

Communication professionals in an online program enhance their skills and career prospects

University of Southern California
Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

The Opportunity

In the 1970s, the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California (USC Annenberg) launched its master of communication management (MCM) program geared toward working professionals looking to improve their management skills and overall employability. At the time, companies headquartered in Los Angeles would often pay for their employees' graduate school education.

Over time, "the professional landscaped changed," explained Neil Teixeira, the director of distance learning at USC Annenberg. "A lot of the folks who had come to USC Annenberg for a full-time master's degree were no longer able to do that. Their companies were no longer sponsoring them to get master's degrees. They had to do it on their own, and they had to do it on their own time."

As the market changed, the school wanted to retain its focus on midcareer professionals. "It became very clear that the only way to do that was by going online," said Rebecca Weintraub, clinical professor and director of the MCM program.



Pearson

An Online Solution

USC Annenberg chose to partner with Pearson Embanet, which provides online program management (OPM) services, to launch and support an online MCM program (communicationmgmt.usc.edu). Pearson provides marketing, recruitment, course development support, and retention services. The first students enrolled in the online program in the fall of 2011.

The school emphasizes the importance of professional experience when recruiting students. On a case-by-case basis, it waives the GRE® requirement for applicants with five to nine years of work experience and at least a 3.0 undergraduate GPA. Generally, the GRE is not required for applicants with ten or more years of professional experience, regardless of their undergraduate GPA.

“Everything we teach comes from the on-campus program,” noted Weintraub. “We have one master of communication management program and two methods of delivery, but the program is the same.”

Every online class has a course director and two or more section instructors, all of whom hold PhDs. “The section instructors are all experts in their field. The course director ensures that we’ve got consistency,” Weintraub said. She believes that “part of what gives the program academic rigor” and distinguishes it from its competitors is that students are taught by PhDs who have both academic knowledge and applied experience.

Both Teixeira and Weintraub credit the OPM team with helping to make the online courses a success. “Without Pearson’s instructional designers, a lot of these courses would not function as well as they do,” Teixeira said.

“Our faculty were incredibly relieved to know that we were working with a team of professionals who understood not only the graphic and media design, but also the real instructional design—how to organize an online course to best suit the needs of an online professional student and to achieve the goals of the faculty. It has really helped us tremendously,” he added.

The program is geared toward increasing students’ career success. “The thing that enhances employability for all of our students in the online program is the immediate applicability of the content,” Teixeira said. Referring to such topics as using data analysis for decision making, change management, and strategic communication models, he commented, “Students are always impressed with how easily they can translate what they learn in the classroom to what they do on a daily basis at work.”

PROFILE

City/State

Los Angeles, California

Institution Type

4-year private research institution

Ranking

#23 National Universities,
U.S. News & World Report,
Best Colleges, 2016

“Our partnership with Pearson has made us more sophisticated about how we think about our curriculum and market.”

— Neil Teixeira, Director, Distance Learning, USC Annenberg

The skills students develop and the strategies they learn are also applicable to a wide range of fields and specializations, such as PR, journalism, or marketing, which further enhances students' employability. "What we're seeing more and more, especially in the digital age, is convergence. We're seeing a lot of the same skill sets being used across a wide array of communication professions," observed Teixeira. Students learn "strategic communication principles and strategic management principles that they can apply in many different contexts."

USC Annenberg, in partnership with the OPM team, provides a great deal of support to each student throughout the rigorous online program, beginning with the application process and extending all the way to graduation. Teixeira said the OPM enrollment and student support teams "have been extraordinary. Our students feel incredibly connected to our teams and grateful that they were there to help push them along the way."

The Results

"One of the most significant results of the program is the effect that our online course development has had on our campus teaching," remarked Teixeira. "Our faculty members have worked really hard to develop excellent online courses. What they've learned in the process is how to optimize their classes and make them more effective in general."

Faculty members are using content they developed for their online courses in a flipped learning environment in their on-campus classes. "It's helping students understand difficult concepts much more rapidly than they would through ordinary lecture," Teixeira noted. "Because students review the online materials between classes, the time in class can be spent on discussion and application," Weintraub said. "It makes the classroom time much more effective."

Since the online MCM program was launched, 216 students have graduated (see figure 1).

“The program I have is exactly the program I wanted to have. I would not have been able to do it on my own.”

— Rebecca Weintraub, Clinical Professor and Director, MCM Program, USC Annenberg

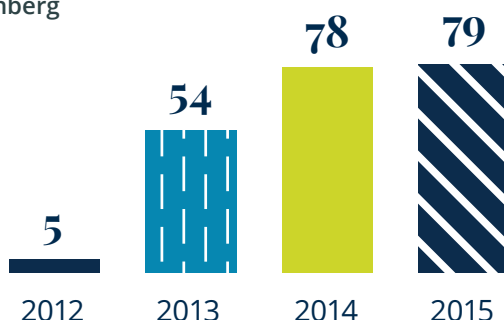
“This program has given me the confidence, knowledge, and skills needed to land a big position.”

— Alexis Santoro, Graduate, Online MCM Program, USC Annenberg

FIGURE 1

Number of Graduates, Online Master of Communication Management Program

USC Annenberg



By the time they have graduated from the online program, students have gained strong personal and professional connections. “We built a curriculum that centers on collaboration within virtual teams,” Teixeira explained. He credits the collaborative environment and an online platform that allows students to interact with each other 24/7 with building strong ties between students—ties that have led to new jobs and new careers for many graduates.

Weintraub has also seen how the program has increased graduates’ career success. “We’re getting a lot of testimonials from people who are getting promotions or getting new jobs based on the work that they have done and what they have learned in the program,” she commented.

One such student is Alexis Santoro, who had been in a lower-level management position at a company. She shared this story with the MCM staff:

“Recently I was given an opportunity to interview for a marketing communication manager position at my dream company and was told that one of my standout attributes was being in this graduate program. In my grueling interview process, I used a little bit of knowledge from each class I’ve taken thus far. Shortly after returning home, I got a call with an offer. But they decided that I was actually at a director level (thanks to everything I’ve learned). So I have just accepted a position as a global marketing communication director!”

Since the market, industries, and the needs of students are ever evolving, Teixeira and Weintraub have come to rely on the OPM team’s deep competitive analysis to help them navigate through these changes.

“Our partnership with Pearson has allowed us to adapt relatively quickly,” Teixeira observed, “and stay out in front of any major changes in the field.”

BY THE NUMBERS

The University of
Southern California–
Pearson OPM Partnership



2010

Beginning of
partnership



12

Graduate
programs



1,418

Total number of
enrolled students,
fall 2015–
summer 2016



1,041

Total number of
graduates through
spring 2016

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