

# **Organizational Constraints on Curricular Adaptation in U.S.**

## **Journalism and Mass Communication Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In a real sense, the university schools and departments offering journalism and mass communication curricula face the same challenge as the legacy media organizations. They must adapt existing resources and structures to a rapidly changing landscape. The record of these academic institutions in adapting to change is not impressive. The topic of industrial change and the required convergence of skills and knowledge areas were prominent in media circles in the early and mid 2000s. A 2004 study showed that while the concept of news industry convergence was much on the minds of school administrators and faculty in the U.S., movement toward converged knowledge areas and curricular tracks was slow and cautious. This paper expands that earlier work by examining data from a census of U.S. journalism and mass communication programs conducted in academic year 2009-2010. The study draws on institutional theory, which predicts that organizations such as universities often adopt only skin-deep change so they may gain public legitimacy even as they hold on to traditional core routines and structures that are in accord with the demands of the organization's wider institutional environment. The paper finds results that are consistent with that expectation.

Universities offering journalism and mass communication curricula in the United States confront a labor market for graduates that is in turmoil. Daily newspapers have cut their staffs, and television and radio organizations have closed newsrooms and modified staff assignments to respond to increasing market pressures and declining revenue. The advertising and public relations fields also have changed as a result of the decline of the traditional media and the emergence of alternative, particularly, social communication opportunities.

Though U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication are showing signs of experimentation in their courses, spurred by turbulence and change in the media industries and professions, many programs cling to traditional structures and practices. A 2005 study showed that changes in the news industry such as “convergence” of media platforms were much on the minds of school administrators and faculty, but movement toward adapting knowledge areas and curricular tracks was slow and cautious. Change tended to derive from individual faculty initiative rather than from formal institutional shift (Lowrey, Daniels & Becker, 2005), and evidence suggests this tendency continues. According to a 2009 survey of U.S.

programs, most maintain traditional “silo” structures, separating print journalism from telecom from advertising/public relations (Becker, Vlad & Desnoes, 2010).

Reluctance to change curricula is attributable to a variety of factors across different levels of analysis. Personal preferences of unit administrators may play a role, as may faculty’s focus on research rather than on fit between undergraduate curricula and changing media. Organizational factors such as unit size and level of unit resources likely have an impact – a 2009 survey of JMC programs showed that academic departments’ operating budgets had dipped (Becker, Vlad & Desnoes, 2010). And influential alumni tied to specialized industries may encourage persistence of differentiated tracks.

Institutional factors should be important as well. Accredited schools must comply with standards that reinforce separate tracks and that leave little room for experimenting with curricula (Seamon, 2010). Schools’ conformity to publicly legitimated forms of education – via adherence to accreditation standards, for example – signals acceptability to the University, to potential students, to peer institutions and to media industries (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). Though external turbulence and a tight labor market for graduates seem to demand transformative change, stasis or

incremental change in current curricular structures seems safer in an environment of uncertainty. The way ahead is murky, while current practices and forms have seemed acceptable to outsiders.

This study focuses on the relationship between accreditation status and curricular innovation in schools of journalism and mass communication. Receiving special scrutiny is the degree to which schools have “converged” their curricula or, alternatively, have structured their curricula around traditional industry lines. We adopt the framework of institutional theory, which proposes that organizations need public legitimacy for ongoing maintenance. This is especially true of public institutions such as schools (frequently studied by institutional researchers), and accreditation status serves as a means by which schools maintain legitimacy. Preserving legitimacy requires ongoing accord with other widely accepted institutions, and radical change can undermine this accord (Scott, 2008). Even as they realize they must adapt existing resources and structures to a rapidly changing landscape, many schools of journalism and mass communication seek legitimacy through accreditation, which helps maintain the stability of longstanding accord with the institutional fields of both higher education and media industries.

### **Curriculum patterns: convergence and specialization**

In the early 2000s, convergence of news forms and practices was a hot topic in the industry and in academia, in the U.S. as well as in other countries. At the newsroom level the concept applied mostly to partnerships across print and broadcast operations (Lowrey, 2005; Quandt & Singer, 2008). More recently, convergence of previously distinct media forms has been largely perceived as a web-based phenomenon – labeled “webvergence” by Thornton and Keith (2009). News organizations have focused on integrating multi-media tasks into daily practices of individual journalists, expecting them to do a little of everything, from reporting and writing, to shooting video and stills, to posting updates and commentary on social media (Singer, 2011; Verweij, 2009). Most recently, an emphasis on entrepreneurial news startups is blurring distinctions between journalistic goals and advertising/marketing strategies (Briggs, 2011).

