

PROFESSIONAL MASTER'S PROGRAM | 2025-26 ACADEMIC YEAR

MA HANDBOOK

JOURNALISM.WISC.EDU/PROTRACK



Updated Fall 2025

Natalie Yahr (MA '19) interviews reporter Parker Schorr for a podcast she produced for the Capital Times in Madison. Photo by Stacy Forster

The University of Wisconsin-Madison journalism program seeks to bridge the gap between the practical work of doing real-world reporting and the theoretical ideal of a profession that serves as a foundation for America's democracy. This program offers the prospective master's student practical skills training in journalism, combined with a knowledge of the industry, its history, missions, practices and relationships with the public. As part of their development, students go well beyond the 5Ws of traditional journalism and explore multiple storytelling platforms.

As part of the contemporary, innovative journalism they create, students produce stories that reflect their curiosity about local, national and international forces, ask questions and deliver the lessons they learn to their communities. Indeed, our students will wrestle with the very meaning of journalism in today's society and culture, informed by a nuanced understanding of media effects, strategic communication, and other concepts shaping and driving their future careers. We teach sophisticated, responsible, 21st-century journalism to engaged students.

"The program was very intentional in saying, 'We really want you to get experience when you get here.'"

—Rosario Domínguez (MA '18)

The professional M.A. — often called the “pro-track program” — typically leads to careers in news and content creation. Students work with an adviser to construct a program of required and elective courses that emphasize in-depth course work in a variety of storytelling genres. To complete this 30-credit degree, students blend courses on practical communication skills, conceptual knowledge of journalism and mass communication, and an area of specialization.

Skills classes are a significant component of this program, yet a hallmark of the Wisconsin method of journalism education is that theory and the role journalists play in society are given equal weight.

The development of a specialty in journalism is a central component of this program. As such, all applications will be considered, however preference is given to those seeking to pursue and build journalistic credentials within a specialty area in order to seek a job in the professional world. The tracks of study for which our school is known include political and civic journalism, science, health and technology, arts and culture, and the environment and sustainability, though other custom tracks can be created.

Graduates of the program will enter the journalism profession with a well-developed portfolio consisting of in-depth storytelling in their area of specialty across multiple media platforms.

This program is particularly well suited for people with undergraduate degrees in non-journalism areas seeking journalistic skills to enhance existing areas of interest or general assignment reporters who seek a specialization. Thus, students should have a strong notion of

what kind of specialty they might want to pursue.

Professional-track M.A. students generally return to the professional world once they finish their degrees. However, UW-Madison professional-track M.A. graduates may matriculate into our Ph.D. program following a successful completion of the program, provided they complete the necessary theoretical courses, finish their degree on time, develop an MA thesis and receive permission from the school.

Every professional master’s student must take at least 12 credits of core skills courses in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, including J335: Intermediate Reporting, which they will take in their first semester in the program, although they may choose to take more. In consultation with the student’s advisor, students instead may be allowed to take eight credits of skills courses, bypassing J335 if they already have the requisite training.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Timeline

A program proposal is due during the first semester of coursework (by Nov. 1 for students starting in the fall).

Students curate a portfolio of their best work at the end of their coursework, which typically takes three to four semesters, and present it to the graduate committee and faculty.

Internships

Students are required to obtain an internship in a journalism-related media company during the program. Credits and grades will be determined by the student’s advisor, in conjunction with formal letters from the internship supervisor at the media company.

Students may choose to do an internship at Madison Commons (madisoncommons.org), the school’s hyperlocal online website.

Students funded through the David Maraniss Fellowship are eligible to apply for a paid summer internship (\$6,000 for the summer) with the Capital Times and the Wisconsin State Journal.

Students from underrepresented groups are eligible to apply for a paid summer internship (\$6,000 for the summer) with the Wisconsin State Journal.



Cathleen Draper (MA '18) interviews Karen Bate for a story she wrote for the J-School's Curb magazine. Photo by Emilie Enke

All professional-track students must take at least seven credits of concepts courses that stress the relationship between journalism and major social institutions and publics. These courses will be selected with consideration of the student's specialty. Coursework must be above the 300 level to count for master's degree credit.

All professional master's students are also required to take J903: Professional Master's Colloquium, which is offered in spring semesters, as part of their concepts coursework. The one-credit offering is a professional development course for graduate students seeking careers in journalism and content creation.

