

External Review of CUNY's Health & Science Program

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At the request of Emily Laber Warren and Jeremy Caplan, we undertook a review of the Health & Science journalism specialization. Our process this spring included talking to current and former students as well to some current and former professors (their names and contact information were provided by the program). We also examined syllabi and sat in on two classes. In addition to providing an overall assessment, we were asked to answer a few specific questions:

- 1) How well prepared are the students for the job market? Do they need any additional skills?
- 2) How does CUNY's Health and Science program distinguish itself from other similar programs? Is there something about it that is "marketable"?
- 3) Is there anything that could be done to make the program or class syllabi even better?
- 4) How can the program attract even more diverse students?

Our overall conclusion is that the program is excellent and prepares its students extremely well for a career in science and health journalism—indeed, for any realm of journalism. One alum, for instance, who did not continue to report on science after school said that learning about numeracy and good-versus-bad studies was invaluable and that she frequently uses those skills. The students and graduates clearly feel confident about their abilities to report, analyze, and write after going through the program. They have a strong sense of what good, responsible science and health journalism is. "The school got me really well prepared," said one alum. "I know what datasets are out there. I know what I might find that other people are not aware of. I know about the newsworthiness and robustness of studies." The students and alums are delighted with the program's diversity, with its practical and urban focus, and with its recognition that science and health intersect with almost everything else—such as social justice, business, and so on. They are also thrilled with their ability to work in different media. They see the program as providing them with relevant, market-ready skills.

The cornerstone of the students' experience is, far and away, Emily Laber-Warren. To a person, everyone we interviewed raved about Emily's teaching style, about the rigor of her class, about her responsiveness. Many also credit her with getting them interested in science journalism, and helping them realize that health and science stories can be fun—and can be found everywhere. As one alum put it: "Emily is great. That is pretty much all. She is amazing. And so available. Really wants you to do what you want to do...to help each student achieve their best." Emily's flexible approach allows students to pursue their interests while also learning the fundamental skills and habits of mind that the specialization entails. "What Emily has put together is that she understands that people are really interested in different things and she is open to creating something like beats that work for them. It's been really useful. She gets that it's a sliding scale,"

said another student. Marshall Allen of *ProPublica*, who teaches the investigative health reporting class gets very high marks as well.

Our observations from two class visits reinforce all that the people we spoke with said. The classroom was dynamic, filled with energy. On April 11, Emily opened by asking the students about what they had seen in the news the week before, which allowed everyone to speak up clearly kept them connected to current events. Reviewing some of those stories also allowed Emily to talk about broader issues of reporting and writing. During the rest of class, students did story analysis, worked on structure, and met with a guest, Harriet Washington. There was a good balance between whole-class and small-group work. Everyone participated. The class felt extremely well organized, informative, and engaging. On May 9, the students in one exercise rated websites for their credibility and value as potential sources of information—the critical thinking they were learning to apply is invaluable for any beginning reporter. This class, too, was strikingly dynamic; just about every student contributed to the discussions, and Emily created an environment that empowered the students to speak up.

With regard to the specific questions we were asked to answer:

1. How well prepared are the students for the job market? Do they need any additional skills?

All the former students we spoke with said that the program trained them well for their current work. They said that the general CUNY curriculum ensured that they were able to create in different formats and so they felt nimble and able to do print, radio, video, or multimedia, whatever their beat. They said that the Health & Science track prepared them to understand numeracy, to do deep research, to think critically, to translate technical material, and to find and tell science and health stories. Everyone felt very well prepared for the work they ended up doing. Some of them wished they had had more training in how to pitch so that they better learned how to sell stories in a newsroom and how to get clips while in school. And one alum said that to stay at the cutting edge, CUNY needed to make sure it was teaching data skills (this was a comment for the overall program, not Health & Science). But the consensus was that the students felt extremely well prepared for the working world and the ones we spoke with were doing very well.

2. How does CUNY's Health and Science program distinguish itself from other similar programs? Is there something about it that is "marketable"?

We asked this question of current and former students and faculty. We got four basic answers:

- CUNY is significantly more affordable than similar programs at NYU, Columbia, Santa Cruz and elsewhere. Here is what some students said:
 - "I think most distinct thing about it is the value, I ended up in the same newsroom with people from some of the other programs, and the main

difference between us is that I have way less debt. I don't know if there's a better value proposition."

- "I applied to Syracuse, Columbia and NYU. I chose CUNY because it was relatively affordable."
- There's more diversity among the students than there appears to be in other programs:
 - "I went to open houses at both CUNY and Columbia, and CUNY seemed so much more dynamic and diverse. It was buzzing. I knew by lunchtime that I'd go there."
 - "Lots of international students, and lots of diversity in students from the U.S. as well. They really seem to reach out to every corner of the U.S. and world—they strongly encourage diversity."
 - "I think my class was really quite diverse, and CUNY itself is generally pretty diverse. In one class we talked about diversity in STEM and science—Emily talked about it. Maybe bringing in more scientists and journalists of color to talk about their experience would be good, but I feel that it was very diverse to start with."
 - And from a faculty member: "The diversity of the student body is really fantastic. Most science writers are white and women, I think [the former faculty member is both], but the CUNY students have such a diversity of backgrounds with regard to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background. the conversations that took place in the classroom were so much richer than they would otherwise be, and that is lacking sometimes in science journalism in general. Unlike SHERP [the program this faculty member attended] and others, you don't have to have a strong science background to go into it."
- The CUNY program is more practical than others in that while it focuses on subject matter, as they do as well, it seems to focus as much on professional development—giving students the skills they'll actually need in the modern workplace. There's also evidently more flexibility for students in customizing their experience:
 - "I had an internship and sat next to interns from Columbia. They had better subject-matter knowledge, but I had more technical skills."
 - "Some of the other places have more prestige, but CUNY is like a speedboat compared with an ocean liner."
 - "I thought I was interested in video—but at CUNY, you get exposed to a variety of media, and it turned out I hated video. I settled on data journalism. CUNY is really forward-thinking and digitally focused."
 - "It feels like it's more accepting and diverse than other programs, probably in part because it doesn't cost as much money. It focuses on new media, new methods of delivering journalism and trying to stay relevant, not just relying on its legacy."

