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Degrees should serve some life skills on the side

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Degrees should serve some life skills on the side

How should journalism faculty prepare students for the ever-changing future of the journalism industry?

That was a rhetorical question during an e-mail exchange I had with a journalist who had been downsized twice — once from a reporting gig and once from a government job. It was a great question.

I pondered the question after that exchange. I'd love to hear your thoughts about what college journalists should learn before they hit the job market. As a graduate of University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Northwestern University, I have a great deal of affection for an education that focuses on skills. Journalism schools should never lose their focus of teaching hands-on skills that help students succeed in a newsroom.

Students should graduate with an ability to communicate effectively; the skill to report stories accurately, fairly and thoroughly; and the proficiency to convey information on multiple platforms, whether through print, broadcast or the Internet. That should be included in the cost of a degree.

Then the coursework in subjects such as history, politics, sociology, business and economics is critical to making a young journalist well-rounded. This knowledge helps students recognize context and connections in their community.

Never to be replaced is the hands-on experience gained in professional newsrooms. The opportunity to work with professional journalists, reporters, photographers, artists and editors is priceless.

But I think college is much more than a time to gather career-related skills. I'd love to see a college course focusing on life management skills and creating life plans so students can live life to the fullest. My philosophy about this type of education extends beyond journalism.

Life management includes skills such as setting goals, managing time, resources and money and making solid decisions that affect the present and the future.

Setting goals is critical to achieving any level of success — however one defines success — because goals provide direction in all aspects of life. In many of the workshops I offer, I use a SMART strategy to help people create goals they can win. A SMART goal, for example, is specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-focused.

Learning how to effectively manage one's time, money and resources is another critical skill that affects the fruitfulness of life. I often say time can be an enemy or friend, depending on how it is

treated. Understanding how to maximize the moment can affect the quality of learning and life outside of the classroom.

One of my favorite money management stories is the young man who set out to save a year's salary early in his career. After achieving that goal, that young man felt a sense of security and freedom that comes with having money in the bank. In his quest to achieve that goal, he also established a pattern of saving and investing that has made life for his family very comfortable as he now nears retirement.

But there are more immediate money management lessons to master while in college. Accepting a credit card offer or using a credit card on a shopping spree can have long-lasting results. Students who learn basics about money and credit management will improve their lives dramatically during and after college.

Learning how to make decisions based on one's values, upbringing and aspirations is another life skill that doesn't get much practice until one is away from home. College is the perfect time for trial and error, but a course that helps build confidence in one's ability to make solid decisions is well worth the admission.

On top of life skills, let's teach journalism students about innovation and entrepreneurship. Innovation may revive the way we practice, deliver and teach journalism.

What if journalism schools were adept at producing students who, like at Microsoft, contribute fresh ideas about delivering information? The industry and its business model could be revitalized by these young minds, if they learn the skill and discipline of continuous innovation. Innovation may be taught primarily in business schools, but, like life skills, this subject is valuable to a variety of disciplines and is more important in a global society.

Finally, entrepreneurship would be another valuable skill to learn in college, regardless of one's academic pursuits. That twice-downsized journalist also wondered what jobs all the future journalism students would find within a shrinking industry. The only way to ensure having money in your pocket is to have multiple streams of income. One stream is learning how to offer your skills for hire.

So, yes, let's teach the skills of our trade, but let's also give our students the skills and knowledge to build the best, well-rounded lives they can. That's an education that parents can consider a worthy investment. ♦