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*Nothing is going back  
to the way it was:*

**Creating Economic Sustainability  
for College News Organizations in  
2020 and Beyond**

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STUDENT PRESS LAW CENTER

# Experimentation must be the priority now.

*“Nothing is going back to the way it was. There is a need to pivot holistically, a 360-degree rethink of structures and operations. Print costs a lot and is not sustainable. All news organizations, including those run by students, must undergo a complete transformation in the wake of the accelerating decline in ad revenue due to COVID-19. Experimentation must be the priority now, with a “product mindset” that serves communities and is sustainable.”*

**LASHARAH S. BUNTING**

Director/journalism, The Knight Foundation

# Contents

<b>PREFACE</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>NO ONE COULD HAVE PREDICTED SPRING 2020</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN THE 2020-21 ACADEMIC YEAR?</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>HOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>CONDUCT AN INTERNAL ASSESSMENT</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>CREATE A PLAN OF ACTION</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>KNOW THE VALUE OF ANALYTICS/METRICS</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>REVENUE GENERATION</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>FUNDRAISING</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>A CHECKLIST OF KEY QUESTIONS</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>EVALUATE AND SHARE LEARNING</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>25</b>

## **PREFACE**

In the wake of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, college news organizations are being subjected to unprecedented financial challenges. This exacerbates historical pressures on college media and requires dramatic shifts by student journalists. Endangering or even eliminating college media is fundamentally antithetical to the mission of higher education, yet current economic and social conditions have often made supporting it less and less of a priority.

College news outlets exist in various shapes, sizes and funding structures. Most are dependent on some combination of student activity fees or direct allocation from their school, plus advertising revenue, mostly from print.

The goal of this report is to help the staff of college news outlets and their advisers create and seize opportunities to ensure that your news outlet survives the pandemic's economic fallout. This report seeks to infuse the expertise of

those who work with emerging and legacy local news organizations with the best ideas emerging in college media. The two groups tend to work in their own silos, despite having much in common.

This report is a distillation of expert advice from a variety of sources working in local media, college journalism, philanthropy and business. There is something for everyone. While some college news outlets may further be on their way of economic reinvention than others, the comprehensive nature of this report provides a wide range of strategies to consider.

At its core, survival requires adopting an entrepreneurial mindset in which college journalists and their business counterparts work together to better understand their audiences, collect data and create financially viable offerings. You must be deliberate and resilient in assessing what best serves your audience and experiment with additional funding streams, starting today. It is our hope that this report will help you find creative ideas and inspiration to help secure your news outlet's financial future.

For more on financial sustainability of student media (including high school journalism), see SPLC's [Student Media Financial Survival Strategies](#).

## **METHODOLOGY**

In May and June of 2020, the Student Press Law Center interviewed and/or surveyed 20 people leading innovation for both new and legacy news outlets, experts in college media, business managers, academics and others. In addition, we reviewed current reports and webinars about the state of college news outlets and financial state of commercial and nonprofit local news organizations.

## **NO ONE COULD HAVE PREDICTED SPRING 2020**

In March 2020, more than 56 million K-12 students suddenly moved to remote learning and nearly 20 million college students soon followed suit. Campuses throughout the country closed abruptly and sent their students home. Student news outlets were forced to pivot too.

Not only did student journalists have to process the personal disruptions of the pandemic's arrival, they also needed to step up to report one of the biggest stories of their lifetime. Forced to cease print publication and immediately transform into all-digital distribution, they had to contend with remote working, a dispersed staff, new business models and new

distribution channels. The very nature of journalism changed before their eyes as journalists were forced to report while sheltering-in-place. And then in the midst of the pandemic, racial justice protests also broke out around the country, largely led by young people, and student journalists jumped in to cover those stories as well.

The impact on the operations of college media was profound. In an email sent on June 26, 2020, by the College Media Association summarizing its 2020 Benchmarking Study, CMA stated that of 135 respondents, “94% of college media outlets continued to produce during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though advertising took a large hit and worries about future funding continue. Nearly 58% of respondents said they reduced the number of printed newspaper copies during the last academic year, and 42% said they permanently reduced print frequency. More than a quarter of advisers said their advertising revenue went down by more than 20% last academic year. Many respondents noted concerns that funding would worsen as schools wrestle with opening in the fall.” This summarizes a deeply troubling trend. But for some, this accelerated a trend already long underway.

## WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN THE 2020-21 ACADEMIC YEAR?

While schools have announced plans for fall 2020, the truth is, no one knows what lies ahead. Based on recent experiences and current trends, there are a few things we do know about the economic landscape which will affect planning and should encourage you to create new financial models:

**No one actually knows if classes will meet in person and for how long.** Despite pronouncements that in-person classes will resume in some fashion this fall, there are many variables at play. This means it’s better to prepare for operating remotely – and then if you can meet in person, all the better.

