On Campus

New MA Brings J-school Back to Its Roots

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In the first major structural change since it was transformed from an undergraduate program in 1934, Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism is now offering a master of arts degree in addition to the master of science degree for which it is known.

The new degree offers students a choice of four concentrations: arts and culture, business and economics, politics, or science and medical journalism. It is designed for graduates of the MS program and other applicants with some journalism or related experience to augment what they have already learned in school or in the field. The existing one-year MS program will remain generally the same in its emphasis on the nuts and bolts of journalism.

Although ideas to change things at the school had been tossed around for years, the effort to introduce a new program picked up momentum soon after Lee Bollinger became president of Columbia in June 2002. That summer, he proposed a rethinking of the journalism program in an e-mail to the students, faculty, and staff of the school, suggesting that "to teach the craft of journalism is a worthy goal, but clearly insufficient in this new world and within the setting of a great university."

With a vacancy in the deanship three years ago, it was already a time of transition in the house that Pulitzer built. Bollinger suspended the search for the dean until a task force he appointed could come up with a new mission for the school.

The current dean and Henry R. Luce professor at the journalism school, Nicholas Lemann, then a Washington correspondent for *The New Yorker*, was one of 34 members of the task force and a leader in drafting the plan for a smaller, yearlong MA program independent of the MS. In part, says Lemann, the task force drew on something from Pulitzer's 1904 manifesto for the school, in which he said, "In general university courses we may find by-products that would meet the needs of

the journalist. Why not divert, deflect, extract, and concentrate them for the journalist as specialist?”

In addition to classes in their concentrations, MA students will take an evidence and inference course taught by Lemann and a yearlong history of journalism course. They will also take one course each semester in another Columbia school or department and complete a master’s thesis.

The first MA class will admit 24 students, with enrollment increasing each year until it reaches 60 students. The MS program now enrolls about 200 full-time and 100 part-time students, although these numbers may be reduced. The University will generously fund the first few years, with most students receiving substantial financial assistance through tuition and fellowships.

This isn’t the first time a new degree has been offered through the J-school. Eight years ago the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences began offering a PhD in communications (administered through the School of Journalism), although it is a tiny program, with only two students earning a doctorate each year. But the MA program aims fully to shift the way journalism is taught, through intensive subject-area training and by exploiting nonjournalistic academic expertise at the University.

So does this emphasis on the MA program take the MS program down a notch? “There’s the question of whether starting a new program is implying that there’s something wrong with the old one,” says Lemann. “Well, my answer is no.” But he also added, “To keep this place first rate, we should evolve and change constantly. We can do more and be better, and what we are offering now doesn’t exist under the roof of any school that I know of.”

While there is a lot of buzz at the school about this new degree, it wasn’t without controversy at first. Bollinger touched a nerve among many Columbia J-school graduates. The idea of tinkering with the school was met with some skepticism, especially as media pundits speculated that he was trying to undo what is often considered to be the top journalism graduate school in the country.

“Bollinger came out swinging for the fences and people were a bit knocked back,” says David Klatell, currently the vice dean and professor of professional practice, who served as interim dean during the 2002–03 year. “We were bombarded by alums, many of whom did not understand the direction in which we were headed.”

By now the specifics of the program are known and the deans have reassured alumni that their school would not become radically different. “I’m a little nervous and I don’t want to declare victory prematurely,” says Lemann. “It will take a couple of years for everybody involved to get their sea legs, but I’m highly confident that this is going to work. I will say that this has been one of the most fun things I’ve ever been involved with and I’m thrilled that it’s starting soon.”



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