

# JOU 3101: Fact Finding

Fall semester 2014, University of Florida

Instructor

Chris Davis (941) 315-0602

[Chrisdavis4444@gmail.com](mailto:Chrisdavis4444@gmail.com)

Office hours: By appointment by phone/email

Office: 490 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. S, St. Petersburg, FL

Assistant instructor

Michael LaForgia

Office: 490 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. S, St. Petersburg, FL

[Michael.laforgia@gmail.com](mailto:Michael.laforgia@gmail.com)

## OBJECTIVE

Students will learn the methods for gathering and analyzing public records used by practicing journalists. We want you to understand the importance of public records for backgrounding people and businesses and for uncovering information that can't always be found by interviewing people. Students will leave the course knowing the kinds of records that are critical to traditional news beats. They will get practical experience uncovering those records and using them to generate story ideas. And they will learn how to get in a document frame of mind to anticipate when and where records might be available.

During the course, students will apply this knowledge in a semester-long research project examining one of a variety of health, safety and public interest issues on the University of Florida campus. Details of the group projects will be developed with students in the first few weeks and agreed upon by week four.

Grades will largely be determined by meeting a series of project tasks throughout the class and by student participation in class discussion. In addition, each student will file weekly journal entries updating the progress they make on their project research.

## ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is **mandatory** and will be taken regularly throughout the course. Absences and excessive tardiness may be factored into the points a student receives for class participation.

Deductions made will be at the sole discretion of the instructor. Absences approved by the instructor in advance, or those due to extreme circumstances, such as illness, may be forgiven at the discretion of the instructor.

Discussions in class may include information about stories in progress. Students will be asked at the beginning of the course to agree to keep all class conversations off the record. Students should not Tweet or share information from class on Facebook or other forms of social media.

If you miss class, it is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to obtain material missed through other students. 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>.

## **JOURNAL ENTRIES**

Each student will maintain an electronic journal shared with the instructor via Google Drive. This journal will be crucial in tracking three things: your class participation, completion of homework assignments and progress on your group project. Keeping entries clear and concise and filing them all on time will ensure a student receives all available points. (In-class participation and a final exam will also factor into grades.)

Late, incomplete or sub-par assignments will result in point deductions as set out in this syllabus. Journal entries and questions should be well-thought-out and original. Summaries that mimic language from stories, or worse that are copied directly, will be considered sub-par.

Entries must be filed by Monday at midnight before the class each week. Each entry should be labeled with the date of the subsequent class. So your first journal entry will be due before the second class session and will be labeled "Sept. 3, 2014."

Each week you should file journal entries under three separate headings with THE LATEST ASSIGNMENTS posted AT THE TOP OF YOUR JOURNALS:

### **Homework/reading assignments**

You will record any homework assignments here. In addition, if you have reading assignments, you will be expected to write a brief summary of each of the stories that were assigned.

Describe the main point of the story and the key sources of information used in each story. File each summary under a separate header with the name of the story or homework assignment.

There is no length restriction, but concision is important. (100 to 200 words for a description is a good goal) If no assignment was given for a particular week, note that under the proper heading.

### **Questions for upcoming class**

You will be expected to file three questions you'd like to ask your instructor in advance of each class. These questions can pertain to the stories you read for the week, the homework assignments or to public records questions in general.

### **Project progress**

After projects have been assigned, students will be expected each week to summarize their INDIVIDUAL progress on the project. Here you will record specific tasks completed, lessons learned and interesting facts you've discovered during your research. Think of this as a reporting memo to your editor. You don't want to waste his or her time, but you want to show off the progress you're making and the most relevant and interesting information you're uncovering.

## **GRADE CALCULATION**

### **Group project – 500 points**

Your group project will make up the bulk of your grade. Weekly project reports must be filed individually. Each are worth up to 30 points. (estimated maximum score of 390 for the semester) Additional group project points will be awarded at the instructor's discretion for overall effort, quality of work, class presentations and end-of-the-year project results.

### **Class participation – 300 points**

Up 300 points will be awarded for completing homework assignments and filing weekly questions in your journal. Late, missing or sub-par work on either of these two weekly requirements will cost students up to 15 points each.

At his sole discretion, the instructor will add or subtract points based on class participation. Absences and excessive tardiness may be factored into the points a student receives for class participation, as well. Deductions will be at the sole discretion of the instructor.

### **Final exam – 200 points**

## **CLASS REQUIREMENTS:**

Computer needs and behaviors: Weekly computer and online exercises will be conducted in the classroom, so it is strongly encouraged for students to come to class with a laptop. Laptop are to be used only for classroom assignments. Use for other reasons, including unrelated email or messaging, will result in lost points from a student's class participation score. Lost points will be determined solely by the instructor based on the infraction and whether a student had been previously warned. The same rules apply for cell phones and all other electronic devices.