**Students won’t just be dispersed, the number of students may likely be reduced.** Many students are [contemplating a gap year](#) or taking time off due to the uncertainty of the situation on campus or economic uncertainty at home. This will reduce tuition revenue (thereby providing fewer dollars for student activities), but it also means that it may be difficult to recruit staff. This is an even larger challenge when contending with training staff and managing organizational culture change as described below.

**The economic recession will affect student media revenue from all sources.**

In addition to the impact on tuition and school-sponsored financial support, [local businesses \(potential advertisers\) which rely on students](#) will also be affected by an uncertain return to school. This means an upending of traditional sources of revenue and the need to expand thinking (and creativity) about income generation.

**Faculty and staff jobs, including advisers, are at risk.** [The Chronicle of Higher Education documented](#) that as of July 2, 2020, 51,793 employees at 224 institutions have been affected by furloughs, layoffs, non-renewal of contracts or permanent job reductions.

While contending with broad socio-economic trends which will affect student media, student news outlets themselves will need to contend with changes driven by these external forces:

**The accelerating move from print to exclusively online will fundamentally change the newsroom operation, culture and business model.** Even if you continue to print a hard-copy paper, your online presence will necessarily need to ramp up. This will affect the staff you recruit, how stories are told, staff training and investments in software or hardware.

**Beats and coverage plans may need to change.** While there will still be plenty of news to cover, with large gatherings likely

banned and sports suspended, editors may need to [rethink their traditional coverage plans](#) and adjust to new realities. In addition, reader engagement and audience development may need to factor more prominently into decisions about new features as new business models develop.

**Beware: Budget cuts for student media may be opportunistic (and illegal).**

This may be just the chance that some administrators or student government have been waiting for. Efforts to downsize or eliminate student media cloaked in “across-the-board budget cuts” may be the result of funding authorities seeing independent student media as a thorn in their side. They may see this as an opportunity to dramatically reorganize or even get rid of student media. [Funding cuts in retaliation over coverage are illegal at public colleges and universities.](#)

**External conditions will present new physical risks and challenges to journalists.**

While reporting breaking news (which drives readership) there are new and different security concerns which require training and awareness. The continued threat of the coronavirus has created social distancing requirements which require journalists to [rethink the way they do their jobs](#). Journalists covering protests have also encountered heightened risk as [journalists have been targeted](#) by both law enforcement and protesters. With neither the pandemic nor

protests abating any time soon, student journalists will need specific training to contend with new challenges.

**Seize the opportunities.** Going digital might actually expand your readership/audience, and provide new opportunities to monetize through advertising and fundraising campaigns. You are no longer constrained by physical presence on campus to gain readership. Many student news outlets have seen exponential growth in traffic on their sites since the pandemic began. Think creatively about how to build audiences and keep them coming back — and how to leverage your audiences to build new financial streams.

# How to Survive and Thrive

**In order to survive and thrive, fundamentally, you need to move to make your student media:**

## **1. INDISPENSABLE.**

How do you ensure that you are the key conduit for information on campus/in the local community? How do you become the indispensable culture-builder for a dispersed/remote campus community? Are you the paper-of-record in the local community (publishing government-mandated public notices?) Are you the only local paper in a news desert? Make sure everyone knows the important functions you play.

## **2. PANDEMIC-PROOF.**

In the short-term, how are you planning for school disruption, a truncated school calendar, remote learning, and/or a dispersed staff? How are you recruiting and training your team? How are you adjusting your content/process/publication to accommodate new realities?

## **3. RECESSION-PROOF.**

In the longer-term, how are you contending with the economic disruption to the college/university and to local advertisers? How are you diversifying revenue streams? Can you think creatively about membership? Sponsorship? Business development? Create other revenue-generating initiatives which spin-out of your core operations?

What follows are some specific ideas and examples of how to ensure that you are doing all three things of these things to reimagine economic sustainability for your news outlet.

*“News and business staff must communicate and work together and get past survival mode. Audience engagement and product development are things that entire staffs need to do together and take joint responsibility to implement...The editorial and business staff need to communicate and work together. It can be done in an ethical manner.”*

## LAURA WIDMER

Executive Director  
Associated Collegiate Press

In order to contend with new realities, you need to engage in a four-step process: Conduct an internal assessment; create a plan of action; implement that plan; then evaluate and share learning.

## CONDUCT AN INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

**What do you know about the business of journalism?** Gone are the days when journalists could operate without regard to the business side of the operation. Today, journalists and editors need to have a deeper understanding of what their business colleagues do, and the consumer insights they possess. The ethical “church

and state” edict of the business side not holding sway over journalism content can remain strong while at the same time developing collaboration about new editorial products and initiatives, and financial goals and strategies. The Online News Association walks you through [some of those ethical considerations](#). The International Journalists’ Network provides an [overview of accounting and budgeting tips](#) for journalism entrepreneurs and College Media Business and Advertising Managers [offers downloads](#) that provide definitions and explanations of various advertising and marketing strategies.

