



Final Report

The Plainsman Assessment Team

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Table of Contents

About This Report.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Key Findings.....	3
SWOT Analysis.....	17
Recommendations	21
Conclusion	29
Appendices.....	30

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About This Report

This report is based on an evaluation of Auburn University's student newspaper conducted during approximately 18 hours of interviews and observation by an assessment team selected by Auburn's Division of Student Affairs.

Members of the assessment team were Chris Carroll, Director of Student Media at Vanderbilt University; Dewey English, Managing Editor at the Mobile Press Register; and Paul Wright, Director of Student Media at The University of Alabama. The assessment team visit was conducted November 14-15, 2011.

The team conducted multiple interviews with administrators of the Division of Student Affairs, The Plainsman General Manager, administrative assistant and faculty adviser; The Plainsman editor-in-chief members of the editorial staff; The Plainsman business manager and members of the ad sales staff; members of the Communications Board; selected faculty/staff representatives; selected advertisers; consumers of the media; and other interested campus personnel.

Introduction

The Plainsman is a previous national award-winner with a long and notable history of providing news and information to the Auburn community.

Once a vibrant voice on campus and a source of campus-wide focus on the issues of the day, the paper has fallen upon some difficult times recently due to a number of factors, many of which are out of student control.

Auburn University is in need of a robust voice on campus once more. And they are well positioned to achieve it. The Division of Student Affairs has pledged their assistance in bringing the newspaper back into prominence.

But the resurgence of The Plainsman will have to include a strong commitment to:

1. rekindling an appreciation for strong news values and aggressive newsgathering;
2. identifying and meeting the news and information delivery needs of the community;
3. rejuvenating relationships, once strong, with newsmakers and advertisers in the area;
4. clarifying the leadership structure and providing strong decision-making and planning;
5. building a strong recruitment and training program;
6. fostering an environment that is receptive to cooperation and change; and
7. providing the financial, personnel and physical resources necessary to build and maintain a strong student media program.

The same challenges that over time have weakened The Plainsman can easily serve as an impetus for building a student media operation that once again provides excellent service to the Auburn community and is envied by universities across the country.

Key Findings

These are the key findings that emerged from meetings with administrators, faculty/staff and students during the committee's two-day campus visit. They are broken into main subject headings that were recurring topics during these discussions.

TECHNOLOGY

- Computer workstations used at The Plainsman have not been upgraded in a consistent and strategic manner. The result is computers that are up to 10 years old in the advertising/business office being used in proximity to relatively new machines in the newsroom. This presents a number of problems with system and software compatibility, maintenance and functionality. This situation also manifests itself in dissatisfaction, lack of cooperation and bitterness between the two departments.
- An undergraduate student serves as The Plainsman's computer systems administrator and is responsible for building and maintaining networks, installing and upgrading software and sustaining and repairing individual machines. Experience suggests this is a practice fraught with vulnerability and potential problems (user error causing crashing/corruption from downloads or poor practices; idiosyncratic structures known only to a student who graduates; systems that function poorly due to a lack of experience or expertise, etc.). Additionally, the administrator password is well known among the student staff indicating no effective system security.
- Operational software was not directly examined, though there were suggestions that individually licensed products are being used on multiple machines. This is an inefficient and illegal practice.
- There is no digital workflow system in place for placing and tracking advertising. The ad insertion process is still a completely paper-based practice that is dated, time-consuming and error-prone.
- There is no systematic plan for hardware repair/replacement or software selection/upgrades. The computer systems at the Plainsman are a jumble, having been selected, configured and maintained at the whim of a succession of students who served in various capacities at the newspaper. Upgraded equipment and a systemic

melding of disparate systems would accomplish much good, speeding the workflow both in Advertising and Editorial operations, and opening new gateways to the web.

STAFF STRUCTURE

- The existing professional staff structure within The Plainsman does not represent an ideal use of valuable human resources. The role, responsibilities and authority of the General Manager are not well defined. In practice, it appears the General Manager is responsible for the overall success of the newspaper, particularly as it pertains to generating the budgeted annual revenue, but she is powerless to exercise the oversight necessary to achieve these goals. The General Manager is treated by student staff as being equal to the editor-in-chief and the advertising manager, two student-held positions. No one person seems to be in charge of critical decision-making, particularly as it relates to long-term operational and institutional matters.
- The role and responsibilities of The Plainsman administrative assistant/business manager are somewhat unclear. Billing and collection for advertising appear to be her primary tasks, along with some administration of The Plainsman budget. There were indications that the assistant was sometimes involved in advertising sales and/or sales training, though it was unclear as to her expertise and/or experience in these areas. She also expressed frustration over persistent poor communication and constantly changing systems within The Plainsman, along with real concern about the newspaper's ability to meet its budget and the significant depletion of its financial reserves.
- The Plainsman's editorial adviser, a journalism professor, appears to be both knowledgeable and personable, but seems to have minimal positive impact on the newspaper's operation and product. In his role as the faculty member responsible for Practicum students, his involvement is seemingly non-existent except for issuing grades as recommended by the student managing editor and mediating occasional disputes. As an adviser to the newsroom staff, his interaction appears limited to twice-weekly discussions with the two ranking student editors and a superficial written critique of each week's issue. He admittedly employs a hands-off advising style, sensitive to intruding into students' decisions. The students interviewed expressed a strong desire for more training and pre-publication advice.
- The paper's student staff structure is top heavy with a desk editor, associate desk editor and assistant desk editor for each section of the paper. This causes unnecessary and

time-consuming steps in the process of getting information out to the campus community.

PRACTICUM

- Practicum is a pass/fail course begun in the 1990s solely to supply content to The Plainsman. It is required for journalism students who will later undertake internships. Practicum students turn in a story per week for the newspaper, working under the supervision of regular Plainsman staff members. Often, the Plainsman staffers choose the story topic and supply a list of sources to contact.
- Practicum students serve as an unmotivated and ragtag reporting corps that supplies a stream of drowsy features and breaking fluff to the paper rather than real news.
- Practicum's sole usefulness to The Plainsman is that it provides content. Because of the heavy dose of Practicum-generated content on its pages, The Plainsman feels like a Journalism program lab weekly in many respects, as opposed to being a newspaper for the campus community.
- The Plainsman staff is highly negative about the Practicum students, viewing them as a lower class and tolerating them only in order to get stories from them. In fact, negativity about Practicum is part of The Plainsman's culture. This semester, The Plainsman editor seems buoyed by the fact that only about a fifth of the latest Practicum students are, in her opinion, unreliable laggards. Apparently, the number is usually much higher.
- Practicum harms The Plainsman by programming too many journalism majors to believe that working at the paper is something they'll do in a course, rather than as a volunteer who's excited to learn and hone his or her craft. Thus, Practicum inhibits true involvement and encourages the idea that The Plainsman is just another credit hour. It was also suggested that journalism students were deterred from volunteering for The Plainsman staff early in their collegiate careers, because they "would be doing practicum next year."
- Student editors referred to Practicum students as a necessary, but onerous burden. Editors have assumed the role of junior journalism faculty members who are obliged to teach, nurture, cajole, babysit, coach and ultimately grade their "students." It appears that all duties related to the management and teaching of these students has been

abdicated by the journalism department to the student staff of The Plainsman, calling into question the role of the faculty member assigned to teach Practicum students.