## **WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

### **Aug. 27, 2014**

#### Fact Finding Introduction

Overview of the class and what it will cover. An introduction to the basics of public records and how journalists use them to discover information and generate stories. We'll walk through several investigative projects and explore how reporters uncovered the information they used. In addition, we'll break the class into semester-long project groups and discuss the approach to the project.

Homework: By Monday, find at least three news or investigative stories (no features) that report on college and university campus issues. These stories could involve campus crime, student safety, mispending of funds, administrative malfeasance or corruption. They can be involve any university or college in the country and be produced in any medium.

Read each story, identify the key issues reported or uncovered. In your journals, briefly and separately describe each of the stories you found, when and where they were published and what death campus issues were explored. Describe the public records you think were used on the reporting process for each story. **INCLUDE A LINK TO EACH STORY.** Come to class ready to discuss the issues.

### **Sept. 3, 2014**

#### On the beat – crime, courts and prisons

You will learn the basic records used on criminal justice beats and how reporters use them. Among them: police reports, calls to service, state and federal courts, prison records and Department of Corrections inmate records. We'll discuss how to anticipate where public records are likely to exist. We'll dissect a John Oliver rant on prisons and, in project groups, determine how we could fact check Oliver's statements.

Each project group will discuss the homework assignment and build a list of questions that could be explored about campus issues at UF. We will discuss the ideas and decide which questions might be answered with public records.

Homework: Each student will go to the campus police department of the Gainesville Police Department and ask to review a log of recent calls or arrests. Pick one interesting case and ask for the Probable Cause Affidavit or incident report. In your journal entries, record your experience, including any trouble getting the documents and the cost. (cost should be minimal) Summarize the case your chose, including a short description of the incident and any other key information available in the report. Record whether you think the report is newsworthy and why.

## **Sept. 10, 2014**

Backgrounding a person or address

Tampa Bay Times Investigative Reporter Michael LaForgia will walk the class through digging up information on a person or address, including the use of Official Records, court dockets, corporate filings, police records and other sources. Project groups will spend class time applying what they have learned by uncovering and recording information about campus personalities – administrators, coaches, athletes etc.

Homework: By the following Monday, each student must identify the name and date of birth of one of the University of Florida's top administrators or athletes and complete a background check on them and record the required information in a shared spreadsheet. Each student must also summarize interesting discoveries in his or her journal.

## **Sept. 17, 2014**

On the beat – Business and nonprofits

Today we'll cover sources that can provide information about businesses and nonprofits. Students will learn about corporate records and the state web site, Sunbiz, that allows access. We'll also cover professional licensing, non-profit 990s and other strategies for digging up information of entities that aren't required to make their documents public.

Students will background check a list of corporate officers for a number of Florida day care centers. Each team will get at least three names. Record in a shared spreadsheet whether each has a criminal background and the associated details. Also review lawsuits and officials records for additional details on each person.

Project groups will identify their subject of focus for group projects and spend time in groups creating a reporting plan.

Homework:

By the following Monday, read the stories here <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2014-Local-Reporting> on Tampa's Homeless housing program. In your journal, summarize the series and describe in a few sentences the kinds of public records reporters used to report this story. Come up with three good questions about the stories, record them in your journal and come to ready to ask them in class.

## **Sept. 24, 2014**

## On the beat – Regulators

Government regulators at every level keep watch on an endless number of activities by people and businesses. Local governments make sure buildings meet code and that property owners don't endanger their neighbors by inviting pests to piles of garbage on the lawn. State officials inspect everything from nail salons to nursing homes to restaurants. You can't get in to these places, but regulators can. You'll learn to follow their trail to bad guys.

These records are crucial for uncovering bad guys doing bad things. But the records also allow reporters to see how the regulators themselves are doing their jobs. Are they letting people get away with bad things time and again? How well are they doing their jobs?

Michael LaForgia will discuss how regulatory records were used to investigate Tampa's Homeless Recovery program.

Further discussion about the questions each group will pursue for the class project. In your groups, research and discuss how campus activities are regulated and inspected. What records and sources of information might exist? Use those documents to look for stories.

Homework: No additional reading assignments. File your weekly questions and continue working on class projects.

## **Oct. 1, 2014**

### Public records and the law

A discussion of public records access laws and how you can make them work for you. We'll discuss how to approach the process of getting records, learn to write an official records request and what to do when you're denied, delayed or told it will cost \$10,000. Students will learn to search Attorney General's opinions and other sources of support for fighting public records battles.

