

2022-23
Revisit Team Report
for Accreditation in Journalism
and Mass Communications

Name of Accredited Unit: Department of Communication

Name of Institution: Jacksonville State University

Name of Unit Administrator: Christopher J. McCollough, Ph.D.

Date of Original Site Visit: Dec. 1-4, 2019

Revisit Date: Jan. 23-24, 2023

Revisit Team Chair: Joel Kaplan, associate dean, graduate programs, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University



Revisit Team Member: Beth Barnes, professor emerita, College of Communication and Information, University of Kentucky



Revisit Team's Recommendation: **REACCREDITATION**

1. List each standard found in noncompliance and the reasons as cited in the original team report. (Add additional pages as necessary.)

Standard 1: Mission, Governance and Administration

Reasons cited:

1. Failure to adhere to the unit's own rules on the search/selection for a new department chair
2. Failure to update all of the appropriate data on the ACEJMC website

Standard 2: Curriculum and Instruction

Reasons cited:

1. Failure to adhere to the 20-1 student-faculty classroom ratio for skills courses
2. Failure to enforce pre-requisites for advanced and capstone courses
3. Outdated curriculum as well as faculty professional and technological skills
4. Subpar/dated facilities and equipment resources are not adequate

Standard 8: Professional and Public Service

Reasons cited:

1. Failure to have any formal vehicle for alumni engagement, including a contact list for recent graduates
2. Failure to use their resources to host public service and outreach events that were present in the past

2. For each standard that had been in noncompliance, provide a summary of the revisit team's findings regarding corrections. Provide an evaluation of compliance or noncompliance. (Present a separate narrative response for each standard in noncompliance. Add additional pages as necessary.)

Standard 1: Mission, Governance and Administration

Summary of findings:

The unit's failure to comply with Standard 1 during the 2019 site team visit was a confluence of leadership turmoil throughout the university. A new department head, who was unfamiliar with the accreditation process, had just been installed after the previous chair had been fired over a negative student editorial concerning the university president. The unit failed to follow its procedures in selecting the new head. The previous head, who had announced his retirement, was put in charge of the self-study and repeated information from the previous report. Meanwhile, the unit was unilaterally moved into the business school, whose longtime dean was unfamiliar with the unit's culture or ACEJMC's values and competencies and had already announced his retirement.

In other words, the unit was an administrative disaster and members of the Committee and the Council expressed concerns that it would not be able to fix its myriad problems during the probationary period.

Nevertheless, a month after the site team visit a new business school dean, who had a background in communications, was installed. The new dean immediately went to work to attempt to bring the unit into compliance with the help of the university's provost and president (both were interim during the time of the site team visit and have since assumed their offices permanently).

During the spring of 2020, the university president authorized the new dean to make an emergency hire to the department with an expertise in assessment and accreditation to help make fixes for the revisit. The following year the unit head stepped down. While the department was not able to do a national search for a new head, the dean consulted with the faculty who unanimously chose the current head, who took over prior to the 2021-22 academic year. Since then, the new head has received accolades from faculty, students, alumni and administrators in terms of leadership, organization and communication. The dean of the business school who hired him is no longer there, but that former dean arranged for funding for new hires and resources including a new studio and equipment. The current business school dean, who had been on the business school faculty, continues to support the department and has a close—and good—relationship with the new head.

In many respects, Jacksonville State University was facing a “perfect storm” during the site team’s previous visit. Every leadership position, from the president and provost to the dean and department head was either new or interim. The university had just faced a devastating tornado that seriously damaged dozens of buildings on campus. And the university was four months away from a pandemic that shut everything down.

In some ways, the department was able to benefit from actions related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The department used FEMA funding to completely restore the business school building—Merrill Hall—where the communication faculty is now housed. The postponement of ACEJMC site visits in 2020-21 gave the department an extra year in which to correct the deficiencies the site team described.

In terms of its failure to update the appropriate data on the ACEJMC website, this was an institutional problem due to the lack of support by the university’s alumni relations office. The current head has instituted a fix: first he conducts exit interviews with graduating seniors plus an annual quantitative survey distributed to graduating seniors. He also collects contact information to generate a dataset and reach out six months after graduation. The result, beginning with those graduating in fall 2022, will be the ability of the unit to keep track of employment results going forward.