- The Plainsman staff members complain about this situation, but do not entertain alternatives. This may be because Practicum students are responsible for as much as half the content of any given issue of the paper, or it could be a deference to tradition.
- It was universally expressed that Practicum students are treated as a belittled underclass not worthy of respect. It was said that Practicum students "don't care about the quality of their work" and few, if any, join The Plainsman staff in the semesters following their Practicum experience.
- The Editorial content generated by Practicum students is weak journalistically, uninspiring and devoid of any strong news values.

PUBLICATION'S MISSION

- The Plainsman lacks a clearly defined mission statement. In all instances, everyone had difficulty agreeing on a clear purpose for the newspaper and was unable to describe any qualities that demonstrated a unique identity or personality for The Plainsman that reflected its unique connection to Auburn University.
- The absence of a collectively embraced mission is an impediment to growth, improvement and a vision of the future for the newspaper. In every functional area, The Plainsman seems to be operating on a model designed to simply replicate the year before, with no provision for objective, strategic planning or growth.
- There is a recurring perception that The Plainsman is an extension of the Journalism Department. Many people believe the paper exists primarily as a lab and it has limited interest for students not associated with journalism, either as participants or readers. This perception seemed to arise both from the integration of the Practicum in the newsroom and the editor-in-chief selection criteria that essentially excludes all but journalism majors.

PROMOTION AND MARKETING

- Promotion of The Plainsman to its constituent audiences is not only non-existent, it isn't even envisioned. It is assumed that the paper's existence will spread solely by word-of-

mouth from old to new students each year.

- The Plainsman editor acknowledges that students generally do not know where the newspaper office is located. She is contemplating arranging an open-house event, in hopes of encouraging students to visit and become involved.

CONVERGENCE

- Student media entities at Auburn do not work together in any meaningful or even inadvertent ways. The overall system seems beset by territorialism and suspicion. A fealty to "tradition" poisons the system, preventing innovation, cooperation and clear thinking.
- At present, student media at Auburn sit next door to one another in the Student Center; yet pretend that they are miles apart. Convergence is certainly a well-plowed subject of discussion among Communications Board members and Student Affairs staff, but remains stalled by mistrust, doubt, dawdling and lack of will. For The Plainsman's part, the editor says that the staff "fears to let go of print."
- There exists an almost universal resistance from media and Plainsman students, as well as some professional staff, toward any effort to promote collaboration. The Plainsman is viewed as elitist and intentionally isolated from the rest of student media. There were few examples of interaction between Plainsman students and other student media staff members, and those cited were generally negative.
- There exists an immediate recognition from many students and staff of the advantages of converging the various student media departments. One student leader said, "All students would be better served if all student media worked together toward a common goal." Another said he would visit daily a converged student media website with updated campus information.

WEBSITE AND DIGITAL MEDIA

- The Plainsman website and web exertions are notably weak, even embarrassingly so. The newspaper's online offerings have received no determined emphasis or dedicated resources.

- The Plainsman website is stale in appearance, hard to navigate, and indifferently updated with fresh news. For the most part, the newspaper staff relies on a single student web technician to post breaking stories.
- Videos on the site are very limited. The most recent video available as of mid-November dealt with a gubernatorial speech in May.
- The Plainsman exhibits a stubborn adherence to a pre-digital, print-first mentality. Or, as one well-informed University staff member said, "The Plainsman is 20 years behind the times." In an age when students are alerted to news events within seconds by a smart phone alert tone indicating an incoming tweet, Facebook update, email or text, The Plainsman is choosing to compete by holding information for days before publication only on dead trees.
- The Plainsman website appears to serve little purpose other than an online depository of material that previously appeared in print. This utilization of a newspaper website is called "shovelware," and is widely recognized by industry leaders and prospective employers as being only slightly better than having no website at all.
- None of the advantages of digital delivery are being realized by students using The Plainsman website. There are no daily, or more frequent, updates of content to the site; essentially no multimedia content (relevant videos, audio clips, photo galleries, interactive content); no effective blogging or opinion interactivity; no hyperlinks included in textual content; no maps, PDFs or other supporting materials; and no obvious connection to social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.).
- Because The Plainsman is only published weekly, readers have a greater expectation of fresh content on the paper's website. Consumers have been conditioned by the marketplace to expect a nearly constant flow of information. The Plainsman is not meeting this need. For example, the story reporting the outcome of the Auburn-Georgia football game Saturday afternoon was not posted until 9 p.m. Sunday. By comparison, the Georgia student newspaper website live blogged the game, posted a photo gallery at half time and another immediately following the game, and posted two game stories immediately following the game.
- Workflow for The Plainsman website is an unnecessarily difficult and time-consuming process, requiring four to six steps that conclude by funneling content through the two

students who have the password and ability to post stories. The number of approvals needed before any information reaches the website almost precludes it from being timely or relevant.

- The content management system currently used for The Plainsman website is clunky and inadequate. Managing the site is difficult, archived stories are impossible to find, the user-generated features are underutilized and the marketplace is not well managed. The site appears to be driven by a template-structure that does not allow easy user customization. Many student users expressed frustration with Matchbin, the company behind the CMS, because repeated requests for support were either ignored or received a delayed response.
- The functionality of The Plainsman website, the staleness of the information and the scarcity of original content concerns very few members of the newspaper's staff.

PRINT PRODUCT

- The Plainsman newspaper is a generally crisply designed, solidly written and well-edited product. There are these notable areas of concern: 1) Photojournalism is a weak point, particularly on Page 1. All photos should include people doing things that communicate a visual story. Plainsman photos are too often still lifes; 2) The packaging and grading of the news (clear centerpieces, use of display headlines, story placement) to help readers understand story importance is not executed well; 3) There is almost too much content representing multiple stories of similar length about disparate topics -- a "hodgepodge of bland stories" according to one reader. This was attributed to the practicum integration by many; and 4) There is too little cross-promotion in the paper for the website, a technique especially important for a weekly.
- The paper does not display a strong news emphasis and employs a lack of good news judgment.