Studies of changing news processes during the 2000s commonly found that reporters and editors tended to resist web work and web staff (e.g., Paterson & Domingo, 2008) and that change to newsroom processes was often more ceremonial than substantive (Domingo, 2008; Lowrey, 2010). In fact, a U.S. study showed that academic units were generally more open to convergence and other innovations, at least in word if not always in deed (Huang et al., 2006). But efforts by U.S. schools were often

informal rather than institutionalized, reflecting interests and efforts by particular faculty who tracked changes in technology and industry practices. Deeper structural changes were relatively rare, as most schools held to their traditional silos (Lowrey, Daniels & Becker, 2005).

Innovation in the news industry in the U.S. has picked up considerably in the last few years. Online/digital/mobile technology has helped usher in an era of converged journalism at the individual level, involving rapid, incremental reporting of ongoing stories via text, video, sound and stills, and “curating” of information from all kinds of sources beyond the boundaries of professional journalism (Beam & Meeks, 2011; Singer, 2011). A new frontier for convergence is the erosion of boundaries between journalists and non-journalists, or journalists and “para-journalists” as Hermida (2010) describes them. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook serve as the major means by which non-journalists – from everyday people, to academic experts, to politicians and companies’ PR wings – produce and distribute information for public consumption (Hermida, 2010; Singer, 2011). If digital “multimedia” technologies revealed traditional media industry silos to be unnecessary obstacles, social and mobile media are rendering them irrelevant. Any journalist can easily capture video, sound and stills and instantly distribute this via Facebook,

Twitter or blog. Non-journalists can do the same, and they have not been socialized to the distinctions between the values, norms and practices of TV, print and online news – distinctions that are increasingly meaningless within new egalitarian news networks. Yet evidence suggests that schools of journalism and mass communication continue to cling to traditional internal divisions, grounded in increasingly outdated media platform distinctions (Becker, Vlad & Desnoes, 2010).

### **School accreditation**

Constraints imposed by rigid accreditation standards are one possible explanation for this reluctance to change. Some 25% of the more than 450 U.S. academic programs in communication are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Among the criteria are that curricula have a liberal arts foundation, that programs support both academic research and service to media professions, and that they embrace diversity and First Amendment principles. The mandate for substantial liberal arts coursework has been controversial, with some arguing that it constrains the ability to experiment with journalism and communication courses (Seamon, 2010).

In an analysis of past U.S. accreditation studies, Seamon (2010) found little significant difference between accredited and non-accredited

programs: “Perhaps the most telling result of this analysis is that none of the existing research on the subject has produced evidence that accredited programs are strongly or clearly superior in major ways to unaccredited programs” (pp. 12-13). Accredited programs have been found to constrain flexibility and innovation in teaching skills courses (Cusatis & Martin-Kratzer, 2010 ; Hatzios & Lariscy, 2008; Masse & Popovich, 2007). Johansen, Weaver and Doman (2001) found that accredited journalism and mass communication programs tend to value faculty credentials over pedagogical effectiveness.

Traditionally, accredited programs in the U.S. have been more likely organized into separate sequences such as print, broadcast and advertising (Dickson & Sellmeyer, 1992). Lowrey, Daniels and Becker (2005) found that accreditation was a significant predictor that U.S. journalism and communication programs would stay in separate tracks and not formally embrace converged curricula. Masse and Popovich (2007) found that print faculty at non-accredited schools were more comfortable teaching broadcast and online writing than faculty at accredited programs. This finding could also relate to program size, as accredited schools tend to be larger, and the Lowrey, Daniels & Becker study found that smaller programs were significantly more likely to embrace courses taught across

skills. Similarly, Auman and Lillie (2008) indicated their program had tried team teaching across skills areas because of reduced number of faculty.

The wider U.S. education literature on school accreditation suggests a disconnect between accreditation standards and performance.

Accreditation aids public legitimacy for schools perhaps more than it aids optimization or measurable effectiveness (Benoit, 2011). It reduces uncertainty for schools, institutions that historically have struggled to connect the dots between practices and measurement of outcomes (Meyer, Scott & Deal, 1983). The homogeneity and consistency it engenders also signals legitimacy to outsiders:

In higher education, accreditation processes for institutions, disciplines, or professions are examples of highly scripted procedures for attaining and retaining legitimacy. In many cases, accreditation is merely a repeated event or periodic review that reaffirms the status of a university, college, or program. In other cases, accreditation represents an aspiration to attain status and legitimacy in order to belong to and mimic an entirely different set of norms, rules, beliefs, and values (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007).

