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ON CAMPUS

Larry Kirkman, SOC Executive Producer

By Mike Unger

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Painted in dark red on the cream wall at each end of the School of Communication's longest hallway are the dual mottos Larry Kirkman has used to re-imagine SOC.

As he prepares to leave the deanship following 11 years of intense change and stirring progress, Kirkman still points to the phrases "Darkroom to Digital" and "Media that Matters" as the pillars of the school's renaissance.

"'Media that Matters' is a statement of values about the purpose of the media to be an agent for change, to engage, inform, and empower, that's been embraced by the school," Kirkman says. "'Darkroom to Digital' asserts the opportunity for schools of communication to serve as laboratories for new professional roles and new media services, understanding the significance of the digital transformation, but also affirms respect for the traditional knowledge and know-how of the professions."

Identifying and seizing those opportunities has been a hallmark of Kirkman's time as dean, during which the school's reputation, strategic partnerships, faculty and staff, alumni support, and visibility all have grown.

"He's pushed us to take chances," says Rose Ann Robertson, SOC's associate dean for academic affairs. "Larry's style is not complacency. He is always coming up with ideas and always thinking, what if, what can we do, how can we do it? Over the past 11 years he's really injected us with energy."

This summer, right about the time Kirkman begins a yearlong sabbatical during which he'll attend several international documentary film festivals, work will begin on the McKinley Building renovation. SOC's new home will be state-of-the-art in every way, designed not only to employ the best of today's technology, but as Kirkman says, to "provide a dynamic, high-energy and high-traffic space for collaboration and creation."

Embracing change — it's been a key ingredient in Larry Kirkman's approach. About all that's remained the same during his decade-plus as dean are those two sayings scripted on the wall.

‘A Continuity of Spirit’

Larry Kirkman’s arrival as SOC dean in 2001 actually was a homecoming. From 1976 to 1980 he was a professor at the school, hired to bring video into the film program.

“There’s a continuity of spirit about AU that I saw in the ’70s that I see now,” he says. “A creativity, an openness to experimentation and innovation, a collegiality, a willingness to work across boundaries, and a commitment to experiential learning that attracted me to come back.”

Between jobs at AU, he brought TV and video into the American Film Institute, media production and advertising campaigns into the AFL-CIO, and served as executive director of the Benton Foundation, where he produced research, demonstration projects, and conferences on media for public knowledge and action.

It was his diversity of experience that at the beginning of the new millennium attracted the interest of the SOC dean search committee, chaired by Professor Rodger Streitmatter.

“We liked the fact that he came from a professional background,” he says. “Larry had been a filmmaker early in his career. Having been at the Benton Foundation he had a good background in fund raising and potential for developing new revenue streams for the school.”

From day one Kirkman made a deliberate and concerted effort to pay equal mind to the school’s trio of programs: journalism, film and media arts, and public communication. He knew that each of these disciplines was changing radically.

Through the creation of new centers, degree programs, and partnerships, Kirkman set out to build a new SOC.

Centers, Partnerships, and New Degrees

When Kirkman moved into the dean’s office, SOC had no centers with external funding. Today, the Center for Social Media, Investigative Reporting Workshop, and Center for Environmental Filmmaking are among the leaders in their fields. Along with J-Lab: the Institute for Interactive Journalism, which Kirkman wooed from the University of Maryland, the centers have brought in more than \$18 million in grants from heavyweights like the Ford, MacArthur, Knight, and McCormick Foundations.

“Our cutting-edge centers are quoted, watched, and envied in our professions and industries,” Kirkman says. “Their programs and activities are bringing enormous vitality to the student experience, supporting faculty research and professional innovation, and building the academic and public reputation of the school. Since we have been so innovative, we have been a sure bet for major foundations, and that is without a home building and the identity and resources it would bring. We have been doing more with less. Ann Richards said Ginger Rodgers did the same steps as Fred Astaire, but backwards with heels on. That’s SOC.”

Under Kirkman’s leadership SOC created joint master’s degrees with the Kogod School of Business (media entrepreneurship), the School of Public Affairs (political communication), and the School of International Service (international media). This year there’s a new PhD in communication, and the business minor created by Kogod for SOC students is among the most popular on campus.

A critical component of Kirkman's vision was establishing partnerships with pinnacle organizations that went much further than the all-too-often superficial relationships between universities and businesses.

The Newseum, *USAToday* and Gannett, the *Washington Post*, PBS's *Frontline*, the Associated Press, American Film Institute, Smithsonian, New America Media, and the Center for Public Integrity are among the organizations with which the school has deep and concrete relationships.

"The partnerships are multifaceted and ongoing," Kirkman says. "We've always had relationships with companies for interns and guest speakers, but I was able to elevate those to formal agreements that are strategic, ambitious, and mutually beneficial."

That's happening in notable ways. Dean's interns and fellows have landed hundreds of bylines in the *Post*. A graduate fellow earns \$1,200 a week working with the AP in the summer helping it transition its content to HD. Students work at the Newseum, which cosponsors the "Reel Journalism" film series.

Bringing Back Alums

Perhaps Kirkman's toughest challenge was to reconnect with alums who had become disillusioned with the school. In 2002 he recruited 25 who were leaders in their fields and asked them to serve on the Dean's Council.

"All of them said yes," he says. "What they wanted and what we gave them was a substantive relationship to the school. A direct connection to students and faculty, and an important role in advising on the curriculum."

Susan Zirinsky, SOC/BA '74, is a senior executive producer for CBS News. Prior to Kirkman's appointment as dean, she had spoken at Harvard University at least 10 times and not once been asked to visit SOC, she said.

"He really reached out to the AU people who had established careers, which is something that had never been done," she says. "He's what we like to call quietly aggressive. I think his connectivity to people and people's respect for his intellect attracts people."

Reengaging alumni led to a successful mentoring program and development efforts, including a \$1.5 million gift from Michael Foreman, chair of Pacific Theatres Corporation and AU trustee emeritus.

"Larry Kirkman came to the deanship of the School of Communication at a critical juncture for his field," AU president Neil Kerwin says. "He understood the importance of the seismic changes that were afoot in communication, broadly defined, and he led SOC with vision and discipline to a position of leadership. Larry Kirkman revolutionized communications education at American University and positioned our programs to compete at the very highest levels for years to come."

When he returns from sabbatical, Kirkman's looking forward to teaching film courses and writing and producing.

At heart Larry Kirkman considers himself an executive producer, "identifying opportunities, mobilizing teams, providing perspective, securing resources, and setting high expectations.

“The executive producer role is entrepreneurial and it’s collaborative,” he says. “The role of the dean is enabling faculty and staff to excel and achieve, to be surprised at how much they can do — and to do more.”

At the School of Communication, Larry Kirkman has produced a hit.