Track of specialty study

By the end of their first semester, students should have established an intended focus of study. During the first semester, students will have had an opportunity to sample a specialty that may interest them. Working with their advisor, students will design a program proposal that outlines the topic of interest, relevant coursework, and overall goals for the program. Students can take advantage of courses in many departments on campus.

Credits and requirements

Master's professional-track students must complete 30 credits. Most do it in three semesters, but students are welcome to expand their timeline to fully develop a specialty by taking advantage of the school and the university's resources.

The credits required for graduation include the minimum of 12 Core Skills credits, at least seven journalistic concepts credits, and at least six credits in electives outside the school. Students are expected to maintain a 3.25 cumulative GPA in all graduate work. At least 50% of coursework must be at the graduate level. Courses numbered 700 and above are graduate level. Courses at the 300 – 699 levels may include the graduate attribute or not (this is noted in the course guide with Y 50%). Consult with Graduate Program Manager Lindsey Bliefernicht for more information as you select courses.

Program proposal

Students must develop a program proposal, which is due by Nov. 1 of their first semester in the program. In this proposal, students should have laid out their ultimate goal for their master's work,

identified their chosen track, and listed possible courses to take and internships to apply for during the next year and a half. This proposal should be about three pages long and must be signed by the advisor. Failure to complete this proposal by the deadline will result in a hold status for the individual, preventing him or her from registering for spring semester. All proposals must be reviewed and approved by the school's Graduate Committee.

Advising

Students will be assigned a faculty contact upon entering the program. The student may choose to keep that advisor or identify a new one based on shared interests before the Nov. 1 program proposal deadline.

While the director of the professional master's program will serve as an advisor to some students, she or he will act as an informal advisor to all students in the program. Faculty members retain the right to refuse to accept students as advisees. This faculty advisor will work with the student to develop a program proposal. In addition, the student and advisor may select a faculty specialty contact to consult on the program proposal.

CORE SKILLS CLASSES

All courses listed here are four credits – these classes qualify for the other eight skills credits required for the professional master's degree (in addition to J335).

J401: In-Depth Reporting
J404: Interpretation of Contemporary Affairs
J405: Creative Nonfiction
J411: Multimedia Design
J417: Magazine Publishing
J420: Investigative Journalism
J425: Video Journalism
J426: Community-Based Reporting
J455: Emerging Media and News
J456: Long-Form Video

Students are required to take at least seven credits of concepts coursework, including the one-credit J903: Professional Master's Colloquium. See the course guide or consult with your advisor for more information about what classes qualify for this requirement.

Student community

During their time in the program, master's students are expected to be active members of the vibrant School of Journalism and Mass Communication community. This includes attending school functions and working with faculty to raise awareness of the program and its good work to the broader academic and professional communities.

Final portfolio

In lieu of examinations or a thesis, professional-track students develop a portfolio with at least five significant, professional clips or projects (text, electronic, photography or multimedia) from classes, independent projects, freelance work or internships for presentation on the job market. Students present their portfolio to students, faculty and staff at the end of their final semester. The Journalism and Mass Communication Graduate Committee constitutes the Review Board for the M.A degree. The Review Board is charged with final decisions regarding satisfactory progress.

A review is made of each student's progress at the end of each semester and, in cases where student performance has not met satisfactory progress criteria, a letter is sent to the student and faculty advisor. Students who receive this letter have a maximum of four weeks to provide a written response concerning any special reasons or circumstances relevant to their failure to meet the satisfactory progress criteria. The Review Board will examine all cases involving lack of satisfactory progress to determine appropriate action. A finding of "unsatisfactory progress" by the Review Board may be grounds for a one-semester

probation, suspension of funding (if applicable) or dismissal from the graduate program, at the Review Board's discretion.

Professional conduct

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication holds expectations for the highest level of academic integrity and expects professional and respectful conduct in all interactions. Misconduct can result in dismissal from the program.