- “I chose loneliness for my beat. People are lonelier these days. I wonder if at Columbia or elsewhere, I would have had to choose something more traditional.”
- And from a former student AND faculty member: “People get a more diverse skill set—no topic seems out of reach for students. The other thing that was distinct about CUNY when I took it (maybe it’s less so now) is that it was a truly multimedia program. So students can go after any assignment in whatever medium they feel best about.”
- Even within the science concentration, the graduate program at CUNY emphasizes local journalism and social justice more than most:
 - “The emphasis on community reporting and craft goes deeper than any comparable program. The Columbia student who was reporting on my same neighborhood stopped showing up after a while.”
 - “With CUNY generally speaking there is maybe more of a social justice issue. Maybe Columbia’s program isn’t as much grounded in social justice or societal issues as it is at CUNY.”
 - “There are skills that you do learn—intense research skills. But you also have room to jump into justice issues.”
 - From a former faculty member: “CUNY does address a lot of the nuts and bolts of science—what is a hormone, what is neuroscience—we do some basic biology that the students might not have had. But we also focus on the city in a hyper local way. We get the students out into neighborhoods, get them spending time in the community.”

3. Is there anything that could be done differently to make the program or class syllabi even better? No one had suggestions to improve the class syllabi specifically, so here we instead review some of the ways people said the program overall could be made better. There were few recommendations for change: the students, alumni and faculty all love both CUNY’s journalism program, its focus on practical and marketable skills, and its commitment to diversity. Here are their few suggestions:

- There was some observation that perhaps these digital skills come at the expense of learning the basics of old-school journalism:
 - “They’re drinking from a firehose and much of their time is taken learning AV and dataviz--really valuable but less time to devote to basic reporting skills of journalism.”
- There was really only one major suggestion, articulated in different ways--giving students an opportunity to start a long-term project earlier in the course:
 - “I wish I had done less of a focus on multiple stories and more focus on one or two big stories that I could report out... I wish I had had training on longer projects. The only thing like that was the final thesis.”
 - “Working on an investigation longer could be good, gives you tools and foundational knowledge that would be more helpful early on... Some of the intro classes, like intro to science and reporting could be condensed to be part of a

class. Maybe just [the] first month and then have more time to dive into stuff. For e.g. for investigative health, that class could be a 2-part or 2-semester class--learn things the first semester and then work on that project. Some people work on their capstone project. Could be set up so that's what the class is, reporting a story from start to finish."

- A more specific suggestion for doing this came from Marshall Allen, who proposed that students start on their capstone projects a year in advance, perhaps as part of a class: "Some of them wait till the last minute and are scrambling to get it together. Capstone should be publishable, and an awesome opportunity to do that but they're starting too late or not getting good guidance early on."
- Allen suggested that one solution might be to move his class to the second semester. "I could continue to advise them through third semester but could develop the idea and [help them] learn what a good project is. I'd have them develop capstone idea in the second semester."
- Paradoxically, a few people also said they would have liked more practice with writing quick turnaround stories.
 - "One thing could have used was more practice in writing study stories. Hard to fit more into curriculum, but that was the only thing could have used more of."
 - "Maybe it would be good to have a component where the aim is to show the students that they possess the capacity to turn around a nuts-and-bolts study story in a day."
- Some students pointed out that while Emily is both a fantastic teacher and journalist, some other instructors, although they are excellent journalists, are not as skilled at teaching or organizing the courses.
 - "A more general comment about CUNY is that even if people have the interest, they are not skilled in teaching, which is a separate skill."
 - "Some other courses, instructors are very experienced at journalism, but not teaching."
 - "She was new to teaching at grad level, also missed a number of classes because reporting... Amazing reporter, but not well organized course."
 - "Every class I took had instructors who had a lot of experience. Maybe not in teaching, but in their areas of expertise."
- Other than these comments, the students had small suggestions--for example, some wanted to learn practical skills such as pitching or negotiating salaries at the job.
 - "CUNY talks about money and salary a lot broadly, but not specifically within health/science. Something we don't talk about is the pitching process. If people are going to be freelancers, having good pitches is so important."
 - "It could help to have more education woven in about being in the workforce. For eg, asking for a raise and what eds/managers should do for you."

4) How can the program attract even more diverse students? As is clear from the above answers, students and faculty already find the program very diverse.

As the testimonials above show, there is very little that any former or current students would like to see change about the program. In all the important ways, it is doing an excellent and comprehensive job of training students to be outstanding reporters in science or health or any field. All the suggestions that we found seem ones that are easy to fix. And it is clear that the will is there: everyone also spoke about Emily's willingness to evolve.

Which brings us to the only downside--if we can call it that—to all the extraordinary qualities Emily brings to the program: she's just one person, and she will inevitably retire someday. When a program relies so much on a single remarkable individual, there's a danger that it could face something of a crisis when that individual leaves. Of course, the same could be said of the SHERP program and Dan Fagin, or the Santa Cruz program and Rob Irion. It's not clear what if anything can be done about it at this point, but it's something to think about.