TRAINING

- No consistent, organized training program exists to prepare student staff members to step into the managerial positions for which they are selected. There is no leadership or management training for anyone on the staff, including the editor or the ad manager.
- There is no emphasis on or training in multimedia production, digital reporting or social

media usage. The Journalism program itself has no teacher or potential mentor who is an expert and the program's one multimedia course has fallen by the wayside.

- Training of students on the Editorial side of The Plainsman, from the editor-in-chief to the lowest ranking writers, is done exclusively on a peer-to-peer basis. Information is passed along from one generation to the next by word-of-mouth, almost guaranteeing that each year at best replicates the last, or at worst takes one or more steps backward. There are no workshops or training opportunities provided by the faculty adviser, alumni, or other outside experts.
- Training of the advertising manager and advertising account representatives has historically been the same as on the Editorial side. The General Manager assists with training the student ad manager, but there appears to be no structured, consistent training for the students in fundamental sales skills, such as overcoming objections, product positioning and awareness of competing advertising vehicles until recently.
- There is no formal guidebook outlining duties and expectations for each position and explaining in detail the newspaper's internal processes and procedures. Information about these critical facets of the operation is informally shared only in quick discussions with outgoing staff members.

COMMUNICATIONS BOARD

- The 19-member Communications Board is far too large to facilitate efficient meetings that encourage discussion and promote full attendance. Some of the members agree that the only real reason to meet is to fulfill obligations to make appointments to student media leadership positions.
- The mandatory appointment of student board members by virtue of their elected or appointed organizational positions creates obvious potential conflict of interest issues and a potential chilling effect (e.g., newsmakers governing news media: such as SGA officers, Greek officers, etc.).
- The Communications Board members are largely supportive of the concept of convergence of the student media and creation of a new unified student media web site drawing on the work of The Plainsman newspaper, WEGl student radio, Eagle Eye Television and perhaps The Glomerata yearbook and The Circle literary magazine.

- The history of the composition and role of the Communications Board appears to be something of a mystery, even to the members of the board. Its primary function, with respect to The Plainsman, seems to be the annual selection of the editor-in-chief. Aside from that task, it serves only to intervene in times of crisis, and even then its powers seem to be limited to personnel-oriented action and public statements.
- The absence of individuals with a strong media background and/or a demonstrated interest in media limits the board's ability to serve as a visionary body to promote advancement and progress for the newspaper.

INFRASTRUCTURE/RESOURCES

- The physical facilities provided to The Plainsman are relatively new, generous in size, and more than adequate to support the paper's operation.
- A visitor entering The Plainsman's front door might well imagine that the newspaper has moved elsewhere. The place seems empty and lifeless.
- The inefficient layout of the newspaper offices places a spacious but pointless reception desk in a narrow hallway at the front by the door. This reception area is unstaffed, dark and vacant. A bell on the counter advises the walk-in to ring for service. The scene, in fact, suggests that there's nothing in here that anyone really cares about.
- The Advertising and Editorial staffs work out of sight and mind of one another. The wall separating the advertising and newsroom spaces represents a literal manifestation of the traditionally cultural wall separating the two staffs, isolating one from the other.
- There are no windows in the offices, either out to the sidewalk or back into the Student Center, and no 24-hour access.
- The oddly configured Editorial space contains two rows of cubicles through the center, with elevated work counters and chairs along one wall, appearing to be something out of a café or coffee house. The Plainsman faculty adviser was told that the counters were installed by mistake. There is a table for meetings outside two small offices, which serve the faculty adviser and editor, respectively.

- The cubicle workstations, while undoubtedly expensive and of the highest quality, are undesirable in a modern newsroom environment. The height of the cubicle walls obstructs sightlines, cloisters staff, and inhibits inclusiveness, discussion and collaboration.
- The location of The Plainsman office, as well as the other student media, is largely obscured with little directional signage or other branding or indicators of the swirl of student activity hidden around the corner.

EDITORIAL OPERATION

- The Plainsman Editorial staff is devoted to the newspaper and proud of its award-winning history and its reputation for vigorous journalism. They are also very tradition-bound and fiercely loyal to the print product, to a fault.
- Inefficiencies in time management and work processes result from the fact that page-design duties are spread across the staff, rather than concentrated each week in one or two hands.
- The editors at the paper have encountered various difficulties recruiting reporters and other staff members. Curiously, The Plainsman struggled to find sports writers during the 2010 championship year for Auburn football. This problem may reflect a feeling among the student body that The Plainsman is the playground of journalism majors and that others can find no acceptance there.
- The Plainsman is experiencing a shortage of seasoned veterans on its staff to serve as editors, reporters and writers.
- The editorial content of the paper is weaker than usual in news value and student interest. Convenience is not a news value. There is concern that too few student staffers are passionate about reporting and digging.
- All in all, there's a certain softness to the paper, most likely the result of the heavy reliance on Practicum students and because the regular staff burns up too much time managing Practicum students rather than originating stories. The Plainsman editor and staff agree the newspaper must do more work to challenge and probe administrative policies and to examine university budgets and student government affairs.

- The listed qualifications for Plainsman editor effectively void the potential candidacy of anyone who is not a journalism major. Thus, at a public university enrolling 20,000 undergraduates of demonstrated ability and rising credentials, the role of chief leader of the most visible and honored media entity is reserved for the limited group of students who signed up for and passed certain journalism courses.

BUSINESS OPERATION

- The professional staff at The Plainsman has endured turmoil and turnover in the past few years, including two general managers. The number of full-time positions has been reduced to two from four.
- The newspaper continues to experience lackluster advertising revenues. There is some doubt about The Plainsman's ability to achieve the revenue goal of \$350,000 this fiscal year. The weekly editions need to average about \$8,100 in revenues to hit the mark, yet the Nov. 18 edition brought in \$4,000-\$5,000.
- The students involved on the Advertising staff have a scarce and distant relationship with the students on the Editorial staff. In effect, the two sides function as two islands. The layout of The Plainsman's offices nurtures this separation by walling off each side from the other.
- The members of the Advertising sales staff are relatively new to their jobs and show some enthusiasm for sales. But they are ill-served by the newspaper's dated and poorly maintained computer system and software. They must fill out ad insertion orders by hand – an outdated, time-consuming task that creates exhaustive and needless paperwork and fosters mistakes.
- The Plainsman faces competition from upstart independent publications, as well as from established media such as the Opelika-Auburn News. In particular, The Odyssey, a tabloid-size publication catering to fraternities and sororities at Auburn, markets itself to advertisers as a print gateway to an exclusive, moneyed audience. Already, The Odyssey has captured full-page advertising from a new restaurant in town that had contacted The Plainsman at one point seeking information about its ad rates.

