

# Democracy Inventory Profile

## Howard University

R. M. Townsend

Black journalists have been vital to the American experiment in democracy. And for over 50 years, Howard University has been a leader in communication and journalism, whose students communicate stories on the compelling issues that are essential to democratic functioning. Howard was successful in leveraging academic program review, strategic planning, and market analysis, resulting in a massive expansion of its pro-democracy offerings and concomitant media coverage about the people and organizations attracted to the successful University. "What's being done at Howard is a big deal," Craigslist founder Craig Newmark observed, adding, "This is protecting the country, protecting the democracy. It should be all hands on deck."<sup>1</sup>

But like any good assessment, knowledge of the broader institution, its organizational culture, key players, and institutional history can help produce significant impacts. This profile highlights Howard University's use of the accreditation-required program review process for innovation. It demonstrates the possibilities of using this required process for making beneficial improvements and catalyzing institution-wide commitments. Regular program review for Howard's Media, Journalism and Film Department programs, said Department chair Professor Ingrid Sturgis, has cataloged the numerous strengths decades of journalism education has produced. Howard's assessment of the [Cathy Hughes School of Communication](#) (CHSOC), founded in 1971, resulted in the CHSOC being named a strategic investment area of the University. Supplementary analysis led to further donations, and, in turn, the creation of the [Center for Journalism and Democracy](#).

## Impetus

Pro-democracy journalism education at Howard is not new, however. Howard students have "team-covered" presidential and local elections since at least 2008, reported from the Democratic and Republican conventions in 2016, and created a fact-checking site to explore misinformation. Students have been covering campus and local communities through their news site—Howard University News Service—as part of their capstone project," explains Prof. Sturgis. She added, "Their stories are picked up by black newspapers across the country." The strength of this academic

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<sup>1</sup>See for example: Philanthropies Pledge \$20 Million to Support Work of Pulitzer-winning Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones at Howard University. (2021, July 7). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nikole-hannah-jones-20-million-donors-diversity-journalism/>; Two Iconic American Writers Join Howard University to Create the Center for Journalism and Democracy. (n.d.). <https://www.macfound.org/press/press-releases/two-iconic-american-writers-join-howard-university-to-create-a-center-to-educate-the-next-generation-of-black-journalists>.

program is bolstered by accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). Preparation for these reviews gave Howard an opportunity for reflection. The analysis done for the 2015–16 ACEJMC accreditation set the groundwork for their growth in enrollment, donations, and activity seen in 2020–24, which was captured in the 2022–23 reaccreditation. Most notably, an additional \$20 million was pledged for founder and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones to launch and chair a Center for Journalism and Democracy to focus on training and supporting aspiring journalists in acquiring the historical, analytical and technical expertise needed for exemplary investigative reporting. Howard’s website observes that “The Center for Journalism & Democracy at Howard University is the first-of-its-kind academic center committed to strengthening historically-informed, pro-democracy journalism.” And “Hannah-Jones, the Knight Chair in Race and Journalism at the Cathy Hughes School of Communications, has called attention to the need for historically informed investigative journalism that meets with urgency the threats to our democracy and for broader representation among the nation’s investigative reporters.” How this expansion of pro-democracy journalism arose is both extraordinary and ordinary—the assessment of what is being done at the institution and what opportunities can arise from its strengths.

## Participants and Process

Every accredited college or university has some method for assessing programs. Program reviews focus on single-degree programs. What happens as a result of these program reviews can influence whether a program stays stagnant or grows with the times. In program reviews, participant types include institutions and individuals. The external accrediting body, ACEJMC, expects departments and academic programs to adhere to its set of standards. They send a small group (in this case four people) as a visiting team to verify the contents of the self-study and write a report to explain their decision on reaccreditation and provide guidance to the department or program. The visiting team members in this case were from other universities, communications progressions and a representative from a media association.

In the Cathy Hughes School of Communications (CHSOC), administrators and faculty members participated in organizing the work, compiling data, and writing the self-study. Their “schoolwide Assessment Committee works with the dean and faculty to review and update the CHSOC Strategic Plan.” (ACEJMC external report). The study encompasses the mission, descriptions of the programs offered, facts about the program such as term length, credit hours, course sequences and modalities, listing faculty members, student data, etc. The CHSOC describes its long-range plans, metrics, resources and needs. In addition to other areas like academic excellence, the School is focused on social justice/advocacy. Howard identified the CHSOC as a strategic investment. The first expected learning goal the CHSOC has is that students “Understand and apply the First Amendment principles and the law appropriate to professional practice.” The CHSOC’s commitment to democratic principles is evident in their outcomes like that one, and in course assignments. The external reviewer’s report notes that “Diverse cultures are examined through course assignments about voting rights, immigration, religion and identity,” and “students take a deep dive in an investigative journalism course through The 1619 Project.”

Faculty members and administrators were integral to the refocusing of Howard's power as a center for journalism education. And the faculty members who are working toward pro-democracy journalism are experienced and respected journalists and media leaders themselves. Dr. Gracie Lawson-Borders, professor and dean emerita, led the re-accreditation work for the ACEJMC evaluation. [Ingrid Sturgis](#), professor and chair of the department, was editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer, Times Herald-Record, Poughkeepsie Journal and managing editor at BET Weekend. [Jennifer Thomas](#), a professor in Broadcast Journalism was Executive Producer for CNN Headline News. Her motto, "journalists are the defenders of democracy, freedom fighters of the First Amendment, and savvy and sophisticated storytellers," is one that speaks to the commitment experienced journalists bring to their role as educators.