**To print or not to print? That is (one of) the question(s).** Admittedly, there are emotional pros and cons to eliminating print: some people feel like print publications have more gravitas. Local advertisers often feel more committed to print publications. Yet with fewer people on campus who will pick up a paper (and social distancing concerns about even touching one) your publication may not be able to reach your audiences and the expectations of advertisers. What are the financial pros and cons to adjusting your printing schedule or going all-digital? Assess the cost of printing versus the advertising revenue it generates minus the return rate of papers. Multiple sources for this report emphasized the need to prioritize discussions on creating a plan for when

and how to let go of print (except when it makes practical and financial sense) while at the same time ramping up the tools and mindset for an all-online/digital newsroom.

**Figure out what you don't know and need to learn (or who you need to recruit that does know).** A wise person once said, you don't need to know everything. You simply need to know what you don't know – and surround yourself with people who do. The same is true as you reimagine the economic stability of your news outlet. That includes not only the budgeting, but also involves revenue generation, audience engagement, metrics and analytics, features and content, marketing, staffing and training. Recruit strategically and fill knowledge gaps. Find people who complement your current internal staff capacity to enable you to move into new areas. Think creatively about who you have access to and how they could contribute (Business school students for revenue generation or a fundraising team? Artists for graphic design? Data scientists for analytics?)

**Know your true budget needs.** If cuts are inevitable, go through the expenses of your organization with a fine-tooth comb. Question everything from office supplies to web hosts and photocopying. But remember when calculating return on investment that sometimes the financial benefit or your expenses can be difficult to measure.

Automatically slashing expenses such as stipends or professional development can be devastating to morale and hurt recruiting, retention and productivity.

*“Organizations should utilize this time for brainstorming with their students and colleagues to come up with new product offerings, rehabilitation of current products to fit today's market and locate other streams of funding beyond traditional media advertising. Professionals should amplify their training of their staff for sales, marketing and communication during this time to ensure clients' needs are being met,”*

#### **TAMI CINDEA BONGIORNI**

Past president, College Newspaper Business and Advertising Managers (CMBAM); former VP Elect Western Association of University Publication Managers (WAUPM); and former assistant director, Kent State Student Media

#### **CREATE A PLAN OF ACTION**

**Make a plan — and build in flexibility.** Don't become complacent about your plan or your budget. Expect more disruptions and create contingency plans. Ensure you have a timeline and benchmarks for implementation.

**Create your budget — and know what you can realistically expect for revenue.**

Don't become complacent about your plan or your budget. Expect more disruptions and create contingency plans. Ensure you have a timeline and benchmarks for implementation.

- **For university-supported news outlets, find out the reality of your funding ASAP.** Take the initiative to have a video call with key decision makers ASAP to find out what has been budgeted for your news outlet (i.e., the head of the student activities office, the student government president, the department/school chairperson.) You need to know what you are operating with (or without), be clear on what you need to be fighting for, and identify any gaps you may need to fill.
- **Create an advocacy strategy to protect your budget.** [Create a plan](#) to respond to a proposed budget cut. Work with the decision makers, lobby them to keep or obtain what resources you need, and, if print is no longer realistic, make a case for reinvesting that money into [building better digital resources](#). If travel to conventions is no longer allowed, advocate to use those funds for online training opportunities and membership in organizations which will help you build skills and compare experiences. Recruit allies (including

alumni and local commercial news organizations) and [advocate for your organization](#). Do not simply accept any cuts you are given.

- **Remind budget decision makers of the essential service you provide - particularly when the school community is dispersed.** Emphasize that now is the time to double-down on funding student media (not cut it) as you have unique access to students at a time when reaching students is particularly challenging. On your campus, your news outlet is the primary source of local news. You are informing peers, faculty, staff and parents, and also dispelling rumors and misinformation. Student media have a unique community and culture-building role, particularly if there is limited physical presence on campus. Student news outlets may be the only vehicle through which students can voice an array of opinions, share common interests and experiences, and hear news conveyed in ways with which they can directly identify. Sometimes student media fills a news desert for the broader community and as such may be a point of particular pride for the university administration. Student media provide an [Essential Service](#).

- **Beware of “death by a thousand cuts.” Fight for every dollar.** Small cuts here and there will add up to larger and larger cuts over time. And a future staff may not realize that you’ve already undergone significant cuts when it is time to advocate for their budget. Fight to preserve every dollar.

