



Built on a Last-Minute Ask: A Virtual Networking Model for Graduating Journalism Students

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The last weeks of a senior capstone course carry a particular kind of anxiety. Resumes are polished. Reels are uploaded. For many graduating broadcast and digital journalism students, the gap between finishing school and landing a first job has less to do with skill than with access: the absence of what Granovetter (1973) called weak ties. These connections do not yet exist but carry the greatest potential for new opportunities. Programs at minority-serving institutions, rural colleges, and smaller programs face structural disadvantages that limit the professional networks available to their students (Crawford II, 2022). As a graduate of an HBCU journalism program who began teaching at one before moving to a regional public university, I was familiar with that gap long before the Zoom Media Mixer existed. The event was not designed as an equalizer. It started as a last-minute fix, and the potential to function as one became clear only after it worked.

The Mixer connects graduating journalism students with hiring managers and recruiters across the media industry. Across seven editions spanning Fall 2022 through Fall 2025, 106 enrolled students have participated, with non-enrolled students bringing total participation to more than 150.

How It Started

The Mixer was not planned. During my first semester teaching at a research university journalism school, near the end of a senior capstone course in

broadcast and digital journalism, it hit me: I had never brought a professional into class. Not once. At two previous institutions, it had been a regular part of the course. This semester, it slipped.

Rather than skip it entirely, I reached out on LinkedIn to ask whether hiring managers or recruiters would be available to talk with students. I was inundated with positive responses, and approximately 40 professionals joined. The guests, students, and I walked away knowing this was a great event, and after debriefing with students, I committed to improving it.

What the Event Became

The format runs on a three-hour Zoom window, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern, keeping professionals across all time zones available throughout. Students join 30 minutes early to check camera framing and lighting, field last-minute questions, and settle their nerves before the professionals arrive.

Before breakout rooms open, each professional introduces themselves and their organization. Professionals rename themselves to include their outlet; students list their name and target roles. Breakout rooms hold five to six students who stay throughout; professionals rotate every 12 to 15 minutes, with three to four visitors per room.

Sessions typically open with 15 to 20 professionals and close with 10 to 15, averaging 45 minutes to an hour. Unlike virtual career fairs, which give indus-

try professionals control over where they spend their time (Vik et al., 2018), the Mixer inverts that logic: students stay put, and professionals rotate, ensuring every student group accumulates the brief, repeated contacts Granovetter (1973) identified as weak ties.

Building the Room Without a Budget

None of this works without the professionals. Most join through direct LinkedIn outreach, reached with a short invitation: honest about the time ask, concrete about the format, centered on a low barrier. Join when you can, leave when you need to, and the students you meet are prepared for real conversations. Outreach begins three to four weeks before each session.

One hazard is worth naming: LinkedIn’s spam detection flags outreach campaigns that send similar direct messages in rapid succession, even when sent manually. Space outreach over several days and use the slower pace for more careful personalization.

After each event, a LinkedIn post tags every professional who attended, signaling to their networks that the event is worth joining. Many of them and the students leave positive comments and connect on LinkedIn, weak ties in Granovetter’s (1973) sense that extend past the session itself.

Students shape the outreach as well: at the start of each semester, they are asked to identify companies or professionals they would like to see, though attendance is never guaranteed.

Early Iterations and What Improved

The first edition exposed two problems. Students joined from a shared computer lab, creating audio feedback loops. The scramble played out in the pre-window buffer: students dispersed to separate spaces, sorted their setups, and the session opened on time. The fix was permanent: the event is now fully virtual, with no morning meetup required. That change prompted a standing pre-session module on camera framing, lighting, and background preparation, skills useful in any virtual interview students face.

The structural flaw was clear. Students moving to professionals meant that if professionals left early, a group could arrive to find their room empty. From edition two forward, professionals rotate while students stay.

The second edition had only seven enrolled students. Invitations went to other graduating seniors with a simple ask: RSVP so guests would know how many students to expect. Graduating students from across the program now receive standing invitations

with a one-hour minimum commitment. Start those records from day one. Names and photographs from the opening and town hall sessions create documentation that memory alone cannot recreate.

Rotation time took iterations to calibrate. Twenty minutes felt long when conversations stalled; 12 to 15 created productive pressure: students deliver their elevator pitch, ask a focused question, and engage before the rotation ends. Room composition matters too: rooms heavy with reserved students stalled when professionals were quiet, while talkative rooms crowded out peers who most needed the practice. Deliberate balance is now standard, a pattern Henry and Van Wyke (2016) confirmed: iteration precedes reliable outcomes.

The Townhall

Closing breakout rooms with 30 to 40 minutes remaining is one of the best decisions in the format. The questions the moderator draws out are rarely raised by students on their own: salary ranges, negotiating a first offer, current industry debates, and how culture and mental health show up in daily work. Professionals have been willing to answer those questions candidly, the information access Granovetter (1973) attributed to weak ties.

Outcomes

Across all editions, approximately 90 professionals have participated, with 26 returning for multiple sessions. Four recruiters and two news directors, two of whom are program alumni, have returned for every edition and stayed the full three hours. That sustained engagement, from professionals with no obligation to return, is the clearest signal the format offers real value. These outcomes align with Granovetter’s (1973) framework, in which newly formed weak ties connected students to information and opportunities they would not have found on their own.

Six students landed their first job through a contact made at the Mixer, a recruiter or a hiring manager. At the most recent edition, a first-time recruiter requested a list of student attendees. That list is now standard follow-up material offered to all participating professionals.

Guests offer an honest assessment of where the industry stands: which positions are growing, which markets are accessible to new graduates, and how competitive certain areas remain. Students learn that producer roles in news and digital and social media content are expanding, while breaking into certain desired markets straight out of college is harder than

many expect.

Student debriefs close the loop. Students talk through what went well and what did not, what they would keep and what they would change, then plan their follow-up. Within 24 hours, participants receive the Zoom chat transcript with contact information and shared job links. When a student misses a professional who left before the session ended, the advice is simple: reach out directly. Every attendee welcomes contact.

Who This Is For, and Where It Can Break

The model is designed to transfer. Magee (2025) documented the resource constraints facing journalism faculty at small, private institutions, and the Mixer was built around exactly those constraints. Any faculty member willing to be active on LinkedIn, with a few weeks of outreach and a Zoom account, can run a version. The model depends on access to professionals, which means being willing to reach out to strangers and be transparent about why.

Honest replication requires honest warnings. Student pool size matters: the format works best with 15 or more in the room. The largest single session had 34 students across six rooms: two held five students and four held six. Six rooms are probably the practical ceiling with the current Zoom setup, where rotating guests manually between breakout rooms takes time. Student-generated requests have a ceiling too: niche industries with small professional networks may yield no connections despite genuine effort, and setting those expectations early is teachable. If guest numbers run low, the format adapts by adding breakout rooms and reducing the number of students and guests per room. Students keep their cameras on while present and coordinate breaks with others in the room, stepping away during a transition when possible.

These constraints are not fixed. They are solvable with time, iteration, and a willingness to start before the model is ready. Anyone interested in piloting a version is welcome to reach out. That is, after all, how it began.

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