FUNDING/BUDGETS

- The current funding model for The Plainsman requires the newspaper to generate revenue equal to its annual operating budget. This model is likely not sustainable unless increasingly deeper spending cuts are made in the years ahead. Since the newspaper is not autonomous of the university (i.e., not incorporated as a separate non-profit), any claim of financial independence by students is more a point of pride than reality.
- According to records and testimony from the long-time business manager, the average annual revenue has fallen short of projections in recent years. This has required funds from the newspaper's reserve account be used to make up the shortfall. Approximately \$800,000 from those reserves has been tapped in recent years, with total depletion a real possibility in the near future.
- The amount budgeted for student pay — \$119,260 — appears excessive when compared to similar newspapers, especially weeklies. This equates to a student labor cost of about \$2,800 per issue. When asked, student staff members indicated a willingness to take a reduction in pay if the savings were reinvested elsewhere in the newspaper. As with some other issues, however, it's not clear whether there's flexibility in the budgeting process to accomplish such a thing, or who would or could make the decision.
- The cost for offering classified ads undoubtedly exceeds the revenue generated by those ads. Thought should be given to eliminating them entirely.

PRODUCT QUALITY/RELEVANCE

- The Plainsman is emerging from a time of turnover and neglect. This has left some of its staff members — both paid staff and volunteers — feeling adrift and overwhelmed, and uncertain about the future.
- As a renowned student newspaper at a major university, The Plainsman is able to attract some very talented young people into its midst, and has benefited from strong chief editors during the past year and a half. The paper enjoys a brand identity upon which to expand its focus and reach.
- With its dogged allegiance to the printed page and with no particular leaders to

encourage, prod or force it into online development, The Plainsman risks losing relevance with the student and local advertising communities. Current print editions are less than half the size of previous years, as fewer student volunteers become passionately involved with The Plainsman and as advertisers encounter lean times and pursue new marketing strategies.

TRADITION/CHANGE

- The Plainsman is incredibly tradition-bound, perhaps as a reflection of the university as a whole. This can be a strength, when appropriately bridled, instilling pride and resolve. In The Plainsman's case, however, burdensome notions of "tradition" prevent the staff from recognizing or accepting the need for introspection and change.
- During quite possibly every constituent interview conducted — student, staff and faculty — one or more comments arose expressing the importance of tradition in all aspects of life at Auburn. In many cases, these comments were immediately linked to the institution's resistance to change. If true, this reluctance to break with tradition will present a challenge to updating and improving The Plainsman's operations.
- Blind devotion to what is believed to be tradition and the way things “have always been done” are turning a once proud and dynamic newspaper into a weak shadow of its former self.

ASSESSMENT/PLANNING

- There is currently no planned periodic assessment of the impact of, satisfaction with or experience gained through The Plainsman.
- There is no regular, scientific surveying of the student body regarding the mission, performance and effectiveness of The Plainsman.
- There is no planning for future growth and development or no one watching for changes in the student body or the media landscape.
- There appears to be confusion about who is “in charge” and who is capable of making any plans for change.
- Little or no strategic planning is done that would provide direction for The Plainsman staff. The result is a lack of cohesive and consistent decision-making that has led to a

weakened product that lacks a unique identity and no plans for anything beyond the next issue.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- As the student newspaper and principal student media entity at a comprehensive university of 20,000 undergraduates, The Plainsman continues to draw dedicated young journalists and advertising account representatives into its ranks.
- The Plainsman boasts a distinguished history as a repeat Pacemaker winner, as a wellspring of outstanding professional journalists, and as a comprehensive source of news and opinion in the university community and the greater Auburn area.
- The university's Department of Journalism is home to a corps of quality faculty members, and the department's Practicum course provides a ready source of student manpower for Plainsman content, whether for print, online or newly converged student media ventures.
- The Plainsman enjoys excellent brand identity in the greater Auburn area, even within the state, and has long and productive associations within the local community.
- The new Plainsman general manager brings to Auburn a record of experience, an eye for innovations and an urge to inspire and lead the needed change and improvement.
- The Plainsman has a strong history of service to the Auburn community with an established base of experienced alumni who believe in the product and would be willing to support its growth and development.
- The Plainsman is an unparalleled learning laboratory, providing experience that translates well into internships and employment after graduation in almost any chosen profession.
- The Division of Student Affairs seems genuinely interested in helping The Plainsman regain its former glory and advance into new arenas of excellence and service.
- The Plainsman's physical facilities are new, located in a prime location and provide a good foundation for growth and development with easy access to the newspaper by the campus community.

WEAKNESSES

- The Plainsman web site and online efforts are astonishingly feeble for a student newspaper at a large university. The student staff lacks guidance and is uncertain how to proceed in reinventing itself and ramping up its online operations. It continues to live by the “we’re working on it” mantra.
- The dated condition of the computer equipment and software, the hodgepodge of hardware and software and a shortage of consistent technical expertise and vision harm all aspects of the newspaper and hinder it from achieving its potential.
- The Plainsman relies almost solely on journalism majors to fill its editorial positions and to provide content and commentaries. Additionally, the academic requirements to become the editor effectively limit candidates to journalism majors. These conditions exclude the majority of students on campus from participating on the staff, severely constraining the variety of viewpoints and creativity available.
- In a time of heavy competition for advertising dollars in a struggling economy, the newspaper is emerging slowly from a lengthy period of neglect and with a weakened editorial product. This limits its ability to compete in the marketplace for necessary revenue.
- The newspaper is without a regular, planned training regimen for its Advertising and Editorial staff members. It also lacks training in management and leadership for students as they move into administrative positions. This almost guarantees a static or conceivably recessive environment that hampers the paper’s ability to serve the needs of the community.
- The design of The Plainsman offices creates a fractured and unappealing working environment and isolates Editorial and Advertising staffs from interaction with each other. The use of cubicle workstations runs counter to modern newspaper office design principles.
- Student media entities at Auburn are isolated with no integration, little cooperation and almost total separation. They keep out of each other’s offices, each other’s operations and each other’s products, to the detriment of all. This isolation is historic and systemic in nature.

- The entrance to The Plainsman office is uninviting and unneeded given the visitor traffic likely to flow to a weekly publication. Having an unstaffed welcome desk is not welcoming, but staffing a rarely needed welcome desk is inefficient.
- The Plainsman's top-heavy administrative structure and ineffective and inefficient Practicum management are impediments to effectual news development and delivery.
- There are no written mission statement, job descriptions, or documented processes and procedures to provide continuity, guide conduct, inform decisions and serve as a road map for growth and development.
- The Communications Board has too many members, an indistinct mandate and weak leadership that have rendered it ineffective as a support mechanism for the newspaper.
- A lack of coordinated marketing and promotion suggests a declining recognition of the value, or possibly the very existence, of the newspaper among entering students each new academic year.

