

Expert Report Syndicate 4: Reimagining journalism education: The role of university-led student reporting programs

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Data published by the Center for Community News (CCN) at the University of Vermont shows on May 15, 2025, shows that 172 higher-education institutions across the U.S. facilitate more than 200 news-academic partnerships. Those partnerships are defined as “college- or university-led student reporting programs where faculty/staff review and edit student content before it is shared with media partners or directly distributed to the public. In programs where the content is shared with media partners, there is active coordination between the institution and the outlet.”

Usually, student reporters engage in this work through credit-bearing courses or structured internships integrated into academic programs. Unlike traditional extracurricular internships or student-run media, these opportunities are guided by faculty members who not only assign and edit student work but also coordinate with partner news outlets. Such institutionalized reporting programs offer more equitable access for students and ensure a steady, reliable stream of local reporting for the communities they serve. The CCN study highlights the pivotal role faculty and staff play in the success of student reporting programs. Regardless of a program's size, faculty and staff consistently dedicate their time and expertise to bridging community information needs with the talents of student journalists, helping to build a more connected and responsive local news ecosystem. These faculty leaders draw on their extensive professional backgrounds to mentor students and provide them with meaningful, real-world experience.

Partnerships between universities and local news outlets create mutually beneficial opportunities: Students gain hands-on experiential learning, while local newsrooms receive much-needed content to inform local communities. As digital disruption and evolving business models reshape the media landscape, these opportunities help outlets stay active and fulfill their role in informing communities. The shrinking journalism industry has

deterred many students from pursuing careers in the field, leading to declining enrollment in journalism programs. To counter this trend, universities must adopt strategic approaches that both attract students and prepare them for the evolving media landscape.

Editors at news outlets often voice concerns that aspiring journalists lack practical, real-world reporting experience. University-led student reporting programs offer a valuable solution to this issue. By engaging in local coverage and reporting on community stories, students gain those skills. Simultaneously, their contributions help address the growing problem of news deserts by ensuring that communities continue to have access to reliable, locally relevant information.

CCN advocates for updated more practice-based curricula oriented toward ample fieldwork. Student reporting can play a vital role in keeping the public informed about key local issues — such as city hall meetings, school board decisions, legislative developments and local business affairs. However, for these programs to succeed, faculty members must also receive strong institutional support from their administrations.

Through this syndicate discussion, we aim to explore key challenges facing journalism education today, including declining enrollment, curriculum development, the role of student reporting programs in supporting local news outlets and the institutional support faculty need to sustain these initiatives. In the face of growing news deserts, the spread of misinformation and disinformation and the dominance of social media, it is crucial for students to develop both strong media literacy and real-world journalism experience. We believe this conversation will offer valuable insights for universities and colleges around the world seeking to revitalize their journalism programs. While a solid foundation in journalism theory is essential, students also need practical experience — and even better if it serves the information needs of their local communities. In doing so, universities can play a dual role: enhancing student education while strengthening access to reliable, trustworthy local news.

The **central question** the members of this syndicate will discuss and answer is: ***“What challenges do journalism educators face in implementing student reporting programs?”***