Overall evaluation: COMPLIANCE

Standard 2: Curriculum and Instruction

Since the new department head took over, he has made it a priority to adhere to the limit of 20 students in a skills course and has monitored all such courses so that no student can be admitted to a skills course once it hits an enrollment of 20.

The site team had also found a lack of consistent advising that meant many students failed to take the correct prerequisites for advanced and capstone courses and forced other students to extend their stay because of the unavailability of courses they needed to graduate. The new head said this was due, in part, to a randomized assignment of students to advisors that often did not align with their concentrations. At the same time, the university launched a centralized advising setup last April which removed faculty from course advising to focus on mentorship. At a meeting of current students, they said they were very pleased with the new advising setup and emphasized how approachable the communication faculty is. They said they have no problem getting into needed courses and all are expected to graduate on time.

In terms of outdated curriculum, particularly when it came to the broadcast concentration, the department has made tremendous strides. In the fall of 2021, the then dean successfully lobbied the Board of Trustees to use \$500,000 of the department's foundation funds to subsidize the renovations of the production studio in Self Hall (the department is divided into two buildings: the newly renovated Merrill Hall, where lecture classrooms are located and Self Hall, where the studio and skills lab is located. Faculty have offices in both locations).

The new studio is state of the art with 4K capacity and many other technological updates. As the department said, broadcast is now out and digital media production is in. In addition, the department outfitted its checkout equipment with 25 additional backpack cameras and LED lighting kits. Students say the new equipment makes a huge difference for all the concentrations, not just broadcast because multimedia storytelling is available throughout the curriculum.

To go along with the technical updates, the department also updated its curriculum and brought in new faculty with updated industry skills. Two new hires with extensive journalism and public relations and advertising skills were added to the faculty and two more new hires were authorized to begin next academic year. In addition, a strategic emphasis was placed on recruiting a pool of adjunct faculty with healthy industry experience to supplement the full-time faculty

While service learning activities take place throughout the department, they are particularly strong in the public relations and advertising concentration. Students are engaged in work for organizations on and off campus, gaining valuable skills and outstanding portfolio pieces. Several members of the department faculty have impressive professional experience in public relations, resulting in instruction that is current. The reworking of the department's computer lab to use Macs rather than PCs has been very beneficial for PR and advertising students in addition to the journalism students. The hiring of a new director of student media with extensive background in local news has also been a boon for journalism students.

Overall evaluation: COMPLIANCE

Standard 8: Professional and Public Service

Summary of findings: The original site team's finding of noncompliance on this standard was due to deficiencies in three components: faculty professional development, alumni engagement/tracking and public service activities. The unit has made very good progress in addressing these issues, with some remedies already in place and others well along in the planning process.

Faculty professional development

The department's faculty makeup has changed considerably since the site team visit. At that time, there were five full-time faculty members, many of them quite senior. There are now six full-time faculty members, with two additional hires underway. Only three of the current faculty members were here at the time of the last site visit.

All of the current full-time faculty members have at least some professional experience, with many having extensive experience. The department has also identified a pool of working media professionals available as adjunct faculty to supplement the full-time faculty.

The department is committed to helping its full-time faculty keep current with professional practice. Each faculty member receives department funding for membership in one professional organization, and the department chair has also identified funds to support further faculty

development, including sending faculty members to the annual conventions of SPJ and BEA/NAB.

Alumni engagement/tracking

As noted earlier, the unit has reworked its senior exit interview process to collect information from students on job placement at the time of graduation. Graduates are also now asked to provide an email address and telephone number that they will continue to use so that the unit can stay in contact with them. The unit will conduct a follow-up survey six months after graduation to gather placement data; this will also be used to offer job search support to alumni who are still seeking employment. (The department reports that placement at the time of graduation for the last three terms averaged 76 percent.)

The department is also increasing its use of social media to stay in contact with both current students and graduates. A faculty member in the department is leading this effort for the college as a whole and using it as a learning opportunity for department students who are helping to create the content. Formative work took place in Fall 2022; content is now being created for Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. The accounts include information on student organization activities; features on faculty, staff and alumni; polls for current students; and recognition of individual achievements.

The JSU PRSSA chapter also regularly invites program graduates to speak to members. The department has also reactivated its SPJ chapter, and that group will also provide opportunities for interaction between current students and alumni. A graduate who is a board member, a director with NBC News/MSNBC, recently visited media production classes to guest lecture and coach students.

The department has reconstituted its advisory board. The now 11-member board has been tasked with developing alumni engagement ideas (among other topics); one board member is leading this initiative. The initial focus is on building the department's database of alumni, something that has not been an emphasis in the past. The lead board member is working with the university's alumni office on this and has several innovative ideas for gathering the needed information and then for reengaging with graduates.

Anecdotally, two program graduates the revisit team spoke with who are now engaged with the department mentioned that they have seen major, positive changes in the past few years. One said, "I think they're better now than they've ever been before," and expressed confidence that that upward momentum will continue. Another advisory board member said the department head "is making things happen very quickly."

Public service activities

Like many JMC programs, the unit's primary public service contributions come through its students' service learning activities. In the time since the site team visit, the unit has increased these, including campaigns course students working with local non-profits, coverage of local issues by students in the digital journalism program, mock press conferences involving students and local journalists, and students making presentations to university communication professionals.

In addition, the unit is now working closely with the Alabama Press Association and the local PRSA chapter to offer events to benefit those groups' members.

Two of the unit's faculty members developed a workshop for reporters to help them think about how their job affects their mental health and to share coping strategies. The first program took place in August 2022; it will be repeated in Summer 2023 with support from the Alabama Press Association. 15 journalists participated in the initial workshop.

In September 2022, as part of PRSA Ethics Month programming, the department worked with JSU's Director of Strategic Communication, a program alumna, to organize an event featuring Lily Ledbetter, a nationally known activist on employment discrimination who is a native of Jacksonville. The event attracted 100 or so attendees from campus and the community and was watched via simulcast by a national audience of nearly 700 people. This event included involvement from department faculty, the advisory board, students and the university. PRSSA students led the Q&A portion of the program and helped promote the event on campus.

The department also facilitated an ethics case study workshop and roundtable on digital ethics for PRSSA and PRSA members throughout Alabama. Between 50 and 75 people participated. In addition to the ethics content, this event also provided a networking opportunity for students and professionals.

Two past events, Communication Week and the Ayers Lecture, have not taken place in recent years due partly to the department's focus on curriculum revision and restructuring as well as the impact of COVID-19. There are plans to rework both of those, which will add even more to the department's public service outreach.

Overall evaluation: COMPLIANCE

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.

1. Eclectic research interests that don't mesh with professional outcomes
2. Not enough emphasis on racial, gender, or ethnic diversity
3. Failure to take advantage of a \$2 million endowed fund to hire a professional in residence

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.

1. The department's junior faculty have been extremely productive over the past three years in important areas of scholarship and have used that productivity to enhance student learning. One of the junior faculty members has been quite active in producing research on strategic health communication and mental health's relationship to journalistic norms and routines. Another has focused on writing about the characteristics of successful female public relations executives. The research interests of other new faculty more closely align with student learning outcomes.
2. While the department was found in compliance on the diversity standard, the site team believed there could be more emphasis on infusing racial, gender and ethnic diversity into the curriculum. The department has done that by working to ensure a diverse population as part of its PRSSA chapter and its recently reactivated SPJ chapter. The department is also committed to maintaining diversity in its adjunct personnel and making better use of diversity in classroom discussion and topics.

3. Beyond the \$2 million Ayers Family endowed fund, the department discovered that it had accrued resources beyond that amount and went to work using that money to assist in other areas that were found deficient on the report such as providing industry-current connections for both students and faculty and for facility upgrades. While the department thinks that getting a visiting professional in residence is important, they chose to use that money in other areas including student media support, stipends for high profile internships, maintaining a guest lecture series and other projects. The Ayers Family welcomed those alternative uses for the money.

5. Summary conclusion and recommendation:

As many have stated during this revisit, the difference between the Department of Communication in late 2019 and early 2023 is one of night and day. A university and a unit that was in turmoil during the site team visit because of natural and administrative disasters has turned itself around and is now a place of terrific teaching, research and advising with up- to-date facilities and an updated curriculum. An advisory board consisting of a diverse group of alumni and friends of the school from a variety of the department's sequences are excited to become part of the department's community and its members are eager to give their time and energy to help in various ways. Most importantly, the department has strong leadership in place and a small but collegial faculty that is clearly on an upwards trajectory.

Recommendation: **REACCREDITATION**