



## **Cyclical Review of the Journalism Program Final Assessment Report**

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***Part I: Synthesis of Review Documents***

a. Summary of Self-Study

This is the program's first cyclical review since its start in 2005. Journalism (JN) launched at Laurier Brantford (LB) in 2005 with three tenure-track faculty members (Saari, Haskell, Ferguson). The original JN curriculum was designed as a spine of courses "meeting specific educational goals regarding essential journalism-specific knowledge and skills," complementing the Contemporary Studies (CT) degree offered at Laurier Brantford. The program currently has seven tenured or tenure-track faculty members and around 190 students taking courses in four streams.

Our faculty strive for teaching excellence and this is reflected in the positive feedback we receive from our students. Both overall course effectiveness and the strength of instruction have received uniformly high marks on student evaluations during the ten semesters included in the report, often exceeding the overall University mean for each semester. Journalism students in recent graduating classes have won the Canadian Association of Journalists' National Journalism Award for student journalism (Tara Hagan, '08); and the David S. Barr award for Social Justice Reporting from the US Newspaper Writers Guild (Meagan Gillmore, '11).

Attrition rates in year two of the Journalism program are, due in part to its liberal arts focus, lower than in other Ontario schools of journalism (between 34-20% at Laurier Brantford compared with 50-30% at Carleton and Ryerson). Nonetheless, the faculty and the Dean's office in Brantford are aggressively pursuing retention strategies for the program, through curriculum redesign, student involvement in the Journalism Guild, and the maintenance of professional relationships that provide students with opportunities for developing their competencies and their portfolios (by agreement with the Brantford *Expositor*).

The strength of the Laurier Brantford Journalism program has, in the eyes of its faculty and many of its students, always rested on its emphasis on "developing a student's critical research about and knowledge of the world." As part of a liberal arts-centered campus, the Journalism program at Laurier Brantford was enriched through the pairing of its own course offerings with those of the campus core requirements in Contemporary Studies. Additionally, by focusing on journalistic story-telling rather than technological skills education, this curricular model has presented an affordable route to journalistic training at the university level. As the program developed, it entered into partnership with Conestoga College in Kitchener, which provides third-year programming in broadcast journalism, a track requiring a significant amount of specialized equipment training.

In response to student interest, administrative budget directives, and a faltering relationship with Mohawk College, the Journalism faculty revised its curriculum for 2010. In the new model, the degree offers four concentrations (broadcast, print, emerging media, publication relations) instead of the previous, more open-ended curriculum. Students who do not take the print concentration can choose to spend their third year at Conestoga College's Doon campus in Kitchener. Typically, the students who choose to go to Conestoga for this third year (which results in a post-graduate diploma) enroll in the Videography-Broadcast Journalism/Documentary program.

While both the human and physical resources currently in place in the Journalism program are sufficient to run the program, neither the equipment currently on hand nor the complement of faculty expertise is adequate to address the future growth and development of the program. Students are dissatisfied with having to move to Conestoga College for third-year programming and the numbers doing so are declining. Thus Conestoga is contemplating shutting down their programs that fulfill Laurier Brantford Journalism students' third-year requirements in practical training. In order to address this looming deficiency, as well as some of the perceived gaps in the undergraduate curriculum, the Journalism program is investigating whether—and with what resources—it would be best to move all programming back to Brantford and reduce the number of discrete streams available to students. By centralizing program offerings and investing in faculty and equipment for production journalism on site in Brantford, the program would be in a better position to offer its students thorough training in both journalistic story-telling (its current forte) and the production requirements of contemporary media convergence technologies (an identified weakness in the program).

In the Self-Study, the program identified the following issues that deserve attention in the upcoming academic year(s):

- Enhance the program's capacity to deliver broadcast and multi-media instruction in Brantford.
- Develop more genuinely cross-platform opportunities for students in courses consistent with the converged media environment into which students will graduate.
- Develop a clearer direction for the Strategic Communications concentration, in order to better reflect the critical, beyond-corporate nature of the field.
- Address the failure of our Collective Agreement to specify works of Journalism as criteria for Tenure & Promotion. (*Note: This has been addressed in the new Collective Agreement.*)

- Recognize the importance of social media networking and having a professional online presence to JN and other jobs and build a professional online presence into the students' overall program experience (Media Portal).
- Revise the JN423 Capstone course to require students to produce their content over two platforms and incorporate a critical reflection piece.
- Use the Campus TV screens as outlets for student journalism content.

Additionally, the program has been working on a proposal for a two-year Master's of Arts in Critical and Investigative Journalism. It is designed to allow students to "explore an integrative model of journalism as a critically reflective practice within an interdisciplinary context." Courses and student work would revolve around three themes:

1. Advanced Reporting Methods (computer-assisted reporting, advanced methods in quantitative and qualitative investigation, deep-ethnographic qualitative research)
2. Advocacy Journalism (research and practice in social justice, conflict, peace or environmental journalism in a global context)
3. Critical Studies (political economy of the news media, critical content and discourse analyses, theories of narrative structure, cultural studies of new media, etc.)

b. Summary of External Reviewer's Report and Recommendations

The Journalism Program offers an Honours BA and a minor in Journalism at the Brantford Campus. A review committee consisting of Dr. Christopher Waddell Associate Professor and Director, School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University and Dr. James Wong, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Philosophy, Wilfrid Laurier University reviewed these programs on April 9-10, 2012.

The reviewers' report summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the program, along with a listing of recommendations. Overall, the reviewers note that the Journalism program,

clearly matches the program level outcomes with Laurier's undergraduate degree level expectations and demonstrates how the program works to achieve these expectations. As well the program's objectives fit well within the mission and philosophy of Laurier Brantford, with its combined focus on liberal arts and professional programs. (p. 1)

However, they also note that the program faces some challenges in the coming years, primarily because of an outdated curriculum, an over-emphasis on theory versus journalism skills, serious student retention problems in the upper years, and a lack of infrastructure required for an up-to-date program. The faculty in the program have challenged the theory-skill balance criticism but agree with the retention, lack of infrastructure and outdated curriculum concerns.

*Reviewers' Discussion*

- *The theory-skill balance in the Journalism Curriculum.* This is one of the most notable and contentious points in the review. The reviewers comment on the lack of skills teaching in favour of "critical thinking" and journalism theory at several points in the review, and note that students also raised this concern with them. Additionally, the reviewers note that the journalism faculty at Laurier Brantford do not have extensive journalism experience which, according to the reviewers, compromises their ability to instruct thoroughly in journalism skills courses.
- *Student retention and recruitment.* The reviewers note that the program is suffering large losses of students in the upper years of the program. While the exact cause seems to be unclear to the faculty and reviewers alike, a lack of infrastructure and an outdated curriculum seem to be two main contributing factors.

- *A department of Journalism, Media Studies and Strategic Communication?* The declining first year Journalism class has been an issue for the last three years, and discussions around the creation of a more diversified unit to address this have taken place between the program and the university for the last two years. As noted, the Journalism program needs some infrastructure and equipment improvements to ensure its long term viability. But faced with declining enrolments, investments in these areas are of questionable value. One proposal that has been discussed at Brantford to resolve this dilemma is the creation of a more diversified program unit that will attract more students and maximize the use of new equipment. The Journalism program already has a media studies option and a core faculty member who could flesh out the option into a combined degree or standalone degree. Similarly, a strategic communications program could be built around an existing faculty member. As these programs grow, more faculty would be added. The reviewers expressed concern about this initiative, recommending further study before implementation. They note that student demand should be firmed up, and that there is a fundamental opposition between journalism and strategic communication.
- *Broadcast Journalism and Conestoga College.* The reviewers correctly note that the partnership with Conestoga College for Broadcast students has not worked as well as either institution anticipated. The problem has been largely that students are not interested in moving 30 minutes away for an entire year and then moving back again. Two potential solutions to this problem are proposed: i) to maintain the partnership and have Conestoga provide the lab and technical equipment and courses on site in Brantford (including the use of the mobile truck); and ii), for Laurier to take over responsibility for this part of the program.
- *M.A. in Journalism.* As the initial discussions of this idea took place when enrolments were still strong, and there was a desire in the program to help the campus expand by tapping into a new market, the reviewers suggest that this project be delayed for the time being.
- *Infrastructure Improvements.* The reviewers note the need for technical and equipment upgrades to make the program more relevant to contemporary journalism. When the program began initially, some attempt was made to address the ongoing equipment needs of the program through the establishment of the Journalism Guild fee. In addition, the partnership with Conestoga College was designed in part to take advantage of the College's greater investment in broadcast equipment. While this worked initially, both solutions have not kept pace with the demands of the program.

#### Summary of Reviewers' Recommendations

1. Acquire the technical equipment necessary to deliver a contemporary journalism program and, as time passes, incorporate its replacement;
2. Establish dedicated journalism facilities that provide space for journalism students to work, try their skills and meet informally;
3. Increase the focus on specific digital journalism-related skills training within the program. The next faculty hire should be someone with a professional media background with a focus on and experience in online, digital and multimedia journalism.
4. Develop a plan to improve retention within the journalism program linked to a clearer statement of the program's content and a better understanding by students of what journalism at Laurier Brantford entails.
5. Consider changing the fourth-year capstone project in substance, requirements, equity and equipment to match better the demands placed on students completing the project in different media with available technical and human resources to support students in this work.
6. Change the relationship with Conestoga College to give students an opportunity to learn video journalism skills while staying on the Laurier Brantford campus.
7. Establish a dedicated library at Laurier Brantford on campus as a top priority.

c. Summary of Unit Response

The Journalism program, in its response, takes issue with the reviewers' assessment that skills training in Journalism has taken a back seat to "journalism studies" in the curriculum. However, the program realizes that, if the reviewers indeed misunderstood the balance between practice and theory in the course offerings, this was likely a result of the program's inability to convey to the reviewers (as well as to its students and prospective students, university administrators and recruiters) its distinctive approach to instruction in journalism.

The program is committed to ensuring that "practical, hands-on, journalistic work is the dominant curricular component" of skills-based courses in the curriculum. Additionally, the program will continue to work on refining its curriculum and messaging to position itself better within the context of university journalism programs in Ontario.

Regarding the lack of journalistic expertise in its faculty, the program acknowledges that the background of its professors has been “less than traditional.” The strategy for hiring in Journalism has arisen from the convergence of the needs of the Journalism program in particular and the campus core programming (Contemporary Studies) in general.“ That said, we wholly agree with the reviewers’ suggestion that new hires are needed within the journalism program, and that those new hires should possess extensive journalistic experience.” The unit notes that the new Collective Agreement contains language that “recognizes works of practical journalism as legitimate scholarship; further, professors whose background is rooted in professional activities can now be hired as faculty with teaching as their primary academic concern.” They feel that these changes to faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure policies will benefit Journalism in the next round of hiring.

The reviewers also urge the program to revise the curriculum to meet the demands of the field of journalism in the age of integrated media. “The reviewers correctly note that the changing media landscape renders our platform-based streamed curriculum model outmoded, and they urge the university to invest in the sorts of technological and faculty resources that would be needed to provide a multimedia learning environment, noting that such a move might also work to improve student retention rates.” In fact, the reviewers’ recommendations mirror recent program discussions and memos to the Dean regarding potential “de-streaming” of Journalism. The capstone course, and its inequity across journalistic media in the current curriculum, will be addressed during general curriculum revisions by the program in the coming academic year.

However, since de-streaming and offering intense, hands-on practical skills training go hand in hand (in the eyes of the reviewers and the JN faculty), our commitment to moving forward in this direction requires a significant investment in faculty hiring and infrastructure, in order to succeed. The program agrees with the reviewers’ assessment that the next hire in Journalism should possess “a professional media background with a focus on and experience in online, digital and multimedia journalism,” and that this new hire would be the appropriate person to take up skills-based teaching and championing of the new de-streaming initiative (in concert with technical support staff).

## ***Part 2: Executive Response***

### **a. Identification of Program Strengths**

The strengths of the Journalism program at Laurier Brantford have been, as revealed in both the Self-Study and the External Review process, tied to the small size of the student and faculty body and liberal arts focus of the degree. The development of the curriculum in Journalism over the

past seven years has sought to capitalize on the program's home within a small, interdisciplinary community and has allowed students to pair their journalism training with other academic pursuits. The requirements of the core Contemporary Studies program at Laurier Brantford have meant that JN students are exposed, not only to up-to-the minute reporting and storytelling techniques, but also to the broad humanistic tradition and key concepts in the history of ideas. The success of JN students in their careers and post-graduate studies is a testament to what has worked about the Journalism program at Laurier Brantford.

The reviewers spend a great deal of their report on the program, as is appropriate. However, it is also important to note the quality of the faculty and students in the program. While the number of incoming students has declined in recent years, and incoming averages are the similar to most Arts programs, the program does produce some exceptional students. Every year our students win local, provincial, national, and sometimes even international awards for young and/or student journalists. For many of these honours, only one student prize is awarded, so our students regularly outperform graduates from many other schools.

In addition, the faculty in the program have strong professional and academic journalism backgrounds. Academically, three of the seven faculty members hold major awards from SSHRC, which is a higher proportion than many other units. On the journalism side, four of the seven members have extensive experience as professional journalists, and two others have worked in political communications and policy analysis. The university does agree with the reviewers that faculty may have imposed on themselves an overly restrictive definition of what will count as scholarship and professional accomplishment for tenure.

The sensitivity of the faculty in Journalism to the changes in their field and the fluctuations of student enrolment and interest are evident throughout the Self-Study and the External Review. The Dean's office in Brantford would like to draw positive attention to the efforts of Program Coordinators Sue Ferguson and Dave Haskell for their commitment to navigating the changing waters of college partnerships and student demand, all while helping to keep the costs of running the program under control.

b. Opportunities for Program Improvement and Enhancement

There are many recommendations scattered throughout the report, focusing primarily on the theory-skill balance in the program, student retention and recruitment, curriculum improvements including the possible creation of a larger unit comprising Journalism, Media Studies, and Strategic Communication, the partnership with Conestoga College, the potential MA in Journalism, and infrastructure improvements. Several other recommendations are already underway (e.g., library improvements, core program improvements, and rolling budget projections for equipment), or do not make sense (e.g., a separate academic advisor for Journalism) and will not be addressed in any detail in this response.

- *The theory-skill balance in the Journalism curriculum.* The faculty are committed to reviewing the curriculum with the goal of ensuring that journalistic skills are “the dominant curricular component” of designated skills courses, and that this is clear to students, faculty, and administrators alike. The university strongly supports this approach to curricular reform.
- *Student retention & recruitment.* The faculty have committed to a curriculum overhaul, and infrastructure improvements have appeared in budget requests this past year and will continue to do so. Re-branding the skills elements in the program, equipment upgrades, and diversifying the program to include media studies and perhaps strategic communication are necessary for this turnaround. The question is whether they will be sufficient. The university agrees that it will continue to work closely with the program to build successful recruitment and retention strategies.
- *A department of Journalism, Media Studies and Strategic Communication?* As noted, the Journalism program needs some infrastructure and equipment improvements to ensure its long term viability. But faced with declining enrolments, investments in these areas are of questionable value. This dilemma can be solved by creating a more diversified program unit that will attract more students and maximize the use of new equipment. The Journalism program already has a media studies option and a core faculty member who could flesh out the option into a combined degree or standalone degree. Similarly, a strategic communications program could be built around an existing faculty member. As these programs grow, more faculty would be added. The reviewers have expressed concern about this initiative, recommending further study before implementation. They note that student demand should be firmed up, and that there is a fundamental opposition between journalism and strategic communication. The university agrees that further investigation of student demand is required, though this depends to some degree

on the nature of the program. Therefore, a proposal for a Media Studies degree will be developed over the next year, and will be subject to the normal program approval procedures. In the process, the recruitment office will be consulted extensively to gauge student demand for the program.

The reviewers' concern that journalism and strategic communication may not co-exist very well is a valid point that will need to be addressed in the media studies and potential larger re-organization proposals. Many units incorporate fundamental academic divides, so that in itself is not a reason to abandon the idea. But there may well be good reasons not to put these two units together, and that will need to be a part of the larger discussion about the curriculum review.

