

## **Leadership Training in an Industry Context: Preparing Student Leaders for a Chaotic News Media**

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### **Abstract**

This application brief explains the creation and execution of a leadership training program within the context of journalism education. The news media has experienced profound changes in an era of digital disruption. Massive job loss, financial distress, and ownership consolidation have resulted in a chaotic industry. Promising young journalists have few leadership development mechanisms for learning how to interpret the environment they are about to enter. This program provides student leaders a framework for understanding and coping with the news industry's challenges. It relies on principles of leadership education to explore change management strategies in times of disruption and emphasizes the ethical responsibilities of news media leaders. Leadership is presented as an active concept based on a model of being and doing.

### **Introduction**

The Cox Poynter Leaders program was created in 2013 at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia located in Athens, Georgia, in partnership with the Poynter Institute for Media Studies based in St. Petersburg, Florida. The idea was straightforward: use leadership education to provide the college's best journalism students with insights and strategies for building a career in a news industry undergoing profound structural change.

The program's mission was assigned to the James M. Cox Jr. Institute for Newspaper Management Studies, which used the initiative as a catalyst for a broader restructuring. It is now known as the James M. Cox Jr. Institute for Journalism Innovation, Management and Leadership (Grady College, 2014). The Cox Institute partnered with the Poynter Institute, an industry leader in professional journalism training programs, to develop the program and provide professional-level training materials through Poynter's e-learning platform, News University. Since its launch in 2005 with 10 courses and 2,000 users, News University has grown to more than 400 courses, with 340,000 users (Poynter, 2015). The Cox Poynter Leaders program has operated three cohorts, including a pilot program in 2013 followed by two full programs in 2014 and 2015. Thirty-nine Grady College journalism students, all competitively selected, have completed the

training.

This application brief explores the industry context for this training, provides an overview of the leadership framework and model used in the instruction, explains the structure and delivery methods of the program and concludes with a discussion of the program's contribution to leadership education in the media industry and considerations for the program's future.

## Background

In *Journalism Unbound*, Stephens (2015) opened with two simple sentences: "Journalism is changing. Journalism education is changing." This reality is manifested by a significant shift in how news is delivered in the current digital environment. Mitchell (2015) called it the "mobile majority," reporting that most large news organizations now get more of their audiences from "mobile devices than from desktop computers." The mobile explosion combined with the influence of social media has brought the most significant change to the news media since the arrival of the consumer internet in the mid-1990s.

The newspaper industry was upended during the analog-to-digital transformation. Much of its business model was rendered obsolete, which led to years of financial turmoil (Herndon, 2012). Newspapers have remained profitable only by shrinking operations, mostly through labor reductions. For example, employment in the newspaper industry peaked with 486,000 jobs in 1991 (Census, 2011). Since then, newspaper employment fell to about 295,000 workers in May 2009 and continued its decline to around 207,000 workers in May 2014 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Meanwhile, television news has been buffeted by rampant changes in station ownership. In 2013 alone, 290 television stations changed owners in deals valued at \$8.8 billion (Potter and Matsa, 2014). An annual industry report summarized the effects of ownership change: "One measurable impact has been fewer stations originating local news content. That number has dropped by 8% since 2005. Fully a quarter of the 952 U.S. television stations that currently air local newscasts do not produce the programs themselves" (Potter and Matsa, 2014).

As the news media suffered through decades of turmoil and chaos marked by layoffs, bankruptcies, and consolidation, management developed a reputation for fruitless introspection because it rarely led to effective competitive responses. Lowery (2012) summarized this perspective: "Leaders of traditional news outlets over the past 30 years have wrung their hands and called for change in the face of financial, technological, and cultural disruption. And then, so often, they have stayed the course" (p. 214). As conditions within the news media worsened over the years – especially within the newspaper industry – commentary has called the industry's management into question by suggesting that leaders have been too focused on short-term results and failed to engage in significant long-term strategic planning. Several prominent journalism scholars were blunt in their criticism: "Managers have made a series of short-run oriented decisions that have had significant and negative consequences on the health of the newspaper business and the quality of American journalism" (Lacy, Stamm and Martin, 2014, p. 7).

