

Program Assessment Plan: Professional Communication

Department of Communication, Jacksonville State University

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Assessment serves as an essential component of quality assurance at Jax State, moving beyond individual student grading to evaluate the effectiveness of the entire Professional Communication curriculum.

This dynamic process ensures that our students acquire the professional values and competencies necessary for success in our rapidly evolving industry. Our commitment to continuous improvement is framed by the three core assessment criteria defined by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC): **Awareness, Understanding** and **Application**. We use collected data to refine instruction and enhance the student learning journey, demonstrating our graduates' accountability to the public interest, citizens, clients and employers.

The Six Pillars of Professional Communication

The Jax State Professional Communication curriculum is centered on Six Pillars, which define the core values and goals of our program. These pillars are deliberately designed to include and build upon the professional values and competencies outlined by ACEJMC.

Pillar (Program Goal)	Description
Ethical Practice	Upholding integrity, accountability and responsibility in all communication activities, working ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy and fairness.
Critical Thinking	Analyzing complex information, evaluating sources and making informed, rational decisions based on research and data.
Creative Problem-Solving	Innovating effective and context-appropriate solutions across various communication platforms and challenges, demonstrating originality and logical soundness.
Diversity Awareness	Valuing diverse perspectives, promoting inclusivity and demonstrating cultural proficiency across all communication strategies, empowering disenfranchised communities.
Professional Competence	Mastering the necessary technical and soft skills, including clear writing and effective use of tools, for successful entry and advancement in communication careers.

Lifelong Learning Embracing continuous professional growth, adaptability and intellectual curiosity, including grounding work in foundational communication theory.

Student Learning Outcomes (Program Competencies)

Our Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are detailed competencies integrated into the curriculum. The table below maps each of the seven competencies to the most relevant Jax State Pillar(s) and the corresponding ACEJMC Professional Value and Competency (PV&C) requirements.

Jax State Competency (SLO)	Jax State Pillar Alignment	ACEJMC PV&C Alignment
<p>1. Writing Clearly & Effectively: Demonstrate proficiency in clarity, tone, grammar and mechanics, adapting style for specific audiences and media platforms.</p>	Professional Competence	(5) Write correctly and clearly. (9) Critically evaluate own work for accuracy, clarity, style and correctness.
<p>2. Employing Tools & Technologies: Select and professionally deploy relevant software, platforms and digital tools, emphasizing ethical and responsible usage (e.g., data privacy, accessibility).</p>	Professional Competence	(4) Present images and information effectively and creatively. (10) Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the professions.
<p>3. Anchoring Content in Theory: Ground strategic decisions and creative outputs in established communication, psychological or organizational theories.</p>	Lifelong Learning, Critical Thinking	(7) Apply critical thinking skills in conducting research and evaluating information.
<p>4. Applying Research & Analysis: Conduct, interpret and apply primary and secondary research data to discover trends, understand issues and inform strategic decisions.</p>	Critical Thinking	(7) Apply critical thinking skills in conducting research and evaluating information. (8) Effectively and correctly apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.
<p>5. Demonstrating Creative, Critical Thinking: Thoughtfully articulate complex ideas, demonstrating the originality, strategic fit and logical soundness of creative ideas and professional solutions.</p>	Creative Problem-Solving, Critical Thinking	(4) Present images and information effectively and creatively. (9) Critically evaluate their own work.
<p>6. Developing an Inclusive Climate: Ensure project strategy, content, and targeting are sensitive, inclusive and</p>	Diversity Awareness, Ethical Practice	(3) Demonstrate culturally proficient communication that empowers the traditionally disenfranchised. (6)

effective for diverse audiences, demonstrating cultural proficiency and equity.

7. Articulating Historical/Legal

Principles: Demonstrate understanding and accurate application of foundational legal (e.g., intellectual property, contracts, defamation) and historical contexts.

Ethical Practice,
Critical Thinking

Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles... and service to all people and communities.

(1) Apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press. (2) Demonstrate an understanding of the multicultural history and role of professionals.

