Grad School Choices: Why You Should Consider IMC

By Basil J. Valente, O.F.M.
Director, St. Bonaventure’s IMC program

For communications pros, a graduate degree can be the boost that gets you into the senior executive suite, prepares you to go solo, or allows you to shift your career focus. If you’re considering a master’s degree, you’re not alone. According to the Council of Graduate Schools, more than 1.8 million people applied for, and 441,000 students began for the first time, graduate studies in the fall of 2011 (the most recent data available).

But, how do you decide which graduate degree to pursue? Depending on your goals, there are a number of graduate programs that can position you for advancement, independence, or a career shift. At St. Bonaventure University, the options that a communications professional would most often consider include:

- Master’s in Business Administration (MBA)
- MA in Integrated Marketing Communications
- MA in Strategic Leadership
- MSED in Educational Leadership

The MBA

An MBA provides a broad degree of business understanding, with the opportunity to focus on accounting, economics, finance and statistics. Some MBA programs offer a marketing concentration, but those programs generally include minimal attention to marketing concepts. If you’re interested in a quantitative career in business administration, an MBA degree may be a good fit.

MA in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)

If you want to work in the marketing field and ensure executive level training, you might prefer graduate classes that do a deep dive into SEO, advertising design, interactive marketing, PR campaigns, media buying, financial tools for marketers, and strategic communications. These are the areas of focus in the MA in Integrated Marketing Communications program. Additionally, career opportunities for marketing communications professionals (which includes PR) abound – it’s a need that every company and organization has, regardless of size. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Outlook Handbook: “Employment of advertising, marketing, promotions, public relations, and sales managers is expected to increase by 12 percent through 2016.”
MA in Strategic Leadership

The Strategic Leadership degree is for people with at least three years of professional experience and it is often seen by seasoned professionals as an ideal companion degree to the MBA or other graduate degrees. It provides a focus on the leadership skills needed to stay competitive in the job market. The curriculum is designed to develop communication skills in conflict resolution, crisis management, and overall organizational strategy, while also focusing on strategic thinking among leaders and how to motivate and retain high performers in the workplace. Strong leadership programs also emphasize the need for use of technology as a key communication tool as the need for global virtual communication and the management of mobile workers increases.

MSED in Educational Leadership

An Educational Leadership degree is designed for professionals in or associated with the field of pre-K-12 education. It is ideal for those seeking to increase their marketability as a school administrator or someone who works alongside the field of education. The program prepares graduates to conduct and analyze educational research and gives them more in-depth courses and experiences at the school district level.

Curriculum

When making the decision between degree programs, it is often helpful to consider the question: What do you want to learn?

The core differences between programs are best illustrated by their curricula. Here is a comparison of the core requirements for these degrees:

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More about IMC

If you want to work in a hot field, and answer yes to any of the following five questions, you should consider a master’s degree in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC):

1. Do you want a career as an executive in public relations, marketing/brand management, corporate communications, advertising, media planning, marketing research, interactive marketing and/or marketing communications?
2. Would you prefer a creative professional learning environment?
3. Do you want to work on innovative advertising campaigns more than accounting spreadsheets?
4. Do you want to learn about any or all of the following: market research, mobile marketing, social media strategy, web metrics/SEO, branding and positioning?
5. Have you seen the corporate trend of integrating the management of all communications and marketing tools to increase effectiveness in building relationships with target audiences?

Working in public relations is a perfect foundation for a master’s in IMC. It allows you to expand your strategic knowledge about the integration between marketing management and communications strategy, and see how PR works together with other elements of the marketing mix to meet business communications objectives. And the IMC degree gives you the whole picture of a marketing communications landscape, and positions you to work more strategically.

A master’s in IMC provides a competitive advantage for high-paying, important and highly visible jobs that allow for rapid advancement. IMC master’s degree programs ensure students graduate with an understanding of a customer-centric guide to optimizing the impact of persuasive communications. Students learn to align multiple, intersecting forms of media and technology on an international scale — with a focus on contemporary best practices taught by faculty with real-world experience.