Lacy et al. (2014) asserted that news media leaders had “ignored emerging technology until it overwhelmed their news organizations,” assigning blame for this oversight to “conservative managerial attitudes and decision-making processes that came with the growth of large public corporations during the 1990s and early 2000s” (p. 16). Lowery (2012) made a similar observation regarding the failure to embrace technology, stating “the field holds innovation at arm’s length” (p. 214).

A review of literature encompassing media management, media economics, and journalism practices reveals a body of work that addresses the news media’s predicament from many business perspectives (Albarran, 2010; Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2011). Although discussed in management and financial terms, the industry’s problems are rarely framed as a leadership issue. Mierzejewska and Hollifield (2006) concluded that leadership study is significantly lacking within the media management discipline. Mierzejewska (2011) added “there has been very little systematic research by media management scholars on leadership behavior and effects” (p. 21-22). Mierzejewska acknowledged that several media management textbooks have addressed leadership, but noted “the number of scholarly studies of media leadership that used primary data and have been published in media management journals has been surprisingly small” (p. 22). Nevertheless, Mierzejewska noted that some media scholars have begun to connect leadership research with the study of change management. Citing the works of Killebrew (2003) and Perez-Latre and Sanchez-Tabernerero (2003), Mierzejewska wrote that such research “indicates that leadership plays a central role in shaping change-management outcomes” (p. 22).

Even though leadership study has not been a significant component of the media management discipline, this emerging connection between leadership and change management provided the link we needed to seed our program. We recognized how the language of change management could address how we discuss digital disruption and challenge students to think about these issues. Furthermore, we understood that leadership education strategies from other industries and other academic disciplines could be adapted for the purposes of our training initiative. This already has been occurring in other professional disciplines. For example, Kaufman and Carter (2005) provided an excellent review of leadership development programs in agriculture that helped to shape our thinking. The next section of this application brief describes how we created the program and determined its leadership model.

### **Creating a Program; Defining a Model**

In creating the program, we consulted with several University of Georgia resources including the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, the Institute for Leadership Advancement within the Terry College of Business and the university’s Career Center. We also reviewed numerous resources from management organizations including the American Management Association and the American Society for Quality. We reviewed material from groups within the journalism industry including the American Press Institute, American Society of News Editors, Freedom Forum, and the Society for Professional Journalists, as well as existing resources from the Poynter Institute. Following this industry review, we considered insights gleaned from several academic sources. Specifically, we found the recommendations from the multi-institutional study by Dugan and Komives (2007) to be especially helpful. This

study emphasized students “recognize that leadership can be learned and developed” (p. 17), which is a core belief of those instrumental in creating our program. Moreover, we incorporated the following key recommendations from Dugan and Komives (2007) into our program design:

- “Include opportunities for deliberate discussions on a wide range of issues” (p. 17).
- “Connect leadership to other social identities so students can explore their leadership practices and personal leadership identity” (p. 19).
- “Align student’s self-perception of leadership competence and confidence. Support students in adopting an accurate and healthy self-awareness regarding their leadership capacity” (p. 19).

Adopting these guidelines made it imperative for us to approach leadership as an engaging activity, not as a passive theoretical construct. For that perspective, we adopted the framework described by Camarota (2004) as “the being of leadership” and “the doing of leadership” (p. 22). Camarota explained “the being of leadership” encompasses one’s values and beliefs and personal identity, and “the doing of leadership” involves one’s capabilities and behaviors within the context of the environment where the activities occur (p. 22). Camarota effectively connected the being and doing of leadership by describing them as a delicate balancing act. We use his words in our first session with each student cohort:

The key to leadership excellence is to balance the being and doing . . . This balance requires knowing the core factors that influence how you approach your leadership tasks. It presupposes that who you are is just as important as what you achieve – in fact, who you are colors what you achieve in many ways. Leadership excellence requires that you show up authentically for your followers, and exhibit integrity and congruency in all that you do. (p. 23-24).

We found that Camarota’s delineation of the being and doing of leadership fit well into our plans for teaching leadership within the specific context of the news media. His definition of “being” aligned with our emphasis on journalism ethics as an important element of industry-specific leadership traits. His construct of “doing” allowed us to frame the conditions of the news media as the environment, and his use of “capabilities and behaviors” created the framework for discussing the significant shift in technical skills required of journalists during this digital transformation.