Curriculum and Proficiency Mapping

Our curriculum is intentionally structured to build competency sequentially, moving students from basic exposure to professional readiness.

Levels of Learning

Learning within our required courses is assessed along three increasing levels of cognitive complexity to ensure students gain professional values and competencies, consistent with ACEJMC criteria for student learning evaluation:

- **Awareness:** Familiarity with specific information, including facts, concepts, theories, laws and processes.
- **Understanding:** Making sense of complex information, concepts, theories and ideas.
- **Application:** Competence in relating and applying skills, information, concepts, theories and ideas to accomplish real-world tasks.

Proficiency Levels

Required courses are mapped to indicate the expected level of exposure for each competency:

- **Introduce (Basic/Entry Level):** Initial exposure to the competency and its basic elements (primarily focusing on **Awareness**).
- **Reinforced (Intermediate Level):** Practice and development of the competency (focusing on **Understanding** and initial **Application**).
- **Master (Industry Ready Level):** Expected mastery and independent application of the competency in complex scenarios (focusing on high-level **Application**).

Direct Assessment Measures

Course-Embedded Assessment (Direct Measure)

All students are assessed annually on their performance against the seven Student Learning Outcomes or competencies within required communication courses. Faculty evaluate student work using the course assignments already embedded in their syllabuses—no additional assessment tasks are required of the students. Faculty evaluate an existing work against the competencies using the 1-5 scale.

- **Assessment Instrument:** Faculty in required courses evaluate student work (e.g., projects, papers, presentations) using the program's 1-5 proficiency scale. For each concentration's capstone, a three-member panel (including one member from our advisory board or industry) will evaluate the final capstone submission.
- **Proficiency Scale:** 5=Industry Ready; 4=Nearly Industry Ready; 3=Approaching Industry Ready; 2=Slightly Industry Ready; 1=Not Industry Ready
- **Assessment Strategy:** Data are collected at the end of each semester from every required course section. Results are aggregated by the Assessment Committee and reviewed by the Department Chair and faculty annually.
- **Benchmark for Success:** *Two benchmarks are applied to ensure appropriate expectation setting across the curriculum:*
 - **Foundational Threshold Benchmark:** *In courses designated as Introduce or Reinforced at least 80% of students achieve a score of 2 (Slightly Industry Ready) or higher on the 1-5 scale for the competencies being assessed. This demonstrates successful achievement of Awareness and Understanding principles.*
 - **Mastery Performance Benchmark:** *In Capstone courses designated as Mastery level, at least 75% of students must achieve a score of 4 (Nearly Industry Ready) or higher on the 1-5 scale across all seven. This confirms readiness for professional application.*

The Assessment Committee presents aggregated findings to the faculty annually. When performance falls below benchmarks, faculty collaboratively identify curricular adjustments which may include revising course assignments, adjusting scaffolding between courses or modifying instructional approaches. Changes are documented and reassessed in subsequent cycles.

Capstone Assessment (Direct Measure)

This measure serves as a summative evaluation of student professional readiness, assessed at the Master level using an external industry perspective.

- **Assessment Instrument:** For each concentration's capstone submission will be evaluated using the program's 1-5 proficiency scale across the seven student learning outcomes or competencies.
- **Proficiency Scale:** 5=Industry Ready; 4=Nearly Industry Ready; 3=Approaching Industry Ready; 2=Slightly Industry Ready; 1=Not Industry Ready

- **Assessment Strategy:** Conducted annually, this direct measure includes a three-member review panel that evaluates completed Capstone Projects from each concentration. The panel includes two internal faculty members (not the course instructor) and one external professional from the Department Advisory Panel or a related industry partner. The panel scores are averaged and tabulated.
- **Benchmark for Success:** *At least 85% of Capstone Projects reviewed must achieve a mean average score of 4.0 (Nearly Industry Ready) or higher across all seven competencies, based on the combined scores of the three-member review panel. This demonstrates that the student work meets or exceeds the minimum expectations set by external industry partners.*

Results inform faculty discussions about curriculum alignment and whether students are adequately prepared across all competencies by the time they reach capstone experiences. Identified gaps prompt review of prerequisite courses and may lead to enhanced emphasis on specific competencies earlier in the curriculum.

