DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING AN ONLINE MASTER'S DEGREE IN JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT
During the fall 2010 semester, 6.1 million students in American higher education took at least one online course (nearly one-third of all students), an increase of 560,000 over the previous year. The 10 percent growth rate for online enrollment far exceeded 2 percent growth overall. A study published in 2011 refers to seven American universities who were among the first to offer online journalism degrees. This paper is a brief case study of one of those programs — the M.S. in journalism at South Dakota State University. This paper outlines the program's development to its first cohort of students in 2009 and its more than doubled grow in two years. It looks at several aspects of offering an online program, from marketing and curriculum to best practices in online teaching and observations from graduates and faculty, including 10 lessons learned.

INTRODUCTION
History of the Program
Since 1949, the first year that national accreditation of journalism programs in the United States began, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at South Dakota State University, a mid-size, land grant institution established in 1881, has maintained continuous accreditation of its undergraduate program. During a past accreditation visit, SDSU's program, with around 200 students at a university of nearly 12,000, was called one of the best mid-sized journalism programs in the nation.

For almost 50 years, from 1956 to 2004, the department had a traditional, thesis-only master's degree program with less than two graduates per year. The program was small because of an emphasis on undergraduate teaching, limited graduate faculty, and traditional class times.

For most of these years, the lone MCOM class for graduate students only was Research Methods in Communication, usually cross-listed and offered by the Department of Communication Studies and Theatre because there were not enough MCOM students to reach the seven students required. Other MCOM courses for the M.S. degree included several 400/500 level classes with undergraduate students. To meet the SDSU Graduate School requirement that 50 percent of M.S. coursework must be 600-level courses or above, students typically took two or three classes outside the department, often in education.

By 2004, the number of grad faculty had doubled. For that reason and others, the department examined nine other journalism and mass communication graduate programs in the region and informally asked potential graduate students what they wanted in a program. The department found that (1) out of nine regional JMC programs, only the University of Wyoming and SDSU were thesis-only, (2) it needed to offer classes more conveniently, and (3) only the University of Nebraska-Lincoln had an online JMC program.

By 2005, the department had added a non-thesis option (32 credits versus 30, with a 2 or 3 credit problem/project paper) and offered two 400/500-level classes (International Media and Opinion Writing) one day a week, starting at 4 p.m. and delivered via the Dakota Digital Network (DDN) across the state. With those two changes, by 2008 the department doubled its grad students to 10, offered two other classes via DDN, and began to schedule Media Law online each summer. DDN courses were an attempt to reach the "Sioux Falls market" [Sioux Falls, the largest city in the state, is 50 miles from the campus] and expand into the state. But, it was quickly evident that students were not only place-bound but time-bound. They didn't want to drive to campus one day a week or even go to a DDN classroom in their community.

Beginning & Rapid Growth of an Online Program
Thus, the department began to discuss an online master's degree with support and encouragement from deans of the College of Arts and Sciences and Continuing and Extended Education. In May 2008, the department surveyed 800 alumni, with 160 responding and 65 indicating considerable interest. The survey found that two-thirds of the 65 respondents: (1) were interested in an online cohort program, (2) said their employer/company would support them pursuing a master's degree, and (3) were not interested in occasional face-to-face instruction. The majority also wanted to finish in two years and take two classes at a time.

This alumni survey provided the spark to move ahead quickly with a proposal to offer an online master's degree. In April 2009, the South Dakota Board of Regents approved the online delivery of a M.S. degree in Communication Studies and Journalism, Journalism emphasis. (Note: The departments of Communication Studies and Theatre Arts and Journalism and Mass Communication have had a combined M.S. degree since the mid-1990s. Students select a Communication Studies or Journalism emphasis.)

Eighteen students started in the first cohort in August 2009. Two years later, four had finished "on time." By mid-April 2012, five more of the original group, 50 percent, had finished. Eleven new students enrolled in the August 2010 second cohort, and 20 began classes in the August 2011 third cohort (nine starting Spring 2012). An anticipated 10 students are expected to enroll in the fourth cohort in August 2012.

Online Trends in the U.S.
This growth tracks with overall national trends but not with what has transpired in journalism higher education. Castañeda (2011) reports that although online degrees are booming across the United States, "online programs have made few inroads into journalism education, at least among ACEJMC-accredited schools" (p. 363).