OPPORTUNITIES

- With all student media entities located next to one another in the Student Center, there is an extraordinary potential to revamp the office space to bring about a physical convergence of the student newspaper, radio station, television station, student yearbook and literary magazine.
- In a large university with a vast array of engineering and scientific programs, The Plainsman, with determined effort, should be able to tap a wealth of student expertise to address its electronic and web issues.
- The Plainsman could call on the services of a pool of accomplished Plainsman alumni as volunteer consultants and trainers for its necessary reengineering, retooling and reemergence.
- The presence of strong student media at Auburn could create a real-time cooperative laboratory that compliments and enhances regular academic coursework in several academic disciplines.
- It is possible to achieve rapid and eye-popping improvement in an online product that

could excite and energize staff members, student readers and local advertisers.

- The convergence of diverse student media offers Auburn a dramatic opportunity to build and burnish the brand and reach of the student newspaper, radio station, television station, yearbook and literary magazine. Each brings to the table essential ingredients for convergent success: skilled reporters and writers, energized photographers and videographers, authentic and creative voices and enthusiastic and capable leaders.
- The convergence of student media — while requiring a great heave of effort, at first — would create a 21st Century learning environment for students, better preparing them to enter the professional media’s new digital world.

THREATS

- Under pressure from a weakened economy, increased competition, and migrating readers and advertisers, The Plainsman is losing readership and revenue by blindly following tradition, failing to embrace change and squandering its resources.
- Already battling the well-established Opelika-Auburn News for advertising dollars, The Plainsman is encountering competition from new student-oriented publications that seek to grab market share.
- A stated desire among students to maintain the status quo, preserve tradition and protect silos will effectively derail any advancement toward growth and development.
- A lack of leadership to provide continuity, reasoned advice and developmental guidance along with weak training and documentation mire the newspaper in a repetitive routine.

Recommendations

1. CONVERGENCE

- Combine The Plainsman with all other student media to form one central student media department for Auburn University, allowing the various media to retain their independent identities while working collaboratively across platforms to function as bold, innovative and expansive sources of news, information and entertainment.

We can find no single compelling argument to support the separation of the newspaper from the other student media. To the contrary, there are dozens of strong reasons to share resources (human, facility, technology, content), unify leadership, maximize fiscal efficiencies and encourage student collaboration.

2. MISSION STATEMENT

- Develop an overarching mission statement reflective of the purpose of a newly converged student media department. This mission statement will help clarify boundaries and expectations and offer guidance for decision-making and goal prioritization. It will help unite students and staff with a collective purpose. Once developed, it should be posted prominently in all student media facilities. (The mission statement from Vanderbilt University can be found in Appendix 1.)

3. PROFESSIONAL STAFF STRUCTURE

- Establish a full-time Director of Student Media position to serve as the departmental manager, hands-on adviser, non-student staff supervisor and the custodian of institutional interests for all student media entities. The Director should be empowered to oversee all matters that preserve and protect the long-term opportunities and success of student media, including budget development and oversight, equipment selection and acquisition, capital investments and expenditures and strategic planning, among other duties. The Director should have no control over the content of any student medium and should act as a guardian of the student's First Amendment rights.

The job description for the Director, as with all newly-constructed job descriptions, should set clear lines of authority and accountability while defining the person's specific duties and responsibilities.

- Undertake an assessment of the professional staff needs of the newly converged student media operation recognizing that the following roles need to be fulfilled:
 - Advertising/Marketing Manager – to oversee the business, advertising, marketing and promotional efforts of all student media entities. Given the importance of generating operating revenue through advertising sales, the training and management of student account representatives needs to be operated as professionally as possible. The result will be better-educated students who earn greater commissions and enjoy a more rewarding experience, along with an increased likelihood for success in meeting overall revenue goals.
 - Bookkeeper – to maintain all business/advertising and accounts receivable and billing/collection records, generate financial reports and retain all budgetary and fiscal records for all student media entities. This should be a person with a background in bookkeeping and accounting and should be a full-time employee.
 - Editorial adviser – to provide hands-on advice and mentoring to the editorial staff members of all student media entities. This should be an experienced journalist and writer who would be available in the media offices during high-demand hours to provide advice and counsel, especially to those on the newspaper staff. This person should have no control over content decisions and should be an advocate for students' First Amendment rights. Depending upon budget, this position could be full-time or part-time.
 - Web adviser – to provide hands-on advice and mentoring to the digital and web staff members of all student media entities. This should be a person who is tech savvy and experienced in digital content production and delivery. This person should have no control over content decisions and should be an advocate for students' First Amendment rights. Depending upon budget, this position could be full-time, part-time or volunteer.

- Broadcast adviser – to serve as a coach and mentor to teach and advise students working in the radio and television operations. This should be an experienced professional who is available in the broadcast offices to provide advice, counsel and hands-on instruction. This person should have no control over content decisions and should be an advocate for students’ First Amendment rights. Depending upon budget, this position could be full-time, part-time or volunteer.

4. FUNDING/BUDGETS

- Establish a departmental budget, separate from individual media budgets, to cover the costs of operating the converged student media department. This budget should include all non-student personnel expenses and all other costs associated with operating the new department.
- Before the next Plainsman budget is constructed, examine the projected ad sales revenue figures to assure that they accurately reflect the actual sales total from previous years, the state and area economic outlook and the competition. Adjust the ad sales projection based upon these factors to ensure budget accuracy and enhance success.

If a cut in projected revenue is needed in the short term, balance the budget with cuts to student pay and discretionary spending (e.g., travel). This would give all students an incentive to support the collective efforts of the business/advertising operation and share equally in the challenges and successes of the paper.

- Consider eliminating classified advertising in print and online. The cost is greater than the revenue. Up-sell classified advertisers to small display space for greater return on investment.

5. PRINT PRODUCT

- Create a unified photo department within the converged student media unit to produce still and video products. Utilize shared resources (personnel, equipment, training, images) to improve visual communications in The Plainsman, the website, yearbook and television operations.

- Develop an editorial personality for The Plainsman, whether it be serious, edgy, investigative, or something else and work to ensure all content reflects the paper's identity. Work especially hard to present a compelling front page for each issue that packages news and features in a way that captivates readers. A weekly newspaper can't afford to be dull or irrelevant.

