New Night, New Venue, Same Great Homecoming Reception

On October 19, 2013, communication alumni came back to campus for our annual reception. Held in the new Shaw Center of Hillyer Hall on Hawktober weekend, the event drew over 60 alumni representing graduating classes from 1975 to 2013. Faculty, staff, and alumni thoroughly enjoyed the chance to reconnect with one another. They even seemed to enjoy posing for photos!

PR Bootcamp a Hit with Alumni and Students

The School of Communication held its first Public Relations Boot Camp during Hawktober Weekend. Twenty-five students were placed on teams and paired with an alumni liaison to solve a current public relations problem, namely the reputation of Microsoft’s Surface tablet. Associate Professor Randy Jacobs wrote the case for the competition. The teams had just a few hours to do research, draft a strategic plan, and develop a client pitch, which they presented to panel of alumni judges.

“The idea came up in a conversation I was having with some former students,” said Associate Professor Susan Grantham. “The graduates were so keen to do something for the current students that the idea just took off. We decided that many of the alumni would already be in town for Hawktober Weekend and that this would be an ideal time to hold the event.”
Jessica Ruggles ’10, of Prudential in Hartford, R.J. Allen ’10, of Mediabend Capital in New York City, and Darren Duncan ’11, of Condé Nast of New York City worked with Grantham over the summer and early fall to recruit additional alumni judges and work out the logistics. Eleven alumni agreed to participate and came from Miami, Los Angeles, Boston, New York City, and the Hartford area. Joining Ruggles, Allen, and Duncan were alumni Donna Oakes Breitbart ’09, of Wagstaff Worldwide in New York City, Michelle DeRaffele ’10, of DraftFCB in New York City, Samantha Fader ’08, M’10, of the Audience in Los Angeles, Lauren Firtel ’03, of QCA in Miami, Jennie Freedman ’05, M’07, of Chitika in Boston, Michael LaBella ’08, M’10, of Indeed.com in Stamford, Amanda Schoonmaker ’09, M’10, of the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford, and Jessica Wolf ’09, of ESP Solutions in Boston.

The alumni team liaisons provided guidance to their team based on their professional experience. The judges evaluated the teams’ strategic plans and client pitches. “I have to say that there was a very competitive atmosphere among the teams,” said Grantham. “Some of the alumni knew each other from their time in the School of Communication. They wanted their team to win. The current students wanted bragging rights in class on Monday.” Everyone agreed that the event was an intense but valuable experience. Current students were able to gain insight into the public relations process and network with professionals who were former students, and learn from their experiences. At the end of the day, the alumni simply wanted to know if they could do it again next year.

A Wealth of Alumni Guest Speakers
In spring and fall, students were treated to presentations by many communication alumni who spoke in classes, at special lectures, and at our spring career mixer.

Students and alumni had a chance to meet each other last March at the Alumni-Student Career Mixer. Undergraduate students learned about the careers of alumni and then got a chance to meet them. Alumni who attended were Kristie Borges ’93, news producer, NBC 30; Stephen Busemeyer ’93, breaking news editor, The Hartford Courant; Jocelyn Feder ’93, former human resources manager, Goodrich PECS; LeAnne Gendreau ’94, web editor, NBC 30; Keith Goralski ’91, senior director, Digital Audio Content, ESPN; Rachel Lutzker ’99, traffic reporter, Fox 61 and Clear Channel Radio, and radio host on WHCH; Amanda Nelson ’04, manager of content, Salesforce Marketing Cloud; Tom Nelson ’04, freelance director of photography; Amy Sandulli ’93, director, ESPN; and Lee Simmons ’06, client relationship manager, Event Resources. Alumni talked about their jobs and offered helpful advice to students. The highlight for all was the opportunity to network and some students were able to connect with alumni about internships and jobs.

Communication students came out in large numbers to hear what alumni Lee Villas ’91, M ’93 and Doug Goodstein ’92 had to say about their careers. Villas, senior vice president and northeast regional manager for CBS Television Distribution, shared his expertise in the television industry and syndication, and discussed how CBS is adapting to the turbulent environment of digital media and changes in television viewing.

Goodstein, executive producer of Howard TV on Demand, focused his talk on how he prepared for his career while a student in the School of Communication and offered sound advice to students about how to make the most of their time at the University. In addition to a Q&A, students had the opportunity to meet Villas and Goodstein and ask them questions.
Coming all the way from Miami, Lauren Firtel ’03 visited Professor Grantham’s CMM 271 Introduction to Public Relations course in October. As area manager for Quest Corporation of America, a firm specializing in many facets of communications, Firtel shared her experiences in the industry. After her class presentation, she visited for several more days to participate in the PR Bootcamp and attend the Communication Alumni Reception.