## **Structure and Delivery**

When deciding how to structure and deliver the program, there were several factors to consider. The partnership between the Cox Institute and the Poynter Institute came together quickly. The Cox Institute understood that Poynter was recognized in the news industry as a trusted training provider, while the Poynter Institute saw the program as an opportunity to engage with future news leaders and expand the audience for its training. Beyond the partnership, however, there were other structural issues to determine: Would the program operate entirely online? How would the participants be selected? Would the program be offered for academic credit? How often would the program operate? How we answered these questions

determined the nature of the program.

McCotter (2008) observed that “online and hybrid classes have become common in the fields of leadership education” (p. 92). Moreover, the explosion of e-learning across curriculum areas had propelled News University’s 10 years of significant growth. Deploying this platform as part of the Cox-Poynter partnership provided a credible turnkey solution for online training. We selected online modules from three primary subject areas to serve as the program’s foundation: interpersonal skills, innovation, and ethics. Poynter frequently updates its course offerings and we have refined our course selections during the three years of the program. In 2015, the six online modules were: *Managing Creative People*, *Dealing with Difficult Conversations*, *Managing Change: Creating Strategies and Setting Priorities*, *Innovation at Work: Helping New Ideas Succeed*, *Media and Innovation: How to Play in the Sandbox*, and *New Ethics for News Managers*.

Although the online training is the core of the program, one line in McCotter’s study caught our attention: “It is a key responsibility of faculty members who teach using technology-enhanced designs to facilitate the community” (p. 111). Given this assertion, we believed that faculty facilitation for a program of this type would be most effective in a hybrid format. By providing face time with the students, the instructor could engage in discussion and community building among the participants while creating direct connections between online content and live discussions. Furthermore, we believed that providing real-time discussions in a face-to-face setting would become an important component of the program, allowing students to interact with the online material as a cohort, learn from one another and provide a vehicle for featuring guest speakers as another form of dynamic content. We believed students would benefit from the combination of professional-level training offered through News University and live classroom discussions.

Because the program became a partnership between an industry training provider and a university institute, we decided to offer the program as an extracurricular activity rather than as a course for academic credit. Students completing the training program are awarded a Poynter Institute certificate and recognized during a leadership banquet hosted by the Cox Institute. It was challenging to determine how long the program would run and when to offer it during the academic calendar. We discussed a variety of possibilities with 10 potential student participants prior to the 2013 pilot program and reached a few conclusions: 1) it would be a concentrated timeframe that would allow students to immerse themselves into the content quickly; spreading the material over an entire semester had little appeal, 2) the content would be divided equally between live and online sessions, creating a true hybrid environment, 3) it would be offered early in a semester so as not to conflict with end-of-course projects and exams, 4) live sessions would be held in the evening so as not to conflict with classes, and 5) there would be no live weekend sessions, which our potential student participants said would discourage participation.

With those parameters established, we launched the Cox Poynter Leaders as an 8-week program based on six live sessions and six online Poynter modules. Participants spend about 50 hours in the program, excluding the banquet. To minimize scheduling conflicts, we conducted the live sessions on six Monday evenings at the beginning of the spring semester, concluding

with the banquet during the week prior to spring break (Cox, 2015).

The scheduling has worked, allowing us to attract many of the Grady College's best journalism students. The program has emerged as recognition for students who are engaged in experiential learning through internships and student media. Students are competitively-selected for the program based on self-applications and faculty nominations, but final selection has been determined largely by demonstrated field experience. Field experience emerged as an important part of the selection criteria because we believed students who had worked in news organizations would bring their experiences into the program, resulting in richer exchanges of ideas informed by the leadership practices students had encountered.

Each cohort has been limited to between 12 and 14 students, which allowed the program to quickly evolve into a competitive, sought-after honor. In the 2015 cohort, for example, there were more than three times the numbers of nominations than available openings. We believe that students enter with a high intrinsic motivation to participate when the program is seen as an exclusive opportunity. McCotter (2008) observed "when students are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to be engaged in their learning and also to achieve high standards" (p. 96). She added that participants "will be motivated to engage in tasks that are perceived to have value for their future," concluding that if they "want to do something and feel as if they will be successful, they are likely to be motivated during the task" (p. 96).

