



TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

REGULAR CALENDAR ITEM: I.B.

MEETING DATE: February 7, 2025

SUBJECT: New Academic Program
Middle Tennessee State University
Digital Media, Master of Science (MS)

ITEM TYPE: Action

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Title and Designation	Digital Media, Master of Science (MS)
Concentrations	None
Accreditation	No programmatic accreditation applicable.
CIP Code and Description	09.0102 (Mass Communication/Media Studies) A program that focuses on the analysis and criticism of media institutions and media texts, how people experience and understand media content, and the roles of media in producing and transforming culture. Includes instruction in communications regulation, law, and policy; media history; media aesthetics, interpretation, and criticism; the social and cultural effects of mass media; cultural studies; the economics of media industries; visual and media literacy; and the psychology and behavioral aspects of media messages, interpretation, and utilization.
SOC Code and Title	27-3099 (Media and Communication Workers, All Other) 11-2032 (Public Relations Managers) 25-1122 (Communications Teachers, Postsecondary) 27-3023 (News Analysts, Reporters, and Journalists) 27-3041 (Editors) 27-3043 (Writers and Authors)
Credit Hours	30
Implementation Date	August 18, 2025
Modality and Delivery Site	Fully online
Department/College	School of Journalism and Strategic Media, College of Media and Entertainment
Governing Board Approval Date	December 4, 2024

ALIGNMENT WITH STATE MASTER PLAN AND INSTITUTIONAL MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN

The proposed Master of Science (MS) in Digital Media at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) was developed to prepare students for the rapidly evolving digital technology landscape across multiple industries, focusing on building critical thinking skills and mastery of emerging technologies, such as social media analytics, search engine optimization, and website creation and management. This program will prepare graduates to interact with artificial intelligence effectively, conduct data analysis, and employ diverse communication approaches across public relations, advertising, journalism, and other evolving digital fields like social media marketing and e-commerce.

The program directly responds to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) State Master Plan's emphasis on technological advancement and sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) interaction skills. Through its fully online format, the program advances the family prosperity priority of the Master Plan by expanding access to higher education for both working professionals and geographically distant students, supporting the goal of increasing educational attainment that leads to family-sustaining wages, and enhanced economic prosperity for Tennessee residents.

The program also strongly aligns with MTSU's mission and strategic initiatives. The fully online delivery method supports MTSU's institutional mission of "enhancing access through unique programs, distance learning, and advising to meet the needs of a diverse student population." The program advances multiple objectives within MTSU's Quest 2025 Quality Enhancement Plan initiative by facilitating successful transitions into the professional world and creating career advancement opportunities for working professionals. Furthermore, the program supports MTSU's Academic Master Plan goals to "enhance academic quality" and "foster student-centered learning" through its innovative curriculum and online delivery format that accommodates diverse learning needs while maintaining rigorous academic standards.

PROGRAM DUPLICATION

Five state public institutions offer master's level degrees in this discipline, including Austin Peay State University (APSU), East Tennessee State University (ETSU), MTSU, University of Memphis (UoM), and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). The proposed program would be the state's only graduate-level Digital Media master's degree to be offered online and on an accelerated schedule, allowing students to complete the program in a calendar year. Additionally, the focus of the proposed program on digital media differs from existing offerings within the state.

WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

The proposed MS in Digital Media at MTSU addresses significant workforce needs in Middle Tennessee's media and communication sector, particularly responding to three "in-demand" occupations identified in the 2002 Academic Supply for Occupational Demand Report produced by THEC and other state agencies. In the northern Middle Tennessee region, these positions include graphic designers (186 annual openings), producers and directors (176 annual openings), and editors (129 annual openings) through 2028. The northern Middle Tennessee region demonstrates a strong industry presence, with employment concentration figures for both producers and directors and editors surpassing national averages. The program's graduates will be particularly well-positioned in the job market, as 2021 data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) demonstrates that professionals with master's degrees in communication & media studies

earn substantially higher starting salaries (\$60,052 versus \$43,762) and achieve higher full-time employment rates (67.1% versus 55.3%) compared to those with bachelor's degrees.

Despite the robust demand, Middle Tennessee faces a significant gap in advanced media education opportunities. According to Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data from 2019-2021, the region's four institutions offering Mass Communication/Media Studies degrees (MTSU, APSU, Trevecca Nazarene University, and Belmont University) produced only 73 master's degrees in 2021, falling far short of the projected 506 annual openings in media-related occupations. This workforce gap is further emphasized by a March 2022 Hanover Research analysis of regional institutions, including MTSU and its competitors across Tennessee, which identified mass communication and media studies as one of Tennessee's 16 "high-growth" areas of graduate education. The strong employment outlook extends nationally, with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicting 155,600 annual openings through 2031 in relevant occupations, with seven media-related positions exceeding the national median for jobs requiring college credentials. The proposed program's online, accelerated format will help address this shortage by preparing professionals for both the specifically identified in-demand occupations and related fields such as news analysis, public relations, and technical writing.