The 2011 Survey of Online Learning (Babson) revealed that the number of students taking one online course had surpassed 6 million. The study noted that the 10 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 2 percent growth in the overall higher education student population. The study reported that there is a "wide variety in rate of growth of online enrollments among different colleges and universities, and also among different programs within the same institution. For example, fully online health sciences programs show higher growth than online programs in other disciplines."

As Castañeda notes, journalism is one of the disciplines where growth has lagged behind. She asks "why?" and reports that journalism programs are "racing to keep up with changes in media landscape by introducing the teaching of multimedia skills in traditional classroom environments instead of developing web-based degree programs." Other factors hindering the development of online journalism degree programs include "faculty skepticism, a shortage of technological know-how, and a lack of support within schools" (p. 361).

Castañeda reports that the first journalism schools to offer online programs were the University of Memphis and the University of Nebraska-Omaha, both in 1994, and the University of Missouri in 2001. Since then, South Dakota State University, Syracuse University, Kent State University, Ball State University, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln launched programs. Of the 14 schools/programs she found, only two were bachelor's degree programs, with most being master of arts degrees, and two (including South Dakota State) being master of science degrees.

This paper outlines the rapid development of the online program, successful beyond initial expectations, at South Dakota State. The following sections present program requirements, how the online program bolsters the on-campus program, quality control of online instruction, student recruitment, enrollment data, and faculty and student observations.

Program Requirements

Table 1 lists the current curriculum for the non-thesis, online, professional M.S. degree in Journalism at South Dakota State. (On-campus students can follow the same curriculum.)

The program reflects Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) guidelines for an accredited professional program, with more than half of the credits being skills classes. In the 32-credit program, students must complete a two or three credit professional project. In their first class, MCOM 704: Introduction to Graduate Studies each fall, students are exposed to the options they have for this requirement and receive lists of projects from previous SDSU students, as well as from other JMC programs, such as the University of Missouri. In their third class, MCOM 787: Professional Research Strategies each spring, students move forward on a possible topic. At the end of their second semester, students are encouraged to submit a project proposal as soon as possible. As project proposals come in, the online program and graduate program coordinators and a third MCOM faculty member review them, provide input and make suggestions on the scope, methodology, etc. This committee assigns a major project adviser and a second committee member.

Table 1 — M.S. in Journalism, Option B, professional program

Core Program Requirement (17-18 credits)
MCOM 530: Media Law (3 credits)
MCOM 692: Topics — Professional Writing (3 credits)
MCOM 692: Topics — Public Relations Campaigns (3 credits)
MCOM 704: Introduction to Graduate Study (3 credits)
MCOM 787: Professional Research Strategies (3 credits)
MCOM 788: Professional Project (2-3 credits)
   *Media Law is not required of students who have taken it recently as an undergrad.

Professional Courses (minimum of 9 credits)
MCOM 513: International Media (3 credits)
MCOM 574: Media Administration and Management (3 credits)
MCOM 576: International and Ethnic Advertising (3 credits)
MCOM 615: Opinion Writing (3 credits)
MCOM 692: Video Production (3 credits)

Electives (5-6 credits)
MCOM 516: Mass Media in Society (3 credits)
MCOM 519: Women in Media (3 credits)
MCOM 553: Mass Communication Teaching Methods (3 credits)
MCOM 617: History of Journalism (3 credits)
MCOM 791: Independent Study (1 to 4 credits)
Or, Non-MCOM classes (up to 6 credits)

Dr. Jennifer Tiernan, online program coordinator, advises most of the projects with assistance from Dr. Lyle Olson, graduate program coordinator. The major adviser, with assistance from the second committee member if needed, works with the student until the project nears completion. Before the oral defense is scheduled, a third MCOM faculty member joins the committee. When the defense is scheduled, the Graduate School assigns a fourth committee member. Due to growth of the program, a third faculty member, Dr. Matthew Cecil, has become involved in advising as well. And, Dr. Mary Arnold, department head, has advised one online student's project.

For the first nine oral defenses in the online program, three were held via Skype (students from Georgia, Idaho, Western South Dakota) and six face-to-face because students were close enough to come to campus.

Online Program Strengthens On-Campus Program

Because of the success of the online program, course offerings for the on-campus M.S. program (with an enrollment of 12 to 15 students) has grown stronger.

