

## The Closure of the Multimedia Journalism Program And Its Implications For The Program Viability Review Process

Submitted to the Arkansas State University Faculty Senate for Deliberation and Advisement

February 2, 2024

### Synopsis:

The Journalism/Multimedia Journalism program has experienced unique circumstances since at least 2013 that have made it impossible to meet state “program viability standards.” Due to these circumstances and due to the fact that an accredited Journalism program is crucial to the university’s role, scope and mission—Arkansas State University should have been more proactive in advocating for the Multimedia Journalism program throughout the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s “program viability” review process, during the 2018-2020 review cycle and during the following “2 year window” per AHECB policy.

### Relevant Background:

The frequent administrative restructuring of Journalism since 2013, from one College to another School, with numerous other changes, has likely contributed to a lack of program stability and identity. See both, Roy Ockert (1967 ASTATE graduate in journalism and former Editor of *The Jonesboro Sun*) and the 2021-22 ACEJMC Accreditation Report for the MMJ Program for an informed critique of some prior administrative actions. <https://sites.google.com/site/ockertarchives/journalism-at-a-state/a-timeline>  
<http://www.acejmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Arkansas-State-University.pdf>

### Points of Deliberation:

1. **Point of Deliberation #1: To better understand the Department of Multimedia Journalism’s unusually large loss of majors and number of degrees awarded after 2016.** The Faculty Senate seeks a more comprehensive understanding of how and why the Multimedia Journalism program rapidly lost majors/graduates from 2017 to 2021 so as to be deemed “non-viable” by the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board (AHECB) in April, 2023.
  - a. On one hand, the dramatic loss of majors seems self-evident in the data. On the other hand, there seems to be no explicit interpretation of the plummeting numbers. Instead, there is an implicit interpretation that the MMJ major rapidly became less desirable after 2016.
  - b. Journalism lost majors at the rate of (62%) in four years—the majority occurred in one year. This would be considered a “rapid” and “catastrophic” loss by most undergraduate programs. Thus, it warrants more scrutiny to determine the probable cause(s).
    - 2016:
      - 82 majors (78 MMJ; 4 Journalism)
      - 24 degrees awarded (16 Journalism; 8 MMJ).
    - 2017:
      - 48 majors
      - 10 MMJ degrees awarded.
    - 2020:
      - 31 majors
      - 7 MMJ degrees awarded.

c. **The 3 likely causes for the Loss of MMJ majors/graduates since 2016, appear to be the following:**

▪ **#1 – Repercussions from two significant student cheating scandals in 2017-18.**

- In 2017 a previous MMJ faculty member caught 38 students in a core course cheating through the GroupMe app. Acting under the Faculty Handbook guidelines at the time, the faculty member assigned an F in the course to all 38. The university ultimately allowed the students to withdraw from the course. *(It is unclear if the if the university allowed the withdrawals through the formal student appeal process or merely via administrative fiat.)* By whichever method the withdrawals happened, the conclusion of MMJ faculty was that they were not supported by university administration in this instance. This increased speculation among MMJ faculty to search for a hidden motive for allowing the withdrawals over and against faculty accusations of student academic misconduct. And the negative “optics” of this incident increased that speculation due to the fact that 1 of the 38 students was a dependent of an ASTATE faculty member (according to MMJ faculty recollection). This further raised doubt, for some, in the integrity of the process. Subsequently, faculty believed this episode eroded their authority in the eyes of students. And, should such an incident happen again, MMJ faculty believed they would be in a weaker position.
  - As a point of reference, this coincided with the occurrence of several student cheating scandals (in other states) using GroupMe—most notably in 2017 at Ohio State University where 83 students tried to use the app to cheat in a business course.
- In 2018 the withdrawing students were allowed to retake the class from another previous MMJ member, who was taken off their normal journalism course load to teach this specific course. That instructor caught some of the same students cheating again and 16 dropped the course. Many of those students changed majors. And MMJ faculty members discovered that many of those students talked their friends into changing as well. This further eroded the department’s number of majors. And according to current MMJ faculty, their numbers “never fully recovered.”
- Some MMJ faculty members reported that they repeatedly dealt with HR for several semesters after the two incidents as students “thought the way to avoid failing grades was to accuse the faculty of malfeasance.” Because students had, “been shown it worked.” This served to significantly erode the morale of MMJ faculty as it reinforced their view that administration (or the academic appeals process) had not supported them during the initial incident.
  - The 2021-22 accreditation visit/report for MMJ states: “In 2017, students accused of cheating in one course filed complaints against their professor. Documentation of any actions involved at the University level were not available.” (p. 5)  
<http://www.acejmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Arkansas-State-University.pdf>

▪ **#2 – “Internal strife between the School of Media and Journalism’s two departments.”**

