

When police moonlight, who's watching?

Inside a CBS News-Howard Center Investigation assisted by ASU students

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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When police officers work off-duty security jobs, or “moonlight,” often in uniform and sometimes with full police powers, the lines between public service and private interest can blur.

A new investigative series by CBS News and the [Howard Center for Investigative Journalism](#) at Arizona State University shines a bright light on that gray area, revealing how little oversight many departments apply to a practice that is widespread across the country. Published in January, “[Under the Moonlight](#)” is the result of a yearlong investigation that examined more than 100 law enforcement agencies nationwide.

At the center of the project is the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the [Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#), where students played a critical role in nearly every phase of the investigation. Fifteen Howard Center students filed public records requests, analyzed data, developed storylines and helped build a centerpiece of the project: an interactive tool that allows the public to see how police departments across the country regulate off-duty work.

The resulting stories include digital reporting and video segments now streaming on [CBS News](#) platforms nationwide.

In this Q&A with faculty and staff involved with the project, they discuss the investigation, the role of students and why projects like this are central to the Howard Center’s “[teaching hospital](#)” model of journalism education.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and/or brevity.

Question: What made this project different from a traditional classroom capstone experience?

[Mark Greenblatt](#), Howard Center executive editor: What set this collaboration apart was that it was real journalism, not a staged classroom exercise or simulation. Howard Center students were not spectators — they were full partners in producing a national investigative reporting series with CBS News.

Students helped build the underlying dataset and an interactive tool that lets the public explore how more than 100 police agencies handle off-duty employment and oversight — a resource that

sits at the center of the “Under the Moonlight” investigation. They also found and developed their own story on how weak oversight of off-duty policing and qualified immunity can shield officers accused of misconduct, a standalone report that ran on CBSNews.com with our students leading the byline. For that piece, students filed public records requests, analyzed policy documents, identified patterns of lax enforcement, and helped shape narrative and visual elements that appear in the published story.

Students did not just contribute in the abstract; they traveled into the field with CBS crews, conducted interviews on camera, helped gather and shoot video, and collaborated in real newsroom editorial meetings. They shaped storylines that went to a national audience, and they made editorial decisions alongside experienced investigative journalists.

This was journalism with real editorial accountability — intended for a national audience, subject to the same standards and pressures as a national newsroom product. That level of trust and responsibility from a major news organization — combined with deep involvement in every stage from reporting to publication — is something most students never experience in a classroom or traditional capstone, but they got that experience inside Cronkite’s Howard Center.

Q: Where did the stakes feel real in ways students immediately recognized?

[Lauren Mucciolo](#), Howard Center executive producer: The stakes became very real for our students during the final reach-outs to all the police agencies examined. This was an onerous process led by two student reporters — an undergrad and a graduate student — who had to engage in sometimes lengthy and antagonistic back-and-forth discussions with public information officers from more than 100 law enforcement agencies of various sizes and across multiple time zones.

While the students initially had trepidation about having these conversations, over time they got better and better at engaging with these officials effectively and not being deterred in the face of criticism and/or pushback. It was a real thrill as faculty to watch the reporters’ confidence grow and hear them talk authoritatively about the accuracy of their reporting.

Q: Students weren’t just contributing — they were embedded with CBS News investigative teams, shaping storylines, data analysis and verification for a national audience. How did you decide when students were ready for that level of responsibility?

[Angela Hill](#), [Ida B. Wells Professor in Journalism](#) at the Cronkite School: Throughout the reporting of this story, Howard Center students were deeply involved and committed to the research, reporting and production process. We had students so committed that they stretched themselves to learn new skill sets — or lean deeper into the ones they already had — and explore a variety of reporting tools.

Most impressively, without requests or any prompting, they worked beyond class hours in an effort to find unique story elements and drive the project forward. And they did it all with the right attitude and with a high degree of professionalism. With this level of dedication and commitment, coupled with their willingness to learn from all their editors and partners, it was clear they were ready to “play in the big leagues” with the right amount of support and guidance.