6. WEBSITE

- Develop and rapidly implement an action plan for a dramatic makeover of The Plainsman website, transforming it into a comprehensive, high-energy asset utilizing real-time reporting, multimedia, live-streaming, blogs, commentaries and user interaction. It should also function as a cutting-edge platform for new and traditional advertising partners, generating a new revenue stream for the paper.
- The first step to building new website is to dump the current website provider (Matchbin) and deploy a new content management solution that better addresses students' needs and their level of technological sophistication. A wide range of solutions is available at nominal or no expense. A system designed specifically for news and multimedia is recommended. Avoid a site that is all or in large part constructed or coded by a transient student staff without sufficient oversight and documentation.
- Create a student staff position at The Plainsman of Web Editor, with a term of office identical to that of the newspaper's editor-in-chief. The web editor will serve under the editor-in-chief, in a role approximating that of the managing editor for the print newspaper. The web editor will manage The Plainsman web site, recruit and direct a web staff and coordinate with other student media at the university to obtain and originate content.
- Consider the creation of a more inclusive Auburn-centric website with a new and corresponding domain (e.g., InsideAuburn.com). Build the site to intentionally aggregate content from the converged media including The Plainsman stories, EagleEye video, Glomerata photo galleries, WEGE audio, The Circle creative contributions and yet-to-be-imagined collaborative content. Make this site the dominant online destination for the Auburn community.

7. PRACTICUM

- Ask the Journalism Department to participate in an examination of the Practicum course to review the purposes and realities of the Practicum experience to determine its value to the Journalism program, the students enrolled in the course, The Plainsman, the newspaper's editorial staff and the readers.
- If the Practicum course is retained:
 - write a new set of objectives and a new operating protocol that make Practicum more useful and valuable to the paper and its readers;
 - ensure the work of providing feedback and grades to the students enrolled is completed by the course instructor, not undergraduate Plainsman staff. Anything less is unfair to students enrolled in the Practicum and to those working in student media;
 - energize the student experience and the paper's digital product by devoting a team of Practicum students each semester to originate written/video/audio or other content for the newspaper's website; and
 - elevate the status of Practicum students from underclass to productive, respected members of the Plainsman reporting staff.

8. TRAINING

- Create and implement formalized training in all areas related to journalism, newsroom operations and advertising sales. Ensure a continued training program exists to teach basic concepts to future staff members in all areas.
- Utilize campus and area media practitioners and Plainsman alumni to deliver professional, real-life training.
- Develop staff manuals for each student media entity to ensure continuity. Student managers should fully understand their responsibilities as well as the responsibilities incumbent to advisers. Put all standard processes, procedures and policies in the manual to ensure continuity over time.

9. TECHNOLOGY

- Assess the Plainsman's computer hardware, software, system security and compatibility issues. Develop an action plan to address the immediate needs identified and a strategy to plan for future purchases and implementations.
- All systems, networks and workstations should be password-protected and set up and controlled using professional standards that ensure consistency and security. This could be managed using university resources or out-sourced to once or twice yearly audits from a service provider.
- Ensure all software is up-to-date and legally obtained. Utilize educationally discounted bulk licensing to purchase essential software (word processing, photo, design, pre-press).
- The Plainsman needs to purchase audio recorders and video cameras immediately to begin producing digital content. They should also consider advertising software, new phones and a law-enforcement scanner radio.

10. INFRASTRUCTURE/RESOURCES

- Redesign the Plainsman office to create a welcoming, efficient, lively and collegial environment. The key goal: convert the isolated, fractured working areas into a more open and airy space, enabling the Editorial and Advertising teams to work together and feed off each other's energy and presence.

To create this open and cooperative workspace, consider removing the wall separating The Plainsman newsroom (1111L) and advertising (1111K) operations (see floor plan in Appendix 2).

To eliminate the abandoned look of the Plainsman entrance and the unneeded reception area, consider removing the walls that separate it from the rest of the office and turn the reception area into an office for the new Director (see floor plan in Appendix 3).

- While a complete makeover of the space devoted to student media in the Student Center is impractical, examine ways to merge operations within the existing spaces

to underscore the new convergent spirit and allows staff members to move easily from one medium to another.

- Replace the high-walled cubicles in The Plainsman workspace with round or oval worktables. This would open up the space, improve sightlines, encourage interaction and reflect industry standard design for newspaper newsroom environments. Consider other ways to soften the corporate/sterile environment currently reflected in The Plainsman space to make it more welcoming, fun and conducive to students adopting it as a destination to work, socialize and interact.
- Consider converting the graduate assistant office (1103) into a cross-platform multimedia studio to be shared by the newspaper, website, radio and television operations. This studio would enable, for example, a Plainsman sports editor to interview Auburn's head football coach and have the interview simulcast on the radio and television stations, streamed as video on the website, and recorded as audio/video for on-demand playback, in addition to simultaneously engaging students gathered in the student center's lounge/dining area who could listen live and text/tweet questions in real time to the studio during the interview. Creating such a studio would result in increased campus awareness of student media, enhanced student media recruitment and strong marketable multimedia skills for student practitioners.

If the creation of the studio is approved, remove the unused reception desk (1102) in front of the windows and the frosting from the glass panels facing the reception area (see Appendix 4). Install an audio board, robotic cameras, microphones, monitors and associated equipment. The estimated cost to outfit this studio would be \$15K to \$25K.

- The Plainsman could profit by bolder signage in the Student Center, as could all Student Media.

11. COMMUNICATIONS BOARD

- Reduce the membership of the Communications Board to include seven or nine members. This smaller number would improve attendance and increase efficiency and focus.
- Examine the constituencies represented by the Board members. Ideally, the student members of the board would be representatives-at-large who have a commitment to

student media balanced with a concern for campus interests. The non-student members should include media professionals and university representatives. There are many models from peer institutions that could be used as a starting point to develop a structure that best fits Auburn.

- Revise The Plainsman editor-in-chief selection criteria to remove the journalism course requirements. This would open the way for members of the Auburn community who are not journalism majors but are equally skilled to be considered for editor. Experience has shown on other campuses that some of the most effective and impressive student editors are not journalism majors.
- Include as a primary responsibility of the board the task of strategic planning: creating a future vision for student media, adapting to changing technologies and consumer habits and a continual review of existing policies, structures and systems.

Conclusion

Auburn University has an opportunity to restore an award-winning newspaper operation and assemble a cutting-edge student media program that combines collaboration and innovation with tradition and service to the campus community.

Critical to the success of any strategy for implementing the recommendations detailed here is the understanding that there exists an extremely strong desire to maintain the status quo, a resolute feeling of distrust and a resistance — shared by most of the student media staff members — to ideas that challenge the traditional way things are done.