*“The only silver lining in this crisis – if you can find one – is that we are now being forced to do the things we’ve long needed to do. To truly be digital first and not let anyone get away with saying they’re saving their best work for the paper edition.”*

**KENNA GRIFFIN**

President 2019–21  
College Media Association

### **Reorganize and recruit your staff.**

- **Reimagine your staff.** Recruit a staff with different skill sets, including business, art, fundraising and data science, to round out your team. Do you have a metrics/analytics team? A development/fundraising team? An events/outreach team? An engineering/app development team? As you recruit, you need to consider training your entire staff so that they understand various business models to sustain and grow local journalism. It means

developing a more holistic view of what they do and how they each contribute to the sustainability of local news. Be sure to acknowledge and plan for recruiting challenges if students are not on campus.

### **Understand who your readers are and expand your readership/outreach**

- **Use analytics to understand who accesses and uses your content.** Analytics are key to your online advertising and outreach to potential funders and partners. Gain as much understanding as possible about who your readers are so that you can market to advertisers and think about features which might increase readership. It’s not just about what is most popular on your site. Who is reading your content? How do they engage? How can you sell “access” to them? Well analyzed metrics should inform your decisions. They let you know when to post, what words to include in headlines, and what topics you should follow up on.

# Know the Value of Analytics and Metrics

**Jed Williams, chief strategy officer at the Local Media Association, says the expectations of advertisers have become more data driven. Williams also serves on the board of directors of The DTH (*Daily Tar Heel*) Media Corp. Here are a few of his observations:**

- It makes sense to continue to harvest print ads when it makes sense for your clients – for as long as you can. At the same time, you must also be fully focused on a rigorous digital strategy.
- Advertising is changing. Online ads are being gobbled up by the big platforms (Google, Facebook, and now Amazon) and you need to work harder to get advertising. The needs from advertisers are changing. They are demanding proof of performance and want to develop intelligence about their audience.
- Static ads are no longer enough.
- Advertisers are interested in branded, sponsored content. They want to be able to measure how it translates into actions like foot traffic, form fills and coupon usage.

*“You need to start by building a large local loyal audience and focus on that. That means understanding the “conversation” that your potential audience is having online, and participating in that conversation by doing quality reporting that adds value to it.”*

One way The Lenfest Institute encourages local news outlets to build economic sustainability is through an audience funnel. The top of the funnel is reach and discovery of audiences. The middle of the funnel is the audience journey where readers develop brand loyalty and habitual usage. The bottom is paid conversion, most often by membership or subscription.

### KEN HERTS

Chief Operating Officer and Director of Operations  
The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

- **Grow your audience: brand and market your news outlet.** Just as your advertisers want to reach the specific demographics who read your content, you need to think strategically about how to increase readership and audience (particularly with groups who your advertisers will find appealing). Be sure you have a presence (even if virtual) in new student orientation, in correspondence to parents and in physical spaces on campus. Distribute branded swag with your news outlet’s social media handles. Growing your readership and understanding your market share directly relates to your ability to expand your advertising revenue.
- **Create an app to expand readership.** A mobile app enables students to read the news on their phone more easily

(and enables your advertisers to access them in a more immediate way.) If you’re going all-digital, having a good mobile app (with push notifications) will be very important to expanding and maintaining your readership. Journalists and their business-side colleagues have to think like news consumers and drive the development process to create an app with effective hierarchies and tagging. Potential downsides: apps can be expensive to create and maintain, so one path is to collaborate with the campus engineering school to make it happen. And when it’s all said and done, no matter how good it is, you still need to convince folks to open *your* app (instead of TikTok or Twitter.)

## REVENUE GENERATION

Looking to the efforts that local journalism outlets have used to stabilize their finances as well as specific [tips for rescuing your student publication's finances](#) is important. Experts that we talked with stressed the importance of diversifying your revenue stream, thinking creatively about how to generate revenue (beyond traditional advertising) and the need to ensure that your staff understands the imperative of financial sustainability.

**Read the moment and target potential advertisers who want to get in front of your readers.** Think about it. There are some big-budget advertisers who want to reach your core audience (college students) *right now*. Reach out to them.

- **Local health departments and government agencies** want to advertise messages to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and messages about how to live healthy lives during the pandemic.
- **Political campaigns** are ripe for advertising dollars as the general election approaches.
- **The US Census** wants to count everyone – and may also be hiring census workers, with an eye on college students.
- **University officials** will be looking for every opportunity to communicate directly and effectively with students (especially if learning is remote.)

*“SPJ’s Foundation realized if ad money perishes, so does journalism. Thus, for the first time in SPJ’s 110 years, it financed an advertising program – because it was the surest way to save journalism.”*

### MICHAEL KORETZKY

Region 3 coordinator,  
Society of Professional Journalists  
Referencing the “[Paper Money](#)”  
training initiative

**Solicit sponsored content and native advertising.** College students are a stable market (consistently in the 18–24 age range, and with significant consumer buying power.) As such, companies want to reach the campus community and may do so by engaging them with [targeted content which resembles the publication’s news/editorial content](#). *Native advertising* is an ad that looks like its surrounding content but which clicks through to an advertisement on a third party site. *Sponsored content* is a longer form type of [brand-sponsored content](#) which exists on the news outlet’s site and resembles an article/video/blog post. These ads are usually designed to match the form and function of the news outlet. Ethics require that they should be clearly labeled as an ad. They are often more effective than regular “display ads” but it should be used judiciously so that people don’t confuse sponsored ads for your journalistic content. The Online News Association’s “[Build Your Own Ethics](#)

[Code](#)” project addresses these important matters.