- *Broadcast Journalism and Conestoga College.* There are two potential solutions to the difficulties arising from third year programming being offered by Conestoga College in Kitchener. One is to maintain the partnership and have Conestoga provide the lab and technical equipment and courses on site in Brantford (including the use of the mobile truck). The second is for Laurier to take over responsibility for this part of the program. This decision should be made sooner rather than later. This decision will need to be made in extensive consultation with the program, and with the President, VPA/Provost, VP-Brantford and VP Finance and Administration, as well as with Conestoga College.
- *M.A. in Journalism.* This is still a worthwhile project, but two factors have changed recently that may extend the timeline for beginning the program. First, undergraduate student enrolments have declined, which will reduce the potential for new faculty appointments in the program. Second, the relationship with Conestoga College in particular should be clarified, and the undergraduate program(s) solidified before mounting a graduate program. There is still good value in pursuing a Journalism Master's program and it should continue to remain a program priority after the changes are made to strengthen the undergraduate program.
- *Infrastructure Improvements.* The reviewers have noted the need for technical and equipment upgrades to make the program more relevant to contemporary journalism. When the program began initially, some attempt was made to address the ongoing equipment needs of the program through the establishment of the Journalism Guild fee. In addition, the partnership with Conestoga College was designed in part to take advantage of the College's greater investment in broadcast equipment. While this worked initially, both solutions have not kept pace with the demands of the program. As noted, the university has already included requests for infrastructure improvements in its budget requests, some of which have been funded. The university will continue to work

with the program to try to address the equipment needs of the program, including the continued development of longer term plans for equipment acquisition, maintenance and replacement.

- *Other issues.* As noted earlier, the reviewers make several other recommendations in the report. These include recommendations about the library, the Contemporary Studies program, and academic advising. For each of these issues, the reviewers have made recommendations about what, in their view, would be best for Journalism, in keeping with their mandate. However, in all of these cases, the recommendations need to be put in the context of the entire campus. In the case of the library, changes are already well underway, and Journalism will continue to be part of that process, like any other program. The Contemporary Studies program has been undergoing an extensive internal review that is now almost complete. And the reviewers' suggestion that a dedicated academic advisor for Journalism be put in place is not consistent with the structure of academic advising at Laurier Brantford. Also, it is not the case that student retention would be improved with a dedicated advisor because the advisors serve the entire campus, yet other programs do not suffer the same level of attrition. The existing model of academic advising is most appropriate for the current size and structure of Laurier Brantford, and any changes will need to be driven by the needs of the campus.

c. Prioritization of Recommendations Approved for Implementation

Overall, the University is supportive of the general recommendations that the Journalism Program should review its curriculum, structure, and partnerships to improve student recruitment and retention, and take advantage of the strong core faculty currently in the unit. In keeping with the recommendations to the University arising from the Undergraduate Review, the following implementation plan is recommended:

- The Dean's Office supports and will work with the program to ensure a timely completion of the curriculum review (including the capstone course) and potential changes to course offerings in Brantford, if these changes can be achieved within the existing resources.
- In addition to supporting these changes, the Dean's Office will continue to review program needs for additional resources in conjunction with the needs of other programs. This will include the development of longer term budgeting models for equipment. These will be developed within the larger context of the integrated planning and resource management initiative across the university.

- The Dean’s Office will coordinate consultation between the program and the senior administration of the university regarding the partnership with Conestoga College.
- The Dean’s Office is supportive of the recommendation that the start date for an MA program should come after any changes to the undergraduate program have been put in place, and the partnership with Conestoga College has been clarified.
- The Program Coordinator will keep the Dean informed of proposed content changes to the program and the potential impact these changes may have on resource needs.
- The Dean will be responsible for reporting to the Senate Academic Planning Committee regarding any new resource allocation as recommended by the review.

***Part 3: Implementation Plan***

Recommendation to be Implemented	Responsibility for Implementation	Implementation Date	Additional Notes
Develop a 5-year plan for the acquisition of necessary technical equipment	Program Coordinator & Program Committee	Academic Year 2012-2013	In conjunction with IPRM
Provide dedicated facilities for students to use and explore new equipment	Dean’s Office	Ongoing—after curricular revision complete	In conjunction with IPRM
Increase the focus of digital journalism-related skills training	Program Committee	Beginning Winter 2013; ongoing thereafter	
Survey students to determine the reasons for poor retention in upper years	Program Committee	Beginning Winter 2013; ongoing thereafter	
Rethink the Capstone Course	Program Committee	Fall 2012	
Pursue a change in the relationship with Conestoga College	Program Committee; Program Coordinator; Dean’s Office	Academic year 2012-2013	