Academic misconduct is an act in which a student:

- Seeks to claim credit for the work or efforts of another without authorization or attribution
- Uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise
- Forges or falsifies academic documents or records
- Intentionally impedes or damages the academic work of others
- Engages in conduct aimed at making false representation of a student's academic performance
- Assists other students in any of these acts

Examples include but are not limited to: cutting and pasting text from the web without quotation marks or proper citation; paraphrasing from the web without crediting the source; using notes or other tools (such as generative AI) when such use is not allowed; using another person's ideas, words, or research and presenting it as one's own by not properly crediting the originator; stealing examinations or course materials; changing or creating data in a lab experiment; altering a transcript; signing another person's name to an attendance sheet; hiding a book knowing that another student needs it to prepare an assignment; collaboration that is contrary to

CRITERIA FOR SATISFACTORY PROGRESS

Master's students must earn a minimum 3.25 cumulative grade point average by the end of the second semester in residence and must maintain that GPA for the duration of the degree program. Grades in courses numbered 300 and above count toward the GPA and the degree.

Master's students who earn grades of incomplete must remove those grades in the semester following their occurrence. A request for a waiver of this rule may be granted in rare cases. Waiver requests should be submitted to the Journalism and Mass Communication Graduate Committee.

Master's students must maintain steady progress toward completion of the degree. Full-time master's students can expect to spend 15 months to two years earning the degree. The time to degree completion varies for part-time students.

the stated rules of the course, or tampering with a lab experiment or computer program of another student.

Chapters 14 and 17 of the University of Wisconsin Administrative Code describes misconduct in detail. Refer to <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/> and <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/nonacademic-misconduct/>.

Process for grievances

The student should speak first with the person toward whom the grievance is directed. In most cases, grievances can be resolved at this level.

If this conversation does not yield satisfactory results, the student should consult with the Director of Graduate Studies in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Should a satisfactory resolution not be achieved at that level, the student should contact the program's Grievance Advisor to discuss the grievance. The Graduate Program Manager can provide students with the name of this faculty member, who

facilitates problem resolution through informal channels. The Grievance Advisor is responsible for facilitating any complaints or issues of students. The Grievance Advisor first attempts to help students informally address the grievance prior to any formal complaint. Students are also encouraged to talk with their faculty advisors regarding concerns or difficulties.

If the issue is not resolved to the student's satisfaction the student can submit the grievance to the Grievance Advisor in writing within 60 calendar days of the alleged unfair treatment.

On receipt of a written complaint, a faculty committee will be convened by the Grievance Advisor to manage the grievance. The program faculty committee will obtain a written response from the person toward whom the complaint is directed. This response will be shared with the person filing the grievance.

The faculty committee will determine a decision regarding the grievance. The Grievance Advisor will report on the action taken by the committee in writing to both the student and the party toward whom the complaint was

directed within 15 working days from the date the complaint was received.

At this point, if either party (the student or the person toward whom the grievance is directed) is unsatisfied with the decision of the faculty committee, the party may file a written appeal. Either party has 10 working days to file a written appeal to the College of Letters & Sciences.

Documentation of the grievance will be stored for at least seven years. Significant grievances that set a precedent will be stored indefinitely.

Students who are experiencing sexual harassment are encouraged to contact Graduate Program Manager Lindsey Bliefernicht for assistance. University resources for sexual harassment concerns can be found at <https://doso.students.wisc.edu/report-an-issue/sexual-assault-dating-and-domestic-violence/>.

An appropriate process is determined in consultation with campus staff and dependent upon the wishes of the student. The Graduate School has established policies governing student conduct, academic dishonesty, and sexual and racial harassment.



Professional master's students are expected to be active members of our vibrant department, which brings in leading professionals to meet with students. Here David Folkenflik, NPR correspondent, center, looks to Jessie Opoien, then a Capital Times political reporter, during a 2018 panel discussion sponsored by the UW-Madison Center for Journalism Ethics. Photo by Jeff Miller / UW-Madison

Graduate School also has procedures for students wishing to appeal a grievance decision made at the college level. These policies are described in the Academic Guidelines (<http://grad.wisc.edu/acadpolicy/#97>).

Financial support

Tuition amounts are set by the Board of Regents of the UW System on an annual basis in the summer for the following academic year. Visit the Office of the Bursar's website for information on tuition costs: <https://bursar.wisc.edu/tuition-and-fees>. Make sure to select the graduate program box.

