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La Salle College High School's new Digital Media and Communication Concentration program shapes students into skilled content creators and collaborators who know how to tell powerful stories.

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Not the Same Old Story

by BILL DONAHUE

La Salle College High School's
NEW DIGITAL MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATION CONCENTRATION
PROGRAM SHAPES STUDENTS INTO
SKILLED CONTENT CREATORS AND
COLLABORATORS WHO KNOW
HOW TO TELL POWERFUL STORIES.

At 17 years old, Owen Kunko already has a student Emmy in his trophy case and his own digital-media company, AOK Studios, which he hopes to surpass \$100,000 in revenue by June 2024. He's eager to begin his senior year at La Salle College High School so he can add to his already impressive C.V.

Kunko belongs to the first cohort of seniors in La Salle's new Digital Media and Communication Concentration program, which he believes has begun to prepare him for a career in the ever-evolving media landscape. Led by professionals he describes as "some of my greatest mentors," Kunko feels as though he has gotten closer to "choosing a path" as he prepares for college and beyond, creating a dynamic portfolio in the process.

"I love to tell stories through cinematic visuals," Kunko says. "Storytelling applies to any aspect of life, including visual marketing and branding. We have the opportunity to learn every aspect of the creative process here."

Kunko and other members of his cohort use the state-of-the-art WEXPtv studio to gain real-life exposure to careers in journalism, video production, social media, digital marketing, public relations, and e-sports, among other modes of content creation. In addition, they can learn how to use digital media tools from Adobe Creative Cloud, become certified professionals through La Salle's partnership with Certipoint, and produce award-winning content for the school, as well as for their own personal brands.

"My goal this year is to leave a lasting impact, bring my skills to the next level, and contribute to an environment in which my team members and I challenge each other to grow," Kunko says. "WEXP is my main thing; it's like a sport at La Salle. It's a lifestyle, and it's the backbone of the school from a visual perspective. It has some stresses, but it's also a lot of fun."

As the first president of the Digital Media and Communication

Concentration program, Kunko will lead the program this year in tandem with Rob Johnson, La Salle's director of digital strategy and chair of the school's Innovation and Design Department. Johnson, a former show producer with Comcast SportsNet/CBS Sports, joined La Salle in 2006. He has led the program through a transformative time in the media landscape—namely, the transition from analog to digital.

"We were doing rudimentary stuff when I first got here, but the school had a vision for where it wanted to go," he recalls. "We used to do a live show [for the students] every day, but as the technology shifted with cellphones and social media, the basic homeroom show was getting outdated. We have since moved the model to a weekly feature show, where the guys really get to showcase their abilities."

"We're big into experiential learning and creating a team environment, where the students work closely together to apply the things they learn in the classroom," he continues. "A lot of high schools are still making live TV shows, but that's not really preparing students for the world they live in; there's not a whole lot of live TV



Photos courtesy of La Salle College High School



production left. Here, they can build a portfolio that's going to put them leaps and bounds ahead of their peers [once they get to college]."

La Salle's innovation and design curriculum has evolved to offer courses in engineering, graphic design, information technology, multimedia production, and web design. It's an especially tempting lineup for students who have the interest or inclination, though every La Salle freshman benefits from an introductory course to technology and design.

"It's a humbling experience as a teacher," Johnson says. "Some of these kids are better than I am at something I've been doing for 20 years. If they wanted to, they could probably go right into the work force the day after graduation. But I stress getting a degree with a focus on digital marketing or business to help use their skills in various professions."

While Johnson and his team partake in developmental workshops to "stay ahead of the curve" in regard to new technology, the collaborative environment enables students and teachers to learn together. Johnson also taps into his vast network of contacts to invite professionals from the public sector to share their experiences with students.

Matthew Sinnott is a fine example. A La Salle alumnus from the Class of 2006, Sinnott followed his love of film to the West Coast, where he majored in multimedia at California State University, Northridge. He then started his own production company, Creative Collision, whose clients included La Salle. After five years of working as a member of the video production team on a freelance basis, Sinnott joined the faculty as a teacher of mobile video production.

"The technology is evolving so quickly, and this generation is keeping up with it, so they can tell if their teachers are keeping up with it," Sinnott says. "They may know their cameras better than Rob or I do, but they don't have the industry experience, and that's what I bring into the classroom."

To keep students engaged, Sinnott often

utilizes current events to teach students the fundamentals of video production. At the same time, he offers guidance on the real-world aspects of the business, such as the importance of meeting deadlines, while also advising them on the subtle art of storytelling.

"If someone is doing a piece about the football team, instead of going right to the highlights, I tell them to look for the story behind the game," he says. "At the end of the day, people value powerful stories. The things we're teaching here force students to learn the process, beyond what are the cool settings on their cameras."

"I also relay to them that there are infinite storytelling possibilities at La Salle," he continues. "You have athletic teams, service trips, people who have seen and done a lot of interesting things in their lives. As I tell anyone who is involved with WEXP: 'All the content and videos you want to make, it's all here at La Salle. Go find a story.'"

The program includes internships and other off-campus opportunities through Johnson's network in sports media and other fields. Some students may have the chance to work with under-resourced schools, for example, using their skills to create a school's

marketing materials for the following year.

The goal, as Johnson sees it: "to help students experience what it's like to work in the field, if they're thinking of doing it for a living. We want to get these guys in front of adults and have them act like professionals so they can understand it's not all fun and games, and that things might not always go according to plan."

Johnson credits the La Salle administration, led by Brother James Butler, FSC, for committing to the program's expansion: an upgraded TV studio, a new robotics lab, and the latest software and technology to help students hone their skills as content creators.

"Our program is based on the Lasallian model of teaching the whole student through student-centered, project-based learning," he adds. "Any idea you want to explore, anything you want to do, there's no better environment I can think of in a high school. Good things constantly happen here. The guys learn new skills they can take with them, some of them go on to do things on their own, and we've won a bunch of awards."

Johnson cites "Climbing the Mountain," which won the 2023 NATAS Mid-Atlantic Student Production Emmy Award in the sports category. The video, which was shot and edited by Kunko and fellow student Sean Gallagher, with Johnson as executive producer, documented La Salle's football rivalry with another Philadelphia-area private school.

"It was a real team effort," Kunko says of the video. "I learned a lot about producing high-level content, but it also taught me how to be a better leader, planner, and storyteller. Going forward, I want to go to college, expand my mind, and build my brand to new heights. Honestly, the opportunities are endless." ■

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