One of the often mimicked features of accreditation for professional programs is a required liberal arts focus, “leading to a myth of uniqueness regarding liberal arts, used to enhance legitimacy and increase the chance of the college's survival” (Delucchi, 1997).

### **Institutional theory**

Institutional theory<sup>1</sup> from the sociology of organizations helps explain the role that school accreditation plays in schools’ decision-making about change. Institutional theorists hold that all organizations require some measure of public legitimacy, though level of legitimacy and the degree to which it is pursued vary across organizational types, from small private ventures to large government bureaucracies. Legitimacy is gained over time through conformity with wide, long-held social “accounts” of how an organization or field is supposed to behave and look, and through accord with the needs of other institutions -- accreditation is one avenue toward this conformity. Decision-making within highly institutionalized organizations tends to be buffered from external change, and this tends to promote stasis, stability and homogeneity – all double-edged qualities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, Scott, 2009).

The theory has been applied most frequently to “institutional organizations” such as schools, government institutions, and non-profits,

entities that tend to be less directly susceptible to market forces, and for which it is difficult to define and measure success (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Yet some institutional organizations are more institutionalized than others, as we see among U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication, where some adhere to institutionalizing accreditation standards, and others do not. According to institutional theorists, if schools deviate from what is widely understood as “school-like,” they risk undermining their long-held social legitimacy, and they increase their chances of failure. As mentioned, accreditation is one way to attain conformity and avoid claims of negligence, and accredited schools tend to adhere to traditional rules more than they adapt to their environments. While this can be helpful because adherence signals stability and normalcy, the rules constrain creativity and limit flexibility. This may lead to problems, especially in highly turbulent and uncertain times.

The adoption of widely accepted forms and practices for the sake of legitimacy – accreditation standards, for example – may be independent of an organization’s efforts to optimize within its environment. In fact, radical adaptation to changing surroundings for the sake of short-term efficiency can present problems for institutional organizations, which rely on long-standing, consistent public images for legitimacy. Decision-makers in more

institutionalized organizations are more likely to decouple from the shifting demands of external change, ignoring fallout from volatile markets, or adopting skin-deep, faddish practices that superficially address change (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2009). They tend to stay to well-worn paths during uncertain times, ensuring traditionally sanctioned behavior and appearance. External change may render such rule-bound organizations irrelevant in the long run, as they become brittle and calcify.

Lastly, organizations may need to show accord with multiple institutional fields with differing demands. For example, business schools seek legitimacy with both the academy and the business community, two fields that do not always coincide (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). Likewise, U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication seek legitimacy with both the academy and media industries and professions, a difficult undertaking that can contribute to vagueness, generalities and duplicity in stated goals, rendering them less effective.

## **Expectations**

The existent research and institutional theory lead to the expectation that programs that are accredited should be more buffered from and less responsive to changes in the labor market than programs that are not.

Accreditation offers a path to legitimacy that may have little to do with optimizing functionality. Accreditation encourages programs to mimic habits and follow regulations built on past market forces and industry structures rather than encouraging creative adaptation to changes in the imminent environment. Institutional theory argues that institutional organizations are more likely to seek legitimacy from accreditation, so organizations that have not opted for accreditation would be less bound by and deferential to the rules from the past. They would be less constrained by traditional social accounts of what these institutions should look like, and more likely to adopt changes such as convergence of traditional industry lines.

We expect to see two types of convergence in the schools. One involves fundamental structural change, disrupting traditional divisions between majors and sequences, and the second involves changing teaching practices. Structural divisions are more institutionalized, held in place by formal policies, accrued legitimacy, co-dependencies with traditional media industries, and stakes held in existing technologies and instructor expertise. Changing these structures requires substantial resources and buy-in at multiple levels of control. The second type of convergence involves changing teaching practices in the classroom. We expect fewer barriers to this type of change, as it is less “tightly coupled”

with structures and processes at higher levels of the university or college, and less salient to the traditional media industries. It may involve only buy-in by faculty members and administrators within the same division. In addition, emerging technologies are making the teaching of converged skills increasingly feasible and inexpensive.