Each group will write a public records request for information about campus activities related to their project.

Homework: Search the Florida Attorney General's opinions database for a ruling involving public records. Describe the type of record and summarize the AG's ruling. Is this a public record? Why or why not? Do you agree with ruling? Why or why not?

Project assignment: Each student will file a public records request related to their project. Summarize the experience and any documents received by your homework deadline.

## **Oct. 8, 2014**

Project work

We'll have a quick discussion via Skype about progress on your class project. Groups will then have time to work on their research. You'll be expected to update your journal with progress made by the end of class.

Homework: Find an investigative story you have not already read. Read or watch it and summarize what reporters found. Describe the kinds of public records used and what information they provided.

### **Oct. 15, 2014**

On the beat – Local Government Records

School boards and city and county governments are a treasure trove of facts. Almost all of it is public. We'll talk about how to keep up with what local governments are doing. But we'll focus more on how to dig deeper and get past the obvious to the fun stuff – phone records, travel expenses, personnel files, audits and emails.

Homework: Identify a typical government record on campus – a meeting agenda, an audit, a budget document, correspondence from the president's office etc. Request a copy or ask to inspect the record if a copy would be too expensive. Summarize your experience in getting the record and explain how the information you find could be useful for a reporter.

### **Oct. 22, 2014**

Project work

We'll have a quick discussion via Skype about progress on your class project. Groups will then have time to work on their research. You'll be expected to update your journal with progress made by the end of class.

Homework: Read fact check stories on the web site Politifact.com or Pundictfact.com and find one that relied on public records. Summarize the story and describe what public records were used by reporters. Include how the information from records was used. If you can't tell what records were used, describe public records that might have been useful to the reporter.

### **Oct. 29, 2014**

Politifact – Fact checking in the modern age

Guest lecturer Katie Sanders from the original fact-checking web site Politifact.com will take students through the process of holding politicians and pundits accountable for their words and claims. Students will learn how working journalists choose statements to check, how they maintain objectivity and key source of information.

Homework: No additional homework. Use this week to work on group projects.

### **Nov. 5, 2014**

Using data

How you can use data to make everything you do better. We'll talk about getting into a data state of mind and how data can answer questions that couldn't otherwise be answered.

Homework: Identify a database available online that involves government data. Record a link to that data in the homework section of your journal and explain what information is available in the data and how you might use it to produce a news story.

### **Nov. 12, 2014**

Intro to Excel

A practical class on using Excel. Sorting, functions and Pivot tables. All you need to know to be dangerous with a spreadsheet.

Homework: Use your Excel skills to analyze the database you identified in your prior homework assignment. Explain anything interesting you found.

### **Nov. 19, 2014**

Ethical questions

Public records give you access to all sort of information that you might not expect. Social Security numbers, bank account information, the names of rape victims and children who are abused. Is it OK to publish, just because you have the information? We'll talk about some real world examples and what should factor in to our decisions.

Homework: Identify one news story where sensitive information was available or was published by reporters. This could involve crime victims, rape cases or other issues discussed in class. But do not use a story that we talked about in class. Briefly describe why you think the information was sensitive, whether you think the reporter handled it correctly and why or why not.

### **Nov. 26, 2014**

Advanced web searches

Michael LaForgia will share secret tips for uncovering documents that even most professional reporters don't know. You'll leave class with an advanced list of web resources and a deeper understanding of how to maximize Google searches. You'll also be introduced to the Deep web and will leave class with the ability to find things Google can't touch.

Homework: TBA

### **Dec. 3, 2014**

Project work

We'll have a quick discussion via Skype about progress on your class project. Groups will then have time to work on their research. You'll be expected to update your journal with progress made by the end of class.

Homework: No additional homework. Use this week to work on group projects.

### **Dec. 10, 2014**

Review for exam

Homework: No additional homework. Use this week to work on group projects.

## **GRADING POLICIES**

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

## **ACCOMODATION OF 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.

## **MAKEUP WORK:**

Make-up assignments and exams are not permitted. However, under an extreme circumstance, if you have an excused absence AND the professor was notified in advance, an exception may be made.

**GROUP PROJECTS:**

This course includes extensive work in groups. Each group is responsible for the content within the final project and to attempt to work out differences among members before alerting the professor. Under extenuating circumstances, grades may be differentiated based on work level. Near the end of the year, each student will file a peer evaluation describing the effort put in by the other group members. This required peer evaluation may impact points awarded for a student's project work.

**ONLINE 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, but students will be given specific times when they are open. 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://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-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. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 9-1-1 for emergencies.

