Communication professionals in an online program enhance their skills and career prospects

University of Southern California
Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

The Opportunity

In the 1970s, the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California (USC Annenberg) launched its master of communication management (MCM) program geared toward working professionals looking to improve their management skills and overall employability. At the time, companies headquartered in Los Angeles would often pay for their employees’ graduate school education.

Over time, “the professional landscaped changed,” explained Neil Teixeira, the director of distance learning at USC Annenberg. “A lot of the folks who had come to USC Annenberg for a full-time master’s degree were no longer able to do that. Their companies were no longer sponsoring them to get master’s degrees. They had to do it on their own, and they had to do it on their own time.”

As the market changed, the school wanted to retain its focus on midcareer professionals. “It became very clear that the only way to do that was by going online,” said Rebecca Weintraub, clinical professor and director of the MCM program.
An Online Solution

To meet the needs of professionals, USC Annenberg developed an online MCM program. USC Annenberg chose to collaborate with Pearson Embanet, which offers online program management (OPM) services, to launch and support the online MCM program (communicationmgmt.usc.edu). Pearson provides marketing, recruitment, course development support, and retention services. The first students enrolled in the online program in the fall of 2011.

The school emphasizes the importance of professional experience when recruiting students. On a case-by-case basis, it waives the GRE® requirement for applicants with five to nine years of work experience and at least a 3.0 undergraduate GPA. Generally, the GRE is not required for applicants with ten or more years of professional experience, regardless of their undergraduate GPA.

“Everything we teach comes from the on-campus program,” noted Weintraub. “We have one master of communication management program and two methods of delivery, but the program is the same.”

Every online class has a course director and two or more section instructors, all of whom hold PhDs or terminal degrees in their field. “The section instructors are all experts in their field. The course director ensures that we’ve got consistency,” Weintraub said. She believes that “part of what gives the program academic rigor” and distinguishes it from its competitors is that students are taught by PhDs who have both academic knowledge and applied experience.

Both Teixeira and Weintraub emphasized the importance of the courses’ instructional design, which enables the online program to support working professionals in achieving the faculty’s learning goals.

The program is geared toward increasing students’ career success. “The thing that enhances employability for all of our students in the online program is the immediate applicability of the content,” Teixeira said. Referring to such topics as using data analysis for decision making, change management, and strategic communication models, he commented, “Students are always impressed with how easily they can translate what they learn in the classroom to what they do on a daily basis at work.”

“Developing an online program has made us more sophisticated about how we think about our curriculum and market.”

— Neil Teixeira, Director, Distance Learning, USC Annenberg

PROFILE

City/State
Los Angeles, California

Institution Type
4-year private research institution

Ranking
The skills students develop and the strategies they learn are also applicable to a wide range of fields and specializations, such as PR, journalism, or marketing, which further enhances students’ employability. “What we’re seeing more and more, especially in the digital age, is convergence. We’re seeing a lot of the same skill sets being used across a wide array of communication professions,” observed Teixeira. Students learn “strategic communication principles and strategic management principles that they can apply in many different contexts.”

USC Annenberg’s online MCM is also notable for the great deal of support each student receives, beginning with the application process and continuing all throughout the rigorous program to graduation. “Our students feel incredibly connected to our teams,” said Teixeira, “and grateful that they were there to help push them along the way.”

The Results

“One of the most significant results of the program is the effect that our online course development has had on our campus teaching,” remarked Teixeira. “Our faculty members have worked really hard to develop excellent online courses. What they’ve learned in the process is how to optimize their classes and make them more effective in general.”

Faculty members are using content they developed for their online courses in a flipped learning environment in their on-campus classes. “It’s helping students understand difficult concepts much more rapidly than they would through ordinary lecture,” Teixeira noted. “Because students review the online materials between classes, the time in class can be spent on discussion and application,” Weintraub said. “It makes the classroom time much more effective.”

Since the online MCM program was launched, 216 students have graduated (see figure 1).

*Rebecca Weintraub, Clinical Professor and Director, MCM Program, USC Annenberg*

“This program has given me the confidence, knowledge, and skills needed to land a big position.”

*— Alexis Santoro, Graduate, Online MCM Program, USC Annenberg*

Since the online MCM program was launched, 216 students have graduated (see figure 1).

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**FIGURE 1**

Number of Graduates, Online Master of Communication Management Program

USC Annenberg

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Graduates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
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By the time they have graduated from the online program, students have gained strong personal and professional connections. “We built a curriculum that centers on collaboration within virtual teams,” Teixeira explained. He credits the collaborative environment and an online platform that allows students to interact with each other 24/7 with building strong ties between students—ties that have led to new jobs and new careers for many graduates.

Weintraub has also seen how the program has increased graduates’ career success. “We’re getting a lot of testimonials from people who are getting promotions or getting new jobs based on the work that they have done and what they have learned in the program,” she commented.

One such student is Alexis Santoro, who had been in a lower-level management position at a company. She shared this story with the MCM staff:

“Recently I was given an opportunity to interview for a marketing communication manager position at my dream company and was told that one of my standout attributes was being in this graduate program. In my grueling interview process, I used a little bit of knowledge from each class I’ve taken thus far. Shortly after returning home, I got a call with an offer. But they decided that I was actually at a director level (thanks to everything I’ve learned). So I have just accepted a position as a global marketing communication director!”

As the markets, industries, and the needs of students evolve, Teixeira and Weintraub have collaborated with the OPM team on regular competitive analyses to navigate through these changes. “You have to adapt relatively quickly in the online learning marketplace,” Teixeira observed, “and stay out in front of any major changes in the field.”