*College news orgs could get more into sponsored content, as a lot of businesses and services want to get in front of college kids in more effective ways ... Generally, the best thing college newsrooms can do is form a local cooperative, B corp or nonprofit that can take donations as well as ads and then distribute the stories out to other local media to get reach (and possibly even more donations.) Charge a subscription fee to those professional outlets who want to use college journalists to supplement their own cuts to local coverage.*

### MANDY JENKINS

The Compass Experiment, McClatchy and Google

**Work with current advertisers to reinvent their advertising and keep their advertising dollars flowing.** Some local advertisers may not know how to adapt their advertising to digital platforms. Help them convert and create new content and strategy. Build on your relationships to talk with Joe’s Pizza Shop about helping them make a short video about how they make their pizza and why you should eat there to drive business. You might charge Joe for your creative services, or you may decide to give this service to him for free as part of a longer-term advertising deal you broker.

Investing time in helping local advertisers upgrade their own marketing strategy can help keep their advertising dollars.

### **Create a monetized email newsletter.**

Consistent newsletters can be an important source of revenue. *The New Republic* asks, [Is Email the Future of Journalism?](#) The Local News Lab offers a step-by-step [Newsletters Guide](#). Keep in mind some tips:

- Focus on your reader experience in order to cultivate a regular readership (which will translate into targeted advertising.) Be sure that it is mobile-friendly.
- The tone should be conversational and accessible (no cut-and-paste of stories.)
- Keep subject lines short and interesting to help open-rates.
- Limit the number of ads in the newsletter (quality over quantity) and ensure they are relevant to preserve the reader experience and effectiveness of ads.
- Consider percentage-of-sale-based advertising rather than charging a flat fee and/or consider adding affiliate links which provide you with a sales commission for products you recommend.
- Ask for donations in the newsletter.
- Consider running [classified ads](#) in your newsletter.

- Ensure that you are consistent with your frequency (weekly? daily?)
- Brand the newsletter. At the [Iowa State Daily](#) it's *The Daily Dose*. *The Chronicle* at Duke University tailors [four newsletters](#) for distinctively different audiences. *The Harvard Crimson* offers [eight choices for alerts and newsletters](#). Ask [basic demographic questions](#), as does the *Minnesota Daily* and others.
- The campus directory is public on most campuses. Experts have suggested that you take the opportunity to download the entire directory and use it to send an introductory or first newsletter of the academic year. Note: it's crucial to check the terms of use of the newsletter platform that you use and have a program that easily allows people to unsubscribe (or opt out.)
- Be sure to add a prominent box or pop-up on your website to encourage everyone to subscribe to the newsletter.

**Hold sponsored or paid events that will draw a crowd.** Take advantage of the moment by convening and curating important conversations on campus through online discussions with notable figures and high profile experts. You are not bound by geography with speakers or attendees. Hot topics and excellent speakers draw an audience. You should look for sponsors to underwrite the event and then use the event to remind people

they can become “members” (see below), make a donation to your organization, and sign up for your newsletter or social media accounts. Remember to have people register for the event so that you can follow up with them afterwards. [A Journalist's Guide to Using Zoom for Community Engagement](#) and [The Texas Tribune's Revenue Lab](#) provide detailed advice on how to get the most out of a virtual event for your organization.

**Sell branded swag.** Put your news outlet's logo on shirts, hoodies, hats, phone covers, water bottles and more. Swag can be sold to raise money, but can also be used to thank donors or members. One easy way to sell products without the hassle is to use a third-party company so you don't have to fuss with production, inventory and shipping (nor do you have to pay up-front costs.)

“This may seem indirectly related to financial sustainability, but I think adopting deep collaborative relationships (and a collaborative culture more broadly) is crucial for any community-based news organization, not least because it helps to maximize an organization’s resources and impact. This includes collaborating & building strong relationships with other local media outlets, but also with local civic groups more broadly (i.e., can you partner in some way with local libraries, or with nonprofits serving specific communities in your area?)”

## GONZALO DEL PEON

The American Journalism Project

**Create strategic partnerships.** Pursue partnerships with a local legacy news outlet, public radio/television, or an upstart online news organization which will pay your organization for your collaboration (this could also include special services like graphic design, outlined below). You may be able to pursue joint grants from foundations to cover specific topics or underrepresented communities. Explore possibilities like sharing revenue from joint online (and some day, in-person) events. Here’s a list of 250-plus outlets that comprise the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#).