As noted earlier, adding a project option and providing more convenient class access doubled graduate program enrollment to around 10. However, that was still not enough students for graduate-level only classes. It was also difficult for non-thesis students to reach the required 50 percent of their 32 credits at the 600/700 level. However, the combination of adding the non-thesis option and offering an online degree with solid enrollment has had a significant impact on curriculum development for both the on-campus and online M.S. program. Since the online program started in August 2009, the department has offered more 600 and 700-level classes (Introduction to Graduate Studies, Case Studies in Public Relations, History of Journalism, Mass Communication Teaching Methods, and Opinion Writing). It has offered sections of 400/500 classes — International Media, Media Administration and Management, Mass Media in Society, Media Law, Women in Media — at the graduate level only. And, it now offers its own research class, no longer needing to rely on the Communication Studies and Theatre Arts offering, a long-needed, positive development.

Quality Matters in Online Program

It can also be argued that the quality of instruction in the online M.S. program is of equal or perhaps even higher quality than the on-campus program. In the summer of 2008, SDSU piloted the use of Quality Matters, a rubric originally created at the University of Maryland, to evaluate the design of online and hybrid courses. Quality Matters had gained national attention and became a leader in quality assurance for online education. The South Dakota Board of Regents had adopted Quality Matters in the fall of 2006, and now all online courses must be reviewed before being offered and then reviewed again every three years. Face-to-face classes do not undergo the same scrutiny.

The Quality Matters rubric examines each online course in the following eight areas: course overview and introduction, learning objectives (competencies), assessment and measurement, resources and materials, learner interaction, learner support, course technology, and ADA compliance. To be approved, a proposed course must receive 68 of a possible 80 points (85 percent). Four instructors in the online program

the past two years — Drs. Arnold, Cecil, Olson and Tiernan — scored an average of 97 to 100 percent on the rubric compared to the university average of 88 to 90. Cecil, Olson and Tiernan have completed basic and advanced online teaching training and are currently working toward master certification, the highest level at the university.

As Castañeda noted, faculty skepticism of online teaching has hindered the development of online journalism programs. The Babson (2011) survey noted that "there continues to be a consistent minority of academic leaders concerned that the quality of online instruction in not equal to courses delivered face-to-face."

To the contrary, Palloff and Pratt (2007) write, "We need not apologize for online classes; when done well, they are every bit as rigorous as face-to-face education. But we do need to pay attention to the differences inherent in this form of teaching in order to develop high-quality courses that are every bit as rigorous as their face-to-face counterparts and perhaps even more so" (xv). Further, a 2009 meta-analysis of online learning studies from the U.S. Department of Education found, "Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction."

At South Dakota State, the previous dean of the College of Arts and Sciences taught online and was a strong advocate of offering the journalism M.S. online; Dr. Arnold, the department head, has taught online. When administrators and faculty members experience first-hand an effective online course and receive training in best practices of online teaching, skepticism of the delivery method disappears.

Table 2 below shows the combined online teaching experience of four primary graduate faculty members in the department.

Faculty Member	1st Added Online Component to a Class	Taught 1st Entirely Online Course	Courses Taught 100% Online	# of Terms Taught Online (F, Sp, Su)	Successful Quality Matters Reviews	*Hold SDSU advanced online certification, pursuing master level
Arnold	2003	2006	2	5	3	
Cecil	2000	2010	2	2	2	*
Olson	1994	1999	8	26	7	*
Tiernan	2000	2000, Iowa 2008, SDSU	5	12	4	*

Student Recruitment
Prior to the fall of 2009 start-up, the department implemented a number of procedures to recruit students to the program. Because of the uniqueness of the program, a variety of promotional tactics were employed ranging from high-tech online promotion to unique and low-tech alternatives.

Given the ready availability of an email list of alumni, an announcement was quickly sent to more than 1,500 SDSU Journalism and Mass Communication graduates. That announcement resulted in several inquiries. Online advertising was used to promote the online program as well. The department placed advertisements on Facebook and LinkedIn, and used Google AdWords to seek interest among users of the most used Web search engine. While we did not see many referrals from the Facebook ads, several applicants and those who inquired about the program said they had seen ads for the program on LinkedIn. A few people indicated they had seen ads for the program when using Google's search engine. An analysis of the Facebook campaign indicates that the targeting terms employed were too general, resulting in a mass but not sufficiently focused audience.

