MODULES
NEW PATHWAYS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Sally Lindel (C15) was a committed theatre major who had focused on acting during middle and high school. She arrived at Northwestern believing that performance would be her entrée into professional theatre, but as her studies progressed, she discovered that acting was not her main interest after all. Encouraged by her professors, she enrolled in a stage management course, where she found a very different way to express her passion for the theatre.

Had Lindel arrived at Northwestern prior to 2011, she would have found no easy way to pursue her new dream to work in theatre management. But the creation of the school's modular curriculum—and specifically the Theatre Management module—provided her with a clear pathway to her goals.

Defining pathways for study

Lindel is among the growing number of School of Communication students who participate in the school's innovative modular curriculum program. In 2010, after learning about student frustration in navigating the undergraduate program, the faculty began developing a new way of organizing their studies: in modules—clusters of four to six related courses designed to usher students from a beginner's interest in a topic toward mastery of the knowledge and skills (both academic and practical) they will need to work in that area as an expert. The program was adopted across the school.

Among the school's undergraduates, communication studies majors are most likely to feel adrift in a sea of attractive course offerings, with no compass. The modular curriculum provides that compass. "There are several things our modules do for students: one big one is create a subcommunity of like-minded students within a relatively large and very intellectually diverse major," says communication studies professor Jeremy Birnholtz, faculty coordinator for the department's Digital Media module. "Module activities bring these students together to network and share ideas with each other, relevant faculty, and professionals in the field."

The communication studies faculty boasts renowned expertise, Birnholtz continues, but before modules were introduced, it was largely up to students to figure out how to tap those resources. Now students are able to discover them "much sooner and in a more structured way." As a pilot program starting this academic year, the Digital Media module is available to students outside the School of Communication.

"If our students are only used to talking to people who share their major, they won't be prepared for the workplace," says Birnholtz. "This way we can spark conversations between communication students and those from fields like computer science, design, psychology, journalism, and many others." This intellectual diversity will only serve to enhance the student experience, he adds, especially given the pervasiveness of digital media in our culture.

"When I came to Northwestern, I was so interested in the innovative changes coming to the digital sphere," says Sam Spector, a senior communication studies major and participant in the popular Digital Media module. "I thought the module was a great way to narrow my interests and learn as much as I could about these advancements."

Bridging theory and practice

In each module, a community of diverse learners and experts is created to help students bridge theory and practice. These communities are led by School of Communication faculty—artists, scientists, and researchers who by and large are as visible and experienced outside university gates as within them. The faculty leaders are supported by advisory boards that bring industry insiders to the table to provide even more practical insight.

The advisory boards, composed mostly of alumni and now in place for nearly all of the modules, interact with students to review projects, answer questions, or just talk shop. The school has built a dedicated web community, dubbed SoCiety, where students can engage virtually with their advisory board members, often in popular "Ask Me Anything" Q&A formats. Each spring some board members travel to Evanston to meet with students face to face and discuss their work.

Advisory board members make a significant commitment to helping students. "It's a healthy amount of time," says David Holstein (C05), a television writer and producer who is starting his second year of advising students in the Creative Writing for the Media module. "A lot of times their questions go beyond their projects, which I think is often more helpful."

Wendy Steinhoff (C92), the vice president for comedy development at Warner Bros. Television, recalls heading to Los Angeles after graduation, trying to navigate the insider world of production and find her way in without a helping hand. She's now in her second year as a member of the Creative Writing for the Media module's Industry Advisory Board, hoping to lend the very hand she sought as a young professional.

"It's this practicality that you really can't get from a theory or traditional professor," she says. "My involvement can make students, at the very least, more confident in interview situations and meeting people."

More curricular innovation: MOOCs

What's all this MOOC business?

Perhaps the fastest-growing sector of the educational market, that's what.

MOOCs (massive open online courses) are booming in response to rising educational costs, better access to connected platforms, and growing trends in online learning. The MOOC market's value is expected to balloon from $1.8 billion in 2015 to $8.5 billion in 2020, according to *Research and Markets*, a resource for industry analysis.

Northwestern introduced its first MOOCs in fall 2013 in partnership with Coursera; 68,000 students worldwide signed up to participate in the University's three free courses, taught by professors in engineering, media, and law. In November 2016 the School of Communication got into the game as part of the six-course Organizational Leadership Specialization, aimed at aspiring managers looking to lead change, resolve conflict, analyze data, and communicate with purpose. The third course in the multischool collaboration, Leadership through Social Influence, is taught by communication studies professor Daniel O'Keefe.

O'Keefe leads his online students to analyze persuasive influence by understanding its effects on attitudes and actions, how to translate intentions into actions, and how to implement and assess the work of influencers—a central component of evaluating and becoming a successful leader. Assignments and student-faculty relationships are all administered and fostered online. Nontraditional? Certainly. But a School of Communication MOOC presence is part of the school's continued effort to accommodate learners' needs and to embrace new technologies and avenues for better communication.