**Print government-mandated public notices.** *The Daily Californian* at the University of California, Berkeley, still puts out a print edition once a week to carry government legal ads. The independent *Daily* is the news publication of record not just for the campus, but for the city as well.

**Publish special sections that can drive unique advertising and sponsorship opportunities.** Publish special sections (in print or online) related to topics that your audience is interested in and can draw sponsors, partners and ads. Topics in the news (e.g., race and representation on campus, the impact of budget cuts, or the job market for recent grads) or high profile campus events (e.g., sports championships, graduation, historic anniversaries) are a good start. Selling commemorative keepsake editions for events like graduation and sports championships can also be good revenue generators.

- **Collaborate with other college news outlets - especially on game day!** Partnering with your rival school to put out a special edition for game day can be lucrative for you both. In 2019, *The Daily Texan* and *The OU Daily* jointly marked the 115th Red River showdown between rival football teams with a [commemorative edition](#).

*“College news outlets need to devote more attention to video, podcasts, mobile distribution, etc. There are resources on university campuses to support this diversification. There is a romantic notion that it only matters if it is confident prose – a bias I share, by the way – but alternate formats will attract a wider audience.”*

**DIANE H. MCFARLIN**

Dean, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida

**Create revenue-generating creative services initiatives using your in-house skills.** In recent years, several prominent college news organizations have developed new income streams by growing full service creative services agencies that cater to local businesses. These include web development, livestream production, graphic design, [photo](#) and video production services, social media marketing and copywriting. They are staffed by marketing, strategic communications, advertising and business students affiliated with the news outlet, leveraging the talents of media-oriented students who are on staff, but who bring additional skills to their work. A few examples include:

- [1893 Brand Studio](#), part of DTH Media Corp. (*The Daily Tar Heel* at the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill).

- [Prospect and Price Creative](#), West Virginia University Student Media, Morgantown
- [The Story Studio](#), *Iowa State Daily*, Ames

**Sell advertising space around campus on newsracks, campus busses and freestanding kiosks.** Negotiate with the university to ensure that you can sell advertising on your newsracks – but also see if they will allow you to support your budget by selling ads on buses or poster kiosks.

“We have a student-run newspaper, TV station, radio station, yearbook and humor magazine, so the [ad reps are leveraging exposure on all these outlets](#) when they talk with potential advertisers. We also took over the running of a grad fair, the freshmen orientation and a Marketplace event on the main mall, which allows outside vendors, such as area apartment complexes, Lyft, Yerba Mate, etc., on campus and to interact with the students. All these events are additional sources of revenue for us because they are involved selling ads in each special section and booth space at the actual events (except the freshmen orientations, but the advertisers get to include their trinkets in the swag bags we hand out to the freshmen.) We also started a creative service for campus partners so they can hire our design, photography, illustration, production and copy students to create content for them (the students who work these jobs are paid by the client, so they earn money and experience doing this work.) We have a video service that staffs the cameras for athletic events and to create high-end videos. We have a magazine that targets just faculty and staff at the university.”

**PETER CHEN**

Student Media Adviser  
University of Texas at Austin

## FUNDRAISING

There are a number of effective ways to fundraise for your news outlet, but you need to invest in people who will cultivate relationships, organize the infrastructure and plan events and campaigns. It is completely do-able, but you need to make it a priority and have staff focused on it. Don't be scared of fundraising - it can be fun.

**Hire a fundraising team and create the infrastructure to make the efforts worth it.** Having a dedicated team (even one or two people) will help you be able to organize, cultivate, and communicate with donors over time. This is different than an advertising or business development team. Similar to memberships, donations need to be tracked and donors need to be communicated with and reminded to give. There are a variety of ways to do that, which we outline below.

**Be sure you have the right structure through which you can accept donations.** Just because you have a "donate now" button on your website does not mean that you can accept donations legally. Does your organization have a bank account? Are you pushing donations through a third-party processing or crowdfunding system? Are you an independent 501c(3)? Do you (or can you) work directly with the university's fundraising system? If you do, is the university taking a "cut" of

each donation or does the entire gift go to your news outlet? Do you have an external fiscal sponsor? If you are working with the university's development office, be aware that university overhead can be extremely high (sometimes up to 40% of each donation) and that the university may approach "your" donors for other university causes. Your arrangements need to be negotiated carefully - with a written agreement emerging at the end.

**Pull together a committee to help.** Fundraising often works best when people reach out to their friends and contacts to ask for funds. Develop a committee of committed alumni, parents, or other friends of the news outlet to help. Be candid about the need for donations and spell out how they can help.

*"Advisers and staffs can't wait for anyone to rescue them."*

### JUDY HOUSE MENEZES

Immediate past president, Journalism Association of Community Colleges  
Adviser to *The Campus*, College of the Sequoias, Visalia, Calif.

