FOCUSED, IN-DEPTH CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

A module is built around four to six courses that provide formal instruction related to a learning goal—for example, Performing for Young Audiences, Political Communication, Advocating for Persons with Communication Disorders, or Staging Live Performance Art. Each department in the school will propose modules that answer specific skill needs in their fields. Although students may need to take a prerequisite course before beginning, the module’s courses can be loosely sequenced to take students from an entry point to mastery of a significant skill or body of knowledge within the communication arts and sciences. Modules will be designed to provide School of Communication students with opportunities for true interdisciplinary study and a learning community of colleagues with shared interests.

ALLIED COCURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Formal course work is paired with co-curricular experiences that provide engaging opportunities for application and practice of knowledge gained in the classroom. Northwestern’s campus is rich with possibilities for student involvement, including student theatre, advocacy groups, student government, and student media outlets.

WHAT DOES A MODULE LOOK LIKE?

Playwright and theatre lecturer Laura Schellhardt invokes a powerful image when she talks to students about their futures—the invisible staircase. “In many fields, you enter and the steps are laid out for you,” she said. “In the arts, you have create those steps for yourself.”

Northwestern students interested in playwriting have taken those steps all the way to the top—including John Logan (C83), 2010 Tony Award winner for best play. But Schellhardt believes a module in playwriting will give new shape and legitimacy to the steps her students have built for themselves.

Steps such as making sure the theatre faculty knows you want to write. Senior Aaron Ricciardi did just that when he first arrived on campus; Schellhardt put him in the playwriting sequence. “The downside was I took the advanced course when I was a sophomore,” said Ricciardi. He ended up taking several more classes with Schellhardt, including an independent study. At press time he was a semifinalist for a 2011 Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference residency.

That self-motivation—and, increasingly, success in obtaining internships and mounting campus showcases for student work—is one reason why the playwriting sequence will be one of the first modules off the ground. The module will combine courses in theatre, radio/television/film, and performance studies with on-campus cocurricular activities (such as the annual Agnes Nixon Playwriting Festival), off-campus professional experiences (such as an internship in literary management or participation in a reading series), and a capstone experience that will help students formulate a professional identity—complete with a résumé, a portfolio, and a mission statement for the work they want to do.

“I’m thoroughly excited about the capstone experience,” said Schellhardt. “We live in times with an active debate about whether or not the arts are part of the fabric of this country. We all know
EXTERNAL SKILL-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

As part of their progression through a module, students will be encouraged to participate in skill- and community-building activities off campus, such as internships and practica at businesses and organizations in the Chicago area or beyond. Internships and practicum experiences provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems and to begin developing their own professional networks. Students can search for these positions in the school’s internships database.

they are, but we have to be able to quantify it and to find the language to say it effectively.”

Students say the module will add dimension to the work they already do. “The most important part about playwriting classes is the connections I’ve formed with other students,” said sophomore Danielle Littman, whose short play Dead Letters is part of Chicago’s annual Collaboraction Sketchbook festival this year. “In the module we will be able to continue these relationships and take more classes together, creating a cohesive and supportive group of writers.”

Collaboration is a key element, said junior Naomi Brodkin, who has twice been selected to participate in the Agnes Nixon Festival—named for alumna Agnes Nixon (C44), famous for creating several daytime dramas. “The great thing about writing a play is that once you’ve put words on the page, it’s just the beginning of the process. You become part of a work of art that’s much bigger than the piece you’ve contributed to it.”

A play is not only bigger than the sum of its parts. It can also accomplish more in the world than people might think, said junior Allison Finn, who hopes to turn her passion for theatre into a career in foreign relations and conflict resolution. “Writing a play is one of the most challenging, frustrating, and rewarding experiences I know,” she said. “Playwriting is not a pastime or a hobby; it is a life.”

CAPSTONE PROJECT

The culmination of this extended, structured learning experience is a demonstration of mastery. Capstone projects require that students produce a significant demonstration of their ability to integrate and apply what they have learned in the module—a film, a performance, or a thesis project. The project demonstrates not only students’ ability to produce an appropriate concluding work for their learning experience but also the ability to articulate what they have learned.

Communication studies sophomore Austin James, theatre senior Jacqui Jarrold, theatre sophomore Amanda Summey, and theatre junior JJ Phillips performed in Car Trouble (written by MFA in Writing for the Screen and Stage student Julissa Castillo and directed by communication studies senior Camille Edwards), one of 19 student-authored plays staged in The State(s) of America: The Regina Taylor Project March 4–6. The festival also included short films, online interactive arts, a literary reading, and a poetry slam, all by Northwestern students.

A capstone is a show of mastery—a performance (such as a star turn in The Who’s Tommy, above, as part of the Theatre and Interpretation Center’s mainstage season), a creative project, a research endeavor—and a chance for our students to shine.