Several forms of financial aid are available for graduate students: graduate assistantships (including research, project and teaching assistantships), fellowships, scholarships and loans. As research, project or teaching assistants, students work on research projects or assist faculty in teaching selected undergraduate courses, although these positions in the School of Journalism and Mass

Communication are typically reserved for research graduate students. However, professional master's students are encouraged to seek project assistantships and teaching assistantships in other departments if they're available. Additional information about assistantships may be found on the web at <https://grad.wisc.edu/studentfunding/types/>.

Scholarships

Through the generous support of our donors, the program is able to make some scholarship money available to graduate students to help pay tuition and fee costs.

Financial aid

Students who are U.S. citizens or Permanent Residents can apply for Federal Stafford Loans (subsidized and unsubsidized) and for Federal Work-Study through the Office of Student Financial Aid at <http://www.finaid.wisc.edu/>. Eligibility is based on financial need. OSFA also offers information on the cost of attendance at

<http://www.finaid.wisc.edu/cost-of-attendance.htm>. OSFA also offers emergency short-term loans to qualified students.

Other assistantships and hourly employment

Other employment opportunities are available both on campus and in the community. Openings for full- and part-time jobs for students are listed on the Student Job Center website at <http://jobcenter.wisc.edu/>.

Travel to meetings and conferences

An important part of the development of graduate students is the participation in professional meetings and conferences. Consult your advisor about the appropriate events for you to attend. Some advisors may have access to funds to help support travel costs. The School of Journalism and Mass Communication offers a fixed annual stipend to graduate students who are presenting papers at conferences. Students

should also explore volunteer opportunities at conferences to offset registration costs. Professional MA students may also be eligible for funds to support their attendance at relevant training and workshops. Consult the Graduate Program Manager Lindsey Bliefernicht for more information.

Health and wellness

UW-Madison has a holistic resource for all things related to wellness. The site at <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/wellness/> includes information and opportunities for wellness for your work/school, financial, environmental, physical, emotional, spiritual and community. All enrolled graduate students are eligible for University Health Services (<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/>). There is no charge to students for many basic services including counseling sessions because services are paid through tuition and fees. Personal health and wellness services, including mental health treatment and services, are available in addition to medical services.

Health insurance coverage

Graduate students who hold an appointment as an assistant of 33.33% or more or who have a fellowship may be eligible for health insurance and other benefits. Contact the staff benefits and payroll coordinator in the unit where you have been hired to select one of several health care plans within 30 days of your hire date.

Grad students without an assistantship or fellowship who are currently enrolled can use the services of University Health Services, called UHS, the campus health clinic. Many services are

provided at no extra cost, including outpatient medical care during regular business hours, Monday through Friday. UHS is located in the Student Services Tower at 333 East Campus Mall, 608-265-5000.

For more info, visit the UHS website at www.uhs.wisc.edu.

Prescription medications, emergency room visits and hospitalization are not included in UHS benefits. Therefore, supplemental insurance covering these drugs and services is recommended for all students and is required for international students.

The UHS Student Health Insurance Plan (SHIP) is an excellent option for many students – contact the SHIP office at 608-265-5600 for more information.

Disability information

Students with disabilities have access to disability resources through UW-Madison's McBurney Disability Resource Center. As an admitted student, you should first go through the steps to become a McBurney client, which you can find at <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

University Health Services, or UHS, is the primary mental health provider for students on campus. UHS Counseling and Consultation Services offers a wide range of services to the diverse student population of UW-Madison. It offers immediate crisis counseling, same-day appointments and ongoing treatment. Go to <https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/> or call 608-265-5600. UHS service costs are covered for students through tuition and fees.

There are many mental health resources throughout the Madison community, but UHS Counseling and Consultation Services is the best resource for referrals to off-

campus providers. Call 608-265-5600 for assistance in finding an off-campus provider.

Information for international students

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security requires student visa holders to register with UW-Madison prior to beginning an academic program in the United States. The UW-Madison International Student Services (ISS) office coordinates an orientation to assist students with complying with this requirement.

For more information, contact ISS office, room 217 of the Red Gym, 716 Langdon Street, or telephone 608-262-2044, e-mail iss@studentlife.wisc.edu. You can find more info on the web at <https://iss.wisc.edu/>.

International Student Services (ISS) is your main resource on campus and has advisors who can assist you with visa, social and employment issues. Visit its website at <http://www.iss.wisc.edu> for more information or to schedule an appointment.