**Create a fundraising calendar and know who you are going to reach out to, when, and why.** Remember, the biggest reason why people do not donate to causes is because they are not asked. You may want to use several fundraising strategies to ask people throughout the year:

- **Direct appeal (several times per year, hooked to specific events/dates).** This might be a direct email or hard copy mailing to supporters/members who can donate to the organization. Linking the direct appeal to certain dates (the anniversary of the news outlet’s founding, end of year tax season, Student Press Freedom Day) can help in your messaging. Quantifying levels of giving (\$100 pays for X, \$1,000 pays for Y) helps people to imagine where their funding is going.
- **Create a crowd-funding campaign to raise funds for a specific purpose or short, time-bound campaigns.** Crowdfunding works best when you are able to create a “viral ask” which gets sent around to large numbers of people who will donate small amounts. It also works well when it is to support a particular need or is a time-bound campaign. The Local News Lab has produced a [Crowdfunding Guide](#). Third-party crowdfunding websites like GoFundMe are for-profit companies that take a fee per donation. These platforms can be helpful to reach a specific, one-time, time-sensitive fundraising goal, but may not be the best option for cultivating the long-term donor support your news outlet will need. A major downside of some third-party websites (particularly Facebook fundraisers) is that you do not receive the email or addresses of donors. This is precisely the kind of information you need to cultivate long-term donor relationships.
- **Write proposals and seek foundation grants.** Do your research and find out if there are local, state or national philanthropies who may be interested in supporting your work. Call them and discuss your work with a program officer. Approach your [local or regional community foundation](#) to solicit donations for your news outlet. The [Foundation Center](#) is a great resource for identifying potential institutional donors.
- **Hold fundraising events like silent auctions or raffles, film screenings or other activities.** Fundraising events are a lot of work, but can also serve the dual purpose of raising money and recruiting readership. A key way to look at earning money from a fundraising event is to recruit sponsors (large funders who will commit significant gifts to underwrite the event and who will then be prominently featured and thanked for their support.)
- **Create an endowment for your news outlet.** Work with the university and major donors to create an endowment to secure the future of your news outlet. It’s not impossible. Endowments can be structured in a number of ways. They

can spin off operating support, endow the salary of an adviser, pay for student stipends or all of the above. The stated purposes of the endowment must be put in writing and there must also be an agreement with the university (if they manage the endowment) about the terms of use and any fees the university would take from it.

**Create memberships.** Memberships require more cultivation and intentionality than subscribers (who simply pay to access your content) or a straight fundraising drive. But memberships have the possibility of generating higher revenue through donation drives and periodic fundraising appeals. Also, you can create different membership levels to generate more revenue than flat price subscriptions. Jay Rosen at New York University launched [The Membership Puzzle Project](#), to provide tools and tactics. Memberships require ongoing maintenance and administration, so you need to have a team in place to manage it, but it can have great returns.

- **Create premium content for members.** This might include podcasts, special video-based discussions with experts, or specific types of stories that only members can access. Consider topics that resonate with your peers like “in the news” topics, or career-oriented tips (like how to build an online portfolio/resume/LinkedIn page),

or host an introduction to personal finance. This may be different from revenue-generating stand-alone fundraising events as described above.

- **Make sure you have the infrastructure to track membership.** Just as with traditional fundraising, cultivation and consistency is the key with maintaining and growing memberships. You need to know who is a member, when they are due to renew, what level they have donated at, and if you get really tricky, you can identify their interests by tracking how they engage with your events (and even what they read on your site). This story explains [membership benchmarking](#).

**Learn from local news initiatives.** It’s crucial to expand your horizons via organizations that have sprung up in recent years to help both nonprofit and for-profit online/digital local news outlets. There are many [interesting models](#) to look to for ideas. [See this list](#) of additional readings, resources and organizations that study the sustainability of digital/online news outlets.

# A Checklist of Key Questions:

- **What kind of publication does your audience want and need ?**
- **Online-only? Print sometimes? Special/commemorative editions?**
- **What are the pros and cons of each? For staff? Financially?**
- **What is your realistic anticipated income for this academic year and the next?**
- **How will you preserve/protect that income?**
- **How will you grow that income? (new advertising, reader support and donation models, special editions, revenue-generating special events, membership, fundraising campaigns, partnerships, “in-house” fee-for-service initiatives)**
- **How will you use that income? (reinvent the budget to invest in reorganization)**
- **How will you plan, reorganize, prepare and train your staff for the academic year ahead?**
- **What do you need to learn and how will you incorporate it?**
- **How do you create buy-in from the university and partnerships with key stakeholders?**
- **How will you evaluate and document what works – and what doesn’t so that you can pass it on to future leaders?**

## EVALUATE AND SHARE LEARNING

### **How will you evaluate your initiatives?**

Be sure to chronicle both success and failure. You need to be sure that next year's leadership and staff can build on your learning. Realize that not everything will immediately resonate, and build in opportunities to fine tune. And, if a project is just not working, let it go and try something else.

