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Experimenting with Experiential Internships: Using Iteration and Feedback in Digital and Social Media

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Abstract

Graduates of communication and journalism internship programs increasingly are expected to possess a spectrum of digital and social media skills that can be applied to a variety of jobs in communication fields. At the same time, students also must know how to pivot and iterate to survive in the workplace, especially as it relates to changes in online publishing. This article outlines strategies for and highlights of creating an experiential university internship program that allows students from a variety of disciplines to play a key role in social and digital campaigns by helping iterate strategy as well as offering feedback that helps guide the program's external communication.

As part of a five-year National Science Foundation-funded project at the University of New Mexico to recruit, retain and promote women and minority STEM faculty, a group of investigators is working to diversify STEM job candidate pools and prepare faculty for tenure and beyond. The group also is studying campus climate and working to make it more equitable for all faculty. These efforts, which engage everyone from junior faculty to the university president, take a lot of experimentation and iteration.

The external communication strategy to showcase this effort, too, is nimble in nature. The strategy is implemented by undergraduates in a classroom-like internship setting who learn how to interview and write about or create videos of the team's work and work done by female and minority STEM faculty members. Students consider the best ways to use digital and social platforms to create and disseminate content to our university community and beyond.

Our program, called Advance at UNM, is part of a national effort by the NSF to expand the number of women in academic STEM careers; similar programs exist at other universities. We are the first in our cohort of grantees to create this type of communication internship program. Our team includes four paid interns from a variety of disciplines and a director who teaches in the Communication and Journalism Department at UNM.

We believe the program we have created serves as a roadmap to help students in communication and journalism fields stay current with changes in the industry.

Keywords: Public Relations Education, Social Media Education, Experiential Learning

To get started, we constructed a communication internship program similar to a strategic communication practicum. Student interns produce videos, stories and social campaigns to share online. Two key components of the internship are iteration and experimentation, which are discussed in this article.

As the team's communication director, my experience includes eight years teaching digital journalism in a college classroom. I run the internship program similar to a newsroom. Both students and I come up with story ideas to cover, and we brainstorm how to best present the information we find. These discussions with students consider whether the topic lends itself to a written story, a video or something else. If we decide to conduct a video interview, for example, I have new interns shadow me and I teach them how to construct a two-camera set-up or how to shoot the most relevant b-roll. As I create new web pages for our site, students look on to see how they, too, can add content using Wordpress.

As part of the program, I conduct other trainings for students as well, including on graphic design and social media analytics. After training with me on these topics, students take on projects alone or in pairs. I often ask older interns to work with newer students to help spread the knowledge that the more experienced interns learn on the job.

The experience of our interns varies greatly: we have employed students majoring in everything from chemistry and electrical engineering to film and multimedia journalism. Some excelled at photography but had never designed a webpage; others were strong video editors who wanted to learn about design. During their internships, our students gain skills in all areas and explore what they like to do. Former students now help produce a local news broadcast and work in communications at NASA, among other accomplishments.

Incorporating iterative thinking and experimentation

We've embraced the ideals of iteration and experimentation in various ways. These include allowing students to help dictate and change social media campaign strategy, having students spend time during our meetings teaching others, and incorporating student and community feedback on our efforts.

The ability – and the encouragement – to pivot from ineffective communication strategies, for example, is crucial to the success of the various campaigns we undertake. It also is vital for students' understanding that adaptation to a constantly changing environment is essential not only in strategic communication, but in any future career field.

In recent years, journalism and mass communication faculty have recognized the importance of agile multimedia storytelling education programs.