## **Methodology**

To test these hypotheses, data were taken from the 2009 *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments*, an ongoing survey that tracks enrollments, degrees granted, curricular offerings and hiring in journalism and mass communication programs in the United States. The survey has a history going back to 1934, but the methodology was revised and standardized in 1988 and has remained unchanged since then. The survey is a census of programs included in the *Journalism & Mass Communication Directory*, published by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, or *The Journalist's Road to Success: A Career Guide*, formerly published and printed by the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, Inc., and now available on the web.<sup>2</sup> All U.S. degree-granting senior colleges and universities with courses organized under the labels of journalism and mass communication are invited to be

listed in the *AEJMC Directory*. To be included in the *Guide*, the college or university must offer at least 10 courses in news-editorial journalism, and those courses must include core courses, such as an introduction to the mass media and press law and ethics, as well as basic skills courses, such as reporting and editing. Since 1992, the two journalism programs listed in the *AEJMC Directory* in Puerto Rico have been included in the population. Programs included in the *AEJMC Director* but not in the U.S. are excluded from the survey.

A combination of these two directories produced 484 listings in 2009. In October 2009, a questionnaire was mailed to the administrator of each of these programs. A second mailing of this questionnaire was sent to the non-responding schools in December. A third mailing was sent to the non-responding schools in January of 2009. In February, the administrators were sent a fourth mailing. In each mailing, administrators were given the chance to return a written form via the mail or download a form from a web site and return it electronically. The 240 administrators of the programs who had not responded by the beginning of April were contacted by telephone and asked to answer as many of the questions over the telephone as possible. One of the 484 schools reported that its program was no longer active.

The questionnaire asked the administrators to provide information on total enrollments in autumn of 2009, enrollment by year in school, enrollment by sequence of study, enrollment by gender, and enrollment by racial or ethnic group. In addition, administrators were asked to indicate the number and type of degrees granted in the 2008-2009 academic year, degrees granted by sequence of study, degrees granted by gender, and degrees granted by racial group. The questionnaire also asked about tuition and fees, skills taught in the curricula, faculty size, faculty characteristics, and faculty hiring. Two additional questions asked for the first time on the 2009 enrollment survey presented administrators with continua on which they could place their programs. The first question asked the administrators if the program was organized along industry lines or ignored industry lines. A score of 1 indicated that the program was organized along industry lines, and a score of 7 indicated it ignored those lines. The second question asked administrators to place their program on a continuum from teaching skills separately for different media and teaching skills across media platforms.

Data were obtained for all of the 483 active programs in the population. Of the 483 returns, 344 were for programs listed in both directories, 93 were only in the AEJMC listing, and 46 were only in the Dow

Jones *Guide*.

## **Findings**

Journalism and mass communication programs in the United States can be divided into three groupings. The first is the programs accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. These programs have agreed to meet a set curricular standard, established by educators in collaboration with existing media industries. Most of these programs also are members of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. ASJMC schools also subscribe to a more general and common notion of journalism and mass communication education, but only the accredited programs among them subscribe to the specific accrediting standards. So the second group of schools are those that are ASJMC members but not accredited. The third group of programs is made up of programs that do not even agree to a minimum definition of journalism education. They often are small programs, sometimes even associated with English departments.

The clearest test of the hypothesis stated above comes from a comparison of accredited programs with ASJMC programs that are not accredited. All schools agree to a general, broad notion of journalism and mass communication education, but the latter should have more latitude

and motivation to structure their curricula to reflect changes in the labor market and among media industries.

The criterion or outcome measures used are the two items included in the enrollment survey for the first time in 2009 dealing with industrial structure and curriculum and with convergence of skills. The data from these two questions that serve as the criterion variable for testing of the hypothesis are shown in Figure 1. Not all administrators answered these questions. Administrators at 92 of the 114 accredited programs answered both and at 48 of the 82 nonaccredited ASJMC program answered both. Of the 287 programs that are neither accredited nor a part of ASJMC, 163 answered both.

The first question asked the administrators if the program was organized along industry lines or ignored industry lines. A score of 1 indicated that the program was organized along industry lines, and a score of 7 indicated it ignored those lines. The mean score for all programs was 3.1, suggesting that the programs overall continue to reflect the old industrial bases of journalism and mass communication (Figure 1 and Table 1). The accredited programs were the most traditional, reflecting industry lines, with a mean score of 2.9. The most innovative programs were the programs that are members of ASJMC but not accredited, with a

mean score of 3.3

The second question asked administrators to place their program on a continuum from teaching skills separately for different media and teaching skills across media platforms. The mean score for this distribution is 4.9, meaning the average program falls closer to teaching skills across media platforms. Accredited programs were less likely to teach across media platforms than the non-accredited ASJMC programs. The mean score for the accredited programs is 4.8, while the mean score for the non-accredited schools that are members of ASJMC is 5.3.

