Starting Something: Advertising Education at the University of Illinois

By Jason Chambers, Associate Professor, Department of Advertising

Fall 2007

When department founder Charles Sandage arrived at the University of Illinois, there already existed a history of advertising education on the campus. Starting in 1916, while still a part of the English department, the journalism faculty offered a single course in advertising. From those humble beginnings and thanks in large part to the hard work of Sandage and others over the years, Illinois emerged to become a national and international leader in the field of advertising education.

In the interim between the first advertising course and Sandage’s arrival, advertising education at the University proceeded in fits and starts. For nearly two decades, only a single course in advertising instruction was offered. In the mid-1930s, additional advertising courses were added to the curriculum, but it was not until the early 1940s that a separate curriculum in advertising was established. Although additional developments in advertising education at Illinois were likely hindered by the impact of the Great Depression and World War II, it is undeniable that the lack of a focused curriculum also hampered its development.

At that early point, courses on advertising were split between the College of Commerce (later renamed the College of Business) and the School of Journalism (now known as the College of Media). There was only limited interaction between the college and the school, and this fractious approach hampered further development. In fact, at one point, advertising faculty in the School of Journalism petitioned to be moved to the College of Commerce, where a new department of advertising would be established. Rather than see the departure of several faculty members, leaders in the School of Journalism agreed to establish an advertising department. Such a department, however, needed a leader.

Fred Siebert, head of the School of Journalism at the time, brought Charles Sandage from Miami University to develop a unified curriculum in advertising education. Arriving at Illinois in 1946, Sandage quickly recognized the divided approach in which the College of Commerce and the School of Journalism handled advertising instruction. Faculty in the College of Commerce focused primarily on management and creating advertisements. Courses in the School of Journalism concentrated on media research and placement. Sandage looked for the unifying feature behind both approaches. He found it by centering his attention and the curriculum on advertising as an “institution of abundance.” He reasoned that, if the primary purpose of business were the creation of goods and services for the consumer, the primary function of advertising was to make consumers aware of them. With that awareness, consumers could
make informed purchasing decisions and use their purchasing power to maintain a high level of
employment in the country. Thus, advertising education should not merely approach the subject as a
collection of skills or the practice of advertising as though advertising professionals were little more than
carnival barkers. Instead, advertising education should recognize the institution of advertising as a
“fundamental economic and social institution” and provide students with the well-rounded intellectual
core to approach it as such. As Sandage later observed, “My own philosophy of education in the field of
advertising is to minimize strictly skills courses and to place more emphasis on the ‘why’ of advertising in
its business and social environment.”

Over the next several years, Sandage and Illinois became recognized leaders in advertising education.
In 1959, advertising became an official department in the School of Journalism and Communications and
its reputation in the academy continued to grow. Sandage carefully established relationships with
advertising practitioners and professional organizations. He did so to ensure that the curriculum at
Illinois would remain relevant to the profession but also that it would not be dominated by a limited
professional focus. Faculty at Illinois continually published books and journal articles on advertising, but
Sandage also encouraged them to maintain relationships with various aspects of the advertising
profession, as he did. He regularly published research or opinion pieces in advertising trade journals,
visited advertising agencies and spoke at the conventions of advertising organizations. He also remained
an active researcher and later became one of the organizational leaders behind the creation of the Journal
of Advertising. As a result, the advertising curriculum at Illinois remained professionally relevant but
broad enough that students learned critical analytical and problem-solving skills that prepared them for
work in many different fields.

Sandage remained the head of the Department of Advertising until 1966. In the 20 years he was at
Illinois, Sandage led the advertising department to a national reputation as the preeminent location for
advertising education. Further, the development of graduate-level advertising instruction led to a cadre of
Ph.D. students trained in the Illinois way who later went on to either create or influence other university-
based advertising programs around the country. Thus, in many respects, the Illinois approach to
advertising education has been spread around the country. Also, beyond their work in the academy,
alumni of the department have become some of the leading figures in the advertising trade, as well as
other fields of endeavor. Sandage’s vision that Illinois advertising students prepare for leadership in the
field of advertising but also in other areas of pursuit has been amply borne out.

After Charles Sandage retired, he was replaced by a succession of gifted academic leaders including S.
Watson Dunn, Arnold Barban, Kim Rotzoll, James Haefner, Linda Scott and Jan Slater. Each of these
men and women contributed to continuing Sandage’s proud tradition and helped Illinois maintain its
position as a leading center for advertising education.

Sources: Charles H. Sandage, “Roads to be Taken: The Intellectual Odyssey of Charles H. Sandage,”
(Lamoni, Iowa: Center for the Study of Free Enterprise and Entrepreneurship), 1993.