

May 3, 2017

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering excellence and high standards in professional education in journalism and mass communications through rigorous, independent program reviews once every six years.

Participation in the ACEJMC accreditation process is strictly voluntary. Currently there are 117 programs in the United States and overseas that participate, up from 93 in 1991-92. Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications has decided it will no longer be an accredited program. The Council typically does not comment on whether individual schools choose to participate in the accreditation process or not. Each school makes its own decision, and the Council is respectful of those decisions. But a series of public comments made by the Medill dean earlier this week – in interviews with media outlets and in an email to alumni – contain factually incorrect and misleading statements. In the spirit of thorough, objective, fact-based journalism, we write to set the record straight:

- The Chicago Tribune reported that, according to the dean, ACEJMC “[limits] the curriculum Medill could offer.” That is incorrect. The accrediting body imposes no limits on what coursework can be offered by a school, requiring only that students have a broad education beyond the journalism curriculum.
- In the same interview, the Tribune reported that the dean believes the accrediting process “[restricts] the ability of students to take courses in different schools.” ACEJMC has no such limitations. In fact, accrediting standards facilitate broad education, and many students at accredited journalism programs are dual majors, dual-degree students and even triple majors.
- The Daily Northwestern reported that the dean said he had concerns about the transparency of the accreditation process. The ACEJMC process is the most transparent accreditation in U.S. higher education. All meetings are open to the public (most of the annual ACEJMC meetings, in fact, are held in downtown Chicago, 12 miles from Medill), and all site team reports dating back to 2012-13 are available in full online on the ACEJMC website (<http://www.acejmc.org/accreditation-reviews/accredited-programs/accreditedreaccredited/>).
- The dean, in an email to alumni, said that ACEJMC “resists change.” In fact, the accreditation process is reviewed by the Council each year, with changes – big and small – implemented regularly to ensure that accredited programs are current in a fast-changing digital environment. Had the dean attended our meeting in Chicago last weekend, he would have heard news of a new database made available to prospective students and their parents to compare programs, and endorsement of a proposal to reward programs that exhibit leadership in teaching digital-technology skills.
- The dean also wrote in his email that no longer being accredited by ACEJMC “may affect the Hearst competition.” In fact, the Hearst Journalism Awards, widely considered the top intercollegiate journalism awards program in the country, is restricted to ACEJMC accredited programs. Medill students will no longer be able to compete in the Hearst Awards.

- The dean was quoted in the Daily Northwestern as saying that the accreditation process requires “a tremendous amount of work.” It does. We believe a comprehensive self-study compiled by the schools under review, replete with hundreds of facts and data points, is essential to a thorough, fair and comprehensive review. Our concern for the amount of time spent on the process is far greater for small, underfunded programs than for large, well-funded programs such as Northwestern’s and others of similar size.
- The dean said that he finds “little value” in the accreditation process. We believe one clear value is that it gives the school the ability – through an independent, objective, fact-based, data-driven comprehensive review – to provide evidence that could support statements such as “Medill has never been stronger.”

We assume that the Medill dean, with deep consultation with the school’s faculty, staff, students, alumni and other stakeholders, came to the decision that he felt was best for his school. We respect that, and are encouraged by his pledge that Medill will conduct its own review starting in July. But we believe hiring evaluators to review a school is significantly less powerful than the assessment of a team of trained, independent evaluators using a set of standards applied uniformly across all accredited journalism programs.

Finally, the Medill dean wrote he sees dropping out of the accreditation process as an example of leadership. We would respectfully suggest that another way to lead would have been to work with ACEJMC, now in its 72nd year of journalism accreditation, to continue to improve the process on behalf of journalism education and the associated media industries.

Sincerely,

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