Students interested in entertainment public relations were especially excited by the return of Tamar Juda ’05, who has started her own company, Last Word PR, in New York City. Tamar represents some of the biggest talent in music and entertainment today, including Grammy-winning producer, rapper, and TV star Lil Jon; DJ and talent-booking agency SKAM Artist; and Video Director David Rousseau. Tamar shared her experiences as a publicist and gave students advice about how to succeed in the exciting but competitive world of entertainment publicity.

Faculty News
Professor Elizabeth Burt Retires

After completing 20 years at the University of Hartford, Professor Elizabeth Burt retired in summer 2013. Known for her dedication to maintaining excellence in the practice of journalism, Professor Burt was instrumental in preparing students for the rigors of life as a journalist. Burt taught courses in journalism and media including news writing, news reporting, journalism history, news editing, media, and society, and woman and the media, among others. While a faculty member, Professor Burt's research focused on journalism during the Progressive Era (1880-1920) and often examined issues affecting women and women journalists. Before joining the School of Communication, she worked as a journalist, translator, magazine editor, freelance writer, and high school teacher. Having earned credentials as a Master Gardener Burt is able to spend more time working in her own or community gardens now that she is retired.

Kristin Comeforo Joins the Faculty

Kristin Comeforo joined the faculty in Fall 2013 as an assistant professor of Communication. With her great sense of humor and unique personal style, she is quickly becoming sought after by students eager to enroll in her advertising courses. She is known for her practical teaching style, which engages students through hands-on learning. Comeforo’s research interests include the representation of the LGBTQ community in mainstream advertising. Comeforo earned her PhD in communication at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; her MBA in Global Marketing at Thunderbird, The American Graduate School of International Management; and a BS in Management Studies at the State University of New York, College at Geneseo. She adds to this background several years of industry experience in marketing communications.
At the opening University meeting in August, Professor Grantham, was awarded an Innovations in Teaching and Learning Award for her public relations campaigns course, CMM 471. Grantham uses actual clients in the course. In 2013, the clients were Hartford Young Professionals and Entrepreneurs (HYPE) and Sikorsky Aircraft. The use of clients creates a level of realism and challenge for the students that is unparalleled. As one student commented, “This assignment was as real as it could have been...Using real clients pushed me to work harder in creating the best work possible.” Grantham took the students for site visits, and their final presentations took place at HYPE and Sikorsky. Students spoke highly of the experience. One stated: “I learned a great deal of public relations. My writing and presentation skills have vastly improved. I am confident I can start my career now thanks to this course.”

Communication Students Special Opportunities Fund

In today’s tough job market, students need to stand out by having opportunities to participate in special experiences, like attending professional conventions to network and learn about industry trends, landing internships in major cities, competing in the AAF’s National Student Advertising Competition, and more.

The School of Communication has created the Communication Students Special Opportunities Fund to support these kinds of activities. The fund has helped send a graduate student to an international conference, enabled an undergraduate to attend a national convention to present her honors thesis, covered transportation costs for a student to complete an internship at an editing house in New York City, and allowed a group of students to attend a presentation by former CBS news anchor Dan Rather, among other activities.

To make a gift online, go to "other" and designate "Communication Students Special Opportunities Fund", or send checks payable to the University of Hartford to Institutional Advancement, University of Hartford, 200 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117. Please designate "Communication Students Special Opportunities Fund" in the memo line.

Communication Students Go to Washington

Students have been making the most of their education by taking advantage of special opportunities such as the Washington semester program at American University in Washington D.C. In spring 2013, Dylan Planeta ’15; pictured in front wearing a light gray sweatshirt, attended and shared his thoughts about the program. He wrote: "My time in the Washington semester program, inside and outside of the classroom, was one that I will never forget. My journalism class took me around the city, meeting many professionals who offered timeless advice about the field. This program pushes everyone to break out of their comfort zone and meet new people who have helped me grow as a person.” Samantha Pulley ’15 and Eboni Rhodes ’15 also attended the program in Fall 2013.

We would love to hear from you, so please send updates we can share in newsletters (e.g., job news, weddings, birth announcements) to kelly@hartford.edu.