

2019-20
Revisit Team Report
for Accreditation in Journalism
and Mass Communications

Name of Accredited Unit: **Richard T. Robertson School of Media & Culture**

Name of Institution: **Virginia Commonwealth University**

Name of Administrator: Marcus Messner, Interim Director

Date of Original Site Visit: October 29-November 1, 2017

Revisit Date: November 11-13, 2019

Revisit Team Chair:

Joe Foote, Dean Emeritus, Gaylord College of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Oklahoma

Revisit Team Member:

Brian Sheehan, Professor, S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, Syracuse University

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 4: Full-time & Part-Time Faculty

Reasons cited:

SUMMARY: Full-time faculty members are well-qualified with a mix of professional experience and academic expertise. They are respected within the College of Humanities and Science, and across campus. Students praised the faculty, noting especially its eagerness to provide personalized attention. However, the imbalance between full-time and part-time/adjuncts is a problem. There are not enough full-time faculty to teach core and required classes, and the imbalance has caused a student-teacher ratio that is too high.

Standard 9: Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Reasons cited:

Summary: While the School was commended for its “good assessment program” during its last accreditation visit, the changes in administration and faculty led to the plan not being implemented and reported properly. The School’s current faculty and administrators found the previous plan to be “complicated and onerous to manage,” resulting in the School’s inability to produce meaningful results to improve curriculum and instruction in recent years. Therefore, during this site visit, no reporting was available that demonstrated data analysis of values and competencies measures and interpretation of data, and very few curricular or instructional changes based on the assessment activities to date were made during the period under review. Recognizing this problem, a new assessment plan has been adopted that should make future assessment more meaningful and helpful in making continuous improvements.

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. (Present a separate narrative response for each of the standards in noncompliance. Add additional pages as necessary.)

**Standard 4: Full-Time & Part-Time Faculty
Summary of Findings:**

During the 2017 site visit The Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture was found out of compliance on Standard 4. The program did not have sufficient full-time faculty to serve the curricular and teaching needs of the unit. Plus, the School was relying too heavily on adjuncts who taught almost half of the required curriculum. Before the site visit ended, the university president made a commitment of six additional full-time faculty lines. That commitment has been fulfilled, and the School has been working diligently to hire new faculty and replace vacant lines.

As of the fall 2019 semester, the School has 29 full-time faculty members, up from 22 during the 2017 visit. Seventy-two percent of the core and required courses are now being taught by full-time faculty. The six new faculty are a combination of tenure-track (2) and term (4). In addition, the School has conducted three replacement searches, two of them tenure-track. Of the total new faculty, one started in the spring 2018 semester, seven in fall 2018 and two in fall 2019.

Clearly, adding 10 new faculty members to a medium-size faculty has changed the face of the faculty as well as its capabilities. In addition, the School is searching for a new director that it hopes to select this academic year. Overall, this is a young faculty with one professor (tenured); seven associate professors (five tenured); 15 assistant professors (11 tenure eligible) and six instructors. Term faculty members have permanent teaching lines and can be considered for promotion to assistant professor.

To address a weakness in adjunct training and oversight, the School has placed the hiring of adjuncts within the university hiring system to insure a fair and open process. Previously, adjuncts were chosen informally by sequence coordinators without a search or competitive interviews. Once hired, the School has an orientation process for new adjuncts and has recently begun to monitor teaching evaluations more closely and to monitor adjunct course syllabi.

It is difficult to see how the Robertson School could have done more to meet the requirements of Standard 4. The president has given the School the faculty resources it needs, and the program has worked extraordinarily hard to complete 10 searches successfully during the two-year probationary period. The School has not only reduced its reliance on adjuncts, but has reformed the way it hires and trains part-time faculty. The main challenge now will be to mentor and advance the new faculty it has hired.

Standard 9: Assessment of Learning Outcomes
Summary of Findings:

The unit regularly assesses student learning and applies results to improve curriculum and instruction.

Unit performance with regard to indicators:

a) The unit defines the goals for learning that students must achieve, including the “Professional Values and Competencies” of the Council.

The unit has embraced ACEJMC’s 12 professional values and competencies in its assessment goals. The School has adopted the ACEJMC values and competencies as desired undergraduate student learning outcomes for each of its five undergraduate programs. In addition, the School has visualized the intended learning outcomes of each required undergraduate course by providing a “curriculum map” as part of its assessment plan.

b) The unit has a written assessment plan that uses multiple direct and indirect measures to assess student learning.

The School adopted a revised assessment plan in 2017. (Note: the plan had not been implemented at the time of the last site team visit.) The plan has multiple, relevant direct and indirect measures with three new measures having recently been added in 2019. It currently totals four direct and seven indirect measures as follow:

Direct:

- 1) Student capstone project and portfolio reviews by media professionals.
- 2) Aggregate internship evaluations by internship providers.
- 3) Embedded assessment in core courses. (Pre-post test)
- 4) Faculty review of class-generated student work.

Indirect:

- 1) Student retention and graduation rates.
- 2) Student internship data.
- 3) Participation and performance in student contests, awards, fellowships, etc.
- 4) Exit survey of graduating seniors.
- 5) Graduating student and alumni employment data.
- 6) Student survey: The National Survey of Student Engagement.
- 7) “Flash” focus groups of graduating seniors.

