

## MESSAGE FROM THE COUNCIL PRESIDENT

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# Accreditation in the spotlight, and why that matters

By Steve Geimann

**A**ccreditation is rarely the main event. It doesn't usually generate headlines or trend on social media. Accreditation works through self-studies, site visits, assessment reports, curriculum reviews, and thoughtful conversations among peers committed to quality education.

For ACEJMC, that work includes open discussion at two public meetings and the publication of site-team reports without press conferences or speeches. But suddenly, accred-

itation is front and center in a policy debate spurred by the federal government. Questions about accountability, cost, authority and outcomes are now discussed more publicly – and more pointedly – than ever.

In January, U.S. Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent, who oversees postsecondary issues, outlined several goals in a speech at the Council on Higher Education Accreditation's annual meeting in Washington. Kent criticized what he called an "accreditation-industrial complex," arguing that the agencies have become monopolistic and insufficiently fo-

cused on student outcomes. "Accreditation today is no longer a reliable indicator of the gold standard of education," he said. In response, leaders of institutional accreditors and programmatic bodies, like ACEJMC, emphasized the importance of independence, accountability and the integrity of the reviews.

As discussions continue and the government drafts rules, accreditors are preparing for what lies ahead. For ACEJMC and its 120 accredited programs, this moment presents both a challenge and an opportunity to reaffirm why accreditation **SEE PAGE 2**



STEVE GEIMANN

## Phillips named associate executive director, Reinardy to retire

Darren Phillips has been hired as associate executive director at ACEJMC, succeeding Cindy Reinardy, who is retiring after almost two decades with the Council.

Phillips comes to ACEJMC with more than 20 years of experience across higher education, journalism and public relations. His recent roles include program coordinator for

the New Mexico Local News Fellowships and Internships program at the University of New Mexico, and associate professor in the Department of Journalism **SEE PAGE 2**

## CALENDAR

### Accrediting Committee Meeting and Standard 4 Session

WHEN: March 19-20

WHERE: [InterContinental Hotel](#), 505 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago

[Details on Page 4](#)

### Spring Council Meeting

WHEN: May 5

WHERE: Freedom Forum, 610 Water St., SW, Washington, D.C.

[Details on Page 4](#)

### Freedom Forum Student Conference

WHEN: June 21-26

WHERE: Freedom Forum headquarters in Washington, D.C.

APPLICATION DEADLINE: March 15

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## Spotlight

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matters – and why it remains essential. Let’s remember that accreditation is voluntary. No journalism or mass communication program is required to seek an ACEJMC review. Programs choose to participate because they value the external review, transparent standards and accountability that are grounded in professional values rather than political mandates. That voluntary commitment is one of accreditation’s greatest strengths. It reflects a willingness to be examined and be pressed to do better.

It’s important that accreditation not be about checking boxes or preserving the status quo. At its best, it is a process for continuous improvement.

Preparing the self-study requires programs to examine evidence, assess student learning, evaluate curriculum relevance and reflect honestly on diversity, ethics, resources and mission. It pushes program leaders and faculty to ask: Are we serving today’s students well? Are we preparing graduates for a rapidly changing media landscape? Are we living up to our stated values?

That commitment to continuous improvement is especially crucial in journalism and mass communication – fields shaped by technological disruption, economic pressure, and shifting public trust. ACEJMC helps programs progress thoughtfully while

remaining anchored in principles such as freedom of speech, professional ethics, and service to the public good. Yet it is precisely this role – independent evaluation and standard-setting – that draws the government’s attention.

**“Accreditation is not just procedural. It is protective.”**

While accountability is a legitimate concern, reforms driven primarily by political or ideological goals risk undermining peer review, academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In this context, accreditation is not just procedural. It is protective. Accreditation affirms that

educational quality is best judged by experts in the field through rigorous, transparent processes. For our programs, that protection is vital.

A free and independent press and mass media depend on educational programs able to prepare tomorrow’s communicators without undue external influence. This latest round of scrutiny reminds us that accreditation is not static or even guaranteed. It must be explained, defended, demystified and strengthened.

ACEJMC’s role – and the commitment of its accredited programs – helps ensure that any evolution of accreditation remains rooted in quality, independence and continuous improvement.

## Phillips

FROM PAGE 1

and Media Studies at New Mexico State University.



DARREN PHILLIPS

Phillips also served as chief photographer and head of the photo services

desk in the Marketing and Communications Department at NMSU.

Early in his career, Phillips worked as a reporter and staff

photojournalist for newspapers in California and upstate New York, as well as Johannesburg, South Africa. He also worked as a photo stringer for the Santa Fe New Mexican for 10 years. His work has appeared in numerous regional and national publications including The Washington Post, Newsweek, USA TODAY, Sports Illustrated and Forbes.