> Even today, there exist no campus-based journalism education equivalents to the digital-native upstarts that are transforming the professional media landscape. (Lynch, 2015, p. 27)

Seizing social media

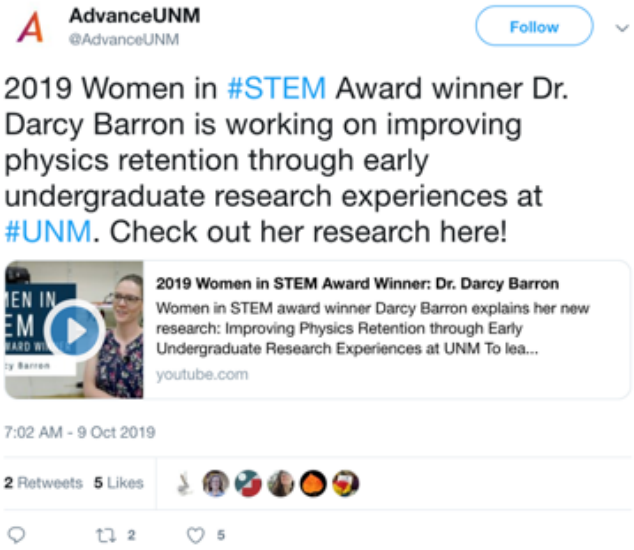
One focus of the program is for students to gain social media skills they can use in a variety of communication jobs. Interns in our program follow several steps as they learn how to create solid social content – posts that are professional in tone, have appropriate images and are engaging. To start the semester, we look for examples of this type of content and think about what elements each of our posts should have, including hashtags and "at" mentions. Students then practice writing posts in a Google document, which I edit for accuracy and clarity. After approval, interns use Hootsuite, a content scheduling tool, to build a weekly calendar of posts.

STEM Shoutout tweet example #1

As they master the technical aspects of posting on social media, students also work to share good quality content, including both articles and videos on our project's website as well as the work of others in our community. Along the way, students consider how to engage users with our posts, including by thinking of questions they might ask our followers, or by creating calls to action (to register for events, for example). Other examples include using Twitter to call for nominations for STEM Shoutouts, which are virtual high fives for faculty teaching and research accomplishments. This call – along with the dissemination of the STEM Shoutouts we wrote – was among our more successful student-run social campaigns. To connect to relevant online communities, students experimented with various hashtags and different social graphics to see which received the most engagement.

Women in STEM winners tweet example #2

We've also used Facebook Live as one of our tools to broadcast our workshops and post weekly updates about our upcoming events. Our weekly videos, which featured an intern talking about what we were working on and what was on our calendar, did not have the viewership we wanted, so we nixed the idea after about a year. In retrospect, the type of content we were putting out in real time – upcoming events explained by one person standing in front of the camera – wasn't a good match for the live stream, as it wasn't engaging or visually interesting. We later tried simply posting the written information about upcoming events to Facebook.



Women in STEM award winners tweet example #3

Part of the experiment involves *not* using certain platforms. Because our target audience is mostly faculty, we do not use Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok. We do have a nascent LinkedIn page, in part so our student interns can list the work they have done with us on their profiles.

Although we focus heavily on social platforms, we came to recognize that not everyone uses these tools – something pointed out by members of our Communication Advisory Board. It was a good reminder to think about connecting with our audience in other ways too. To adjust, we added digital wall signage in the Student Union Building for some of our events to connect with people on campus who are not social media users.

Experiments in editing video

Many students in digital journalism or communication programs learn Adobe Premiere for editing video. While we use Premiere, our interns have also used the socially oriented Adobe Spark Video and Adobe Premiere Rush. Spark was great for short, simple videos we wanted to push to social platforms right away. Premiere Rush, which at the time was still developing as a platform that's easier to use than Premiere, contained

software glitches and working between Premiere and Rush wasn't straightforward. Premiere Rush is now part of the Creative Cloud and seems easier to use than when we started. Trying a variety of video tools was important for students, who need to be able to adopt quickly as new software becomes available.

The video content our students create includes feature videos that highlight the work of women scientists as they conduct research outside in the field. Students have traveled with faculty around the state, including visits to a remote desert research station and to an archeological dig in the mountains. Along the way, students have learned how to improvise when a tripod jams with sand or the unrelenting New Mexico sun makes it tough to focus a camera.

