

# Analysis of the Importance of A Liberal Arts Curriculum for Employment of Tennessee Mass Communication College Graduates

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## Introduction

This study grew out of the findings reported in an earlier study which examined the college curriculum and skills required of news interns at commercial television stations (Shaffer, 1986). The earlier study reported that the courses and skills which television station news directors believed important for a successful internship were developed through an all-encompassing liberal arts background, not by taking specific mass communication courses. It also revealed that media professionals, college faculty, and television news interns believed liberal arts courses were as important for a successful internship experience as were the more specific mass communication courses.

The conclusions of this earlier study raised the following question which this study seeks to answer: are employment opportunities of mass communication graduates of television, print or radio studies enhanced when the job seeker has a solid undergraduate liberal arts background?

## Need for the Study

The Austin Peay State University (APSU) administration and mass communication faculty believed strongly, but without adequate support, that a quality undergraduate liberal arts education enhanced the marketability of a graduate who sought employment in the news areas at Tennessee mass media outlets. Research on this question particularly interested APSU because the Tennessee Board of Regents had designated APSU as the only state supported liberal arts university. Also, APSU offered an extensive professional preparation program in three mass communication areas: print, radio, and television.

A grant to examine the importance of liberal arts study to the employment of Tennessee mass communication college graduates was funded by the Research Committee of the Graduate and Research Council of Austin Peay State University. This study was to determine if mass media news department professionals who hire college graduates for entry-level news positions value the job applicant with an extensive liberal arts undergraduate education.

## Scope and Limitations of the Study

In order to discover whether a liberal arts background is desirable for a career in mass media news, supervisory professionals working in Tennessee mass media were contacted and asked to indicate the importance of various liberal arts courses when hiring college graduates.

Specifically, newspaper editors as well as radio and television station news directors were asked to respond to a questionnaire which required them to assume that a newly graduated college senior had applied as a news department employee or reporter with their media outlets. In addition, the editor or news director was requested to assume that the applicant for the job had no significant practical experience. Hiring considerations were to be based only on the academic studies of the job applicant. The editors/news directors were then requested to rate 22 traditional liberal arts areas.

Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to indicate those liberal arts areas which they believed to be "irrelevant," "not important," "somewhat important," "important," or "very important" to the hiring of graduates for employment in mass media news. The respondents circled the number one if they believed the course area to be "irrelevant" to employment; the number two if "important"; number three if "somewhat important"; number four if "important"; and number five if they believed the course area to be "very important."

After a brief pilot study was conducted in May of 1987, questionnaires were then sent in June to randomly selected Tennessee daily and weekly newspaper editors and radio and television station news directors. Ninety-one questionnaires were sent out with 34 directed to newspapers, 21 to television stations, and 36 to radio stations. Total response rate was 55% (50 of 91) for the entire study. The response rates by groups were: 56% by newspaper editors (19 of 34); 67% by television station news directors (14 of 21); and 47% by radio station news directors.

## Method of Statistical Analysis

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the means of the three groups on each of the questionnaire items. The ANOVA tested the differences in the means of the samples to determine if any differences were large enough to conclude if the populations surveyed significantly differed in responses. This yielded a "yes" or "no" answer to the question, are the means of the groups on each questionnaire item significantly different?

The level of significance selected for the statistical analysis of the data gathered for the study was established at the .05 level prior to completion of the data gathering. If  $P > .05$  was indicated for an item when the means were compared, the null hypothesis (that there would be no difference among the response means of the three groups) would not be accepted. The results of each ANOVA can be found in Table One.

**TABLE ONE**  
**Importance of Liberal Arts Core Courses to the hiring Practices of Editors and News Directors at Tennessee Mass Media Outlets**

Subject Areas	Newspapers		Television		Radio		F-Ratio	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<u>Communication Courses</u>								
English Composition	5.00	.00	4.64	.50	4.71	.47	4.38	$p < .05$
Public Speaking	3.32	.95	4.43	.65	4.47	.72	12.00	$p < .05$
Interpersonal Comm.	4.58	.69	4.58	.65	4.76	.56	.49	$p > .05$
<u>History/Humanities</u>								
American History	4.11	.74	3.93	.62	3.76	.97	.82	$p > .05$
Art Appreciation	2.37	.76	2.71	.91	2.24	.83	1.34	$p > .05$
Foreign Language	2.58	.90	2.36	.84	2.59	1.00	.30	$p > .05$
Introduction to Theatre	2.32	.58	2.71	.47	2.18	.95	2.35	$p > .05$
Music Appreciation	2.32	.58	2.29	.47	2.53	1.12	.47	$p > .05$
Philosophy	3.05	.85	2.57	.65	3.00	1.06	1.37	$p > .05$
World History	3.95	.78	3.64	.84	3.65	1.00	.70	$p > .05$
World Literature	3.63	.83	3.07	.83	2.71	.77	5.97	$p < .05$
<u>Mathematics/Science</u>								
Biology	2.74	.87	2.64	.84	2.29	.77	1.37	$p > .05$
Geology	2.68	.82	2.50	.76	2.24	.75	1.49	$p > .05$
Algebra	2.74	.99	2.43	.94	2.00	.87	2.79	$p > .05$
General Mathematics	3.47	1.07	2.86	.95	2.94	1.20	1.65	$p > .05$
<u>Social Sciences</u>								
American Government	4.47	1.02	4.43	.51	4.47	.80	.01	$p > .05$
General Geography	3.89	.99	4.14	.66	3.82	1.07	.47	$p > .05$
Political Science	4.37	1.01	4.29	.61	4.24	.83	.11	$p > .05$
Economics	4.00	.94	4.00	.55	3.76	.97	.42	$p > .05$
Psychology	3.63	.60	3.36	.74	3.35	1.11	.63	$p > .05$
Sociology	3.63	.90	3.50	.76	3.41	1.00	.27	$p > .05$
World Civilization	3.63	1.01	3.57	.85	3.24	.90	.90	$p > .05$

