

University, Industry Group Help Forge Internet Links

ADVERTISING: mSchool program trains employees for digital campaigns.

By **JOEL RUSSELL**, Staff Reporter

Reinvent the TV dinner. That was the assignment in a recent late-night session at advertising agency **Deutsch LA** in West Los Angeles.

But the mandate didn't come from a major food company and the people toiling away weren't agency employees.

The assignment was for a class in a new program to train advertising workers for Silicon Beach in this digital age. The program, a partnership between Loyola Marymount University and ThinkLA, an advertising trade group in Culver City, is called mSchool: Institute for Marketing at LMU.

Eric Johnson, president of agency **Ignited** in El Segundo and co-president of ThinkLA, said the many new digital agencies, video game companies and boutique marketing firms on the Westside of Los Angeles need entry level employees who can produce digital advertising on their first day of employment. The mSchool was created to fill that need.

"As brand marketers, we need employees who are ahead of the curve," he said. "Los Angeles is the world capital of creativity, so we thought we could tap into that creativity and produce a better curriculum."

The class meets on Thursday night, with locations split among the Loyola Marymount campus in Westchester and offices of local agencies or marketers. Future sessions are scheduled at video game publisher **Electronic Arts** in Playa Vista and ad agency **TBWACHiatDay** in Playa del Rey.

Andrew Rohm, associate professor of marketing at Loyola Marymount, said each class features a lecture, a creative exercise or experiment, and students' presentations of the results. Also, in keeping with the job market, the curriculum has a heavy emphasis on digital skills.

"As individuals these students use social media, but they don't know how to use it for marketing," he said. "We hope to fill the gap with graduates who can hit the ground running in social, interactive and digital-oriented jobs."

The 19 students in the class, who had to submit resumes and essays to be accepted, will receive elective credit toward a bachelor's in business. By 2014, the program will become a two-year academic track leading to a new bachelor's degree called modern marketing. It will produce about 50 graduates a year.

Eventually, Rohm hopes the program offers graduate degrees and executive midcareer classes.

ThinkLA provides the lecturers for free and LMU already has classrooms and vans to shut-

tle students to the firms. But the school plans to raise money to bring resident professors and eventually build facilities at the Westchester campus. Rohm doesn't have an estimate for funding needs.

Casey Burnett, director of West Coast operations at marketing consultancy **Roth Associates** in downtown Los Angeles, said specific agencies have tried to institute programs similar to mSchool, including **72andSunny** in Venice, which launched in-house training program 72U last year. But local schools don't consistently feed talent into the ad agencies, with the exception of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

"In a market as large as Los Angeles, we could use another option," Burnett said. "It will be interesting to see how this plays out, but I think they will be successful. It's certainly needed in this industry and in this market."

Newfangled colander

Johnson said ThinkLA chose LMU because the administration supported the idea and it offered an ideal location.

"Nearly all these advertising companies are located between the Santa Monica Mountains and Torrance, and west of the (San Diego 405 Freeway)," he said. "Loyola Marymount is almost at the geographical center. That makes it easy for students to come from school to visit and work at these companies."

Burnett noted that local agencies compete for marketing talent with computer and consumer goods companies, and even engineering firms. He hopes programs such as mSchool can slow the brain drain.

"All these companies that never cared about creativity are poaching advertising talent," he said. "It's imperative for the industry as a whole to retain those people."

Rohm believes mSchool has a motivational as well as skill-oriented purpose because the classes provide a chance for students to meet what Rohm calls "industry rock stars" who are living the dream of creating campaigns for hip brands.

In reinventing the TV dinner, one team proposed a mobile app that would allow people to use their phones to order custom meals delivered by local companies. Another team suggested the creation of a one-time-use solar panel for heating frozen meals.

The students received a longer-term assignment due at the end of the semester. They have to take an ordinary pasta colander, alter it slightly and figure out how to sell it as a new product using both traditional marketing techniques and those of the digital age.

"If they thought they wanted a degree in marketing but didn't know why, this will answer that question," Rohm said. "I hope this experience opens their eyes to the opportunities in marketing and advertising."