- The 2021-22 Accreditation Report for MMJ <http://www.acejmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Arkansas-State-University.pdf> made three separate notations of the “division” and/or “strife” within the SMJ. Although the language in the report is diplomatic, it indicates the absence of collegiality within the School and the compelling need for arbitration.
  - **Notation #1:** “The School’s two academic units fractured their shared ACEJMC status – Multimedia Journalism is seeking renewal; Creative Media Production is not. Mending divisions within the School remains a challenge for the director.” (p. 4).
    - The implicating conclusion of the above statement is that if only one of the two departments in the School continued to maintain accreditation (while the other did not)—“divisions” would be the expected outcome.
    - A Journalism and Media School where one of the two programs is accredited and the other is not, could plausibly lead to antagonism and incompatible goals.
  - **Notation #2:** “Internal strife between the School’s two academic programs require resolution.” (p. 5).
  - **Notation #3:** “Some representatives from other academic units on campus cited the divisions as a blow to the School [of M & J].” (p. 4)
- Confidential testimony from MMJ faculty supports (their perspective) that divisions, competition for majors and impeding student access to shared facilities existed in the School. Specifically:
  - that CMP faculty advised students not to take MMJ courses and actively recruited MMJ students to switch majors.
  - that CMP faculty attempted to persuade students that they could secure journalism jobs without a journalism major.
    - MMJ faculty state they voiced this issue up the academic chain of authority many times but “nothing was ever done to prohibit this attack from the inside . . .”
  - examples given by MMJ faculty of CMP using their oversight of the broadcast studio to attempt to make it difficult for MMJ majors to use it, etc.
  - *Even if the above accusations proved to be entirely unfounded, the accusations alone are sufficient evidence of the fundamental lack of trust among the faculty within the SMJ. And, therefore, reflective of the need for resolution by third party arbitration—just as the Accreditation Report recommended.*
- **#3—A decline in student interest in the journalism major, likely reflecting current cultural trends.**
  - By way of comparison, UAF B.A. Journalism degrees declined 28% from 2017 (146 degrees awarded) to 2023 (105 degrees awarded). This demonstrates the intuitive conclusion that Arkansas college students are not pursuing the journalism degree at previous levels. But the precipitous decline at ASTATE is well beyond that.
    - (See, UAF School of Journalism Self-Study, 2022, p. 24.) <http://www.acejmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/University-of-Arkansas-2022-23.pdf>

- (See, UAF Data Sets)  
<https://osai.uark.edu/datasets/student/awards/index.php>

2. **Point of Deliberation #2: To better understand why the Department of Multimedia Journalism was not properly informed that AHECB formally ruled it was not viable—presumably in 2021.** The Faculty Senate additionally seeks a more comprehensive understanding of how/when the initial ruling by AHECB was *supposed* to be disseminated to MMJ faculty *and* why it was not.

a. AHECB Agenda Book for April 28, 2023 states that, “initial viability was established based on a three year average for the 2018, 2019 and 2020 academic years. Programs considered for deletion at the April 2023 meeting were also identified as non-viable for two more three year averages . . . [concluding with the 2022 academic year].”

[https://adhe.edu/File/Agenda%20Book,%20April%2028,%202023%20\(3\).pdf](https://adhe.edu/File/Agenda%20Book,%20April%2028,%202023%20(3).pdf) (p. 29)

i. Based on this timeline, it seems that MMJ should have been formally notified sometime in 2021 that they had dipped below the viability standard and presumably be under a “2 year clock” per AHECB policy.

ii. Based on correspondence with all 4 MMJ faculty:

1. None were informed of the program’s formal closure prior to April, 2023.
2. None were informed of a “2 year window” (at any point since 2020) to make a case for their program’s continuation or increase enrollment in order to avoid inevitable closure.

b. AHECB policy states, “programs identified as below the viability threshold will have two (2) years to meet the threshold or be removed.” In light of this, the Senate seeks to establish a timeline for the decision and whether or not commensurate actions were taken by all parties with an interest in the outcome.” [https://adhe.edu/File/AA\\_CAO\\_Handbook.pdf](https://adhe.edu/File/AA_CAO_Handbook.pdf) (p. 11).

c. There is conclusive evidence (in the reporting of Roy Ockert) that Dr. Brad Rawlins did not know the program was formally identified by AHECB as below the viability threshold and slated for discontinuation—before April 5, 2023.