The employment outlook for program graduates extends well beyond the immediate region. The Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development projects 2,122 annual job openings statewide through 2030 in media-related occupations, with five key positions (graphic designers, writers and authors, public relations specialists, producers and directors, and editors) exceeding the statewide median for jobs requiring a four-year degree. These promising state-level projections are mirrored nationally, with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasting 155,600 annual openings through 2031 in relevant occupations, where public relations specialists, graphic designers, producers and directors, writers and authors, fundraisers, web developers, and editors all rank above the national median for jobs requiring college credentials.

CURRICULUM

The proposed MS in Digital Media will be a 30-credit, non-thesis-based study program delivered fully online. The program will be housed in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media and is designed to be accelerated and completed in one academic year for full-time students. However, part-time students can complete the curriculum in two years. The program requires no new course development, as all ten courses in the curriculum currently exist. The MS in Digital Media will allow media professionals to advance their expertise in social media, digital analytics, communication technologies, data journalism, media theory, and applied research methods. It will also offer professionals from other fields a pathway to develop advanced digital media competencies.

PROJECTED ENROLLMENT AND GRADUATION*

	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30
Enrollment	12	13	14	15	15
Graduates	8	8	9	10	10

*Please note: Figures above include part-time enrollment

STUDENT INTEREST AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

A Spring 2023 survey of MTSU's School of Journalism and Strategic Media stakeholders demonstrated strong interest in the proposed MS in Digital Media program. Of the 317 respondents,

230 were current students and 88 were alumni. The majority reside in the Nashville/Murfreesboro area, with additional representation across Tennessee's major metropolitan areas. The program's proposed curriculum showed particularly strong appeal, with respondents rating the overall attractiveness of the course offerings at 78%. Alumni expressed notably higher interest than current students, with an 84% attractiveness rating. The survey reached a demographically diverse group spanning ages 17 to 65, with respondents representing both local and national perspectives.

Letters of support were received from industry partners who emphasized the critical need for professionals skilled in evolving digital media technologies and strategic communication. The industry partners expressed strong interest in hiring graduates from this program who will be equipped to navigate technological changes and provide innovative solutions in the digital media landscape. Support letters were provided by leaders from major media and marketing organizations including Finn Partners, Knox News and the Knoxville News Sentinel, USA Today, and Redpepper marketing agency, as well as community partners such as Rutherford County Schools, Tennessee Justice Center, and United Way of Rutherford and Cannon Counties.

EXTERNAL JUDGMENT

An external review of the proposed program was conducted virtually on October 1, 2024, by Dr. Debbie A. Owens, Emeritus Professor of Mass Communication at Murray State University. Dr. Owens strongly recommended approval of the program, noting that the curriculum is "academically rigorous to prepare students to meet the challenges of a shifting mass communication industry in middle Tennessee and beyond." She emphasized the program's strong institutional support, evidenced by the broad range of resources available for launch and sustainability. Dr. Owens specifically praised the program's online delivery infrastructure, highlighting that faculty are well-prepared with extensive online teaching experience and supported by robust technical resources, including 24-hour student support services and a comprehensive media arts library. The reviewer also noted the program's strategic positioning, stating it will "meet the challenges of preparing professionals to serve an evolving consumer marketplace" over the next decade. In her conclusion, Dr. Owens commended the synergy among various personnel involved in developing the proposal and emphasized the program's potential to help MTSU "remain competitive in educational online delivery," particularly noting its ability to serve working professionals seeking to upgrade their skills while remaining in the workforce.

PROGRAM COSTS AND REVENUES

The proposed expenditures for the MS in Digital Media are listed in Table 1 below. Start-up costs are minimal, and most expenditures are for marketing the program. There will be no new faculty or staff hires for this program as the courses already exist and administrative support is sufficient.

Table 1: Estimated Costs to Deliver the Proposed Program

<i>Estimated Costs to Deliver the Proposed Program</i>						
One-Time Expenditures						
Category	Planning	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Faculty & Instructional Staff						
Non-Instructional Staff						
Graduate Assistants						
Accreditation						
Consultants	\$4,000				\$1,300	
Equipment						
Information Tech						
Library						
Marketing						
Facilities						
Travel						
Other						
<i>Total One-Time Expenditures</i>	<i>\$4,000</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$1,300</i>	<i>\$0</i>
Recurring Expenditures						
Category	Planning	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Faculty & Instructional Staff						
Non-Instructional Staff						
Graduate Assistants						
Accreditation						
Consultants						
Equipment						
Information Tech						
Library						
Marketing		\$10,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000
Facilities						
Travel						
Other						

<i>Total Recurring Expenditures</i>	\$0	\$10,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000
Grand Total (One-Time and Recurring)	\$4,000	\$10,000	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$2,300	\$1,000
Projected Revenues						
Category	Planning	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Tuition		\$163,500	\$196,200	\$212,550	\$228,900	\$243,900
Grants						
Other						
Total Revenues	\$0	\$163,500	\$196,200	\$212,550	\$228,900	\$243,900