Newspapers: N = 19  
 Television: N = 14  
 Radio: N = 17

A second table was constructed to display the rank order of the means for each liberal arts course within the three mass communication professional groups. This allowed a method of comparing how the editors/news directors rated the various liberal arts areas.

#### Analysis of the Findings

A primary analysis of Table Two indicated similar rankings across the three media disciplines surveyed. All three groups were in relative agreement concerning the five most desired courses in which a potential media news employee should have competence. In fact, the same five courses were selected by both radio and television news directors in only marginally differing order.

TABLE TWO

Importance of Liberal Arts Course Areas to Hiring Practices  
as Ranked by Mean Responses  
of Newspaper Editors and Broadcast News Directors

Newspaper Editors		TV News Directors		Radio Directors	
	Mean		Mean		Mean
1. English Comp.	5.00	1. English Comp	4.64	1. Interper. Comm.	4.76
2. Interp. Comm.	4.58	2. Interp. Comm	5.58	2. English Comp.	4.71
3. American Gov.	4.47	3. Public Speak.	4.43	3. American Gov.	4.47
4. Political Sc.	4.37	3. American Gov.	4.43	4. Public Speak.	4.47
5. American History	4.11	5. Political Sc.	4.29	5. Political Sc.	4.24
6. Economics	4.00	6. Gen. Geography	4.14	6. Gen. Geography	3.82
7. World History	3.95	7. Economics	4.00	7. American Hist.	3.76
8. Gen. Geography	3.89	8. American Hist.	3.93	7. Economics	3.76
9. Psychology	3.63	9. World History	3.64	9. World History	3.65
9. Sociology	3.63	10. World Civil.	3.57	10. Sociology	3.41
9. World Civil.	3.63	11. Sociology	3.50	11. Psychology	3.35
9. World Lit.	3.63	12. Psychology	3.36	12. World Civil.	3.24
13. General Math.	3.47	13. World Lit.	3.07	13. Philosophy	3.00
14. Public Speak.	3.32	14. General Math.	2.87	14. General Math.	2.94
15. Philosophy	3.05	15. Art Apprec.	2.71	15. World Lit.	2.71
16. Algebra	2.74	15. Intro. Thea.	2.71	16. Foreign Lang.	2.59
17. Biology	2.74	17. Biology	2.64	17. Music Apprec.	2.53
18. Geology	2.68	18. Philosophy	2.57	18. Biology	2.29
19. Foreign Lang.	2.58	19. Geology	2.50	19. Art Apprec.	2.24
20. Art Apprec.	2.37	20. Algebra	2.43	19. Geology	2.24
21. Music Apprec.	2.32	21. Foreign Lang.	2.36	21. Intro. Thea.	2.18
21. Intro. Thea.	2.32	22. Music Apprec.	2.29	22. Algebra	2.00

NOTE: The means correspond to the ratings of the questionnaire in that:  
 5 = very important to the job  
 4 = important to the job  
 3 = somewhat important to the job  
 2 = not important to the job  
 1 = irrelevant to the job

The five liberal arts courses which radio station news directors rated highest were: interpersonal communication, English composition, American government, public speaking, and political science. Television station news directors who responded to the questionnaire reversed the first and second courses in their order of priority of the courses listed. Newspaper editors' rank order of these top five courses was very similar, differing only with the placement of public speaking at the fourteenth position. Since the newspaper industry concentrates almost totally on written communication rather than oral communication, this exception was understandable.

The ranking of the mean scores reinforced the importance of those course areas to the editors/news directors (see Table Two). The relatively small standard deviation scores observed also supported the importance of these liberal arts course areas to the editor/news directors. As illustrated in Table One, the narrow standard deviation scores generally indicated homogeneous agreement within each of the three groups. The pattern generated by the questionnaire data lends believability to the contention that knowledge based upon liberal arts studies which enables the graduate to communicate verbally and in writing are very important to the job seeker. For example, when calculating statistical significance for the study items, three liberal arts courses were found to have probability scores which rendered them significant. That is, the probability scores of  $p < .05$  for English Composition, interpersonal communication, and world literature suggested that competency or at least knowledge gained in these subjects was of utmost importance for employment in news departments within mass media.

