

## **JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding, Class No. 15826, Section 3G05**

Spring semester 2020, University of Florida  
Mondays 3p-6p, McCarty Hall 3194

### Description:

Students will learn methods used by professional journalists to gather and analyze public records and publicly accessible records. They will learn to understand the importance of records for backgrounding public figures including politicians, athletes, celebrities and other newsworthy people, organizations and businesses, and for uncovering information, including identifying prospective sources and verifying what is conveyed in interviews. They will discover what kinds of records are generally available to reporters in Florida and beyond, and learn strategies for identifying and obtaining them for free or reduced costs. They will learn practical experience finding records and using them to generate story ideas. The class meets weekly. To prepare, students will read stories showcasing how journalists use documents in their reporting. Students will apply their knowledge in individual and group exercises and quizzes. Your grade will also factor in homework, a weekly online discussion platform and graded in-class exercises.

### Attendance:

Students can learn the material only by attending class regularly. If you miss class, you are responsible for obtaining notes about the lectures from classmates. You also are responsible for arranging to complete any missed quizzes, assignments or other graded work within one week of your return to class. Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

### Office hours:

Office hours will be 10a to 2p Thursdays in Weimer 2066C. \*Please\* make an appointment in advance, whenever possible, to avoid waiting on the bench outside my office (appointments take priority). I am also generally available by appointment on other days or evenings. My email is [tbridis@ufl.edu](mailto:tbridis@ufl.edu). I generally respond within 24 hours to emails during weekdays or within 48 hours during weekends.

### Homework:

Students will read specific news stories assigned by the instructor, identify the types of public records the authors used in their reporting and submit those answers in Canvas.

### Grading:

Four quizzes will be based on the lecture material only and will be a combination of multiple choice and true/false questions. Each quiz is worth 100 points. There are five assignments, worth 20 points each. There will be four graded in-class assignments, worth 100 points each. A participation grade worth up to 100 points will be awarded for meritorious class participation and mandatory weekly postings to the online Packback platform (see "Textbooks"). There may be occasional, optional extra-credit assignments.

### Grading scale:

A = 94-100  
A- = 90-93  
B+ = 87-89  
B = 83-86  
B- = 80-82  
C+ = 75-79  
C = 70-74  
C- = 67-69  
D+ = 63-66  
D = 60-63  
D- = 55-59  
F = 54 or below

NOTE: The journalism school requires a minimum grade of a C in this course. If you end the semester with fewer than 70 percent, you may have to retake it.

### Class requirements:

We will use our computers and online services each week in the classroom, so students must come to class with a laptop and make sure it has an adequate charge. There are outlets for charging but not enough for everyone to use each class. Please use them only for classroom assignments. We will take breaks during classes for you to check messages, emails or social media accounts.

### Grading policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

### Accommodating students with disabilities:

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

### Textbooks:

The optional textbook is, "The Manual to Online Public Records: The Researcher's Tool to Online Resources of Public Records and Public Information," by Michael L Sankey and Cynthia Hetherington. Students will also find it useful to own a copy of "The Associated Press Guide to News Writing: The Resource for Professional Journalists," by Rene J. Cappon.

Students will be required to purchase a \$25/semester access to Packback, an online discussion and participation platform. On Packback, students will be encouraged and rewarded for asking complex questions and interacting with classmates about how our studies relate to the real world. As it relates to

this specific course, my goals for using Packback are to ensure students comprehend material from lectures and assignments.

#### Course evaluation:

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.

#### Honesty policy:

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: ‘On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.’ The Honor Code (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel.

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 352-392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 911 for emergencies.

#### Weekly schedule (subject to adjustments, which I will announce):

##### Jan. 6 – Week One

Fact Finding introduction

Overview of the class, grading, office hours, textbook, expectations

Discussion of human sources vs records; producing reliable, distinctive journalism

How & when do modern newsrooms assign reporters to background individuals, organizations (breaking news vs in-depth reporting or vetting)

Case studies for in-class discussion

When “fact finding” goes wrong

##### Jan. 13 – Week Two

Covering the police beat

Homework/in-class assignment: Writing off police reports (20 points, due 3p Jan. 27)

##### Jan. 20 – Week Three (holiday, no class)

##### Jan. 27 – Week Four

Covering courts & the criminal justice system

LexisNexis Public Records data service review, demonstration

PACER service review, demonstration

Homework assigned reading. News article tbd (20 points).