**Share what you've learned.** It's also important to share what you've learned with your counterparts at other student news organizations. Do so through state and national organizations focused on student media.

**Keep learning.** It's crucial to expand your horizons and to follow the work of organizations that help facilitate, study and track the financial paths of online/digital local news outlets. Many smart people are thinking about income generation and financial sustainability. [Learn from them.](#)

## CONCLUSION

Be aware of your own capacity. This report is filled with a lot of ideas compiled from many experts. As you consider taking these ideas and running with them, there is a temptation to think that more is better. Often, it's not. Determining which

of these ideas you have the bandwidth and passion for is key. If your staff seems really excited about one of these ideas, even if it's not the biggest potential revenue generator, it might be a better option than a project that no one on staff is going to put a lot of energy into. Know your team, know your capacity and focus on building your efforts strategically.

While huge sums of money are being poured into efforts to stabilize and grow local news outlets, little is available to student journalists. Still, there is much to be learned, translated and applied to college media. Take from this report the things that might work for your circumstances and structure. Hold on to journalism's best practices and ethics, and take bold steps to keep your news outlet financially afloat. This is a moment that demands innovation and requires imagination.

As Chuck Clark, director of student publications at Western Kentucky University said when asked about his best advice for economic sustainability for college media, "[Great ideas can come from unexpected places. Be open to ideas from everyone and everywhere.](#)"

## REPORT RESPONDENTS

The Student Press Law Center extends its gratitude to those who provided input through interviews and/or SPLC's Survey on Sustainable Economic Models for College News Media.

**Tami Bongiorno**, past president, College Newspaper Business and Advertising Managers (CMBAM); former VP Elect Western Association of University Publication Managers (WAUPM); and former assistant director, Kent State Student Media

**LaSharah Bunting**, director/journalism, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Peter Chen**, adviser, Texas Student Media

**Chuck Clark**, director, Western Kentucky University Student Publications

**Lucy Dalglish**, dean, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland

**Gonzalo del Peon**, associate, American Journalism Project

**Lydia Gerike**, spring 2020 editor-in-chief, *Indiana Daily Student*

**Kenna Griffin**, president, College Media Association

**Ken Herts**, chief operating officer and director of operations, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

**Mandy Jenkins**, general manager, The Compass Experiment, McClatchy and Google

**Michael Koretzky**, region 3 coordinator, Society of Professional Journalists

**Chris Krewson**, executive director, LION Publishers (Local Independent Online News)

**Alex Kronman**, CEO & founder, flytedesk

**Frank D. LoMonte**, director, Brechner Center for Freedom of Information

**Diane McFarlin**, dean, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida

**Judy House Menezes**, immediate past president, Journalism Association of Community Colleges, adviser, *The Campus*, College of the Sequoias

**Mi-Ai Parrish**, Sue Clark-Johnson Professor in Media Innovation and Leadership, Arizona State University, Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication

**David Perlmutter**, president, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication; professor and dean, College and Media & Communications, Texas Tech University

**Charlie Weaver**, general manager & co-publisher, *Minnesota Daily*; president, College Newspaper Business and Advertising Managers

**Laura Widmer**, executive director, Associated Collegiate Press

**Jed Williams**, chief strategy officer, Local News Association; board member, DTH Media Corp (*The Daily Tar Heel* at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

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# About the Student Press Law Center

Since 1974, the Student Press Law Center has worked to support, promote and defend the First Amendment rights of student journalists and their advisers at the high school and college level.

SPLC works at the intersection of law, journalism and education to ensure that student journalists can publish freely, without censorship or prior review, in an open marketplace of ideas which promotes a true culture of transparency, accountability and critical thinking. Each year, SPLC fields inquiries from more than 2000 students and advisers on its [free legal hotline](#). SPLC reaches thousands of students through its [Virtual Speakers Bureau](#) and training workshops, and provides a wide variety of [online teaching](#) and [training resources](#) for student journalists and advisers. SPLC also provides guidance on reporting on emerging and current events, like the [Coronavirus Toolkit](#) or assistance in [reporting on protests](#). SPLC also engages in programmatic initiatives to promote [New Voices](#) student press protections, to celebrate the contributions of student journalists through [Student Press Freedom Day](#), and to help stabilize the financial posture of college student news outlets and [high school journalism programs](#). Based in Washington, DC, SPLC is an independent, staunchly non-partisan 501c(3).

Learn more about the Student Press Law Center at [SPLC.org](https://www.splc.org)

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Student Press Law Center  
1608 Rhode Island Ave, NW #211  
Washington, DC 20036