Additional studies which supply the graduate with a basic understanding of the society in which he/she functions are also important for success in the mass media job market. These included historical and political courses which the prospective college graduate will need in order to function effectively in mass media news departments.

The category of the social sciences contained subjects which focused on society's political infrastructure. This category included American government, political science and principles of economics. Based upon the mean responses, these subjects were ranked between the third and seventh positions by each of the three groups of media professionals. Such a finding adds substance to the claim by editors/news directors that they want college graduates with a well-rounded liberal arts background.

Another general group of liberal arts courses on the questionnaire included the histories: American history, world history and world civilization. Those areas ranked between five and twelve, with newspaper editors ranking these subjects consistently higher than their broadcasting colleagues.

The social science group of subjects included general geography, psychology, and sociology. These seemed to be relegated to rankings well into the middle of the 22 course areas contained on the questionnaire. The sciences, consisting of biology and geology, also fell into the middle ranges.

The group of subjects the editors/news directors consider of least importance for employment by a college graduate in print or broadcasting were found in the humanities area. These courses included art and music appreciation, foreign language, and introduction to theatre. The one exception was world literature which editors/news directors showed to be "somewhat important" to a news job. Perhaps somewhat surprising, course areas such as art and music appreciation and introduction to theatre, often considered as akin to the media industry and frequently associated with college communication departments, received rankings which relegated them to the "irrelevant" or "not important" areas. Editors/news directors indicated in the survey that they did not believe these three subject areas to be very useful for employment in mass media news department.

One recurring written comment the editors/news directors often attached to a returned questionnaire noted that trade skills (such as equipment operation) could be taught 'on the job.' However, written and verbal expression skills as well as knowledge gained from liberal arts subjects which focus on societal issues could not be taught "on the job." Thus, written remarks by some of the respondents reinforced the belief that liberal arts studies develop competencies which the communication graduate applying for a job should possess and study.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Responses to the questionnaire by media professionals suggested that they consider a well-rounded liberal arts education imperative in order for colleges to prepare adequately their graduates for employment within the news areas of mass media.

Three conclusions based on the data became readily apparent. First, the data from this study point to the need for mass communication graduates to have a mastery of liberal arts courses which lead to proficiency in written and oral expression. Such course areas included English composition, interpersonal communication, and public speaking. These courses were found to be of particular importance to the hiring practices of editors/news directors.

Second, mathematics and science courses were consistently ranked lower than communication skill areas. They still, however, tended toward the "somewhat important" category when editors/news directors considered these course areas in their hiring practices.

Third, survey-type courses such as art appreciation, music appreciation and introduction to theatre were found to be "not important" to a graduate seeking a news job at a newspaper or broadcast station. This does not imply, however, that these courses are unimportant to the personal development of an individual. The editors/news directors only indicated that they did not attach much importance to these three areas when making hiring decisions in mass media.

The data gathered by the study suggest several important recommendations toward curricular development in a mass communication degree program. The study pointed out dramatically that competencies in many of the traditional liberal arts courses are necessary to finding employment within news departments at mass media outlets.

One specific recommendation for developing a curriculum for the mass communication major is to require liberal arts studies which develop written and verbal expression skills. The study pointed specifically to such courses as English composition, public speaking, and interpersonal communication.

Another recommendation is that higher education mass communication programs include a range of courses which require the student to become knowledgeable concerning the structure of the American society, the social sciences and the world in which we live. Such course areas should include American government, political science, economics, sociology, psychology, and general geography.

A third recommendation is that the mass communication curriculum must develop the ability to perceive events in their historical context for those who wish to pursue a career in news areas at newspapers and broadcast facilities. Editors/news directors indicated, for example, that they considered American history and world history important for this reason.

The results of the study suggest that colleges and universities, which emphasize primarily professional training of the mass communication major should consider implementing a core of liberal arts requirements. This study also suggests that graduating seniors will find an education in a liberal arts core of marketable value to them in the job market of Tennessee mass media outlets.



Similar studies should be conducted on a nationwide basis to determine if industry professionals consistently value a liberal arts education for entry level personnel. In other words, do industry executives in other areas of the United States believe a liberal arts education to be as important for employment in mass communication news departments as do Tennessee editors and news directors?

Finally, we need to study Tennessee media personnel managers to determine how much importance they place on mass communication professional studies curriculum in their hiring practices. In other words, are there important professional development skill requirements which are specific and necessary to the newspaper, television, and radio industries?

#### References

Shaffer, Paul D. (1986). An analysis of the importance of selected course areas to television news internships in Tennessee. *The Journal of the Tennessee Speech Communication Association*, XII(1), 11-15.