#### Feb. 3 – Week Five

Pulling it all together for an in-class assignment: a mock reporting exercise based on a fictional, breaking news event or an assignment to investigate a politician, appointee or other news figure

#### Feb. 10 – Week Six

Investigating politicians: scandals, financial disclosures, tax returns, bankruptcy records, property records

Quiz on cops & courts (100 points)

Homework assigned reading. News article tbd (20 points).

#### Feb. 17 – Week Seven

Pulling it all together for an in-class assignment: a mock reporting exercise based on a fictional, breaking news event or an assignment to investigate a politician, appointee or other news figure

#### Feb. 24 – Week Eight

U.S. Freedom of Information Act

Homework assigned reading. News article tbd (20 points).

#### March 2 – Week Nine (spring break, no class)

#### March 9 – Week 10

U.S. Freedom of Information Act (cont'd)

State public records law, including Florida's Public Records Law

In-class graded exercise: Draft US FOIA request and Florida public records request (100 points)

#### March 16 – Week 11

Influence game: Political contributions, dark money, domestic & foreign lobbying, regulatory process

Quiz on FOIA, open records law and investigating politicians (100 points)

#### March 23 – Week 12

Investigating businesses: SEC filings, LLC registrations, federal & state tax enforcement, regulatory and license enforcement, patents & trademarks, press releases

State and federal government business contracts; educational records

Quiz on lobbying, political money (100 points)

Homework assigned reading. News article tbd (20 points).

March 30 – Week 13

Transportation issues & accidents: Plane, trains, automobiles, boats, pipelines, etc.

Quiz on investigating businesses (100 points)

April 13 – Week 14

In-class review and exercises for upcoming graded assignment

April 20 – Week 15

Pulling it all together for an in-class assignment: a reporting exercise based on a fictional, breaking news event or an assignment to investigate a politician, appointee or other news figure

#### About your instructor:

Ted Bridis (“BRY-dis”) was editor of the Pulitzer-winning investigative team for The Associated Press in Washington for 11 years before coming to the University of Florida. He is a founding editor of Fresh Take Florida, a news service covering state government by UF student reporters. He is also administrator of the new \$25,000 Collier Prize for State Government Accountability awarded each spring at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner in Washington. In addition to teaching, he works as a consulting editor with journalists internationally for Freelance Investigative Reporters and Editors, a project of Investigative Reporters & Editors Inc. Bridis was the first journalist to identify Hillary Clinton’s personal email server and trace it to her home’s basement. His team of AP reporters also was the first to reveal the illegal foreign lobbying activities of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign chairman, who was subsequently fired, indicted and imprisoned. He was AP’s editor on the series on child-immigrant detentions that was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer. His team won the 2018 AP Media Editors deadline reporting award for coverage of Hurricane Harvey and its aftermath, and was a finalist for the 2017 IRE award for investigations triggered by breaking news. Bridis led efforts that won the \$10,000 Eugene S. Pulliam First Amendment Awards in 2014 and 2011, and he won the 2014 Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics and 2014 SPJ Ethics in Journalism Award. His team won the Pulitzer & Goldsmith prizes for investigative reporting in 2012 on NYPD intelligence programs. He is one of six AP journalists whose phone records the Justice Department seized in 2013 as part of a criminal leaks case involving a major terrorism investigation, which led to stronger press protections under new federal regulations. He was one of AP’s seven analysts since 2004 responsible for calling winners in national elections, and his call in 2016 allowed AP to be the first new organization to project Donald Trump winning the presidency. Bridis previously covered technology, hackers, national security and the Justice Department for the AP in Washington, where he has worked since 1998. He spent two years at the Wall Street Journal, where he covered technology policy and computer and national security. He witnessed Flight 77 crash into the Pentagon and was first to report it to his editors; the Journal subsequently won the 2002 Pulitzer for Breaking News Reporting for its 9/11 coverage. He returned to AP to head coverage of the 9/11 terrorism investigations. He has a journalism degree from the University of Missouri.