Q: The interactive tool is a major resource. What did students learn by building something meant to be used by the public and not just graded by faculty?

Hill: The reporting, precision and verification behind the interactive tool examining off-duty policing was a herculean task. It required a high level of organization, extensive research on policies, persistent reach-outs to law enforcement agencies followed by numerous emails, calls and conversations to ensure accuracy and creating a system that allowed us to accurately track our findings. We were creating something that had not previously been done and that would be viewed by a national audience.

Students quickly understood the stakes. They learned how important precision was to telling the story and gaining the trust of those who would consume our content. As a result, they leaned into collaborating with one another and our CBS partners, and they became sensitive and extremely committed to the verification process — even when it seemed daunting. They were always willing to double, triple and quadruple check everything because they wanted to ensure accuracy and make sure no error of any kind was allowed to overshadow an important story.

After the project was published, a student texted me ... “Thank you for everything. ... Five billion drafts and clarifying questions every day, but it was so cool to learn so much from you!” The text underscored how committed they were to the process for this story and will be for their future stories.

Q: Several of the stories focused on weak oversight and the consequences of off-duty misconduct. How did you guide students through the ethical and legal complexities?

Mucciolo: Students in the Howard Center are taught that documents and data are essential building blocks in creating high-impact, credible investigative reporting. We placed a high premium on collecting primary-source records from police agencies, such as policy documents, officer personnel and pay records, incident reports and court records. The Howard Center also instructs students to be fair — every police officer mentioned in this reporting was given an opportunity to comment. So was every agency named; after obtaining and reviewing policy documents from more than 100 police agencies around the country, our reporters then reached out to every department to verify that we read their policy correctly and asked if they thought it prudent to include any additional context.

When police officers and departments showed reticence to talk at length about their policies, we had discussions with the reporting team on how else we might include the perspective of law enforcement. That’s when we reached out to the Harris County Deputies’ Organization, which represents law enforcement officers in the Houston, Texas, area. Harris emphasized to reporters the positive impact moonlighting provides to the public, in terms of putting more uniformed officers on the streets and providing additional income opportunities that can help recruit and retain officers.

Q: While the project was still in production, students were already being recruited for jobs and fellowships, with CBS News leadership actively advocating for them. What does that say about how industry partners are viewing Cronkite students right now?

Greenblatt: It shows that industry partners are viewing Cronkite and Howard Center students as professionals in practice, not journalists-in-waiting. When senior newsroom leaders are willing to write letters of recommendation, take calls from hiring managers and advocate for students before a project has even published, that reflects a high level of trust in their skills and judgment.

What's especially telling is that this advocacy happened organically. Executives and senior network leaders mentored students in the field, invited them into the reporting process, and voluntarily stepped forward as references for competitive fellowships and jobs. That signals a shift in how partners view our students — not as interns or observers, but as journalists whose work already meets professional standards.

Q: Looking ahead, what does this collaboration signal about where Cronkite journalism education is headed?

[Battinto Batts](#), dean of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication: College journalism programs can produce excellent and impactful work, and — relative to their size, expertise, resources and location — play a leadership role in reporting and delivering impactful work. I have believed this for some time now and shared this perspective with others: We are not apart from industry; we are a part of industry. And it's more than the traditional role of being a pipeline of talent.

Cronkite students have demonstrated the capacity to work alongside organizations such as the Associated Press and CBS News — and have earned their trust and respect. I expect this will lead to even more collaborations as industry partners are faced with reductions in staff and resources, and the industry continues to evolve.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: Howard Center students Aspen Ford, Tallulah Anne and Chad Bradley with Brian New of CBS News gathered for a shoot on location in Fort Worth, Texas. Photo courtesy of the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism

Text image(s)



Howard Center students Chad Bradley (left) and Aspen Ford prepare for a shoot in collaboration with crews from CBS News on location in Fort Worth, Texas. Photo courtesy of the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism