require to download or the buffer-interrupted videos that start and stop over and over again. The segmented and linked videos download quickly and then lead the user quickly to the next segment. Total download and viewing time is longer than with a complete video, but it doesn't seem as long because of the quick download of each segment. And, as suggested, even those 10-15 seconds per segment are not necessarily wasted if the user is provided written material to read and ponder during download.

An educator can also create and link slide graphics and audio on Model. A 5-minute audio can download with DSL bandwidth in about 30 seconds, but, again, extensive reading material and graphics can be visible during the entire download. Other multimedia tools can also be linked within Model, including PowerPoint PPS files and Flash presentations. Interactive, self-grading quizzes can be experienced at Virtual-School.us. I have not yet added any to my Virtual-University.us site. Tests and quizzes are very easy to create. I had a team of high school students help create much of the Washington State History course located at the Virtual-School.us site.

Another powerful online educational tool is the live web-conferencing system created by HotConference. You can view an online video about the system at http://www.hotconference.com/overview.php and get other details at http://www.hotconference.com/members/eduken . What I like is that in my use of the system for nearly 10 years, it has been extremely reliable even when connecting people from all around the world. For two years I met every Saturday morning with educators from Turkey, England, Columbia, Canada and the U.S. to discuss, experiment with, and learn about new tools in educational technology. The most valuable part of the system is the follow-me browser that allows you to go from one web site to another, drawing all conference attendees with you. In essence it works as a Powerpoint slide show. In fact, I frequently create a PPT slideshow and then quickly convert it into a series of linked web pages precisely for this purpose. The new generation of HotConference allows a more direct use of Powerpoint without having to convert it into HTML. While displaying the slides, even with the old system, however, you can be lecturing with its excellent audio tool. As a professor lectures, students can be typing questions or comments with the text chat system, which the professor can ignore or respond to. The professor can also be displaying his web cam image – all of this simultaneous. The professor can also display a white board on which you and attendees can write. He can even display a transparent form of the white board on top of a slide or web page and make marks and comments on top of the image. He gets all of this for under $45 a month for the entire organization – and free to all other participants. Literally hundreds can attend an online lecture, or you can password-protect it and allow in just a select few. As part of my presentation at KIMEP International Research Conference, I will

demonstrate these tools as I discuss my survey results and conclusions. I have had an opportunity to present training over Washington State's billion-dollar K-20 video system, and in many situations the $45-a-month HotConference system is superior. And soon far superior systems will become available as Internet Protocol v. 6 is adopted and installed on servers around the world.

Dr. Michael Murphy, director of the Rogers Communications Centre at Ryerson University in Toronto is working on a Daimler-funded project, which with Internet Protocol v. 6, is achieving full TV-quality video with cable modem bandwidth. He showed my class a video of a live video-conference between sites in Germany, Canada and Japan. IP v. 6 and their open-architecture video-conferencing system are ready to roll out.[7]

The 2009 Horizon Report -- produced by the New Media Consortium, including input from its advisory board of experts from the consortium itself, along with Microsoft, Apple, Educause, Cornell University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, European Schoolnet, University of Chicago, Cellcove Ltd., Project Tomorrow, Skoolaborate, University of Madrid, Collective Invention, Sungkyunkwan University, Global Kids, Foundry Media, St. Joseph's College (Australia), edNA, Learning Anorak Ltd, University of Tempere, INHolland University, Exploratorium and numerous other organizations – concludes that new online communication and collaborative tools will begin having a major impact on school within the next 12 months. It's not five years away – it's essentially now.[8]

4. Tying together old-school and new-school education

Phoenix University has been extremely success with what has been called a "bricks and clicks" approach to education – a central campus and numerous small learning centers for live, face-to-face instruction, but with most students taking courses online. The weakness of online courses to date has always been a high drop-out or incompletion rate, which many attribute to lack of human interaction and motivation, along with lack of immediate feedback when students have questions or concerns.[9]

My research suggests a new generation of "bricks, clicks and internships" might solve those problems and provide a viable alternative to classroom instruction that in at least the case of mass communications might be preferred by students' future employers.

As demonstrated at my Moodle-based sites, we know we can provide effective on-demand instruction, which can be supplemented by live instruction via HotConference. My research demonstrated one more important element – the willing participation by future employers in providing internship opportunities.

With just 340 surveys completed, we have accumulated a database of about 1,500 internships. By the time our survey is completed, we expect to have about 5,000 internships in our database, which we will make available at our Virtual-University.us Web site for a very low fee in order to update the site yearly. Based on the percentage of respondents willing to provide paid or unpaid internships, as illustrated in Table 5, we should be able eventually to build a database of 20,000-40,000 annual internships just in mass communications and just in the U.S. Tens of thousands more could be added by expanding worldwide and/or by expanding into additional industries.

With the demand for practical, old-school training combined with new-school technology, a revolutionary new concept in education may emerge. Blend the "bricks, clicks and internships" approach with the "World is Flat" recognition of

globalization, and even universities as remote as those in Kazakhstan may have an opportunity to launch the next "University of Phoenix."

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