For the creation of the Center for Journalism and Democracy, the inaugural executive director Dr. Kali-Ahset Amen explained that the strategic planning process was approximately 70% complete when she arrived in 2022. The mission and vision were established, and the comparative market analysis, from an outside consulting firm, ensured that Howard could "occupy a niche that could have substantive impact in journalism education and extend from there." This research looked at public and private journalism programs across the U.S. The consulting firm conducted a comprehensive mapping. Examining the needs of communities that surround HBCUs, they sought to "shore up investigative reporting training and capacity building because of the belief that we have to equip the next generation of journalists with new kinds of tools to engage in research and storytelling that expose abuses of power of all kinds." Local journalism is in decline and few programs exist in partnerships with news organizations (Dennis, 2024; Salah & Smith, 2021; Lynch 2015). Although many programs have drifted away from this in the broader landscape of U.S. journalism schools, Howard's research into this landscape helped them enter into conversation with other schools around these questions of journalism training. The Knight Foundation was also instrumental in the development of the Center, with [Nikole Hannah Jones](#) serving as the inaugural chair. Through her course work, Dr. Amen explains, Professor Jones includes the 1619 project and questions (e.g., "How do you engage with historical questions, race and justice questions, in this kind of work to reframe American history and the canons that guard that history? When we use a different lens, how do we reconsider the health of our democracy?) in her teaching practices.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

The challenge for faculty and administrators is in taking the results of program reviews and implementing a plan that builds on strengths, addresses weaknesses, anticipates or handles threats and finds opportunities. Since the program review for the Media Journalism and Film Department, together with administrators in the Cathy Hughes School of Communication, sought to implement a plan to address the program review concerns, they saw several opportunities for growth.

Professor Sturgis and students provide an example for growth in [Truth Be Told](#), "a non-profit, non-partisan website and digital network, run and edited from Howard University's Department of Media, Journalism and Film in the School of Communications." Students, as the staff members, develop their reporting skills and apply them in social media. They provide fact-checking, which, as

they note, “has emerged as a critical part of American journalism over the last decade.” The School “reorganized departments, revamping our curriculum as well as the leadership.” They note further that “while we have been using the teaching hospital model for quite some time, this project [Truth Be Told] would allow us to push students to go deeper behind news and information to deliver a public service. This would also provide more public affairs opportunities for students to cover Capitol Hill and federal agencies.” Dr. Amen asked, “How can we use our small lane to build up a cadre of journalists prepared to do deep dives into the issues of the day, that result in pro democracy journalism?”

## Results

Review of internal processes, conducted by faculty and staff in the Media, Journalism and Film Department was complemented by the larger studies of the CHSOC. Journalists’ role was important. The earlier 2015–16 cycle of re-accreditation identified an area of focus to address the need for Resources, Facilities and Equipment. It was through this regular re-accreditation processes that the University identified the CHSOC as a Strategic Investment Area. Assessment identifies needs and opportunities. Program review assessment and University focus brought in the need for consultants to contribute market research on the niche Howard could occupy. This then led to the donations and partnerships that garnered media attention itself, like the \$5 million to establish the Knight Chair in Race and Journalism and the \$20 million to create the Center for Journalism and Democracy. As the ACEJMC notes, “The unit now has more state-of-the-art audio and video equipment than many of the nation’s professional newsrooms, and audio and video companies.” Howard University is using these resources to enhance pro-democracy journalism.

Results of review and assessment help students keep and improve opportunities for experiential learning. Students at Howard cover national and local politics and issues, publishing their articles and posting video packages online. Prof. Sturgis noted, “We win awards because of our reporting,” such as an Emmy for public-service announcement, or National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Student Production awards. The program review offered a chance for reflection and future action, stimulating significant growth in the pro-democracy journalism that is the core strength of Howard University. Inspired by the long tradition of Black journalism, Dr. Amen said it is “imperative” that “this kind of journalism methodology is perpetuated. We need the 4th estate to do its job and not be the mouthpiece of the rich.” The Center is “critically aware of ways our work is either pro-democracy or anti democratic.”

Pro-democracy journalism abounds at Howard. The numerous awards-winning Howard University [News Service](#) coverage and “content has been used by the Washington Post, the Washington Examiner, CNN iReport, BlackAmericaWeb.com, Human Nature magazine, Heart & Soul magazine, Trentonian.com and many of the 200 NNPA newspapers, including the Baltimore and Washington Afro-American, the Washington Informer, the Los Angeles Sentinel and the Chicago Defender.” The course “Truth Be Told,” hailed by El-Sayed & Guston as a way to “empower students against misinformation and manipulation” (2022, p.8). And they note that “Students have received instructional support and training from PolitiFact, the American Press Institute and Bloomberg,

including a visit to Bloomberg’s offices during spring 2022. They have also won awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and the National Association of Black Journalists. In addition, truthbetold.news has been presented to international delegations of journalists through the US State Department, a fact-checking summit at the National Press Club, and social media, technology and journalism conferences” (p. 9).

The vision of the Center for Journalism & Democracy is “to use the unique and necessary traditions of the Black press to influence and shape American media in ways that advance racial equality and justice, hold power accountable and strengthen U.S. democracy.” Program reviews helped amplify its core strength in journalism. The analysis ultimately has led to the creation of the [HBCU Investigative Journalism Consortium](#), a nine-member consortium of HBCUs (Morehouse College, North Carolina A&T University, North Carolina Central University, Savannah State University, Texas Southern University and the University of the District of Columbia, Florida A&M University, and Morgan State University) that are collaborating on pro-democracy journalism education. Its pro-democracy work continues: in fall 2024, Howard convened its third annual Democracy Summit. Students are writing about [billionaire influencers](#) in the election for how “their influence pushes the boundaries of democracy” (Brown-Lewis, Dec. 12, 2024). Howard University is telling the truths that need to be told.

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