MOOC participants submit a capstone project and earn a certificate at the completion of their online learning.

Setting goals and achieving them

In addition to defining pathways through the curriculum and connecting theory and practice, modules give students the opportunity to build a portfolio showing what they have learned. Each student creates a capstone project that is submitted at the end of the module, and it invariably includes directly practical content—such as sample cover letters, assembled portfolios, reports on internships or special projects, or a detailed five-year plan.

As students integrate their work in the capstone project, they demonstrate their ability to pull together what they have learned in and out of classes and apply their knowledge and skills to produce innovative work. Faculty and advisory boards work together to evaluate the projects, and students emerge with a mentored achievement they can show to prospective employers or graduate programs as they leave Northwestern.

The capstone serves as a kind of "final examination" that tests student learning—a reflective-narrative paper for Digital Media, a diagnostic scene study for Acting for the Screen, a TV pilot script for Creative Writing for the Media. A capstone script by Chamblee Smith (C15), who now works as a VFX assistant coordinator on the forthcoming Universal Pictures film *The Huntsman*, is currently getting a read-through by execs at Disney.

But the capstone is not just a final test; it is also a resumé and confidence builder. "I say I graduated from the media writing module at Northwestern," notes Smith.

The Theatre Management module gave Sally Lindel the direction she needed to pursue her new career. "It just made a lot of sense to me," says Lindel, who secured her current development job at New York's Roundabout Theatre Company prior to graduating last spring. "It allowed me to take courses with a focus."

This is the most important outcome, says School of Communication dean Barbara O'Keefe. "Our students will find it easier to find their way after leaving Northwestern if they know how to tell their stories: what they learned, what they can contribute, and where they hope to end up. A module provides them with advanced knowledge and skills, practical knowledge about careers, mentoring from faculty and alumni, and a network of other professionals they can turn to as they leave the University. The capstone provides evidence that they have achieved a meaningful goal they set for themselves, along with the confidence they need to keep moving forward."

Barbara Butts, one of two coordinators of the Theatre Management module, attests that its entire spring 2015 cohort secured not only postgraduation jobs but jobs with preferred employers. "Our module students graduate able to articulate who they are, what they have to offer the professional world as leaders, with a researched business plan designed to achieve their goals," she says. "Module students have an easier time entering the profession."

Theatre Management coordinators have created internships with high-profile theatre partners to match student skills with the working style and personality of organizations' leadership. "I'd call that a win-win for the students and the organization," says Butts.

Alumni involved in the program are enthusiastic about its potential. Steinhoff observes that one of Northwestern's strengths is avoiding complacency and embracing innovation to better serve students. Modules "will prepare people better and continue to attract the best students coming into the program."

For Kayla Griffith, a junior theatre major, the Acting for Screen module provides a pathway to achieving her dream. "I know that a lot of people think that's a silly or misguided goal to have," she says of her acting aspirations, "but I understand how to make this a feasible goal and how to get there. I'm itching to get into this business." Crediting the guidance of theatre professor and actor Cindy Gold, Griffith adds, "For me, the faster the better, but I've learned that it's important to put on the brakes and make sure I have all my ducks in a row."

Lindel agrees—and so do her parents. "My parents have always been supportive of my love of theatre," she says, "but it was reassuring to them to know there was someone on the ground at Northwestern who cared about my getting a job."

Anatomy of a capstone

A module capstone isn't simply a final project; it's often the blueprint for a career. **Eleanor Rae Burgess (C15),** a graduate of the Digital Media module, developed a firefighter safety information collaboration system, launched an app to crowd-source student event transportation, and created a Google Glass tour of Northwestern, all while she was a student. The assessment of these experiences in her capstone paved the way for a Fulbright Scholarship with a tech entrepreneurship in London. "I got to build, design, and have access to amazing faculty," says Burgess of the module, "which allowed me to do great research and receive detailed feedback."

Chamblee Smith (C15), the graduate whose capstone caught Disney's attention, penned a well-crafted half-hour TV pilot for a kid's comedy about supernatural powers. "I think it was one of the best decisions I made at Northwestern," she says of her Creative Writing for the Media module.

Elizabeth Dauterman (C14) completed modules in both Theatre for Young Audiences and Theatre Management. For the latter capstone, she assembled a robust portfolio comprising letters of recommendation, future plans, production books, and more. It was a project that proved unexpectedly challenging, especially the philosophy statement. "That was probably one of the most difficult three pages I've ever written," she says. "Yet the content of that statement has been edited into all of my cover letters and interview answers." The portfolio did its job; Dauterman is now the stage management apprentice at Chicago Children's Theatre—a well-earned synthesis of two modules. "The work we did in my module classes allowed me to begin to shift from identifying as a student stage manager to a professional stage manager, and also for the long road ahead."