All new international students must attend the ISS Mandatory Orientation Program. This is required by both the university and federal visa regulations. At the orientation, new students will register their arrival on the F or J student visa and gain information on maintaining legal status while attending UW-Madison. The orientation also offers information on how to get involved in ISS and campus programs and how to take advantage of services available both on and off campus. Orientation information can be found at www.iss.wisc.edu/orientation_info.

The online Guide for

International Students is a comprehensive and valuable resource for international students and is sent to international applicants initially when they apply for their I-20. The guide provides appropriate resources and information on any of the following topics:

- Obtaining a student visa
- Maintaining immigration status
- Academic/enrollment requirements for international students
- Employment options for international students

Student life for international students

Consult the Graduate School Guide to Student Life at <https://grad.wisc.edu/newstudents/> and International Student Services (ISS), which sponsors programs for international students: <http://www.iss.wisc.edu>

Madison Friends of International Students (MFIS) is an organization of volunteers that offers services and programs to international students and their families at <http://www.mfismadison.com/>

Visit the ISS website for more information about resources available for dependents: <https://iss.wisc.edu/>

You can find more information about university housing at <https://www.housing.wisc.edu> and off-campus housing at <https://campusareahousing.wisc.edu/>

Sufficient funds

International applicants are required to have sufficient funds to cover their expenses completely while attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Visit the Graduate School website for more

information: <https://grad.wisc.edu/international-students/>

English language proficiency

Every applicant whose native language is not English, or whose undergraduate instruction was not in English, must provide an English proficiency test score. Your score is considered too old, and will not be accepted, if it is more than two years old from the start of your admission term. Country of citizenship does not exempt applicants from this requirement.

Language of instruction at the college or university level, and how recent it has been, are the determining factors in meeting this requirement.

Applicants are exempt if:

- English is the exclusive language of instruction at the undergraduate institution; or
- they have earned a degree from a regionally accredited U.S. college or university not more than five years prior to the anticipated semester of enrollment; or
- they have completed at least two full-time semesters of graded course work, exclusive of ESL courses, in a U.S. college or university, or at an institution outside the U.S. where English is the exclusive language of instruction, not more than five years prior to the anticipated semester of enrollment.

The required scores are:

Minimum TOEFL requirement: 92 internet (iBT); · 580 paper-based test (PBT)

Minimum IELTS requirement: 7.0

Minimum MELAB requirement: 82

Under certain circumstances, and with program approval, admission may be granted with the following scores. However, as a condition for admission, an English

assessment test (ESLAT) will be required upon arrival, and any recommended English as a Second Language (ESL) course must be completed successfully in your first semester.

Below are the ranges in which an ESLAT will be required:

- TOEFL (iBT) 80-91
- TOEFL paper based 550-579
- IELTS 6.5
- MELAB 77-81

Any international student whose native language is not English and who wishes to TA must take the SPEAK Test unless they have scored 26 or higher on the speaking portion of the TOEFL. Check <https://esl.wisc.edu/ita-training/speak/> for more information.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

During your time in the program, we'll pay for you to attend a conference or training, either virtual or in person. Here are some organizations that can help you start to network and build expertise.

Asian American
Journalists Association
aaja.org

Association of LGBTQ Journalists
nlqja.org

Investigative Reporters & Editors
ire.org

National Association of
Black Journalists
nabj.org

National Association of
Hispanic Journalists
nahj.org

National Association of
Science Writers
nasw.org

Native American
Journalists Association
najanewsroom.com

National Center on Disability
and Journalism
ncdj.org

Online News Association
journalists.org

Radio Television Digital
News Association
rtdna.org

Society for Features Journalism
featuresjournalism.org

Society of
Environmental Journalists
sej.org

Society of Professional Journalists
spj.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Professional master's director

Stacy Forster, 5058 Vilas Hall
forster2@wisc.edu
608-263-3069

Graduate program manager

Lindsey Bliefernicht, 5132 Vilas Hall
lindsey.bliefernicht@wisc.edu
608-263-4858

SJMC website

journalism.wisc.edu
Program requirements, financial
assistance, TA training

Graduate School website

grad.wisc.edu
Policies, funding, professional de-
velopment, degree completion

Photo by Bryce Richter/UW-Madison





**School of Journalism
and Mass Communication**
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