Early in each cohort we discussed intrinsic motivation in connection with the participants' motivation to lead. The motivation for a student to participate in a program about leadership may not be the same as their motivation to lead other people. To help participants benchmark their own level of motivation, students complete an assessment adapted from DuBrin's "readiness for leadership" assessment (2012). The assessment is a simple scoring system based on 14 questions about interpersonal skills, collaboration, and engagement styles. We found this assessment provides individual context for each student and allows them to better tailor the material and discussions to their own needs.

After three cohorts, we believe the program is creating a positive conversation among our top students – those who are intrinsically motivated to participate and to lead – about the challenges confronting the news media. Deuze and Steward (2011) wrote "that the models for media management and managing careers in the media need reconsideration" (p. 3). The Cox Poynter Leaders program has emerged as a forum within one of the country's leading journalism colleges for such reconsideration to take place among students who are motivated to make a difference in an industry seeking solutions to a vast array of problems.

## **Discussion**

The Cox Poynter Leaders program uses online courses, assigned readings, group discussions and guest speakers to address the leadership challenges confronting the news media. These elements support a forum where bright, motivated students discuss and debate leadership performance in an industry they want to thrive so that it can provide them with careers. From this perspective, a significant majority of the students in program evaluations rated the program

highly “as an intellectual challenge requiring me to think about important topics.”

A 2014 participant said the program provided a relevant way for her to consider career goals: "There is no doubt that the journalism industry is changing, and if we hope to serve in the field someday, I think we owe it to ourselves, to our school and to our community to discuss how to lead in the 21st century" (Grady College, 2014a). A 2015 participant, said the program provided insights that will allow her to “go into my future career more confident, willing to help others come together for a better final product and ready to take on adversities” (Grady College, 2015). Despite the business turmoil in the news industry, another 2014 participant, said the program allowed her to realize “this is a perfect time to take charge in the journalism field and be a creative, active and inspiring leader to keep the core of journalism alive in this changing world” (Grady College, 2014a).

Students in the Cox Poynter Leaders program are established leaders in campus media and other student organizations. Our focus is not on developing skills for those roles, but rather to encourage its participants to think deeply about their media careers and the potential leadership opportunities that await them. Of the 39 participants in the three cohorts, 36 have graduated. Of those graduates, 31 are professionally employed in the media and three are in graduate school (including two in law school). We believe the program has had an impact on the participants’ professional outlook, but we intend to refine the approach.

Student feedback, for example, indicated the program needs to adopt more experiential exercises as a way to reinforce the discussion material and the online training modules. In responding to this feedback, we have returned to the Dugan and Komives (2007) study and are working toward implementing another of their key recommendations by introducing formal mentoring elements into our program (p. 18). We see the Cox Poynter Leaders program as especially suited to adopt their recommendation to “develop peer-mentoring programs for older peers to intentionally link with new or younger students” (p. 18). Our college is structured as a two-year professional program for juniors and seniors, so creating a mechanism for our participants to engage with pre-Grady students would be an opportunity to extend the dialog about industry leadership challenges to a group of students before they begin their coursework.

We are also discussing ways for connecting our Cox Poynter Leaders with interested mentors from our alumni network. Our college’s alumni outreach department has identified a number of interested participants and we are developing a plan for the 2016 cohort. We are encouraged about the prospects for an alumni mentoring enhancement based on the findings in a study by Priest and Donley (2014). Their research of an alumni mentoring program at Kansas State University found that students “wanted to be mentored” and that “alumni were eager to be mentors” (p. 114). They concluded that “any leadership education initiative . . . could utilize formal or informal mentoring as a student development strategy” (p. 114-115). Enhancing our program with mentoring opportunities will benefit participants as they seek out real-world advice to better understand the leadership challenges they will face during their careers.

Coffey (2002), in a collection of interviews with news executives about leadership, described journalism as “a field that will always lack final answers” (p. iv). That may be true, but it should not dissuade us from asking important questions about the industry’s future, and it

should not deter the next generation of practitioners from debating what the future of news will be in the face of ongoing technology disruption. The Cox Poynter Leaders program will never promise its students the answers, but it will promise an enthusiastic search for the questions news leaders must ask.

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