Comparing SBU IMC To Other IMC Programs

The best IMC programs should offer compelling, comprehensive coursework in a combination of face-to-face, online, hybrid, and distance learning formats, as well as global internship initiatives. If you’re looking for a program that will help you think critically, reason effectively, calculate strategically and ensure the most effective integrated campaigns at the highest levels of competition, Integrated Marketing
Communications could set you apart from those with other graduate degrees.

**10 Aspects To Evaluate IMC Programs**

- **Core Curriculum** – Do the required classes cover the foundations of integrated marketing communications in a meaningful way? Do they prepare you for the realities of today’s business environment, including the need to work with finance, HR, operations and other departments?

- **Final Projects** – The best programs culminate in a real-world final project, the creation of an IMC plan for a company. Some schools have every student develop a plan for the same company, while others afford more freedom of choice. Ideally, students can pick a project they’re passionate about (including one for a current client or employer if they chose) and then have an opportunity to present their plan as they would in a business setting. The final project’s a valuable portfolio piece, especially during job interviews after graduation.

- **Elective Offerings** – Look for a depth and breadth of courses that covers your areas of interest. Focus on how current the descriptions sound, and if they seem to align with today’s evolving business and technology environments.

- **Caliber of Faculty** – Closely evaluate from whom you’ll be taking classes. Do they have real-world experience? What are their academic credentials? Have they worked at top agencies or companies? Has a member of the IMC faculty engineered (created) the IMC program? Look for a mix of adjunct faculty currently working in the field, and full-time faculty members (both academically and professionally qualified) who have experience in advertising, marketing, strategic communications, public relations, media buying, corporate finance and digital media.

- **Global Features** – Companies operate, and communicate, at an international level today — and your master’s should as well. Look for programs with global opportunities, like an international student body, study abroad programs with “live-client” IMC consulting initiatives, and global internships at multi-nationals. Additionally, look for IMC courses that focus on international issues and/or multi-cultural activities. After all, that’s true INTEGRATION.

- **Alumni Engagement and Support** – Never underestimate the power of networking. Schools with active, supportive alumni networks can be integral in helping your career. Look for programs where you get an opportunity to forge strong connections to your classmates and faculty; they’ll be invaluable resources for learning and advancement. Also, look for programs that provide career support — from job listings and networking events to résumé workshops and cultural training.

- **Continuing Education** – After graduation, what opportunities does the school provide? Some programs will allow alumni to take additional course work — like a refresher in social media, or a business law class — at a significant discount. Others provide informative resources, from blogs and newsletters to online forums and discussion sessions. Look for a program that will be an educational resource long after you’re out of class.

- **Cultural Environment** – The culture of a school and program, whether it’s online or in-person, will strongly influence your experience. A highly competitive, individualistic program feels different than a collaborative, team-based one. Speak with current students and faculty to get a feel for the people involved in the program, before you decide if it’s a fit.

- **Class Format** – Don’t discount the power of in-person learning, for comprehension, for communications/presenting skills and for networking connections. But online programs have a lot of benefits as well. Consider how the classes are taught — will they have a required Skype session? Do the faculty have virtual office hours? How will you present to the class?

- **Costs** – Carefully consider what you can afford, and the additional costs beyond tuition. Graduate school’s an investment in your career. It will pay off when you pick the best program that fits your
About the IMC Director: Basil Valente, O.F.M, is a tenured professor of Integrated Marketing Communications at St. Bonaventure University in Western New York. Valente researched and created St. Bonaventure University’s MA program in Integrated Marketing Communications, the first program of its kind in New York state. Since its first cohort began in 2003, St. Bonaventure’s had more than 200 students graduate with an MA in Integrated Marketing Communications.

Valente has a background in brand development and strategic communication, and has been featured by the media for his innovative teaching approaches, successful strategic communications campaigns and for the accomplishments of client/student firms in both the U.S. and abroad. A professor of higher education for more than 20 years, Valente also serves as director of The Francis E. Kelley Oxford Program, St. Bonaventure’s prestigious study abroad program at the University of Oxford.

http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=26523445&trk=tab_pro

www.sbu.edu/imc

About the University: Inspired for more than 150 years by the Catholic Franciscan values of individual dignity, community inclusiveness, and service, St. Bonaventure University cultivates graduates who are confident and creative communicators, collaborative leaders and team members, and innovative problem solvers who are respectful of themselves, others, and the diverse world around them.