We also create videos about the annual Women in STEM awards that we host. In our first year, we created a video about the winners using text and still photos. While the video performed fairly well online (95 views), we saw better metrics in the following years as we created shorter mini video vignettes of each winner specifically for social media – another example of experimentation and iteration to improve our reach. A subsequent video using this different approach had 288 views.

Grasping graphic design

Part of our program involves hosting workshops related to faculty development, including help with planning for or applying for tenure, information on integrating computation and data management into grant projects and making good grant proposals great by demonstrating broader social impacts.

At first, students used a standard 8.5 x 11 format flyer to promote the events, and posted those to social media. We did very little printing and physical posting. Digital distribution worked well in terms of driving registrations, although we missed reaching people who aren't regularly online.

After early struggles with onboarding students to Adobe InDesign, we started to use the program Canva to create flyers. While InDesign is powerful, it took interns too long to master the nuances if they had not previously used it in a classroom setting. Canva was easy to use, and I could create templates for interns to follow each time we had an event to advertise.

About a year into the program, interns and members of our advisory board were asked to evaluate our flyer designs. A few said that the templates were confusing because each event posted to Twitter looked the same. Since then, we have created different flyers for each type of event, including different sizes that work across our website and newsletter. The time students spend creating different flyers seems worth the payoff, as registrations for our workshops continue to grow. From the 2018 spring semester to the spring of 2019, for example, the number of workshop attendees increased by almost 25 percent.

Slacking together

In the first year of our program, I used Google docs and Gmail to communicate with interns. Soon, the sheer volume of messages and time spent searching emails became unwieldly and we switched to Slack for our internal team communication. The online group messaging platform has proven to be a great tool to broadcast weekly assignments to interns, remind them about their timesheets, and get them "talking" to each other about work.

Slack also has been a good way for interns to share knowledge and experiences. I know from my time in the classroom that teaching students and asking them to train others is a good way to expand a group's knowledge without relying solely on the educator in the room.

For example, in our "video interview" channel students can share their posts for others in a very visual way. As we experimented with a new video camera, for example, we needed a way to communicate the best settings for the audio inputs, a tricky thing to explain in words. Posting a photo of the correct settings in Slack allowed other interns to see exactly how the camera should be set and refer back to it while working in the field. I also ask students to routinely share things they are learning from YouTube and other sources about camera and lighting setups and editing techniques. In doing so, they have created an informal database that will help future interns learn.

Redoing weekly meetings and focusing on analytics

Instead of tedious weekly team meetings, I pictured our gatherings as mini classes – opportunities for students to collaborate and to show what they've learned.

If one student is working on a video project, he or she describes it, and then I ask for input from other students, who are expected to contribute new interview questions. Others chime in with ideas for camera shots or editing ideas.

During our meetings, students are expected to share other knowledge as well. As they learn social media analytics, for example, interns present platform analytics reports, outlining what content worked well and what didn't. This sparks a weekly group discussion on what we should keep doing, as well as what we need to stop or change. Interns also analyze metrics for our YouTube channel, newsletter and website, and they share ideas on improving those products. We keep our analytics reports in a Slack channel so new interns may learn from and build on them.

This work ties to the general recognition that understanding and knowing how to act on analytics increasingly is a central part of creating content that's relevant to consumers.

> With new tools like analytics in the hands of communication professionals, understanding stakeholders and publics becomes easier, and students become stronger professionals. (Kent, Carr, Husted, & Pop, 2011, p. 543)

Walking away with new skills

My teaching strategy of guiding students through real life work as interviewers, photographers, video editors and social media creators is effective because practicing these jobs in a professional environment gives students concrete experience and skills.

Students who were interviewed as part of an NSF site visit and review of our work said they benefitted from the opportunity to create and publish content for a real organization, vs. working on hypothetical assignments in a classroom.

The work of the interns has enriched our organization as well. Faculty have praised the virtual community that has been created through their work.

Allowing students to help drive our communication strategy, to work with tools that best fit them, and to perform in a collaborative and iterative environment has boosted our program's communication on a variety of digital platforms. As they leave our program, our graduates are qualified for potential careers in a variety of fields, including science communication, multimedia journalism or social media management.

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