

**2019 - 2020**  
**Revisit Team Report**  
**for Accreditation in Journalism**  
**and Mass Communications**

Name of Accredited Unit: **Division of Journalism**

Name of Institution: **Florida A&M University**

Name of Administrators: **William Jiles, director**  
**Division of Journalism**  
  
**Michelle Ferrier, dean,**  
**School of Journalism & Graphic Communication**

Date of Original Site Visit: **Feb. 4 - 7, 2018**

Revisit Date: **Jan. 14 - 15, 2020**

Revisit Team Chair: **Caesar Andrews**  
**Leonard Distinguished Chair in Media Ethics and Writing**  
**Reynolds School of Journalism**  
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Revisit Team Member: **Greg Pitts, Director**  
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Revisit Team's Recommendation: **RE-ACCREDITATION**

## **BACKGROUND:**

Florida A&M University's Division of Journalism, the unit seeking re-accreditation, is housed in the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication. The two specializations for students in the Division are journalism and public relations, which combined enrolled about 81% of 428 students at the School during fall 2019. The other 19% were in the Division of Graphic Communication, which is not seeking ACEJMC accreditation.

FAMU was the first historically black institution to earn journalism accreditation, starting in 1982.

The 2018 site team re-evaluating the School found seven of nine standards in compliance and noted faculty, facilities and alumni engagement as hallmarks of the program. But two standards were deemed out of compliance, Standard 5 Scholarship and Standard 9 Assessment. That team recommended reaccreditation. The Accrediting Committee rejected the recommendation and voted provisional status for FAMU. The Council voted for provisional, as well. The University agreed to seek re-accreditation again in two years, culminating in this year's revisit.

In addition to reviewing the two standards found out of compliance, this revisit report also addresses two other concerns identified by the 2018 site team: student-teacher ratio in skills courses; and unsettled leadership at the campus and unit levels.

FAMU hired an experienced journalism administrator in 2018, following a national search. She started a thorough review of curriculum, combined with efforts to develop new strategies for generating more research and refining assessment.

### **1. List each standard found in noncompliance and the reasons as cited in the original team report.**

#### **Standard 5. Scholarship: Research, Creative and Professional Activities**

*Reason cited: Underperforming faculty scholarship.*

*"The Division of Journalism's scholarly output has declined significantly during the past six years. The new unit administration has plans that, with University support, are expected to reverse that direction in the years immediately ahead."*

#### **Standard 9. Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

*Reason cited: Incomplete and inconsistent execution of assessment.*

*"A record of attention to assessment is apparent in meeting minutes, discussions with faculty members and others, and in self-study details combined with additional data provided to the team during visit. But lack of continuity across the past six years reduced the effectiveness of SJGC's assessment efforts. Uneven documentation of assessment across the full range of the process – gather, measure, analyze, identify opportunities, implement meaningful changes – made substantive assessment results sometimes difficult*

*to verify. Valiant attempts to embolden assessment in 2017 is a positive indicator of potential for reclaiming assessment as a persistent strength."*

**2. For each standard that had been in noncompliance, provide a summary of the team's findings regarding corrections. Provide an evaluation of compliance or noncompliance**

**Standard 5. Scholarship: Research Creative and Professional Activities**

Summary of revisit findings:

Since the 2018 site team visit, Florida A&M University has experienced a number of positive campus climate changes. Gone from the campus is the leadership instability noted in 2018 when a number of higher administrative appointments were interim appointments. The University has a popular new president, selected and affirmed by the University's board. A new and highly experienced provost has been selected. A new and experienced dean has been hired for the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication. These three appointments are representative of a redefined campus, beginning with the new president's vision. Under the president's leadership, the University Strategic Planning Committee has identified scholarly productivity and development as University priorities. The provost is placing new emphasis on research agendas, including collaborative research. This administrative action provides support to the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication to pursue an appropriate focus on faculty scholarship, through peer-reviewed traditional academic research or creative accomplishments.

During the 2018 site team visit, the team noted that the unit's "Tenure and Promotion Policies" document provided a detailed guide to faculty hiring and advancement, stating clearly the qualifications and accomplishments expected for both faculty tracks – professional practice track and tenure track. Tenure candidates must hold a Ph.D. in journalism or in a closely related field and must meet the University's criteria for publications and/or creative activities as judged by the unit's tenured faculty, the division director and the dean.

Thus, there is a mandate for faculty to publish research or produce creative works in support of tenure and promotion or promotion from associate professor to professor.

The new dean was hired during a 2018 search; she joined the School in fall 2018 but did not arrive until October. It is too early in the process to declare a new research agenda for the School, but the appropriate steps have been taken to begin a new discussion as to the importance and appropriateness of faculty research and creativity. Included in the new culture is a review process that requires faculty to prepare a report highlighting their research agenda. The dean will review the report and write review letters for all faculty, tenured, tenure-track and professional faculty.

