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Reporting for Duty, RWU’s First Journalism Grads

While some schools shutter their journalism programs, RWU boasts versatile reporters ready to take on the shifting media terrain

May 16, 2014    |    Jill Rodrigues ’05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Whether riding along with a police officer to experience a typical patrol shift or grinding through the monotony of covering town meetings, Samantha D’Orsi ’14 has already executed the customary assignments that most journalism grads will encounter in their first days on the job. But original reporting, complete with producing her own video, while simultaneously performing as the on-camera talent before engaging in robust conversation with her audience via social media – how many rookie reporters fresh out of “J-School” can make that claim?

As one of the first journalism graduates from Roger Williams University, D’Orsi says the innovative training instilled from the new major will give her an edge over other job-seekers, whether they’re newbie grads or veteran newsroom reporters.

From the basics of news writing and long-form feature articles – one course requires a 10,000 word report on any topic to ingrain comprehensive research skills and the dexterity in uncovering all the key voices on one subject – to the wide gamut of written and technical skills required for digital journalism, the dozen seniors comprising the inaugural group of journalism graduates have completed traditional and pioneering aspects of the trade. Certain techniques like tweeting and live web-reporting are so novel to the news industry and anathema to Higher Ed’s persisting focus on
print journalism that other college programs actually discourage students from bringing a laptop to the classroom, according to Associate Professor of Journalism Paola Prado, who along with Michael Scully and Edward Delaney developed the nascent journalism major.

Some journalism programs “train their journalists for the newsrooms of the past,” Prado says, while RWU’s “focuses on the newsroom skills that the market needs now.”

D’Orsi concurs with that sentiment.

“They’ve really prepared us in a well-rounded manner,” says the journalism major and film studies minor, who has written about what motivates a person to work as an emergency medical technician and produced a video on the untold story of the college ambitions of many students at Central Falls High School.

“We’re not just print journalists, and we’re not just digital journalists – we’re multimedia journalists. We can write news and shoot video to go with it. We can even write news in 140 characters,” says D’Orsi, whose educational experience was crowned with earning Journalism Senior of the Year Award.

There are detractors of digital journalism who view it as a quick-hit, surface-level form of reporting: How much work really goes into a brief video clip, those critics ask. But query any one of this year’s crop of journalism grads – who spent 15 weeks on their capstone project conducting original reporting to produce a video account on Central Falls High School four years after the controversial school board decision to fire all of the teachers and start from scratch – and they’ll give you an earful about this demanding style of news reporting.

“It’s a difficult, intense form of reporting,” says Alexander Castro ’14, who spotlighted the school’s creative, nurturing after-school fashion club. “You can’t think in isolation – there’s a lot more planning and preparation you have to do than for written reporting. You have to think of what you need to get for the story and what resources you will need to bring to do the reporting.”

A multi-layered educational experience, the capstone project on Central Falls High School challenged the aspiring journalists to confront their perceptions of what had previously been reported by spending significant time at the school. The RWU reporters gained access to students, teachers and staff – the people closest to the story that few reporters were able to obtain during the media firestorm four years ago – thanks to a collaboration with Anna Cano Morales, director of the Latino Policy Institute at RWU, Central Falls School District Superintendent Fran Gallo and the administrative staff of Central Falls High.

“This project showed them that reporting is more than just a fly-through of a community – that you have to spend time with your sources and that you have to dive deep,” Prado said. “It provided them with a realization and cementing of their knowledge and awareness of the ethical and moral obligations that reporters have to be truthful and to have balanced reporting of the people they’re covering.”
Their capstone videos (all 12 can be viewed here) round out a robust online portfolio of written and digital reporting produced throughout the journalism program. Via the final Journalism Capstone and Portfolio course, the seniors build a private website portfolio to use as a calling card to enter the job market. Additionally, each novice journalist was obliged to complete an internship – D’Orsi worked in WCVB Boston’s evening newsroom and assisted in field reports for the station’s long-running newsmagazine program, “Chronicle;” Castro served as communications intern for the Latino Policy Institute and freelanced for hyperlocal news site Portsmouth Patch.

And with the shifting terrain of the news industry, there are plenty of journalistic opportunities that continue to grow with the development of social media outlets and entrepreneurial news sites, Scully says. And many companies outside the realm of journalism need skilled communicators, he adds.

“Our journalism students graduate with the ability to write, present themselves in a public forum, to research and think creatively – so they’ll be ready for any field,” Scully says.

Post-graduation employment statistics alone may offer a window into the program’s success – one-third of the class have already accepted jobs, according to Prado. Some of those appointments include:

- Christopher Ferreira ’14 will report live news as a general assignment reporter for KCPW NBC-Montana in Kalispell, Mont., beginning in June
- Nicholas Handy ’14 will be reporting the news, with a focus on the Worcester, Mass., area, for GoLocalProv.com and GoLocalWorcester.com
- Olivia Lyons ’14, a journalism and graphic design double major, will join a start-up company, The Visual Brand, and continue to pursue journalistic opportunities

While Castro is still sussing out his job opportunities, he says he finds his prospects exciting. “There are a lot of hip, new publications looking for fresh, young voices,” he said. “The skills I’ve learned at Roger Williams and the inspiration I’ve received have vitalized my journalism and my ideas about journalism.”

D’Orsi says she’s prepared to pay her dues to work up to her dream job as field producer for WCVB Boston’s “Chronicle.”

“We all have the skills to go out and get a job and be successful in the journalism world,” D’Orsi says. “In a couple of years Roger Williams will be on the map for journalism – it’s a true testament to the job professors Scully and Prado have done in creating the major and making it so well rounded.”

For more of the students’ work, search “Coast to Coast: A Journey Through Rhode Island” and “Oyster Farming” on the iTunes store.