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Lifelong learning is central to the practice of public relations and communications management

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ABSTRACT

Remarks by Maria P. Russell, delivered on Saturday, October 18, 2014 at the Autumn Gala Dinner of the Master of Communications Management program, which is offered in partnership between McMaster and Syracuse Universities. Russell was the founder of the Master of Science of Communications Management at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and has been its director for twenty years. The author discusses her long career in public relations, as a practitioner, academic and active professional association member. She discusses five trends that Richard Edelman, chairman of Edelman Public Relations has put forward. Russell finishes the speech with a quote from Ann Lamott

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Good Evening! And thank you Alex, for that very kind introduction.¹ This is always a very special evening in the Syracuse-McMaster partnership as we come together to welcome the newest students in the MCM program.

I am especially pleased to bring you greetings this year because, back in Syracuse, we are celebrating the 20th year of the Communications Management program. Twenty years. Hard to believe!

Alex has asked to share with you my personal career trajectory and like most of you, I suspect, I'm uncomfortable in talking about myself, but I hope my story might resonate with you, or at least help me illustrate my general points for tonight.

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By coincidence, just a few weeks ago I was asked to share my career progression with the students in our traditional master's program, which is populated by recent college graduates seeking entry into public relations. Here's what I told them.

Most career manuals have a photo or a visual of a ladder. The implication is that we step up, or pull ourselves up, one rung at a time, but I don't think that's always the reality. Instead, I told these career seekers to try visualizing a pin-ball machine, where we take our education and our skills and, after much practice, we make strong, confident thrusts and the metal ball is advanced upward: sometimes vertically, sometimes laterally, with bells ringing and lights flashing, as milestones are reached.

I told these students that while we, as their faculty advisors, put much emphasis on resume writing, it is often networking, personal connections, volunteer leadership positions and memberships in professional and civic organizations that thrust our careers forward and upward. I suspect that many of you would agree with that.

I also told them that often my most unique and rewarding opportunities came these ways, including managing media relations for the 1980 International Winter Olympic Games; helping a long list of not-for-profits develop communications programs whose strategies rival well-funded corporate programs; and advising the international airline industry in crisis communications. Even my transition from practitioner to professor came through personal connections and networking.

While I did not recognize it during the trajectory, a theme was developing – the theme of life-long learning.

My first job out of college was as a writer and editor for a federally-funded study of the continuing education needs of health care professionals. Later, as an instructor in the oldest continuing education program in the world – the United States' Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organizational Management, I learned lessons in adult motivation and behaviors. Then there was the volunteer leadership position with the Public Relations Society of America: overseeing the overhaul of all of its professional development programming and helping that organization move into online delivery. Next, a stint with Motorola University in the United States and Asia helped me internalize “best

1. In this comment, Professor Russell is thanking Dr. Alex Sévigny, APR who introduced her speech to the 2014 MCM Autumn Gala Dinner. The Autumn Gala is important because it is the first time that the new cohort of MCM students gets a chance to spend some time with the second year MCM students as well as alumni and program faculty. This dinner was held at the historic Hamilton Club in Hamilton, Ontario which was founded in 1873 and continuously housed in the private residence of Hamilton's ninth mayor Charles Magill.

practices” in course development and interactivity.

All of these thrusts upward on my personal pin-ball machine helped me when I led the development of one of the very first executive education programs for US professionals – the Master of Science degree in Communications Management – which eventually led me and Dr. Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS to develop your MCM degree program in 2014.

I must pause here to recognize the role of our faculty in building the M.Sc. program at Syracuse. Without the faculty from the Newhouse School of Public Communications, the Whitman School of Management and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, there would be no such program. They are the heart, soul and brains of our success.

So. . . here we are. Twenty years later. Twenty years! How things have changed!

Twenty years ago we had to insist that members of the Inaugural Class get email accounts in order to participate! In the early days, the “interactive/distance learning” came not via WebCT, but through long, asynchronous email exchanges on listservs!

Back then, students submitted their work to professors not at the click of a keyboard key into a dropbox, but through FedEx, guaranteed, of course by 10:30 a.m. the next day!

So many changes!

Even more significant, of course, are the changes to our world, to society and to our profession that make the Master of Science in Communications Management and its sibling MCM program even more relevant today, even more valuable.

Richard Edelman of Edelman Worldwide is one of the most compelling thought leaders in public relations. He puts forward the argument that five major trends are making it our time to lead.

First, he says, there’s the “seismic shift in trust. Edelman’s firm has been exploring “trust” for 14 years through its “Trust Barometer”, now in 27 countries, including Canada.

The report tells us that confidence in government has virtually collapsed, due to perceived incompetence and paralysis. While trust in business has had a resurgence since its all-time low in 2008, by a 3-1 margin, respondents to the Trust Barometer survey want more regulation of energy, financial services and food industries. No surprise here.

Trend #2, says Edelman, is that “we’re living in a world of unprecedented complexity. Globalization, technology and privacy are colliding.” We need to look no further than the [current] Ebola situation to confirm that statement.

Trend #3, continues Edelman, is that “brands are now serving as representatives of their communities.” Today’s brands are built not only by the tangible benefits they offered, but by inspiring causes and content sharing. Brands can force change, he says, as was seen in recent months in the US when 13 major brands discontinued their relationships with the National Basketball Association’s in reaction to one team owner’s controversial remarks. The brands walked away, and the NBA Commissioner had additional ammunition for his dealings with that owner.

Trend #4, says Richard Edelman, is the transformation of media. He points out that the reader is now “also content creator and advocate.” His example: major newspapers are running sponsored content next to journalistic pieces. Savvy companies are creating their own online newsrooms.

And, lastly... in Trend #5, Edelman says that “technology is causing the integration of corporate reputation and brand marketing. ... Consumers do not differentiate between an engagement with a corporate call enter from an interaction on Twitter. ... Great companies are making change, not waiting for it.” His example: Nestle is imposing its animal welfare standards on all 7,300 of its suppliers.

So, what should we make of this? Even given these trends, what has not changed for the Syracuse program, nor for its younger sibling at McMaster, is the recognition of the need for public relations and communications professional to stay current; to hone their current skills while acquiring new ones; to gain a global perspective; to advance as strategic managers, not just as good technicians; to serve as counselors to top management; and to play a role in organizational excellence.

That is what our unique master’s program at Syracuse has done for hundreds of graduates. As its director, it’s gratifying to hear alums say: “This have been the best decision of my professional life,” “this has revitalized my career” and “this has been life-changing. This is what I wish for you as well, as you engage in the McMaster program.

The MCM alums and the second-year students have probably already told you that this hybrid program of short residencies, independent study and online learning is not an easier route to a master’s degree. It was never meant to be easier... given the high standards of Syracuse and of McMaster, but it is intended to be more flexible and to create a community of life-long learners.

I will leave you with the same advice that I give each year to our own new students. It comes from Anne Lamott, a favorite author of my book club, especially her *Tender Mercies*. Anne is also a writing coach.

When her writing students are stuck, frozen unable to produce, unable to get their typing fingers around their ideas, she relates for them this childhood memory:

. . . thirty years ago, my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'

That's my advice: take this degree program "bird by bird" and enjoy every minute of the learning experience. It will last a lifetime.

Thank you.

Note: Maria P. Russell, APR, Fellow PRSA, is a professor of Public Relations at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications and Director of the School's Executive Education Programs. She developed the M.S. in Communications Management degree program in 1995.

References

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