These are not unfamiliar obstacles in implementing change, but the feelings here seem unusually passionate. Because of these distinct differences and a profoundly held sense of tradition and independence, the task of convergence will be especially difficult. It is recommended that the broad changes should be made quickly, efficiently and publicly. One member of the assessment team equated it to the most effective way to remove a bandage: quickly and forcefully.

This tactic could produce a considerable short-term outcry, but it will subside as collaboration yields meaningful and transformative experiences and staff turnover naturally occurs.

Remember that part of the challenge here is not to implement change and be fooled by the result. As Irene Peter put it, “Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed.”

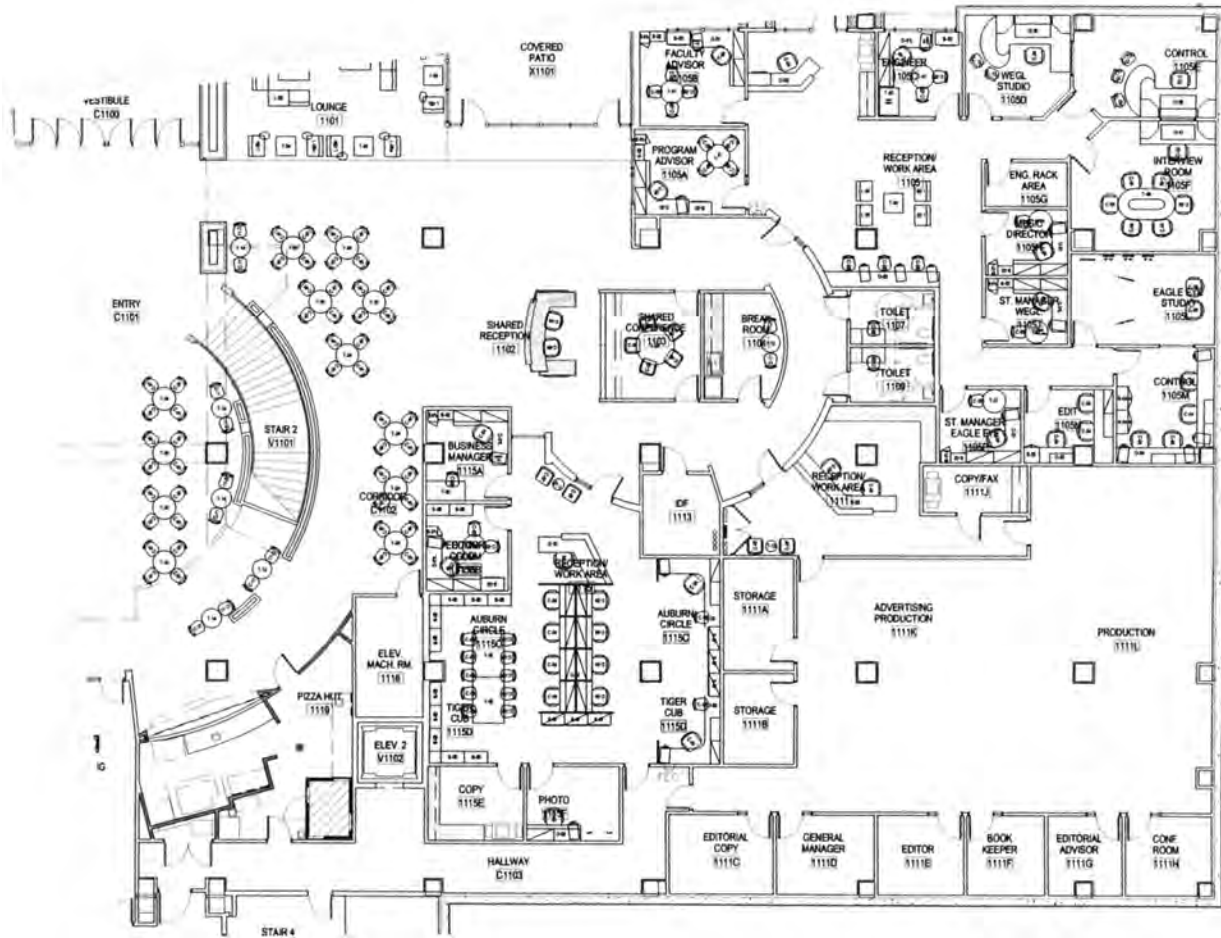
To realize success, it is critical to harness resources, hone skills, foster leadership and set high standards to build a student media environment free of false competition and divisive rivalries. An atmosphere that builds competencies, values cooperation and rewards innovation will be one that not only provides transformative learning experiences, but also results in an informed, engaged and empowered student body.

APPENDIX 1

Sample student media mission statement:

