

College Newspapers in the 21st Century: Nurturing a Passion for News is the Most Important Job Facing College Newspapers

For the foreseeable future, college newspapers will continue to play the two roles they have played since their start: chronicling life on campus while providing a training ground for aspiring journalists.

If that seems like old news, think again. Today, the college newspaper must accomplish those tasks while working with undergraduate students who often have not been raised to be newspaper readers, much less reporters.

The college newspaper now also plays a third role: It must nurture a passion for news in its staff members.

Though there are exceptions to the generalizations I am about to make, for many students today, following the news means following their sports team or the latest celebrity scandal or, the latest sports-celebrity scandal. Journalism schools and college newspapers must focus on teaching students to view the world as reporters and photographers and provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to chronicle that world, but the college newspaper has the special task of training student journalists to make their coverage relevant under real-world conditions.

If we hope to produce reporters and photographers who will sustain journalism, we must teach them to produce newspapers that people want to read. We also need to teach our readers that newspapers still have a vital role to play in

American society. If the college newspaper does its job well, it can train students to become news consumers who will turn to newspapers throughout their lives.

How do we teach students to make coverage relevant? Student journalists must be taught to recognize all the possible ways to cover stories that will have meaning for their readers. Newspaper advisers must have a constant, boundless enthusiasm for the possibilities of news coverage and must pass that enthusiasm on to their students, many of whom cannot see those possibilities when a story idea is broached. Students covering their first budget, speech or meeting story are often overwhelmed just by the reporting.

The adviser (aided in large part, it is hoped, by the journalism faculty) must teach student journalists to show their readers how they will be affected by the story.

Advisers must teach students to think beyond the surface, to ask questions that will lead to the kinds of stories that will pull readers in and help them understand what's what. Ad

visers must teach students to be thinkers and diggers, not just stenographers.

We have to ground our student journalists in the basics of newsgathering and story-telling and then give them the opportunity to practice, until those basics become second nature. Through that practice, reporting improves, organization improves and storytelling improves.

The college newspaper has lately been expanding its definition of the basics to include online reporting. Good reporting is good reporting whatever the medium, but good online reporting requires additional technical skills as well as the ability to think of alternative ways to tell a story. Some students today resist learning online skills.

Another large part of the adviser's job is to help students

recognize the importance of those skills, both to expand the newspaper's coverage and to give students additional qualifications for their first jobs after graduation.

For us, online-only is not an option, nor will it be until our online news site produces income. College newspapers that want to break news online and follow it with print the next day also have to accommodate students' class schedules. When students are working for little or no pay, how demanding can the newspaper's publication schedule be?

College newspapers also face the question of whether or when to remove content from the Web site. Such requests come from former students who were the subjects of arrest stories but also from former staffers who want to have poorly written articles removed. Our policy is not to remove online content because we are the paper of record for our university. If we would not remove a less-than-flattering story about a former student who was not connected to the newspaper staff, should we consider removing less-than-flattering examples of a former staffer's work?

These are only some of the issues unique to the online age that are facing the college newspaper. But just as 25, 50 or 100 years ago, the college newspaper must set the standard for reporting for the public good. In teaching our students to see journalism as a public service, we help to ensure that good journalism will have both practitioners and an audience throughout the 21st century.

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