[https://sites.google.com/site/ockertarchives/journalism-at-a-state/condensed-version?fbclid=IwAR1LGCYsmVF0UMegYkmSTI4\\_nnPS4dZjfpTf-TioefRj2qpwXOKZkCS1g2I](https://sites.google.com/site/ockertarchives/journalism-at-a-state/condensed-version?fbclid=IwAR1LGCYsmVF0UMegYkmSTI4_nnPS4dZjfpTf-TioefRj2qpwXOKZkCS1g2I)

3. **Point of Deliberation #3: To better understand why Arkansas State University administration did not request a reduction in the viability target for MMJ per AHECB policy.** The Faculty Senate seeks to understand whether or not an accredited journalism program and degree are considered “crucial to the university’s role, scope and mission.” If so, this university should have made a formal argument to AHECB (presumably in 2021 or 2022) stating as much.

a. AHECB states, “Institutions may also request a reduction in the viability targets for specific academic programs that are crucial to the institution’s role, scope and mission. Evidence must exist that students can graduate in a timely manner (courses needed to complete an associate, bachelors or masters-level programs are taught within a two-year time frame and courses needed to compete a doctoral level program are taught within a three-year time frame). Academic programs with a reduced viability threshold will be monitored based upon the revised threshold.”

b. AHECB Agenda Book, April 28, 2023 (p. 30): “0 program(s) requested and were allowed a reduction of viability standards based on the institution’s role, scope, and mission.”

- c. Based on the reporting of Roy Ockert, it is likely that the university never responded to the 2021 viability report (showing MMJ in imminent danger of closure). ADHE has no record of ever receiving any response. <https://sites.google.com/site/ockertarchives/journalism-at-a-state/part-1-non-viability>

4. **Point of Deliberation #4: Because Program Viability Review by the state is a continual process, the Faculty Senate is eager to avoid a repetition of a similar scenario in the future and to proactively protect vulnerable programs if and when possible.**

- a. Are any other programs currently under a “two-year” window and slated for discontinuation, but unaware of it?
- b. There are several degree programs at the university that will likely be in danger of falling below the state’s viability thresholds in the near future. It seems incumbent on the university to publicly “get in front” of this issue and begin advocacy now.

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**Advisement:**

**The Senate wishes to inform the Chancellor and the Provost of the following and requests they take them under advisement:**

**1. The Senate finds it plausible that since 2016, the number of MMJ majors declined due to the below reasons which should have afforded the department additional or exceptional consideration in the viability review process.**

- a. General drop in student interest in the major, possibly in the 25% range (comparable to UAF over the same period) and likely resulting from current “cultural headwinds” against professional media and journalism overall.
- b. The cascading effects of the two student cheating scandals in 2017 and 2018.
- c. The preexisting acrimony (and competition for majors, etc.) within the School of Media and Journalism, documented by the 2021-22 Accreditation Review Report for MMJ, and attested to by MMJ faculty--which has continued to the present without resolution.
  - i. The Senate does not seek to assign blame to CMP for attempting to recruit majors or otherwise secure their own numbers for viability. In fact, one could make the argument that this is exactly what the state assumes university departments will do. Therefore, we take this opportunity to highlight one of the nefarious effects of the *program viability* policy of AHECB. At the end of the day it is a policy of “survival by numbers only.” Because of that, it entails the temptation to pit programs against one another in order to survive, especially programs that offer complimentary degrees. The current policy incentivizes a competitive environment to “take” students from other programs without consequences—yielding only the “viable” and the “non-viable.” This type of competition has long been the core of American capitalism but only in the last generation has it become the new core of American higher education. This policy can make it more difficult for faculty to provide the commensurate public service to the people of our state when we are compelled to view our colleagues as competitors for “numbers” in order to be seen as *viable* by our overseeing agencies.

**2. The Senate finds it plausible, in hindsight, that specific actions taken by administration could have either prevented or delayed the closure of the MMJ program:**

- a. Provide support during the loss of majors due to the cheating scandals—by acknowledging that any department would probably need 2 to 4 years (or more) to re-establish their numbers in such a scenario.
- b. Provide arbitration within the School of Media and Journalism that would have facilitated the short-term survival of both departments in the School to see if MMJ numbers could have partially recovered. This would have been especially helpful in light of 2021-22 Accreditation Review documenting the need for “resolution” within the School.
- c. Communicate the decision of the AHECB to place the MMJ degree under a “2 Year Watch” and establish, by clear documentation, when that happened.
  - i. This entire multi-year episode—failing to communicate AHECB rulings down to the department level—has revealed a significant breakdown in the internal communication structure at this institution.
- e. Make an early and well-documented argument to AHECB that MMJ has a unique contribution to make in a democratic society and therefore is vital to the mission of the university and worthy of special consideration if/when the department fails to meet graduation numbers every year.

**3. The Senate finds it implausible that the departments of CMP and MMJ will be able to “reimagine” a new journalism program due to the stated internal divisions mentioned above.**

- a. Therefore, without arbitration and resolution—spearheaded by administration—it seems fruitless to continue to wait for them to “self-resolve” their past grievances.