

How J-Programs Can Pass Accreditation

Contributed by {{Mike McQueen - Black College Wire}}
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Four HBCUs can take advantage of their second chance.

By Mike McQueen
Black College Wire

It could have been a banner academic year for journalism at the nation's historically black colleges and universities. At the start of the 2005-06 year, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications announced it was considering credentialing 19 programs -- four of which were at HBCUs.

Three of them, you would think, would have no problems: Florida A&M was the first HBCU journalism program accredited by the ACEJMC; Hampton had recently hired an all-star faculty of former journalists; Southern is one of the nation's largest HBCUs. Further, all three schools had previously been accredited, so the 2005-06 review was just that -- a review of what had gone on in the six years since the last accreditation. Winston-Salem State was the only "newbie" seeking accreditation.

By May, all four HBCU schools had been told: You'll have to be provisionally accredited, and we hope during the two-year period of provisional accreditation you'll solve your issues and gain full accreditation.

What happened? More important, what's next?

The answer to the first question was spelled out by the accreditation reviewers in each case. I'll simplify their explanation: The reviewers were worried about the leadership at FAMU and Hampton. At Hampton, they also were worried that professors weren't publishing enough scholarly material. Southern, the reviewers thought, was requiring its professors to teach too many classes. Winston-Salem just wasn't ready for the major leagues. The student newspaper, for example, was published once a month.

It is important to note that all four of the schools have a second chance. They can fix the problems and gain full accreditation, and there's a very good chance that some, perhaps all of them will. It is almost inconceivable, for instance, that FAMU, with its veteran faculty and record of producing first-rate journalists, will not find a way back into the good graces of the accrediting council.

From 1991 to 2004, I taught journalism in the graduate program at the University of Miami and later at Florida International University in Miami. From 1999 to 2004, I was chairman of the journalism program at FIU. During that 13-year stretch, I was involved in three accreditation reviews; at the conclusion of the last one (2002), the accrediting panel that visited FIU told the university's president, Dr. Modesto "Mitch" Maidique, that we had fashioned a "top-notch, nationally competitive program" that excelled in all 12 -- now nine -- standards used to judge programs.

So it is from that experience in higher education administration that I offer five suggestions to the leaders and faculty of the four HBCU programs. These ideas might or might not help you with your current dilemma -- getting fully accredited -- but they surely can help as you build toward being a top-notch program.

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Work closely with the right people.

At FIU, the top five people in our School of Journalism and Mass Communication were extremely well-connected. Each year, we sat down and identified the associations that we, and our faculty members, were going to become heavily involved in as leaders. The goal was to get into the organization, work hard and eventually rise to the presidency -- with FIU supporting us financially so long as we continued to strive for the top job. Our associate dean had been president of nearly every journalism education association in the nation. Two other faculty members became presidents of national organizations.

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Invite the right people to your campus.

Far too many journalism programs try to attract the big-name speakers from the industry %e2%80%93 the news anchor, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist. Granted, it is important that your students hear from such luminaries. But these are not the people who sit on the councils and committees that decide the fate of your program. The people who sit on these councils are the folks who have demonstrated a love for working for the good of journalism education. They might not be luminaries. But many of them can teach -- and they would do a great job if you invited them to campus to spend a week talking to students, faculty and administrators. By the way, take them out to nice restaurants while they are in town, rent them a nice car and pay them handsomely for their time and expertise.

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Put one person in charge of all program reviews.

All academic programs serve at least three masters -- your professional accreditation body, the regional accreditation group that credentials the entire university and the provost's office, which generally requires an annual report from you to prove you have a viable program. So putting one person in charge of all three of these reviews ensures that your program is always sharp, always prepared to answer fundamental questions about what you do, and is ready to prove your worthiness.

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Borrow best practices from other programs.

As I mentioned, every academic program has to undergo review. At FIU, we had a relationship with the creative writing program. In both creative writing and journalism, the best faculty are masters at their crafts: novelists and short-story writers, for example, or reporters and TV producers. But those faculty generally lack the academic credentials. Their scholarship, if you can call it that, is intended for a mass, rather than an academic audience. From the creative writing program, we learned to send the published work of our professor-journalists to a panel of distinguished professional journalists and have them comment on it.

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Network with your professional sisters and brothers.

All too often, black professional journalists and programs at historically black colleges and universities fail to connect in a meaningful and sustained way. Sure, black professional journalists are invited to speak, sometimes to teach, at HBCUs. But rarely are they at faculty meetings or in intimate gatherings with administrators talking about the future of HBCU programs and what black professional journalists should and could do there. Black professional journalists can be powerful advocates within their corporations for funding for HBCU programs. HBCU administrators should make a point of courting black editors, for example, and pointing out good story ideas on their campus. It should go without saying that black professional journalists in each city where an HBCU is located should be members of advisory boards guiding campus media.

Anyway, I wish all four programs the best of luck. If I can be of any assistance, you can reach me at (504) 523-3931 or mmcqueen@ap.org.

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