



THE things students should demand from their journalism schools

Robert Niles

The new semester is well underway at almost all the nation's journalism schools. Students have received their syllabi, explaining exactly what the school expects from its students during their courses. But what should students expect from their schools? Sure, they're getting classes and instruction, but those alone won't be enough for most journalism students. Their educations must extend beyond the classroom syllabus if they are to have the best chance to compete in what has become a brutally-competitive information marketplace.

Unfortunately, that experience can "fall through the cracks" of a college education, if students do not seize the initiative to demand it. So here is my list of eight things I believe every journalism student must demand from his or her journalism school:

1. Role models

Students should demand access to working journalists, in addition to the adjunct faculty. Most schools provide that, frequently bringing guest speakers on to campus. But such events often are not required, leaving students to take the initiative to attend.

Not only should they do so, they should let the school's faculty

and administration know what additional voices they'd like to hear from, too. Programming speakers can be a pain. Most schools would welcome students' feedback on guests and events, despite many students' reticence to speak up about them.

2. A mentor

Access to potential role models outside the school's faculty is just the first step. At some point in their careers, students need to deepen their relationship with at least one role model, and adopt that individual as a mentor.

In teaching our "boot camp" for news entrepreneurs earlier this year, Tom O'Malia of the USC Marshall School of Business insisted that campers find a mentor to help guide them on their journey as news entrepreneurs.

Mentorship provides crucial guidance in any professional's lifelong education. Students cheat themselves of opportunity if they wait until mid-career to find a mentor, or if they never find one at all. (Not finding a mentor in my early journalism career remains my single greatest professional regret in life.)

Like a romantic relationship, a robust mentorship can't be forced. It must develop, naturally, between two people. But that does not excuse students to be passive in seeking a mentor. They must actively engage with potential mentors during their time in school.

3. Employment contacts

Yeah, sure, education is its own reward. Yada, yada. But when you're spending this kind of cash to get a degree, you'd better demand some help in getting a job once you're out of school.

Job fairs featuring reps from newspapers that just laid off a quarter (or more) of their newsroom staffs shouldn't count anymore.

Students must demand that their schools begin engaging with publishers who aren't laying off staff and losing market share. Sure, it's nice to meet folks from the big newspaper chains. But journalism schools must start building relationships with emerging online news publishers in their communities, with people who can either hire their graduates or at least provide the entrepreneurial mentors that they will need.

Economic consolidation is coming in the independent online news business.

The schools that build relationships early with the Scripps and Knights of tomorrow will be the ones who place more of their graduates with these emerging firms. No, they likely won't hire as many grads as the old Scripps, Knights and Gannetts did back in their day.

Which makes it all the more important that j-schools have a chair for their grads when the music stops.

EIGHT things

4. A place to hack

Online is becoming the dominant news publish medium. And online publishing will not look the way it does today 10 years from now, just as it looks little now like it did 10 years ago. Students need forums in which to explore and test their interactive publishing skills. They need sandboxes in which to play.

While traditional syllabi train students in established story forms, students must demand time and access to explore emerging forms, in social media and whatever else they might dream up.

Hacking isn't simply programming; it's an attitude that encourages people to find new uses for old forms. That's something journalism desperately needs. If a school doesn't provide those opportunities for its students, they must demand it.

5. Work experience

Every j-school I've ever encountered has a placement office where you can get applications and contacts for internships, part-time jobs, freelance gigs and full-time work.

I'm not talking about those.

Students need to demand directions to the school's general placement office, where they can find jobs that have nothing to do with journalism.

Every j-student needs to spend at least a few summers working outside the field, learning what work's like for other folks.

These shouldn't be the type of jobs that other college students take to earn a few bucks; these should be the type of jobs that some people do for a living.

Great journalists draw upon a wealth of personal knowledge and experience. Work provides as much, if not greater, opportunity to develop that as the classroom does.

I spent my summers as an undergraduate working at Walt Disney World. I never dreamed that job would affect my journalism career, but that experience eventually led me to start a theme park news website that's become my primary source of income.

The fewer, or narrower, life experiences a student has to draw upon, the fewer such opportunities that student will have later in life.

6. Deep knowledge of a field other than journalism

I'm making the same point here, but from the academic perspective.

Today's publishing market has little place for the general assignment reporter. Readers have instant access to experts writing on any topic imaginable.

A journalism graduate must be able to report with understanding and write with insight to compete with the many other available news sources online today.

Academic study in one's beat field provides the foundation upon which a journalism student can build a lifetime's personal experience and reporting to help inform their writing.

Don't slide by with the minimum the j-school requires you to do outside the school. Students must demand, of themselves and of their schools, rigorous coursework in the fields which they will cover when they graduate.

7. Getting your name out there

Here's a scenario I often described for my students, when I was teaching: "Imagine that you are a news publisher. Your budget's tight and you can hire only one j-school graduate this year. You've got hundreds of applicants, many with great clips. Some you have met, and like. And a few have started their own online publications already. Who

ya gonna hire? The student with potential... or the student who's already got 50 000 unique readers a month?"

A generation ago, no students brought an audience to the table. All anyone had was potential, and employers hired based on that. That's no longer the case. Students who bring their own audience have measurably more value to an employer than those who do not.

Don't get caught behind those students. Get your name out there, now. Find opportunities to publish your best work online, with your name and photo prominently attached.

Engage with readers in comments and forums. Demand that your school provide its students with every opportunity to do so.

Journalism schools must act as agents for their students, promoting them to potential employers and readers from the first day they start reporting on campus.

Developing potential isn't enough in this competitive environment. Students need j-schools that will help them offer not just potential, but results.

8. Passion, not excuses

The worst thing that journalism schools can do to their students is immerse them in a culture of failure.

Instructors do that anytime they complain about the state of the news business, griping how much better it used to be and how awful bloggers/forums/websites are.

Students need passion for their field they are about to enter, not complaints and excuses from those who have left it.

There are more news sources available today to readers than ever before. More eyes are watching our governments and our business institutions.

The public can speak for itself to a global audience, moving closer to fully realising the potential of democracy. Experts are becoming storytellers, offering greater detail and deeper insight to the readers who want that.

I can't speak for you, but this fires me up. It should fire up every journalism instructor, too.

There are so many opportunities out there for our journalism students today. But they won't be able to engage those challenges if they've been steeped in a culture of a failure, knowing no other way to work in journalism than to be hired by a shrinking newspaper chain.

Students must demand better than that from their journalism schools. Those schools owe it to their students to deliver.

