History of the Department of Mass Communication and the Department of Communication Studies

Figure 1: McFadden Alexander Newell in Principal's Office, Maryland State Normal School, 1887.

Maryland State Normal School

Course catalogs published during the first session of the Maryland State Normal School (the first iteration of Towson University) list “Rhetoric” as a subject. Students who would be teachers were instructed on how to speak clearly and project their voices. The name of the subject would change from rhetoric to elocution to speech arts, and the focus of the classes changed as well, from learning how to speak before a class to understanding the physical science behind what made it all possible. These classes were taught by teachers in the English Department during the first 100 years of the school’s existence. All students were required to pass a speech class in order to graduate from the school.

State Teacher’s College at Towson

By the 1940s, when the school’s name was now the State Teacher’s College at Towson, drama was introduced as a facet of speech, and attempts to understand and correct “defective speech” also came into play. Drama was used as a way to engage school children, and stagecraft was also introduced at this time. Students also learned how to identify speech problems in children.

Figure 2: Sophomore students in hallway heading into classroom, 1948.
Towson State College

In 1962, just before Towson became Towson State College and a liberal arts school, the department of Speech and Drama was formalized. A student could now major or minor in Speech and Drama and focus on public speaking, theater, or speech science. These programs continued to develop at a rapid rate as the enrollment and course offerings at Towson rapidly grew through the 1960s and 1970s. In 1967, classes in journalism and public relations were added to the curriculum. Additional classes included in subsequent years included those that focused on film studies, audiology, and radio and television directing.

Radio and TV at TU

In 1971, the school started a closed-circuit radio station that broadcast only to campus buildings on weekdays from about 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. Its call letters were “WVTS” and stood for the “Voice of Towson State.” By the fall of 1976, another station was broadcasting on a FM signal with the call letters “WCVT” – the “Community Voice of Towson.” This station became the center of progressive and alternative music in the area. Finally, in 1991, the station call letters were changed to “WTMD,” originally meaning “Where Towson Makes a Difference” and the format became more education focused. The format has changed again since then reverting back to alternative music and focusing more on live performances and local events. The original closed-circuit radio station is now an internet radio station known by the call letters XTSR.

Television, with its more expensive equipment, proved a little trickier for the school. Agreements were made with other local stations to use their resources to try and develop programs for the airwaves. A campus television station did not begin until 1992 when Towson started TSTV – a student-run station. That station became WMJF-TV.

Departmental Evolution

In 1972, the department’s name changed to Communication Arts and Sciences after Theatre broke off and established its own department. The name changed again in 1979 to Speech and Mass Communication after the department of Communication and Science Disorders was established. In 1998 the department officially became Mass Communication and Communication Studies.
Another departmental change came in 2000 when Electronic Media and Film (EMF) splintered off and became its own department. The television and the radio station, XTSR, are housed today within EMF.

In 2018, there was yet another split, with the Department of Communication Studies launching along with the Department of Mass Communication.