One lesson learned in the promotion of the first cohort was that decidedly low-tech promotional tactics were the most effective. For example, the department used guerilla marketing tactics to promote the program to journalists in the region. Newsrooms of the major newspapers and television stations in South Dakota and North Dakota were sent boxes of doughnuts with flyers and postcards advertising the online master's program. The flyers and postcards instructed hungry newsroom employees to "1. Eat donut. 2. Check out our online master's in journalism program." This tactic generated some discussion, prompted several journalists to call the department, was positively received and ultimately resulted in the enrollment of several mid-career South Dakota journalists.

The most successful form of marketing, however, has been traditional word-of-mouth. There is a notable "buzz" about the program in South Dakota and the surrounding area. In some instances, current students in the program and recent graduates are recommending it to others. Alumni are talking about the program. South Dakota television reporters have inquired about doing a story about the program. The central administration on the SDSU campus has begun to tout the program as an example of the university's ability to solve the problem of geographic isolation and to attract a new demographic to SDSU. Thanks to word-of-mouth, the program's success has become known in journalism education circles as well. One SDSU faculty member visiting a large Ohio university was spontaneously approached by a journalism instructor and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist there who had heard of the program and was thinking about enrolling.

Within South Dakota, the alumni connections, excellent reputation of the undergraduate program in journalism and mass communication, and faculty connections have generated interest. It is the expansion of that interest to a wider network of potential students, mostly through word-of-mouth, that has been most surprising.

Advising and Retention
The online program coordinator handles inquiries about the program, assists students with the application process, and helps them enroll for classes, which includes setting up an SDSU email account and a WebAdvisor account (used to access transcripts, course schedules, payment information). As per SDSU Graduate School policy, each student must prepare a plan of study (POS) prior to completion of 50 percent of the credits toward graduation. Dr. Tiernan assists students with their plan of study, their project proposal, graduation application, and so forth.

Although there are no formal retention policies, because Tiernan and Olson typically teach at least one and sometimes two of the first four classes in the program and up to half of the courses overall, they monitor student progress class-by-class and are aware of students who fall behind in a class, drop a class, or sit out a class.

Statistics from the first cohort in the fall of 2009 illustrate that regular adviser/instructor contact and the cohort emphasis aids in retention. Of the 18 students who started that fall, eight are done and three more are on track to finish summer in 2012. Of the remaining seven students, two dropped out, two are on hold for personal reasons, and the status of three is uncertain. Still, a 61 percent completion rate (11 of 18) is comparable to on-campus completion rates and commendable for an online program without face-to-face contact. Of the 11 students in the second cohort, nine are still enrolled.

Enrollment Data
Tables 3 and 4 present data on inquiries about the MCOM graduate program, as well as a comparison of online and on-campus students during the 2010-2011 school year. Table 3 reveals that (1) there tends to be about 20 percent more inquiries per enrolled student for the

online versus on-campus program but (2) once students are admitted there are more "no shows" for the on-campus program.

Table 3 — MCOM Online and On-Campus Admittance and Enrollment Data from 2008-2011*

	Inquiries	Admitted Uncondi-tionally	Admitted Condition-ally	Students Enrolled	Denied Admission	Students Graduated
2008-2009	**n/a** — 19	**n/a** — 7	**n/a** —2	**n/a** — 9		n/a — 4 (3 theses, 1 project)
2009-2010	**50** — 17	**12** — 7	**3** — 4	**15** — 11		n/a — 7 (1 thesis, 6 projects)
2010-2011	**29** — 13	**9** — 5	**1** — 2	**11** — 6	**0** — 1	**4** — 7 (3 theses, 8 projects)

*Data for the online program is on the left in bold; on-campus data is on the right.

Table 4 reveals four things: (1) Although the online students are older, as expected, the average on-campus student is still a non-traditional age, (2) the gender make-up for the online program is much closer to 50/50 than the on-campus program, (3) on-campus enrollment is more diverse due to international students, and (4) a majority of students in both programs are not SDSU graduates.

The last item, that students are not primarily alumni of South Dakota State, is somewhat unexpected. Although the department anticipated that graduates of other universities would enroll, it did not expect that students from states outside of the Midwest would enroll at such a high number. Anecdotally, low tuition seems to be one reason for this. In the fall 2009 cohort, a student from Georgia who works at a university selected SDSU's online M.S. program because the tuition of under $11,000 for 32 credits was less than universities within commuting distance with face-to-face programs and much less than other online journalism and mass communication programs.