In his new role, Phillips will collaborate closely with Executive Director Susan Walton and Executive Assistant Denise Baar to produce and manage

accreditation and site visit information for schools. He will also create web content, produce and oversee ACEJMC’s semiannual newsletter, record and edit meeting minutes, review self-study reports, and help organize and run the annual Accrediting Committee and Council meetings.

Phillips is currently based in Chicago. He began his employment with ACEJMC in late February, and will work in his new role concurrently with Reinardy until her departure

in May.

Congratulations and welcome to Darren Phillips, and many thanks and best wishes to Cindy Reinardy. Her 18 years of service have left an indelible and invaluable mark on ACEJMC. Her knowledge, thorough and analytical approach, and strong relationships with the Committee, Council, academic units and volunteers will be missed.

Phillips can be reached at [darren.phillips@acejmc.org](mailto:darren.phillips@acejmc.org)

## New members on the Council

### Chen to serve as AAJA representative

The Asian-American Journalists Association will return to the Accrediting Council as a professional organization member.



JOIE CHEN

Joie Chen will serve as AAJA representative. Chen is a long-time television journalist who has worked for CBS, CNN and Al Jazeera America, where she anchored the flagship newscast, "America Tonight." At CBS, she covered the White House, Capitol Hill and other beats,

winning an Emmy for coverage of the D.C. sniper attacks. Previously, she was an anchor at CNN International and CNN, where she received an Emmy for coverage of the 1996 Olympic Park bombing. In 2018, Chen became director of Northwestern University's

Medill School of Journalism program in Washington, D.C., and later served in a senior leadership role at the Poynter Institute. Most recently, Chen was senior correspondent for the nationally syndicated Hearst program "Matter of Fact with Soledad O'Brien."

### Kissel to serve as Society of Professional Journalists representative



KELLY KISSEL

Kelly Kissel will serve as Council representative for the Society of

Professional Journalists. Kissel joined ABC affiliate WBRZ in Baton Rouge in 2023, and now serves as managing editor. Earlier, at The Advocate, he was metro editor, state news editor, and developed a stra-

tegic plan to expand regional coverage. The Associated Press was his professional home for 34 years, where he served as news editor in Little Rock, Ark., and as a correspondent in Pennsylvania and West

Virginia. A 1984 graduate of Louisiana State's Manship School, Kissel has served on accreditation site visits to Syracuse, Southern University, and others. He previously served on SPJ's national board.

### New public member appointed by ACEJMC president

Jude McCartin will serve on the Accrediting Council as a public member. President Steve Geimann named McCartin to



JUDE MCCARTIN

a three-year term that begins in May. McCartin served in the Biden White House, leading a media relations and external governmental affairs team tasked with confronting the fentanyl crisis. Prior to that, she was chief of staff at Families USA, running a 50-person

organization that worked to ensure all Americans had access to quality, affordable health care. McCartin also served in the University of California's government affairs office in D.C. From 1998 to 2018, McCartin worked on legislative planning, political

analysis and communications strategies for three U.S. senators. Before starting on Capitol Hill, she was a reporter for the Watertown Daily Times in Ogdensburg, N.Y.

McCartin holds degrees from Syracuse University and SUNY Binghamton.

### Puckey succeeds Shelly as RTDNA leader and Council representative

Tara Puckey will serve as Council representative for the Radio Television Digital News Association. Puckey became president



TARA PUCKEY

and CEO of RTDNA on Jan. 1, succeeding Dan Shelly, who stepped off the Council at the end of 2025.

Puckey has held senior leadership roles at both RTDNA and the Society of Professional Journalists. She has trained more than 3,000 journalists

and nonprofit professionals in effective leadership. Puckey is recognized as one of Association Forum's Forty Under 40, and is an Obama Foundation USA Leader for 2025-2026. Puckey is also a Certified Association Executive and Fellow of the American Society

of Association Executives.

During his tenure with RTDNA, Dan Shelly served as a former chairman of the board and foundation secretary and treasurer before becoming RTDNA/RTDNF executive director in 2017. He assumed the title of president in 2022.

## March Accrediting Committee Meeting Details

The Accrediting Committee will meet Friday, March 20, at the InterContinental Hotel, 505 N. Michigan Ave., in Chicago.

The committee will vote on accreditation recommendations for nine schools. (See discussion schedule below).

The meeting will begin at 8 a.m. in the Hemingway Room on the 11th floor and is expected to conclude by late-afternoon.

Observers are welcome to attend and can come and go as their schedules permit. School administrators of programs being reviewed should be present when their school is discussed.

Attendees are also invited to a Standard Four session from 3-5 p.m. Thursday, March 19, at the InterContinental in the Chaplin Room on the 11th floor. This session is in response to questions and interest around ACEJMC's revised Standard Four.

