Choosing Between Communication Studies and Film Studies

Many students with an interest in media arts come to UNCW. They often struggle with whether to major in Communication Studies (COM) or Film Studies (FST). This brief position statement is designed to help in that decision.

Common Ground. Both programs have at least three things in common. First, they share a common set of technologies and software. Both shoot projects in digital video. Both use Final Cut Pro as the primary editing software. Both use Adobe Creative Suite for other manipulation of digital images. Second, they both address the genre of documentaries. Documentaries blend the interests of both “news” and “narrative” in compelling ways and consequently are the interest of both departments. Finally, both departments are “studies” departments: Communication Studies and Film Studies. Those labels mean that issues such as history, criticism and theories matter and form the context for the study of any particular skills. Neither department is attempting to compete with Full Sail or other technical training institutes. Critical thinking and application of theory to practice are critical to success in FST or COM.

Communication Studies. The primary purposes for the majority of video projects are to inform and persuade. Creativity and artistry are encouraged within a wide variety of client-centered and audience-centered production genres. With rare exception, projects are approached with the goal of local or regional broadcast. Many projects are service learning oriented such as creating productions for area non-profit organizations. Students will create public service announcements (PSA), news and sports programming, interview and entertainment programs, training videos, short form documentaries and informational and promotional videos. The COM program is holistic and embraces its heritage as a liberal art, social science and craft. Each tradition informs our emphasis on versatility. Students are expected to learn and apply a broad range of communication skills and concepts (e.g., interpersonal, small group and persuasive communication, etc.), while pursuing mastery of video production. Even within the media arts, versatility is stressed through courses in digital animation, still photography, on-camera performance, along with studio and field video. In addition, students have the opportunity to gain competency in all aspects of production (i.e., videography, editing, lighting, etc.) even as they identify and refine their preferred specialization.

Film Studies. Dedicated to both the study of film as a text and to creating film texts, the Film Studies Department will prepare students to learn the discipline of film through a thorough understanding of film form, film style, genre, history, culture, methodology, and criticism, as well as to prepare them to make narrative, documentary, and abstract/experimental films. With respect to the latter aspect of the study of film, students will be expected to create, produce, and exhibit their filmic creations by participating in film festivals, local screenings, and competitions. The art of filmmaking involves envisioning a story, be it factual or fictional, that engages, entertains, and excites an audience to respond on a personal, social, or theoretical level, so as to be moved not only to appreciate the work of art but to approach it in such a way that engaged viewers will want to change the world in which they live after seeing such influential films. As a means to achieve this goal, creativity, imagination, and skill will be crucial to developing a keen kinocentric vision. Students will practice their craft by not only learning about ways that pre-production, production, and post-production operate, through studying aspects of film aesthetics, but will also write screenplays, act in films, design and record sound, operate cameras, direct film projects, and edit meaningfully as a way to understand the entire filmmaking process. Equally important to a thorough understanding of filmmaking will be to write critically about film history, world cinema, American cinema, film genres, and film theory, because, as the best of today’s filmmakers can attest, one cannot be a good creator of film without being a dedicated student of film. Even as the Film Studies program guides students to create quality work with respect to our regimen of study, and through opportunities to work with professional filmmakers through the internship program available to upperclassmen, there is yet room for students to find their own special interests within the major and to hone their craft accordingly.