Internship Evaluation (Direct Measure)

All students complete a professional internship before graduation. This measure provides critical external feedback from industry professionals on the student's real-world readiness, professional behavior and demonstrated competence, with analysis segmented by concentration.

- **Assessment Instrument:** Standardized Internship Supervisor Evaluation Form administered through the Internship Director. The form includes rating scales related to the 7 Student Learning Outcomes or competencies and professional demeanor/work ethic. This uses the scale 5=Industry Ready; 4=Nearly Industry Ready; 3=Approaching Industry Ready; 2=Slightly Industry Ready; 1=Not Industry Ready
- **Assessment Strategy:** Direct measure conducted at the end of every internship (fall, spring, and summer) and aggregated annually. Results are analyzed by individual concentration to identify program-specific strengths and opportunities for curricular alignment related to specific career paths. Data are tabulated by the Internship Director and reviewed by Department Chairs and the Assessment Committee.
- **Benchmark for Success:** *Professional Readiness Benchmark (Concentration-Specific): For each concentration, at least 75% of external site supervisors must rate the student as "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" on questions related to the student's mastery of the 7 core competencies and overall professional job performance.*

Concentration-specific analysis allows faculty to tailor curricular content to industry expectations. When supervisor feedback reveals skill gaps in particular concentrations, faculty review relevant courses to ensure industry alignment and professional relevance.

Indirect Assessment Measures

Indirect measures collect student perceptions and external indicators providing contextual depth to the direct measures of performance.

Senior Exit Interview (Indirect Measure)

This interview captures graduating students' self-assessment of their learning, perception of the program and confidence in their professional skills.

- **Assessment Instrument:** A standardized interview administered during the student's final semester. Questions are aligned with the 6 Pillars of Professional Communication.
- **Assessment Strategy:** Conducted at each point of graduation (fall, spring and summer) by the Department Head. The data are aggregated to identify student perception trends, perceived value of specific courses, and alignment between self-reported growth and objective performance data.
- **Benchmark for Success: Self-Assessment of Learning Benchmark:** *At least 80% of graduating seniors must respond with Nearly Industry Ready or Industry Ready to questions assessing the program's contribution to their mastery of the 6 Pillars/7 Competencies.*

Student perceptions are triangulated with direct performance data to identify disconnects between student confidence and actual competency. This informs advising practices, course communication about learning outcomes and potential curricular modifications.

Student Competitions (Indirect Measure—Proxy Indicator)

Student success in external awards and competitions provides validation from the professional community regarding the high quality, creativity and strategic soundness of student work originating from the program.

- **Assessment Instrument:** Annual compilation of student success in professionally related, industry-centric competitions (e.g., media awards, PRSSA awards, regional/national research forums).
- **Assessment Strategy:** Data compiled annually by the Department Head based on submissions from faculty, student media advisors and student organizations. The results are used to gauge external visibility and excellence in creative and strategic execution.
- **Benchmark for Success:**
 - **External Recognition Benchmark:** *The department maintains or increases the total number of external awards won annually, and students must achieve recognition in at least three (3) distinct regional or national competitions/forums per academic year.*

Competition outcomes help identify program strengths worth highlighting and can reveal emerging areas of excellence. However, because participation is voluntary and represents only top performers, these results supplement rather than replace direct measures of all student learning. Patterns in competition success may inform marketing of program strengths and can validate curricular emphases.

Assessment Timeline

- **Ongoing:** Course-embedded assessments, exit interview and internship evaluations collected each term
- **Summer and/or Early Fall Semester:** Capstone panels review and competition data compiled (this helps us align with SACSCOC)
- **Late Spring:** Assessment Committee analyzes data and prepares report
- **August Faculty Meeting:** Full faculty review findings and discuss curricular improvements
- **Fall Semester:** Implement agreed-upon changes and monitor effectiveness