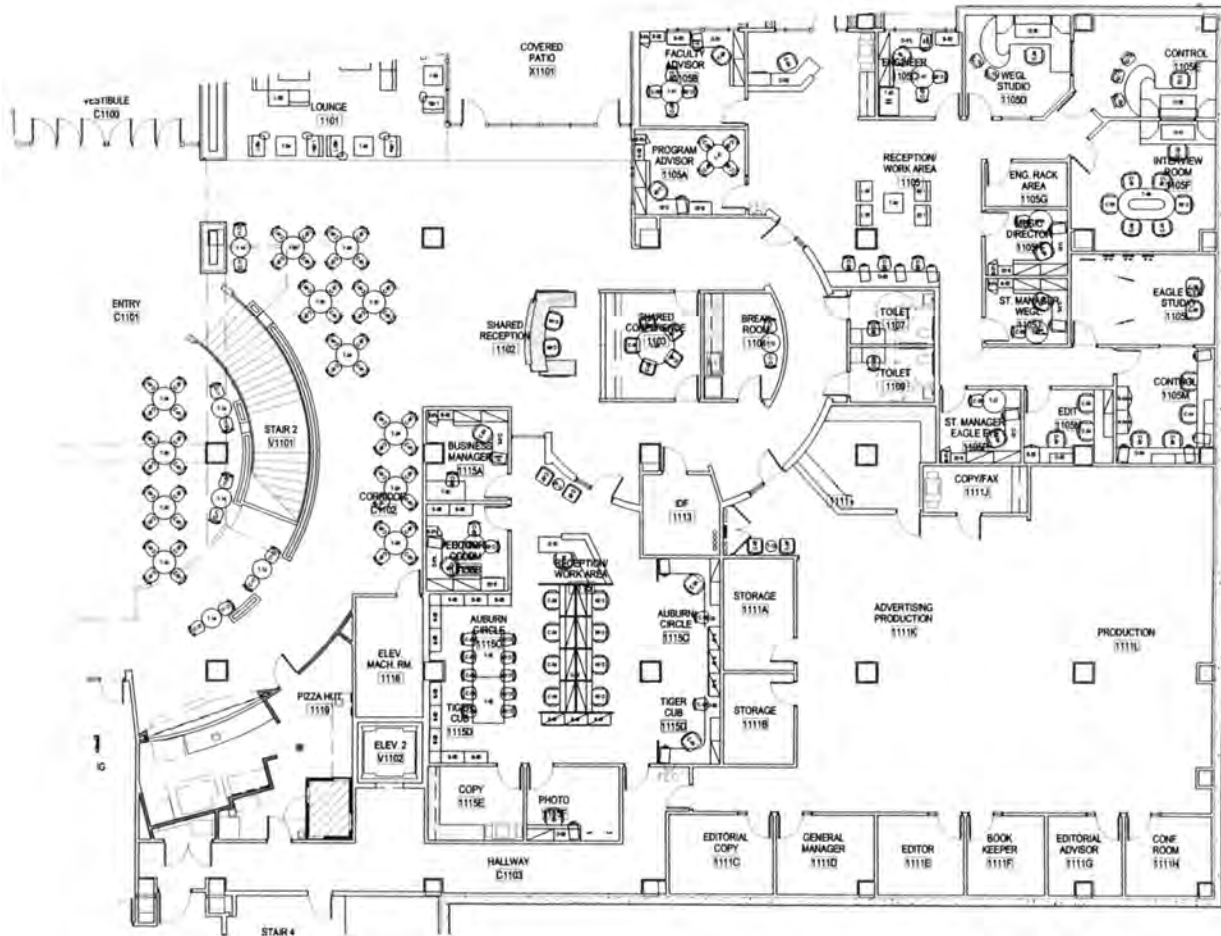
"Vanderbilt Student Communications, Inc. exists to provide the students and other members of the Vanderbilt community specific services and outcomes, primarily, (1) the provision of an environment that fosters the development of students' skills in leadership, management, human relations, and fiscal responsibility in a unique co-curricular setting that allows for high levels of participation in daily-run, product-oriented organizations; (2) the provision of realistic opportunities for students to learn and gain competency in specialized mass communications skills ranging from writing, editing, computer-aided design and production, advertising creation, sales and accounting, to television and radio production, program conception, and on-air participation; and (3) the provision to the campus community of print and broadcast media serving as forums for free expression, allowing the exchange of ideas, dissemination of news, outlets for creative work, and vehicles for entertainment, fulfilling a role critically essential to the health of a vibrant university in a democratic society."

APPENDIX 2



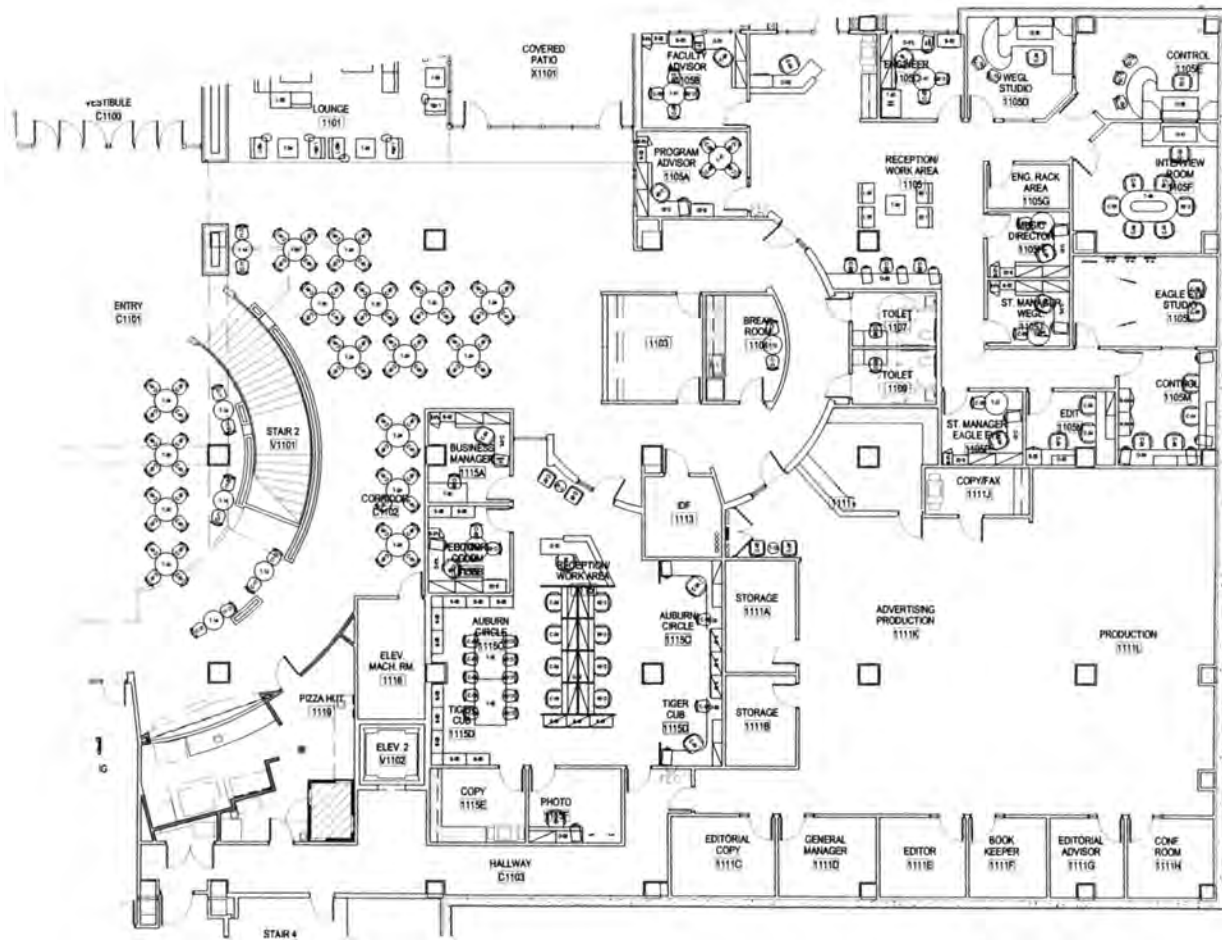
Current Plainsman office with wall between the Advertising office space (1111K) and the Newsroom office space (1111L) removed.

APPENDIX 3



Current Plainsman office with wall between the Advertising office space (1111K) and the Newsroom office space (1111L) removed as well as the wall that defined the reception area (1111). The previous reception desk area has been turned into storage.

APPENDIX 4



Current Graduate Assistant office (1103) outfitted as a studio with the shared reception desk removed and additional seating inserted.