Table 4 — Comparison of Online and On-Campus Students (2010-2011)

	Online, n = 24	On-Campus, n = 18
Average Age	40.6 (25 to 58)	33.5 (25 to 60)
Male	11 (46%)	5 (28%)
Female	13 (54%)	13 (72%)
Minority or International	3 (12.5%)	5 (27.7%)
*Mean under-grad GPA**	3.26	3.41
SDSU under-grad degree	9 (37.5%)	8 (44.4%)
Residence (# of states)	10 (CA,ID,GA,MN,NC, NE,NM,PA,SD,TX)	2 (MN,SD)

*Students admitted unconditionally.

Two Very Good Decisions
As indicated earlier, the online program developed and grew quickly. Just 11 months after obtaining alumni input about such a program, the department received Board of Regents' approval to offer one. Just four months later, the department began offering classes to the first cohort. Two years later, enrollment in the program more than doubled. At times, faculty describe the process as "controlled chaos."

One of the most important decisions the department made was to emphasize cohorts. A cohort, by definition, is a "group of persons sharing a particular statistical or demographic characteristic" or "a companion or associate." Students who enroll in the online M.S. program, despite their widely varying backgrounds and experience, are companions in an educational endeavor. The first class, MCOM 704: Introduction to Graduate Studies, incorporated various concepts from Palloff and Pratt's (2007) *Building Online Learning Communities.* These authors write,

> Online education requires more than a software package that allows an institution to offer coursework online. In any setting, whether academic, organizational, or corporate, it is *people* who are using the machinery that makes the course go. The human element, therefore, will inevitably play a role in the electronic classroom, particularly as we work toward the *purpose* for being together online. Human concerns should be welcomed into the classroom, not feared, and should be worked with as they emerge. (p. 64)

Professor Olson established Lyle's Lounge as a place for students to reflect on the online learning experience, to comment on the pros and cons, similarities and differences, frustrations and highlights of online learning versus face-to-face. Palloff and Pratt write that an online virtual café should be "a space in the course where everyone, instructors and students alike, can let their hair down and be comfortable with one another — a community space, if you will ... The sharing of our lives, including our travels, our observations, our emotions, and who we are as people is deliberately brought into the classroom in an effort to promote group cohesion and connection" (pp. 113-115).

After the initial offering of the course, however, students' use of Lyle's Lounge, a chat tool in D2L, dwindled to almost nothing, partly due to the chat function being cumbersome. But, discussion postings elsewhere in subsequent courses indicated that relatively free-sharing cohorts had developed. All of the online courses begin with initial "getting to know each other" or "getting to know each other better" discussions, followed by weekly discussion topics that allow students to share their experiences and resources related to the content and then comment on each other's postings. Often in these discussion areas, students will preface their comments with personal statements, such as this post April 15, 2012 in a progress report assignment — "Time seems to be slipping away from me! I am more behind schedule than I should be. (Admittedly, I was distracted over the last week or so by a friend visiting from Seattle and turning the dreaded 3-0.)"

In addition, open discussions in classes such as Mass Media in Society, Media Law and International Media allow students to post and comment on current events related to the course. This "value added" content goes well beyond what students typically share in a face-to-face class because of the ease of doing so online. This liberal sharing of resources and experiences builds the camaraderie among students in a cohort/class to the point that quotes like these from students are common —
• *One student —* "Has anyone ever had a class — sitting in a classroom — with this much discussion?"
• *Another student —* "Never. And I never got to know my classmates as well. Heck, I didn't even know some of my high school classmates as well, and that was a class of 44."

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Palloff and Pratt point out that an effective online learning community has emerged when (1) there is active interaction involving both course content and personal communication, (2) collaborative learning occurs through student to student comments primarily rather than student to instructor, (3) students share resources, and (4) students exchange expressions of support and encouragement along with a willingness to critically evaluate each other's work. We have seen all of these occur, and when they do, students respond positively to individual courses and the program overall.

A second important decision at the start of the program was to offer one course at a time. Instead of offering two semester-long courses concurrently, SDSU's Dean of Continuing Education wanted courses to be offered one at a time. Consequently, from the start, the department has offered one eight-week course, followed by a second course. Most semesters, two courses are offered the first eight weeks (one for a new cohort, one for the previous year's cohort), followed by two more courses the second eight weeks (again, typically, one for the new and one for the old cohorts, but sometimes two elective classes in which cohorts intermingle). Students overwhelmingly prefer taking one course at a time. Although the content of the course is more concentrated, students with careers and families like to be able to focus on one set of assignments and deadlines at a time with the end (only eight weeks) in sight.

Problems

The department has faced two main problems offering an entire degree online. One problem, for which it has no control, is the learning management system the university uses to deliver the courses. The other more vexing problem is the course ending professional project.

In South Dakota, all higher education institutions use Desire2Learn to deliver courses via the Internet. Desire2Learn, abbreviated as D2L, is an online learning management systems used at more than 450 institutions around the world, according to Wikipedia, the only source that listed a number. Founded in 1995, the company's headquarters are in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. D2L is adequate, but it's not perfect. With servers outside the United States, access time within courses can be slow. Further, many of the functions are cumbersome and click-intensive. When graduates of the program were asked to rate various aspects of their online education experience using a 5-step scale from excellent to poor, they ranked "facilities," including the learning management system, as good, so there is room for improvement. (Anecdotally, the Blackboard Learning System is said to be more refined, and with over 9,300 institutions in 60 countries in December 2010, again according to Wikipedia, it likely is.) But, it is also more expensive and South Dakota's Board of Regents opted to save money.

The second problem — concerns about the semester-ending project — can be solved. Offering 10 three-credit courses has gone relatively smoothly, but the final two-credit project has not. When the first group of graduates assessed the program, the only pattern that emerged was students wanted more guidance and information on the expectations for the final project. When students weren't submitting proposals for their projects or drafts of their projects in a timely manner and when students who completed the program indicated that "lack of direction" on their project was their biggest complaint, the coordinators knew there was a problem.

"The lack of direction" input was disconcerting because starting with the first class (Introduction to Graduate Studies), students received three separate handouts on the difference between a thesis and a project, types of projects, and lists of completed projects. The project is also discussed in some detail in the research methods class. It became apparent that after having encouraged and developed a cohort system that served students very well as they took courses together, we left students "hanging" to work on their own on the program-ending project. The solution, we think, is to offer MCOM 788: Professional Project as a class during which students provide feedback, support, and otherwise assist each other with input from faculty advisers. This course will begin Summer 2012.

In addition to "the lack of direction" concern, the growth of the program has resulted in a heavy project-advising load for, essentially, two faculty members. Although projects don't take as much time as a thesis, they still require that a faculty adviser expend considerable effort in guiding students. When students in a previous cohort don't complete their projects "on time" (two years) and double up with students in subsequent cohorts, a backlog develops. An easy solution would be to offer a course-work only master's degree, but we are not willing to do that, believing in the value of a program-ending project that allows students to apply and demonstrate their proficiency after having completed their coursework.

Offering the project course will help solve the problem, and, potentially, hiring qualified adjuncts to advise projects is another option. Another way to handle the project problem is to limit enrollment in the online program, which we have not done yet, but may consider in the future.

Lessons Instructors Have Learned

Added together, Drs. Tiernan and Olson have taught 13 courses online over 38 terms (fall, spring, summer), successfully passed 11 Quality Matters online course reviews, and attended numerous seminars on effective online teaching. Twice, the department hired inexperienced adjunct instructors to teach online courses, and it did not go well. Clearly, teaching online effectively is not for the novice. Following are 10 things we have learned about online teaching:

1. The instructor's role shifts from being a knowledge disseminator to a knowledge facilitator, changing the dynamics of a class, as well as the assignments, grading, feedback, etc.

2. Online courses, taught well, can indeed be just as effective as face-to-face courses, and in some cases more effective.

3. If discussion questions are carefully thought out, participation is higher and richer in an online class compared to a F2F class where introverted students don't talk and thoughtful students think of good comments after class is over.

4. A tremendous strength of an online learning environment is "value-added content" in which students locate and post links to resources related to course content.

5. Some students who were initially skeptical of online courses end up saying they prefer it.

6. Students drawn to a M.S. in journalism are not reluctant to discuss topics and express their opinions. (At South Dakota State, the math department tried an online program, and it failed because "students weren't willing to discuss.") The takeaway — not all fields of study are suited, perhaps, for an online degree.

7. Synchronous learning (real-time) doesn't work. Students lead busy lives, and they much prefer being able to do their work 24/7 asynchronously. We have tried live sessions with guest speakers, but participation is slim. On the plus side, such sessions can be recorded easily for students to view later.

