



University of Vermont

Center for Community News

Bridging Campus and Community: How Student Media are Filling Local News Gaps

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Executive Summary

This report analyzes 110 student media organizations to assess their role in local community reporting and identify opportunities for growth and collaboration. The findings highlight how these organizations engage with communities, balance campus and local coverage, and build partnerships with professional media outlets. Their multi-platform distribution and institutional integration position them as vital contributors to local information ecosystems while providing students with real-world journalistic experience.

Key Findings

Nearly 70% of student media organization respondents are engaged in community reporting activities.

- **57% express a desire to cover more community-related topics**, indicating unmet potential for expansion.
- **42% operate under academic departments**, compared to 28% under student affairs, reflecting differing institutional priorities.
- **24% actively collaborate with local news outlets**, co-publishing student-produced content.
- **96% use websites**, 71% use social media, 61% provide print copies and 40% use email newsletters to distribute students' content.

Introduction

Student media organizations, which are usually editorially independent and run by students, have long offered opportunities for emerging journalists to hone their skills by providing news and information for students, faculty, staff and sometimes residents.

The Center for Community News (CCN) continues to study and fund efforts to provide community news coverage via the classroom. In this research, we wanted to find out the degree to which student media organizations — campus media outlets like newspapers, TV stations and radio stations — cover communities outside of campus.

We found that most student media organizations cover both campus and communities, but to varying degrees. While most wanted to do more community reporting, they faced barriers, particularly a lack of student staff and financial resources. However, the success of those engaging in community news reporting across a diverse set of institutions highlights opportunities for sustaining and expanding this work, especially in service of closing local news gaps.



Method

This study was conducted by the Center for Community News (CCN) from March 1-June 30, 2025. To gather data, the research team developed a 16-question survey consisting of eight open-ended and eight close-ended questions, designed to be completed in five minutes or less. The survey was distributed to 430 college media professionals whose contact information was collected as part of a national cataloging of student media organizations. The survey was also shared multiple times on the College Media Association listserv (approximately 500 members), featured in the CCN newsletter and included in the College Journalism Newsletter (published by the lead author and reaching about 300 subscribers). In total, the survey reached an estimated 1,000 potential respondents.

We received 126 responses representing 110 student media organizations across 37 states and 110 institutions. Of these institutions, 70% were public and 30% private. The majority (86%) were four-year schools, while 14% were community colleges. Respondents included 60 advisers, 35 student media directors, six staff holding other roles and 25 students, offering a broad perspective on student media operations nationwide.

Community coverage

Almost 70% of the college media organizations respondents regularly report on community news. More than half of all respondents reported a desire to do even more. Examples of student media reporting demonstrate the diversity of institutions involved in this work:

- A mid-sized public university in the Midwest regularly covers topics including city hall, courts/cops, elections, economic development, and political activity such as protests. Recent stories included a murder conviction and local mayoral elections.
- A public Big 12 school regularly covers city events such as new business openings and city council meetings.
- A small private school in Los Angeles makes a concerted effort to “cover our two neighborhoods as much as we can.”
- A respondent at a small private school in Florida says they have “always had more of a focus on community reporting and stories than most typical college newspapers” and deliberately developed more local content to address the void left by staff reductions at the local professional newspaper.
- A public university in a major Northwest city covers the vibrant arts and culture scene in its major metropolitan location.
- At a California community college in a large, majority-Latino city of 350,000, off-campus coverage is highly relevant because nearly all students are from the city, which lacks a professional media presence. Student media covers everything from local public meetings to restaurant openings and business features as well as larger issues affecting the community.



Beats, topics and issues

Student news organizations cover a range of topics that often intersect with or directly impact their student and campus communities.

They include beats like local government and elections, crime and public safety (especially involving students or the institution), economic development (especially related to restaurants and businesses near campus), arts and culture, and sometimes the statehouse.

Many respondents reported that students were particularly interested in covering political protests, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity and immigration issues, as well as topics like climate change, homelessness and food insecurity.

One student stated, “A reporter on the news desk wrote a piece on ICE officers spotted in (town). Although it didn't directly tie into (the university), her story gained a lot of attraction and I believe was one of our most viewed stories. ... Some of these stories that pull in news affecting the community kind of creates a symbiotic relationship.”

Several respondents said their student journalists reported on weather disasters. One campus news adviser noted that during a recent hurricane, their reporters provided regular updates, even when the university closed and many utility services went offline.