ACEJMC is again collaborating with the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication for the March meeting. ASJMC will hold its winter workshop at the same hotel earlier that week.

For more information, contact Susan Walton, ACEJMC executive director, at [susan.walton@acejmc.org](mailto:susan.walton@acejmc.org).

### March Accrediting Committee Discussion Schedule

The Accrediting Committee will discuss nine schools during its annual meeting in Chicago. Accrediting Committee Chair Rafael Lorente will convene the meeting at 8 a.m.

#### The discussion order will be as follows:

1. University of Minnesota (Greg Pitts presenting)
2. Pennsylvania State University (Jennifer Sizemore presenting)
3. Columbia University (Lucy Dalglisch presenting)
4. Ohio University (Kristin Gilger presenting)
5. University of Memphis (Caesar Andrews presenting)
6. Savannah State University (Shirley Staples Carter presenting)
7. University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras (David Kurpius presenting)
8. Abilene Christian University (Dave Davies presenting)
9. Washington and Lee University (Alan Stavitsky presenting)

## Spring Council Meeting May 5 in DC

The Accrediting Council will meet Tuesday, May 5, at the Freedom Forum, 610 Water St., SW, Washington, D.C. This one-day meeting will begin at 8:30 a.m. and is expected to conclude by 3 p.m.

Accreditation decisions will

be made for 9 schools, followed by a business meeting.

The council does not have a host hotel, but there are options nearby. Paid parking at the Freedom Forum is limited. Attendees are encouraged to Uber or take a taxi to

the meeting. The Waterfront Metro station on the Green Line is a short walk from the Freedom Forum headquarters. For more information, contact Susan Walton, ACEJMC executive director, at [susan.walton@acejmc.org](mailto:susan.walton@acejmc.org)

CLICK ON MAP FOR DIRECTIONS



## Brill to lead Appeals Board

Ann Brill, associate professor in the William Allen White

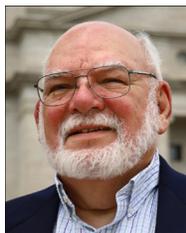


ANN BRILL

School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University

of Kansas, will chair the 2026 Appeals Board. Sonny Albarado and Johnny Sparks will round out the three-person board. The board was appointed by Steve Geimann, Accrediting Council president.

Brill served 21 years as dean of the school and recently stepped down to return full time to the faculty. She has been a site team chair for numerous accreditation site visits and is a former Council member.



SONNY ALBARADO

Albarado retired in 2025 after three years as the editor-in-chief of the Arkansas Advocate, an online-only

news outlet that is part of the States Newsroom network. He has more than 50 years of journalism experience as an editor and reporter at newspapers in Arkansas, Tennessee and Louisiana. A former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists, he currently serves as secretary of the SPJ Foundation Board. He also served as SPJ representative to the Accrediting Council for several years and has served on numerous accreditation

site-visit teams.

Sparks is a professor and the director of the School of Journalism and Strategic Communication at Ball State University. He served as the 2023-24 president of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication and has served on ACEJMC site-visit teams.



JOHNNY SPARKS

## Pitts to lead Nominating Committee

Accrediting Council President Steve Geimann ap-



GREG PITTS

pointed Greg Pitts, Rosanna Fiske, and Jason Shepard to the

Nominating Committee to make recommendations for open seats on the

Accrediting Committee.

Pitts, Accrediting Council vice president, will chair the committee. He is a professor and former director in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media at Middle Tennessee State University. He represents the Broadcast Education Association on the council.

Fiske, APR and Fellow PRSA,

is global head of corporate affairs for Signature Aviation in



ROSANNA FISKE

Orlando. She represents the Public Relations Society of America on

the Council.

Shepard is interim dean of the College of Commu-

nications at California State University, Fullerton. He is



JASON SHEPARD

the council representative for the Association of Schools of Journalism and

Mass Communication.

## ACEJMC LEADERSHIP

### Chair, Accrediting Committee

Rafael Lorente  
Dean, Philip Merrill College of Journalism  
University of Maryland  
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### Accrediting Council President

Steve Geimann  
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### Vice Chair, Accrediting Committee

Diana Martinelli  
Vice Dean, College of Creative Arts and Media  
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### Accrediting Council Vice President

Greg Pitts  
Professor, School of Journalism & Strategic Media  
Middle Tennessee State University  
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### Executive Director

Susan Walton  
Ph.D., APR, Fellow PRSA  
Meridian, Idaho  
[susan.walton@acejmc.org](mailto:susan.walton@acejmc.org)



## Bland receives journalism champion award

Dorothy Bland, an Accrediting Council member and journalism professor at the University of North Texas Mayborn School of Journalism, was awarded the 2025 Richard J. Levine Journalism Champion Award.

The award, established in 2022, honors those whose work supports the perpetua-

tion of a strong and diverse free press. The award also pays tribute to the late News Fund president and longtime Dow Jones news executive Richard Levine and his journalism service.

Bland, a former dean of the Mayborn School, is credited with helping set enrollment records, raising more than

\$2 million, and launching a master's degree program in digital communication. Before her appointment at Mayborn, Bland was a professor and director of the journalism division at Florida A&M University. During her years in the industry, she held a variety of roles at USA TODAY and was publisher of Gannett Co.'s Fort

Collins Coloradoan.

Bland's extensive involvement in ACEJMC work includes numerous site visits, both domestic and international. She serves on the Accrediting Council as the representative for the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

## Scholastic journalism opportunity

DC's premier high school journalism conference accepting applications

Applications are open for the Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference, June 21-26, in Washington, D.C. One student from each

state and the District of Columbia will be selected for the skill-building, network-growing, all-expenses-paid trip. Now in its 25th year, the an-

nual conference, established to honor Al Neuharth, founder of Freedom Forum and USA TODAY, is designed to inspire and encourage high school

juniors to pursue careers in journalism, multimedia storytelling, and other fields across the media industry.

**WHAT:** [Al Neuharth Free Spirit and Journalism Conference](#)

**WHERE:** Freedom Forum headquarters in Washington, D.C.

**WHEN:** June 21-26

**COST:** Free. Includes hotel, airfare, meals and activities. Students also receive a \$1,000 scholarship.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE:** March 15

Students will:

- Go behind the scenes in some of D.C.'s top newsrooms
- Hear from leading journalists about their work
- Learn from Free Spirit alumni and be inspired by honorees at Freedom Forum's Free Expression Awards
- Receive a \$1,000 college scholarship
- Tour the sites of the nation's capital
- Make connections with students from around the country who are passionate about journalism and multimedia storytelling
- Join the Free Spirit Scholar community, which includes a network of over 1,700 alumni who have gone on to work for The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA TODAY, ESPN, network-affiliated TV stations, "This American Life" podcast, entrepreneurial media outlets like The Juggernaut, and many more.



### SEEKING JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION PRACTITIONERS AND EDUCATORS

ACEJMC is seeking qualified individuals interested in serving as future site team members.

[Contact Executive Director Susan Walton](#), who can review the process with you and provide the application. Applications are due Friday, April 17. Additional training sessions are planned.

## Member program updates

### University of Nebraska

Adam Wagler is serving as interim dean of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, succeeding Shari Veil, who is now provost at North Dakota State University. Wagler is an associate professor in advertising and public relations. He served as associate dean for academic

programs from 2020 to 2025. Veil, a North Dakota native, had served as dean of the college since 2020.

### University of Arizona

Jan Boyles is serving as the director of the School of Journalism. Boyles previously served as associate director and professor at Iowa State

University's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication. Boyles succeeded Jessica Retis, who served as the director of the school from July 2022 to July 2025, and is the director of the school's master's program in bilingual journalism.

## Reminders

### Accreditation seal available

A seal of accreditation is available for ACEJMC's accredited schools. [Access the seal](#) and guidelines for use at [acejmc.org](#) under the Resources tab.

### Annual update of student data

Accredited programs are required to annually update student retention and graduation data on their website by Aug. 15, and notify ACEJMC headquarters when this is completed. Information is available at [acejmc.org](#) under the Resources tab.

### Update ACEJMC searchable database

Accredited programs should continue to update information in ACEJMC's [searchable database](#). The tool allows users to compare accredited programs side-by-side. [Instructions](#) are available at [acejmc.org](#) under the Resources tab.

### Council members

Check your inbox. Accrediting Council members are reminded to use their acejmc.org email accounts for accreditation communication. These email accounts are intended to create a community of council members, foster discussions, and help you avoid clutter in your work or personal email boxes.

Please check your account periodically throughout the summer and then more frequently in the lead-up to site-visit season and the spring meetings. Meeting materials are shared through [acejmc.org](#).

Council members can email ACEJMC Executive Assistant Denise Baar at [denise.baar@acejmc.org](mailto:denise.baar@acejmc.org) for assistance in setting up and using their ACEJMC email account.

### Dues increase in effect

The Accrediting Council increased yearly member dues. The new rates went into effect at the start of the 2025-26 academic year. School dues are now \$2,500. The administrative fee for site visits increased to \$750. International schools will pay a \$1,500 one-time initial accreditation application fee; domestic schools pay a \$1,000 application fee.

### Noncompliance policy

An ACEJMC policy enacted in 2024-25 requires accredited or reaccredited units with a standard out of compliance to demonstrate within three years that deficiencies have been rectified. The policy and timeline for this process can be viewed at [acejmc.org](#), under the Policies and Process tab > Process of Accreditation > Accreditation Status.