Missing from the School was a solid cohort of research-driven tenure-track faculty. Including the dean, only four faculty are tenured in the School (one of those tenured faculty announced a resignation effective January 2020), but the School now has three faculty in tenure-track appointments, two at the assistant professor rank and one at the associate professor level. All three have PhDs. A fourth tenure-track assistant professor with an MFA recently left for a non-faculty position at another University. The dean has received permission to hire at least two more journalism faculty, one at the assistant professor level and one at the associate professor level. These tenure-track faculty represent the start of a deliberate effort to hire faculty with an interest in research and to create a collaborative research and creative climate that will sustain faculty productivity.

As a researcher, the dean is leading by example, with an active research agenda addressing media entrepreneurship, online journalism, online communities, digital ethnography, online harassment and social media marketing. She has published one journal article, served as a panelist or speaker at a dozen national or international events and written additional articles and short papers reaching media professionals. Faculty research productivity has increased through the efforts of existing faculty and new faculty hires. Recent accomplishments by the faculty include six peer-reviewed conference papers, five book chapters, three published journal articles, another journal article under review, one book review and the formation of the Data Science Research Group, a collaborative project with computer sciences faculty to respond to data journalism analysis and reporting. The Data Science Research Group will impact the curriculum but also create a collaborative research group through which publication opportunities are expected to emerge. This research accomplishment, in slightly under two years, matches the quality of the research output from the unit in the previous six years cited in the most recent self-study. The faculty research accomplishments above do not include scholarship completed by the dean.

Other accomplishments to promote the research culture include:

- Re-establishing a relationship with the Knight Foundation to enable the dean to fund faculty development and support research with a substantial investment.
- The dean has requested research or creative ideas from the faculty who need support funding with the clear knowledge that Knight Foundation funding is available to support faculty research.
- A newly established unit Research Committee to promote faculty research collaboration.
- A series of 2020 election workshops and partnerships that should yield both creative and peer-reviewed research.
- A planned certification in Cybersecurity for Communication that will come through the Data Science Research Group.
- Strategic scheduling of classes to enable faculty research through guaranteeing research productive faculty a 3–3 teaching load. (FAMU is often cited as a teaching institution where a 4–4 teaching load is typical.)

- The University's dean of Graduate Studies and Research noted that deans have the authority to use the 3–3 teaching load to support faculty research, as long as the course release results in appropriate research productivity.
- A climate where some faculty are willing to embrace a heavier teaching load or teaching preparations in order to provide opportunities for colleagues to research.
- A renewed discussion of what research means — with regard to peer-review.

It is too early to declare complete success, but the faculty, with support of the dean and upper administration, will find themselves in an appropriate faculty climate where research is expected, but also where the University provides course release and financial support to promote research or creative accomplishments.

## COMPLIANCE

### Standard 9. Assessment of Learning Outcomes

The unit's self-study in advance of the 2020 revisit outlined a series of actions and initiatives that significantly improved upon the School's previous assessment performance. During the campus revisit, progress was echoed in conversations with the dean, Assessment Committee chair, FAMU administrators who monitor assessment, and nearly every faculty member who addressed the topic.

The unit described assessment procedures as more thorough, steadier, and more meaningful. Routines include collection of data from designated courses each semester, an annual report to the Office of University Assessment, and an annual Program Evaluation Plan, which expands upon the annual report. The Evaluation Plan follows reviews and analysis of the preceding year's results, and is used as a pivot point for driving the mechanics of the program's assessment. Student learning outcomes that work can be reconfirmed and new ones established during this phase.

Direct measures include pre-post tests, rubric-based criteria, comprehensive exams, targeted assignments and capstone projects. Indirect measures were anchored in exit surveys of seniors conducted by University, as well as a more-tailored survey managed within the unit. Students placing in college journalism awards competitions also count as indirect measures.

Much of the assessment structure during the 2018 site visit remains in place. But, as the unit explained, new approaches and renewed commitments are yielding better results. Among specific activities:

- In 2019, the School conducted training sessions and course reviews concentrated on reinforcing the value of assessment, building tools to better measure student outcomes, sharpening processes for analyzing results, and revising assessment efforts accordingly.

- ACEJMC's values and competencies, already present in previous iterations of School assessment plans, appear more explicitly restated and embedded in most recent revisions of plans and in syllabi.
- In the School's comprehensive review of curriculum, assessment of student outcomes is described as an essential part of rethinking sequences and courses.
- The School updated assessment grids for each of two sequences in the re-accreditation-seeking Division of Journalism – journalism and public relations. Grids overlap where logical, while also providing assessment criteria and tools distinct for individual sequences.
- The School intensified coordination with the Office of University Assessment, which directs FAMU's campus-wide assessment using a strategic concept and format labeled STARS. The School also worked more closely with the Office of Institutional Research. According to the unit, these collaborations led to refinement of the School's annual STARS plan, revised as of September 2019 and blending more thoroughly the unit's ACEJMC assessment plans with those required for the University's state mandates and regional accreditation.
- As part of its 2019 STARS report, the School declared intent to pursue ACEJMC's Digital Certification. This strategic planning step gazes beyond current efforts to win re-accreditation. As the dean explained, FAMU wants to create more opportunities for students in emerging media. The School considers the kinds of rigorous standards required for certification a potential guidepost for reworking curricular and assessment plans.

Signs of an evolving and active assessment plan were spotted in numerous self-study and supplementary documents. One example: To sharpen students' grasp of numeracy, instructors assign a scholarly paper in PR Research and Strategies class, requiring use of basic numerical and statistical data. Analysis of results is expected this spring. Another example: When a pre-post test section on media history registered improvement one semester, then declined 8.89 percentage points in aggregated responses over the next two semesters, committee members noted the changes and began reviewing options for responding.

The unit received a rating of 3.11 out of 5 in the most recent annual performance evaluation administered by the Office of University Assessment. A rating at or near 4 is likely when the next annual results are announced this year, according to the office. One administrator referred to the School as an emerging model for the campus on raising performance standards. Several faculty members singled out the Assessment Committee chair as a linchpin of these efforts.

Even as the unit effectively uses assessment data to help shape curriculum modifications, it is aware of areas needing improvement. That list includes continued refinement of planning documents, a review of which courses best serve the aims of assessment, and a search for methods of streamlining efforts.

Within the School, assessment is a priority. It is robustly tended to, is aligned with ACEJMC's values and competencies, and is effectively used as a tool for continuous attention to quality improvement.

## COMPLIANCE

### **3. Describe any other weaknesses cited by the site team in its report and any additional concerns cited by the Council in its letter to the unit regarding provisional status.**

2018 concern: Skills classes exceeding 20:1 guideline for students-to-teacher ratio.

2018 concern: Instability of leadership positions in unit, as well as across University.

### **4. For EACH of the other weaknesses cited by the site team or concerns cited by the Council, provide a summary of the revisit team's findings regarding corrections.**

#### **2018 concern: Skills classes exceeding 20:1 guideline for students-to-teacher ratio.**

##### Revisit findings

The school has made steady progress in controlling enrollment in professional classes by adding new faculty and managing offerings with greater effectiveness. By Spring 2020, all skills classes in journalism and PR classes were in compliance with the 20:1 ratio. One section of PGY Photo Foundation exceeded the cap by two students. The PGY courses are part of the School's Graphic Communications program, not an accredited unit, but a unit from which students are allowed to complete classes that count as major credit.

In the previous term, fall 2019, all skills classes enrolled 20 students or fewer, with the exception of three sections of PGY Photo Foundations with 23 students per section.

In Spring 2019, with the arrival of the new dean, the faculty achieved the 20:1 ratio for skills courses in all but two journalism sections, with one extra student in each. Six sections of PGY Photo Foundations exceeded the 20:1 ratio.

The dean and program directors are aware of the need to maintain the 20:1 ratio in skills courses. New full-time faculty have been hired; additional full-time faculty searches are anticipated. Additionally, adjunct faculty are available in the Tallahassee market and faculty in professional tracks have shown a willingness to teach a course overload, should the need arise. Under the new dean and with enthusiastic support from the faculty, attention is being paid to skills course enrollment.

#### **2018 concern: Instability of leadership positions in unit, as well as across University.**

### Revisit findings

During the 2020 revisit to the campus, leadership appeared more anchored for both the University and the School, compared to the scene two years before.

While some predictable campus transition still was afoot, interim/vacant administration positions appeared much less prevalent. The University president by now exceeds more than three years on the job. A veteran FAMU administrator was appointed provost in 2019. Previous concerns about campus leadership instability seemed to be allayed by the march of time and by significantly fewer interim roles on campus directly affecting the Division of Journalism.

Within the School of Journalism & Graphic Communication, the dean, an experienced journalism program administrator and accomplished digital media researcher, was into her second year in charge. The most recently appointed director of the Division of Journalism, the unit seeking re-accreditation, is a long-serving faculty member with extensive professional experience in journalism and strategic communication.

Perceptions of the new dean were mixed, though more often than not faculty members pointed out attributes such as research credentials and strategic thinking. Critics cited lack of communication and concerns about morale. Faculty members impressed with the dean described an energizing force with an inspiring vision for the program's future.

### **5. Summary conclusion and recommendation:**

FAMU's School of Journalism & Graphic Communication addressed program shortcomings first identified in 2018 with a sense of purpose that was apparent during the site team revisit. The unit increased research and positioned the faculty for more opportunities, bolstered by recent and anticipated hires recruited based on their scholarly records. The unit embedded ACEJMC values and competencies more fully into plans, generated more thorough analysis of student learning outcomes, and produced more consistent documentation.

The Division of Journalism's work over the past two years merits re-accreditation. Thanks to the School's recommitment to scholarship and assessment, the dedication of faculty, and ambition plans to re-imagine curriculum, this program is poised for more success.

### **RE-ACCREDITATION**