8. Other forms of individual communication (telephone conversations, Skype chats, email) are important to maintain adviser/student connections and to encourage students to move forward with their program-ending projects.

9. Because of the absence of informal opportunities for students to ask questions about assignments or policies, successful online courses require that instructions for students be meticulous and complete. Typically, syllabi included not just lists of assignments, for example, but detailed instructions for those assignments.

10. Assigned group activities require lengthy lead times and, again, carefully drawn instructions. Group assignments are most

effective when they include instructor access to student work process as well as work product.

What Reviewers and Graduates Say

Initial assessment of the program is very positive, but preliminary due to the newness of the program. To prepare for an ACJMC accreditation visit in November 2011, the department asked two media professionals to evaluate each of the projects the first four graduates of the program completed. Using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the reviewers rated several areas. The overall combined averages for all reviewers was 4.4. The highest score was for "judgment and understanding," while the lowest score (but still a 4.1) was for the incorporation of "words numbers and images."

In addition, the department created an online survey to obtain input about the program, asking master's graduates to judge their educational experience. All nine of the students who had completed their master's degrees in the previous year completed the survey – four from the online program and five from on campus. There were no marked differences between the online and on-campus students.

Students were asked to rate five aspects of their educational experience using a 5-step scale from excellent to poor with 5 being excellent. Students ranked the curriculum, faculty, instruction and facilities as good or higher. Students ranked the department's atmosphere and culture as excellent. In open-ended questions about strengths, weaknesses and recommendations about the program, students singled out various professors, courses and advisers as strengths. As previously indicated, the only pattern that emerged was that students wanted more information about the final project earlier.

Examples of favorable comments were:
• The classes overall were great and very easy to manage. The research class was great in developing the first half of my project which made the final easier to manage.
• All of my instructors were outstanding. As a result I had a blast learning from each one.
• In my opinion, all of the classes were very valuable to be applied in my further occupation.
• Instructors were helpful and supportive. Online discussions were valuable.

Examples of constructive comments were:
• Communication with faculty over the Internet was difficult.
• Introduce more courses.
• Some of the discussions got a bit overwhelming and stressful at times.

Students were also asked to gauge how well the program met the objective stated in each of the 12 ACEJMC professional values and competencies. Students consistently ranked the department as very good or excellent on all 12 competencies. There was no difference between the online and on-campus groups, except that students in the online program gave overall higher ranking to the "numerical and statistical concepts" competency. Another section asked students to gauge how well the department helped to develop their leadership skills, since enhancing those skills is a goal for our professional program. Students rated the department as excellent or very good on all categories.

Conclusion

From the beginning, a driving reason for developing an online M.S. degree in journalism at SDSU was to provide students who could not come to campus for face-to-face classes (place-bound) or who could not enroll in synchronous education (time-bound) the opportunity to pursue a master's degree. The first graduate of the online program was both time- and place-bound but also has a physical disability (hearing loss) that, he said, made face-to-face classes difficult. During his oral defense, he said that the online program was the only way he could have pursued a master's degree, one of the items on his bucket list. After the defense he wrote,

I will miss it. Greatly! It [the program] has rekindled my love and enthusiasm for the journalism profession, as well as my love for learning. Back from our very first course when we were doing book reports, I bought several of the books that the other students reviewed, and now I have time to read them. My library has grown considerably. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed the program. I only wish there was a Ph.D.-level program as well." Another student, who started in August 2010 in the second cohort and who will graduate Summer 2012, wrote recently:

WOW, where has the time gone. This is my last class. It's amazing how fast all of these classes have gone! I see many new "faces" in this class. It's amazing how we really do get to know each other through these discussions. When I started my master's classes, I really had no idea where this would take me. It has already opened doors that I would have never even found the knob for! :) I started a new job this week . . . I have my B.S. in marketing, and I thought that a mass comm/journalism master's would complement that. Little did I really understand what I was going to learn in these classes and how I would be able to apply them. One of the topics in my interview with my "boss's boss" was what I liked the most about marketing. I like research. I CAN RESEARCH! Thanks to these classes!

As comments like these come in from students who could not have earned a master's degree on campus, the hassles with learning management systems, the time spent learning how to teach online, the issues of advising master's projects without face-to-face interaction, and so forth all become worth the time and effort when students reach a new level of achievement in their lives.

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