Given the nature of the data, traditional significance tests are not appropriate. The accredited programs for which data on the criterion variable are available make up an 80 percent sample, while the nonaccredited ASJMC programs are a nearly 60 percent sample. If traditional significance tests are used, however, the paired comparison between accredited and nonaccredited programs for the measure of curricular independence is not significant, while the comparison for the independence of teaching of skills courses is at the .05 level.

## **Conclusions**

Findings offer support for expectations that accredited U.S. programs would be less likely to break away from traditional industry lines in their

structures and their course content. Though differences are not dramatic, they indicate a clear distinction in decision-making between the accredited and the non-accredited. Findings are also consistent with institutional theory, which predicts that organizations with stronger institutional orientations will stick to the tried and true and will be less likely to accommodate the demands of external change. According to the theory, adoption of accreditation standards reflects this institutional orientation: Interest in maintaining traditional sources of legitimacy as well as the regulatory power of the accreditation standards themselves discourage creative adaptation.

Findings also support expectations that teaching skills across industry lines would be more likely than restructuring programs by merging traditionally distinct tracks. These results also support institutional theory. Decisions about class content are more loosely coupled with external institutional structures and influences than are decisions about the structure of the schools themselves. Changes in school structure and fundamental processes will more likely be noticed within traditional media industries, which have a stake in the nature of the labor market. These structures and processes are also more tightly coupled with policies and procedures of the larger academic unit (the University or College).

Results here contribute to a growing literature that raises questions about the benefits of ACEJMC standards for U.S. programs. The literature suggests accreditation can constrain experimentation in curriculum structure and in course content, and can dampen response by schools to a disruptive media environment. This sluggish response to this environment is especially concerning because of the weak job market for graduates of these schools, who already face a daunting challenge and need every advantage. Of course findings here do not suggest a complete lack of attention to external changes, as more than half of the respondents indicated they are teaching media skills across industry lines. This is consistent with 2004 findings by Lowrey, Daniels and Becker that media convergence was more evident at programs where faculty championed it. Yet change in class content is likely to be more fleeting than structural change, as individual teachers with an interest in specific changes and department administrators who sanction these changes may come and go, or move on to other interests.

It should be noted that institutional theory also suggests there is value to stability, to fitting in with traditional expectations, and to maintaining legitimacy and avoiding claims of negligence. In fact, rapid, radical overhaul can undercut legitimacy, leaving organizations subject to “liabilities of

newness” – unproven track records, weak knowledge domains, tenuous external relationships and unreliable resource flow (Aldrich & Ruef, 2007).

Nevertheless, the extreme turbulence and uncertainty in today’s media environment, coupled with an unforgiving job market, indicate that now is a time for schools to experiment and even take risks – though perhaps with one eye on benefits that derive from a long-held legacy. It appears we are seeing substantial and widespread change in news production processes – more than we did in the early 2000s when TV-newspaper partnerships were central to the convergence discussion. Partnership efforts were skin deep and relatively sparse, and arguably schools were justified in their hesitance to follow suit by converging curricula (Huang, 2006). But the merging of media today via social media, “cloud” computing, mobile media devices, intuitive video and audio editing software – all this can be done by anyone, anywhere, cheaply and easily, with relatively few institutional or technological constraints. These changes are increasingly pervasive both within and outside the industry, and they seem more worthy of schools’ attention.

Results here apply only to U.S. schools as the structures, policies and processes are unique. But technological change, turmoil in media fields and the harsh economy are global phenomena, and so clearly there

are lessons here for schools in other nations as well.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons not very applicable to this paper, institutional theory is now most often called “new institutionalism” to distinguish it in from traditional “institutionalism,” a framework adopted by social scientists in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The essential difference has to do with an emphasis on cognitive typification in new institutionalism as opposed to normative socialization in traditional institutionalism. As institutionalists and new institutionalists sometimes argue whether or not this subtle distinction even matters, it is ignored here, and we simply use the term “institutionalism.”