The plan appears to be a living document that guides learning goals for the program.

c) The unit collects and reports data from its assessment activities and applies the data to improve curriculum and instruction.

The unit has been diligent both about collecting and reporting data since the plan’s implementation in the fall semester of 2017. Assessment data has been collected in a systematic way every semester. The School’s Accreditation and Assessment Committee has reported the assessment findings to the Robertson School’s faculty every semester.

Every semester, the School’s Undergraduate Studies Committee also reviews the findings and provides its recommendations to the faculty for discussion of possible curricular and programmatic changes. In the spring semester of 2019, the Accreditation and Assessment Committee provided a summary report for the assessment data from the fall semester 2017, spring semester 2018 and fall semester 2018. The committee also included longitudinal summary data in its next report in the fall semester 2019.

The assessment plan has been instituted assiduously.

In an attempt to increase the depth of the analysis, three additional measures were added to the assessment plan in 2019. Despite the fact that the Undergraduate Studies Committee reviews the report, and makes recommendations to the faculty every semester, the site team was quite surprised that the School’s self-report did not mention one recommendation for concrete

curricular or programmatic change to date. However, in further discussion with the School's assessment committee, it became clear that the feedback had indeed been used to improve both instruction and advising, and that the feedback had also been used to confirm the soundness of bigger decisions already made about curriculum.

Some examples of assessment findings affecting specific educational initiatives follow:

- In the Journalism sequence, there were relatively low scores on the "Numbers and Stats" competency as reflected in how professional journalists rated students' portfolios. In response, the School created a new course on Data Journalism and Visualization (MASC 344) and is offering it for the first time this semester. In the Fall of 2018 and Fall of 2019, the Journalism sequence held study sessions to help students prepare for the editing tests required to apply for Dow Jones News Fund Summer 2020 Internships. Two of the editing tests (Data Journalism and Business Reporting) required extensive knowledge of math and statistics to help make sure the School's applicants would do well.
- In the Advertising sequence, the department received feedback in the assessment process that the program was too focused on "traditional ad agency" jobs. In response, they have increased the focus on new media and non-agency work.
- In the Public Relations sequence, feedback in the capstone course assessment led to a redesign of MASC 337 Case Studies (which became MASC 337 Strategy) with an emphasis on the four-step PR process and building strategic PR plans.
- Feedback from internship evaluations highlighted the need to improve students' soft skills. This reinforced the decision for Robertson Student Services Center to provide career development workshops and information targeted soft skill development.

d) The unit maintains contact with the alumni to assess these experiences in the professions and to provide suggestions for improving curriculum and instruction.

The school has an advisory board that includes alumni. The School reviews major new educational initiatives and curriculum changes with the board for their input. For example, they recently discussed a new initiative to provide mentoring to male African-American and Latino students to improve their outcomes. The School has also recently launched the new Robertson School Speaker Series, which brings three Speakers to campus each semester to talk about current topics involving the media. Importantly, they use these speeches as a way to engage alumni to come back and engage in the program by announcing them in alumni newsletters. The development team of the College of Humanities and Sciences and the leadership team of the Robertson School also regularly invite alumni to visit the School and reconnect.

e) The unit includes members of journalism and mass communication professions in its assessment process.

The School uses journalism and mass communications professionals to review capstone projects and portfolios. Over 200 clients and professional evaluators have been involved since 2017 to review projects by over 500 students.

SUMMARY:

Overall, the School has made big strides in assessment since the last ACEJMC site visit. They have a concrete plan with multiple direct and indirect measures. They are diligent about information gathering, analysis and dissemination. They are to be applauded for their attention to this standard since the last site visit. There is also good reason to believe that the School will continue to improve on assessment going forward. The site team had a number of very constructive discussions with the School's assessment committee and leadership about how the School might want to modify its data collection process and rubrics/tools going forward (especially regarding portfolio/capstone project evaluation and internship data). To this end, there was discussion of combining direct-measure numbers 1 and 4 into a single, more comprehensive process. There was also agreement to bring longitudinal data collected before 2017 into the analysis when and where relevant.

Overall evaluation, compliance/non-compliance: 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. 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.

- An underdeveloped alumni engagement strategy.

The 2017 site team noted that the School lacked a consistent, effective means to communicate with its alumni. Since then, the unit has created a bi-monthly e-newsletter produced jointly by faculty and interns and has issued a print publication, "The Robertsonian."

- Lack of student collaborative work space

As the 2017 site team was leaving campus, the administration committed to giving priority to the Robertson School in its strategic master plan. That promise has been officially incorporated into the university's master plan. The building currently housing the School will be demolished, and a larger cross-disciplinary building will be erected that includes far more space for the unit. There will likely be an interim period where the School can obtain two or three additional rooms on the top floor of its existing building.

In the meantime, the School has enabled after-hours building access to students, opened a new multimedia lab and created an attractive, makeshift collaborative space in one of the classrooms. While the program still lacks an exclusive non-classroom lab for students to do their work, it is providing the best access it can until a new building can be built around seven years from now.

4. Summary conclusion and recommendation:

The School has met the need for more full-time staff admirably. It has also improved its assessment planning and tracking substantially. Based on the discussions during this visit, the next site team should expect that assessment data-gathering has been consistently improved in terms of quality and usefulness of application to both day-to-day instructional improvements and larger curricular improvements.

We recommend **reaccreditation**.