How content is distributed

Student media organizations employ a comprehensive, multi-platform approach to content distribution. Websites are the most frequently used distribution channel, mentioned by 121 respondents. Many student media outlets update their sites daily; some are online-only newsrooms. Ninety respondents reported using social media platforms to broaden reach and engagement.

Print editions remain a significant platform for written content, with 77 respondents continuing to produce newspapers or magazines. Distribution frequency varies — ranging from weekly to bi-annual — and print copies are typically circulated on campus, with some also reaching the surrounding community and local businesses. Fifty-one respondents (40%) said their organizations use newsletters to share updates, with frequencies ranging from daily to bi-annual.

While all respondents in this study represented student newspapers or other student media primarily publishing written content, a handful reported partnering with campus TV and radio stations to conduct and/or distribute community reporting through converged newsrooms or collaborations.



Partnerships and collaborations

Collaborations with professional news partners extend the reach of student media reporting and provide real-world experience for student journalists. They can also give students the opportunity to cover topics that may have limited possibilities on campus. At least 30 respondents reported partnerships with local news outlets for distributing student-produced content.

Some partnerships are highly structured and involve regular co-publishing. One big-city Eastern student media organization launched an initiative this year matching 18 student journalists with 15 local, mostly nonprofit news organizations. They published 50 stories within the first five weeks, and expect to exceed 100 stories in a semester. Other partnerships are less formal, involving a professional partner occasionally publishing a student story. Some schools report their own university communications departments often distribute their stories.

A handful of student media entities report that interns have helped staff at professional media and student media organizations build relationships, easing the path for collaboration.

Obstacles

Barriers to expanding community news coverage include staffing shortages, transportation access and lack of money to pay reporters. As an adviser at one Northwestern university said, students “don’t really have the bandwidth to cover our own campus well, let alone issues of off-campus importance.”

Secondary barriers include students’ need to prioritize school work and jobs. Respondents also mentioned student audiences’ perceived limited interest in city affairs, difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships with off-campus sources, and students’ often limited knowledge of civic topics. An Ohio adviser said, “Most town-gown stories require a lot of background to fully understand.”

Sometimes, respondents reported, because some other media outlet is providing coverage, there’s no reason for students to double up. Finally, not all students are interested in community reporting, survey respondents said, and some lack the confidence to interview community leaders or delve into complex local government issues.

About 13% of respondents said their outlets never do community reporting. Their reasons center around mission, audience relevance, strategic priorities and the existing local media landscape, rather than resource limitations.



Conclusion

While barriers to community coverage by campus media exist, most campus media groups are eager to embrace and expand it as a means of serving communities and providing experiential learning opportunities.

The biggest opportunity to increase and improve student media coverage of community news is through partnerships with professional media organizations such as co-publishing and content-sharing agreements.

Other opportunities include:

- At smaller schools, college media outlets could become the “paper of record,” a transition some student media organizations would be happy to make if the conditions and resources were right.
- At organizations such as community colleges, there is a significant opportunity to deepen and increase community coverage due to student reporters’ existing local knowledge and relationships.
- Student media organizations could focus on community issues that directly affect students, or, in the words of one southern newspaper adviser, cover “all news in the community that affects students, but from the steps of campus looking out.”

Additionally, classroom-based opportunities such as community news classes, in which students cover a nearby city or neighborhood as their beats, writing classes that require off-campus reporting, and internships that include co-publishing have positive implications for student media.

Students are energized about this work, and the often-welcoming response from local audiences demonstrates the potential for aligning institutional resources and student talent with community information needs.

Many advisers reported encouraging their students to do more off-campus coverage as a means to offset the news deserts created by the contraction of legacy media. One adviser said college newsrooms should be “harnessed to fill in the void of disappearing local news.”

Further research

Additional research could attempt to quantify the numbers and types of community news stories produced by student media or examine the number and kind of stories published or co-published in local news outlets or made publicly available. Additional research could also seek to determine historic and current trends for the prevalence of student media coverage of community news.



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About the authors

Barbara Allen is the founder and director of CollegeJournalism.org, a consultancy and training resource for journalism professors and student media, and the author of the College Journalism newsletter. Previously the director of college programming for the Poynter Institute, Barbara has enjoyed a 25-year career in journalism, higher education, nonprofit news and student media. She is originally from Oklahoma and now lives in Los Angeles.

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