

2023-24
Revisit Team Report
for Accreditation in Journalism
and Mass Communications

Name of Accredited Unit: **Department of Communication**

Name of Institution: **University of North Alabama**

Name of Unit Administrator: **Dr. Patricia Sanders, Chair**

Date of Original Site Visit: **Oct. 17-20, 2021**

Revisit Date: **Dec. 7-8, 2023**

Revisit Team Chair: **Caesar Andrews, Distinguished Chair in Media Ethics and Writing, Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada, Reno**

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Revisit Team Member: **Dr. David R. Davies, Professor, University of Southern Mississippi**

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Revisit Team's Recommendation:

REACCREDITATION

Background: The Department of Communication at the University of North Alabama received ACEJMC accreditation for the first time in 2015, with all standards in compliance.

Six years later, the 2021 site visit team recommended provisional. Assessment of student learning outcomes, still housed under Standard 9 at the time, was the only standard in non-compliance. While all eight other standards earned compliance, the 2021 site team identified three additional concerns or weaknesses beyond assessment. A summary of that team's rationale for non-compliance on assessment and its descriptions of the three weaknesses are restated elsewhere in this revisit report.

The council voted 13-1 in April 2022 to accept the site team's and the Accrediting Committee's recommendations for provisional, setting the stage for a revisit in fall 2023. By this time, ACEJMC had revised its standards and streamlined the total from nine to eight, with assessment as the new No. 3. But for the sake of continuity, this revisit review retains the old No. 9 as the guide for evaluating the department's assessment.

The Department of Communication is among 17 units operating under the College of Liberal Arts, Sciences and Engineering. Recent restructuring in the college call for the Department of Communication to report through a newly established School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

In fall 2023, the department enrolled 123 students, compared to 130 listed in the previous site team report for spring 2021. The fall 2023 roster listed 11 full-time faculty members, compared to 12 as of the 2021 report.

Students select an area of primary academic emphasis from three sequences. The department is seeking reaccreditation for two, Journalism and Digital Media Production and Public Relations. The third, Communications Studies, has not been part of accreditation.

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

Standard 9: Assessment of Learning Outcomes

2021 site team's summary of noncompliance: *"The unit needs its own assessment plan that explicitly shows how the values are assessed.*

"Direct measures should be analyzed formatively and programmatically. Rather than having a professor grade his or her own students, faculty should work together to assess student work as a cohort, with the goal of assessing whether the program learning outcomes are being met.

"Whether using direct or indirect measures, faculty need to thoughtfully analyze the results, then make programmatic improvements based on the data (i.e., 'close the loop.')

"Professionals need to be involved in at least some assessment of program learning outcomes."

Deficiencies to address, as recommended by 2021 site team: *"Develop and execute a systematic and authentic assessment plan that includes the input of industry professionals, measures program-wide student learning of the Council's professional values and competencies, then provides evidence of closing the loop for continuous improvement of the curriculum."*

Statement from May 9, 2022, council letter to the University of North Alabama, following decision on provisional accreditation: *"The site team, Committee and Council expressed concerns about the lack of a department assessment plan. The department must develop and execute an assessment plan that includes the input of industry professionals, measures program-wide student learning of the ACEJMC values and competencies, and provides evidence that assessment results are used to improve curriculum."*

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

Standard 9: Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Summary of findings by revisit team:

Bluesy jazz stylist Dinah Washington sang "What a difference a day makes." That notion is a fitting conclusion to the fall 2023 revisit to the University of North Alabama, reflecting the Department of Communication's diligent work across the two years since assessment was found non-compliant.

The 2021 site reviewers concluded that the department did not demonstrate sound fundamentals in its assessment of student learning. That team found insufficient evidence that the unit analyzed student learning outcomes to drive cohesive and ongoing progress in curriculum and instruction.

The 2023 revisit team witnessed substantial improvement in assessment activities. This determination is based on review of the unit's 148-page revisit self-study, evaluation of relevant documentation (meeting agendas, email exchanges, syllabuses, annual assessment reports), an hour-long discussion with more than two dozen majors, numerous exchanges with the chair in advance of the revisit, and a Dec. 7-8 trip to the campus in Florence, Alabama. The site visit focused on conversations with the chair, Assessment Committee members, other faculty members, and top university administrators.

The unit proved to be responsive and frequently effective in addressing the assessment shortcomings expressed two years before.

- The 2021 site team reported that the department's curriculum map for assessment did not sufficiently demonstrate direct connections to ACEJMC's values and competencies.
 - As of fall 2023, the curriculum map covers each value and competency directly and sufficiently.

- In 2021, the site team found ACEJMC's full complement of values and competencies in the syllabus for just one course. (Fairness context: Seven learning outcomes actually were included in syllabuses at the time, all associated with the department's accreditation regimen for SACS, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. But, as the 2021 site team observed, the unit did not connect or align those outcomes with ACEJMC's expectations.)
 - As of 2023, ACEJMC's mandated values and competencies appeared across a large sampling of syllabuses reviewed by the revisit team, alongside the program's SACS-driven objectives. The revisit self-study included a grid showing how ACEJMC and SACS are applied to align with each other.

- In 2021, the unit did not present the site team a written departmental assessment plan.
 - In advance of the 2023 campus revisit, the chair provided a two-page plan. Departmental correspondence indicates work on the plan started immediately after the 2021 site visit, leading to faculty consensus on initiatives and an assessment blueprint in place by spring 2022.
 - The plan lists seven measures total, embedded in two courses required of all majors – COM 420 Communication Capstone and COM 499 Internship.

Four direct measures:

- ✓ COM 420 Communication Capstone: 1. Outside professionals including alumni conduct mock interviews of students, evaluating them using a five-point rating system and criteria that align with the unit's learning outcomes. 2. Outside professionals and faculty members evaluate students' digital portfolios.
- ✓ COM 499 Internship: 3. Professional supervisors at companies, agencies and other organizations that employ interns use the department's rubric to evaluate interns' overall performance, with emphasis on skills and workplace professionalism. 4. The same supervisors evaluate portfolios of work produced during internships, assessing the degree to which interns fulfill ACEJMC's values and competencies.

Three indirect measures:

- ✓ Survey of interns' impressions of experience, with essay responses on topics such as the First Amendment and diversity.
 - ✓ Interns' self-evaluations of their work experience.
 - ✓ Survey of students' impressions of the communication program and their plans for post-graduations, along with self-evaluations on learning outcome topics such as writing, law and ethics, and diversity.
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- In 2021, the department lacked documentation of programmatic analysis of results associated with measures. "There is very little specific, concrete evidence," the site team wrote, "to suggest how effective these measures have been in advancing student learning related to the professional values and competences."
 - As of 2023, the department's Assessment Committee was able to document how student learning is evaluated from a programmatic perspective. One public relations writing example involved recognition that students struggled to repurpose content across different platforms – shifting from a standard press release to social media postings, to take one scenario. After the assessment review process pinpointed this weakness in one course, specific writing exercises were added to an earlier prerequisite course in the curriculum. Another example: Insufficient math skills emerged as a shortcoming during assessment reviews. In response, the unit shifted to more emphasis on numerical and statistical concepts in courses that precede internships. Additionally, as another example of instructional attention to numbers, statistical software was deployed, allowing students to practice managing data.

 - In 2021, "the faculty appears to have misunderstood ACEJMC requirements for assessment. ... Assessment was understood to be the same as grading."

- As of 2023, the unit exudes a clearer and more confident sense of assessment as an overarching vehicle for programmatic progress, not just for tinkering at the level of individual course or individual assignment. Conversations with faculty members reinforced the self-study’s contention that assessment is a frequent subject of attention. University administrators agreed that the department has pivoted toward a more sure-footed practice of assessment.
- In 2021, the site team did not find explicit, documented evidence that the unit used meaningful outside reviews and perspectives from alumni and other professionals to help drive improvements in curriculum and instruction.
 - As of 2023, the self-study offers ample proof that outside professionals now contribute to the department’s assessments. Examples from the self-study included three professionals signed up to review digital portfolios, and more than 24 workplace supervisors who conducted evaluations of interns. ACEJMC’s values and competencies are embedded in reviews.

The sum of the department’s assessment activities paints a robust picture of engagement. The unit meets ACEJMC expectations for both the old Standard 9 and its successor Standard 3. Beyond its concentration on two core courses as the anchors for assessments, it also applies similar strategies for cultivating student learning outcomes across other parts of the curriculum.

Opportunities to stretch and improve further are apparent within the Department of Communication. Targeting more specific objectives during each round of analysis is worth consideration. So is re-evaluating and perhaps even streamlining the lineup of measures.

But the main motivations for change at this time are not shortcomings of the kind that prompted the previous non-compliance in assessment and provisional accreditation status for the program. Two years later, there is a dramatic difference. Fundamentals are in place. Cultural understanding of assessment is heightened. The next tasks now are comparable to the never-ending assessment mission for all programs. Keep searching for continuous improvements tailored to the unit. Continue unrelenting review of how best to drive student learning.

Overall evaluation: 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.

Other weaknesses described by 2021 site team: *“The department is on its fourth chair*

since its initial accreditation in 2015 and the current chair has only committed to a one-year, interim appointment; it has a tight budget, with unclear access to travel funding; the department needs a clear diversity plan with measurable outcomes; the department's assessment activities do not include professionals, are not explicitly tied to the Council's professional values and competencies, are based on course-level grading, rather than program-level assessment, and lack evidence that faculty use evidence to close the loop."

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.

Leadership: The department has an energetic and well-respected leader who is in her third year as interim chair and has led the department's efforts to build its assessment program. Department faculty as well as the college dean cite her leadership as exemplary, and correspondence shows that she has offered strong leadership of the department's revamp of its assessment program. The college dean reports that the unit is perceived positively across campus, with a faculty engaged in campus work and students who are active in the larger community through internships.

Budget: The budget for the unit remains tight but reflective of the university's overall budget during recent lean years. The university uses a historical funding model that has kept the department's budget static, and the travel budget is particularly tight. Tenured and tenure-track faculty receive up to \$850 a year for travel for conferences or professional development, while lecturers receive up to \$550. According to the college dean, those amounts are on par with other departments in the College of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering. Both the chair and the dean noted that additional travel resources are available. A college travel fund usually awards \$35,000 to \$40,000 in additional support each year. A universitywide fund is also available, and the dean reported that faculty members usually get at least some funding in response to their requests.

Diversity plan: The department has described its diversity plan as a work in progress, as the unit has directed the bulk of its work on and attention to reaccreditation matters toward work on the assessment plan.

However, the department submitted a vision statement for its diversity plan along with a 10-point outline of goals and initiatives under consideration. This outline proposes training, recruitment, curriculum, engagement and accountability that demonstrate the faculty have put considerable thought into the overall direction of diversity initiatives but have stopped short of completing an overall plan. Some initiatives are quite detailed, with outcomes that could be easily measured.

The department chair, the first woman and the first African American to serve as a chair of her department, said she places a high priority on diversity. She said an initial goal of her tenure as chair was the addition of another African-American faculty member, a goal that was accomplished with the hiring of a visiting lecturer during the current academic year.

Other weaknesses: The other weaknesses cited by the previous site team concerned deficiencies in the assessment plan, all of which have been addressed in previous sections of this revisit report.

5. Summary conclusion and recommendation:

The department responded to provisional accreditation two years ago by undertaking a robust and wide-ranging effort to draft and implement a new assessment plan in spring 2022. The chair selected three faculty members to join her in overseeing committee efforts. The team put together a robust plan to assess the program through various measures in the unit's capstone and internship courses, which are required of all students, as well as in one key course in each of the department's three sequences. Faculty members attest to an evolving culture of assessment in which everyone is aware of assessment efforts, which are discussed frequently in faculty meetings.

Assessment data tied explicitly to ACEJMC's values and competencies is collected throughout the academic year. Faculty members assess the data each spring to determine what changes should be made to individual courses and the overall curriculum. An appropriate mix of direct and indirect measures of learning outcomes is used, and professionals are heavily involved in the process. The department has ample evidence that it has used assessment findings to improve its programs and thus to "close the loop."

University officials stress that the University of North Alabama only recently made assessment a priority. Nonetheless, they now cite the department as a much-appreciated contributor to the university's assessment efforts.

Recommendation: REACCREDITATION