2.The URL is:

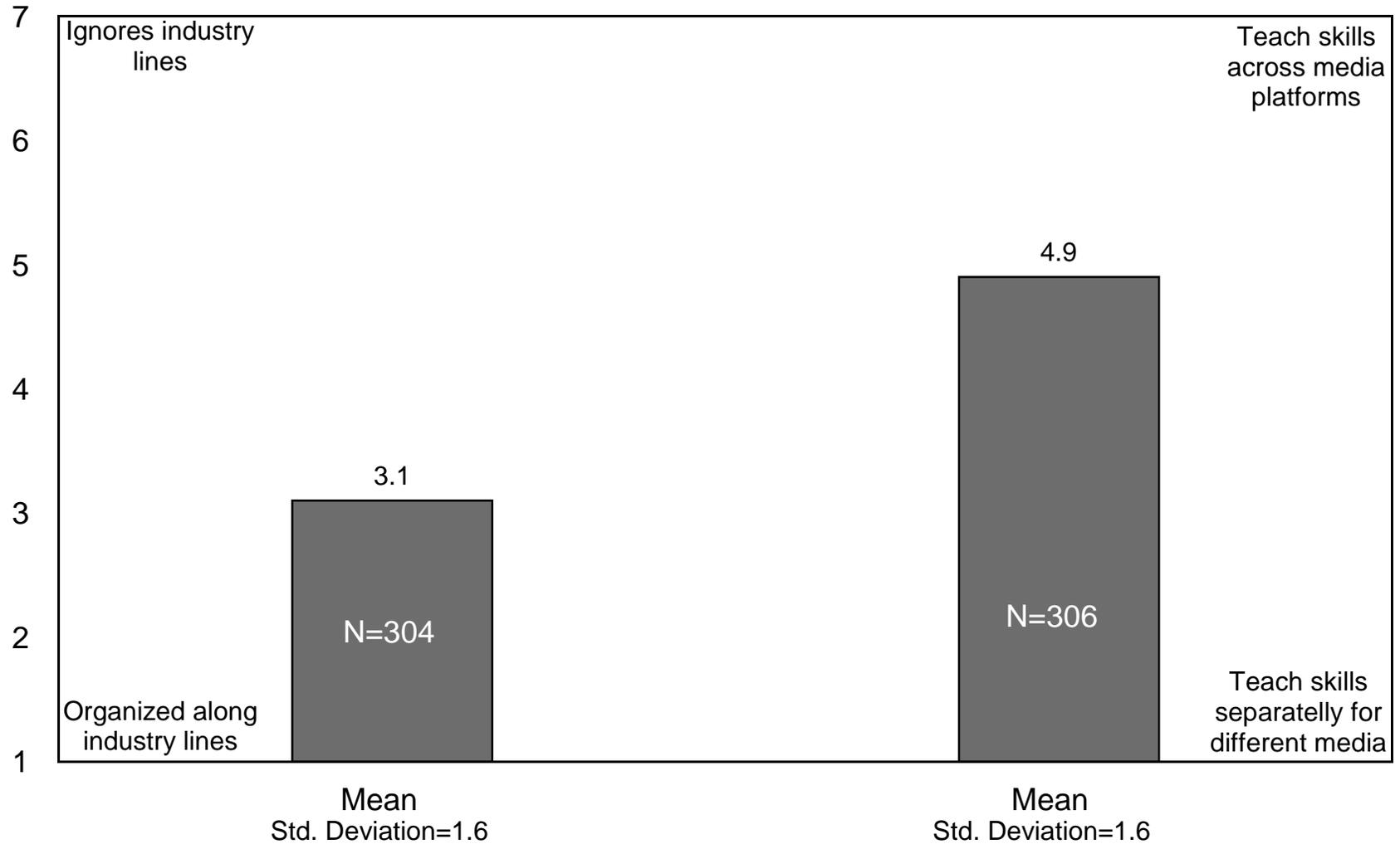
[https://www.newsfund.org/PageText/JournRoad.aspx?Page\\_ID=JrRd](https://www.newsfund.org/PageText/JournRoad.aspx?Page_ID=JrRd).

Table 1. Curricular Independence and Skill Convergence by Program Type

Program Type		Curriculum Independent of Industry	Skills Taught Across Platforms
Accredited	Mean	2.9	4.8
	N	92	93
	Std. Deviation	1.4	1.7
Not Accredited ASJMC Member	Mean	3.3	5.3
	N	49	48
	Std. Deviation	1.5	1.3
Not Accredited not ASJMC Member	Mean	3.1	4.9
	N	163	165
	Std. Deviation	1.7	1.6
Total	Mean	3.1	4.9
	N	304	306
	Std. Deviation	1.6	1.6

Figure 1  
Curricular Independence and Skill Convergency by Program Type

On a seven point scale, place of the curriculum regarding media industry, and strategy of teaching skills separately or accross media platforms



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments