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# FREEDOM IN COLLEGE NEWSROOMS

**An Assessment of Financial and Editorial  
Independence in College Newsrooms**



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# Executive Summary

Independence in college media is essential to ensure good accountability reporting can be done by journalists who are hyperfocused on the ongoings of major educational institutions in the United States. However, their ability to maintain autonomy is constantly being threatened.

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Collegiate student-run publications are under threat in the United States from a lack of independence. College media outlets are an important part of the journalism landscape, as they serve not only the campus communities that get news from the publications, but also the industry as training facilities for journalists headed into professional careers.

In the past decade and during the Covid-19 pandemic, college-based, student-run media outlets have served as stopgaps in communities where the local daily has cut back or halted production entirely, and they have provided reporting when reporters couldn't gain access to institutions. However, just as the commercial, local news industry has experienced issues of ownership consolidation and financial instability in recent years, so has the college media industry.

This report summarizes three years of research done at the University of Florida's Brechner Freedom of Information Project to find an answer to our big question: **How can college media outlet independence remain stable amid financial instability?**

## Scope

To answer this question, we conducted a study of all student-run "papers of record" at universities of 5,000 or more enrollment in the United States. Out of our initial list of 655 institutions that fit this category from the National Center for Education Statistics, the ultimate number of student news organizations analyzed for this report included 512 outlets throughout the country.

# Key Findings

Our findings reveal some important trends in college media that could help the industry find a sustainable way to keep students active and vigilant in their fight for autonomy and freedom.

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## Financial Support

**Most (at least 56.1%) student news outlets get some sort of direct or allocated funding from their associated university or college.**

Financial ties to the institution can be problematic for student journalists for several reasons. Students who challenge the wrong person in administration are vulnerable to lose funding for their student press if there aren't several safety guards in place. This number does not include other forms of support such as pay for a faculty or staff adviser, facilities and space, or equipment and software support.

## Faculty and University Staff Support

**Most (58.8%) outlets are advised by a university-paid faculty or staff member.**

Advisers are helpful to students because they often bring experience and knowledge to a newsroom of young professionals; however, university-paid employees are often held accountable for the actions of their students, and can influence the choices students make regarding their story choices and publication decisions. Some have advisers or professional staff who are paid by the publication and others do not have advisers at all. **A total of 179 outlets (35%) were verified to have a faculty/staff adviser and receive direct or indirect funding allocations from the university.**

## Financial Dependence on Institutions

Survey data and interviews with student news outlets found that immediately after schools reopened from the Covid-19 shutdowns, university allocations made up a slightly larger portion of student media budgets than before the pandemic. **While advertising revenue declined an average of 8.5% among survey respondents, the average revenue provided by direct university funds and indirect university allocations both increased.** Findings showed a direct correlation between declines in advertising and increases in university funding, both direct and indirect (through student fee allocations).

## 501(c)(3) Status

**Only 52 outlets (10.16% of the total) were classified as 501(c)(3).** The structure of a non-profit organization should protect student journalists from many of the threats seen in other structures, but this structure is generally reserved for the elite and powerful. Out of the 52 outlets, 19 were at private universities, including all Ivy League schools. Thirty-six outlets were at schools with 20,000 or more in student enrollment.

## New Voices Legislation

Given the most common financial and editorial structures in these student media outlets, the **New Voices model legislation is imperative for protecting faculty/staff advisers and college journalists from retaliation.** Findings indicate that the legislation would be stronger if it could give outlets a more solid foundation of financial autonomy.

# Introduction

Student publications play a vital role in disseminating information on college campuses. Beyond writing stories detailing campus events, student journalists hold university administrators accountable and inform the larger campus and geographic community about relevant events. In recent years, we have seen student publications break major stories exposing wrongdoing by university administrators and hold their fellow students accountable for questionable decisions.

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The role of student media is especially important as increasing numbers of local news outlets are shutting their doors for good. The spread of “news deserts” with little or no media outlets to cover local events has thrust student media in some communities into an even greater role as the sole source of information about what is happening within college campuses but also in the surrounding areas.

The work of student publications is indispensable for producing quality journalism on campus and surrounding communities. In response to the perceived threats of having inappropriate acts exposed, some university administrators and others in power have attempted to limit the publishing of controversial stories that may reflect negatively on their person or the university.

In other instances, when universities attempt to censor content they regard as “controversial,” and the newspaper continues to publish the content, some university officials have resorted to reducing or outright eliminating the newspaper’s school funding in order to suppress speech that does not portray the university in a positive light or speech that the university simply does not agree with.

In response to efforts to censor or limit funding, many school publications have cut ties with school administration and function as independent publications. These publications receive no university or state funding.

To survive, some are registered nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations and some are non-501(c)(3) groups that rely on various types of income to stay afloat. In other instances, some student publications consider themselves “editorially independent” and are not subject to official censorship by school officials, but may still be fully or partially funded by the university in some manner.

**There is a wide variety in the editorial and financial makeup of student publications, each tailored to the newspaper’s unique resources and capabilities.**

In some cases, student newsrooms facing financial difficulties must rely on university funding to remain active, and this poses the potential for university interference in publication decisions. For student publications to serve as information hubs for their community and publish investigatory pieces, they must be autonomous and free from university-initiated censorship.

To achieve this goal, many publications do not just have to be editorially independent, but financially independent as well. Becoming fully financially independent is no easy feat, and many publications struggle to remain active when funding disappears. This leaves student newsrooms in a predicament of balancing their integral mission of providing their community with uncensored reporting while facing potential financial concerns that could lead to the elimination of the publication.

This paper outlines the array of independence levels of student publications and the general trends in financial and editorial structures of student newsrooms. Additionally, this report analyzes the balance between student journalists' freedom to report issues of public importance and the newspaper's financial resources.

## About this Report

This study is based on data and insights from 512 student news organizations. **A map and full list of these outlets are available online at [campusmap.splc.org](https://campusmap.splc.org).** While researchers did their best to identify all outlets at colleges and universities of 5,000 and more student enrolment in the United States, there might be more. Additionally, schools of less than 5,000 students represent an important aspect of the student journalism industry that was out of the scope of the current study.

Our initial list of 655 institutions that fit this category from the National Center for Education Statistics was whittled down to 525 schools with active outlets in 2021, verified by a team of student researchers at the Brechner Freedom of Information Project. Between the beginning and end of this research, at least 13 outlets have halted production. The themes and trends identified in this report are the results of data collected through observation research, surveys of 126 outlets and interviews with a sample of the 512 outlets identified.

### This report is divided into four main sections:

Part 1: The state of student media and their independence

Part 2: Trends in financial and editorial structures of student newsrooms

Part 3: The subtle effects of New Voices legislation

Part 4: Recommendations for the future of student journalism

# Defining and Determining Student Media Independence

Students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”

**JUSTICE ABE FORTAS,  
TINKER V. DES MOINES (1969)**

Historically, college media have been regarded as generally distinct from scholastic journalism in the K-12 system. While collegiate journalists produce news that is indistinguishable from professional work, they are also not recognized in the courts as equivalent to professional, commercial media. Instead, these outlets sit somewhere in the middle, where they are deemed independent but also educational.

To determine independence in these settings, scholars have identified several key characteristics that can indicate the amount of control a university could, if prompted, exert over the student publication. Louis Ingelhart in his 1993 book, “Student Publications: Legalities, Governance and Operation,” described 26 items that could be used to measure the amount of independence a student outlet had. These items, as John Bodle describes, can be broken into three categories: financial independence, editorial independence, and structural independence. Using some of these measures, as well as some that are updated for modernity, this study aimed to determine independence on the measures described in Table 1.

**Table 1. Measures of College Media Independence**

Financial Characteristics	Editorial Characteristics	Structural Characteristics
The outlet does not receive student fee funds.	No faculty member or university-paid staff member works with the publication.	The outlet does not use on-campus facilities or space.
The outlet does not receive direct university allocations.	Only students work for the publication.	The university does not supply technical equipment or support.
The university is not liable for the outlet’s debts.	Students are not mandated by the university to meet a GPA requirement to work at the outlet.	The university’s legal counsel cannot represent the outlet in a legal proceeding.
Student leaders make financial decisions.	Students do not receive grades to work for the outlet.	Faculty/staff do not select the outlet leadership.
	The content is not required to be university-related.	Faculty/staff cannot influence or interfere with production.

“Being independent from the university means that, inside the boundaries of media law, we can publish anything we want without facing censorship or prior restraint from university administration. As long as we are holding up journalistic integrity, we have no responsibility to answer to UW and we have the freedom to set our own editorial agenda. This gives us a better opportunity to hold UW accountable to the student community.”

**CELIA HIORNS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE BADGER HERALD  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN- MADISON**

In addition to the standards listed in Table 1, as they are measured in a scholarly setting, the courts have also set up tests to determine whether students' publications should be treated as professional outlets or as pedagogical tools. Even before *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the judicial system in the United States had set up a structure for students to exercise their right to freely express themselves. The *Tinker* case is regarded as one of the first decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court to set up this freedom in common law. In this case, three students wore black armbands to school to protest the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The court ruled in that case that students held a right to express themselves as long as they did not cause a disruption to the educational mission of the institution.

In 1988, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* etched away some of this right to expression by adding that schools had the right to disassociate from student speech. For student publications, this meant that the school could argue that its stakeholders (parents and community members, for instance) might mistake what was written in the student newspaper as the voice of the school, not just the students. The *Hazelwood* court set up a hierarchy of student outlet independence in which “public forums” could not be regulated either in practice or in policy. What defines a “public forum” then becomes imperative to determine whether an outlet can be regulated by a public institution. While the *Hazelwood* framework was specifically meant for K-12 settings, it has been successfully argued at the college level as well.

Given this context and background, the current study aimed to define how college media outlets were independent in practice. Most of these outlets call themselves “independent” in some way, either in their name, their motto or their “About Us” pages; but according to the standards of academic and court-based practices, very few are wholly untied to their associated institution.

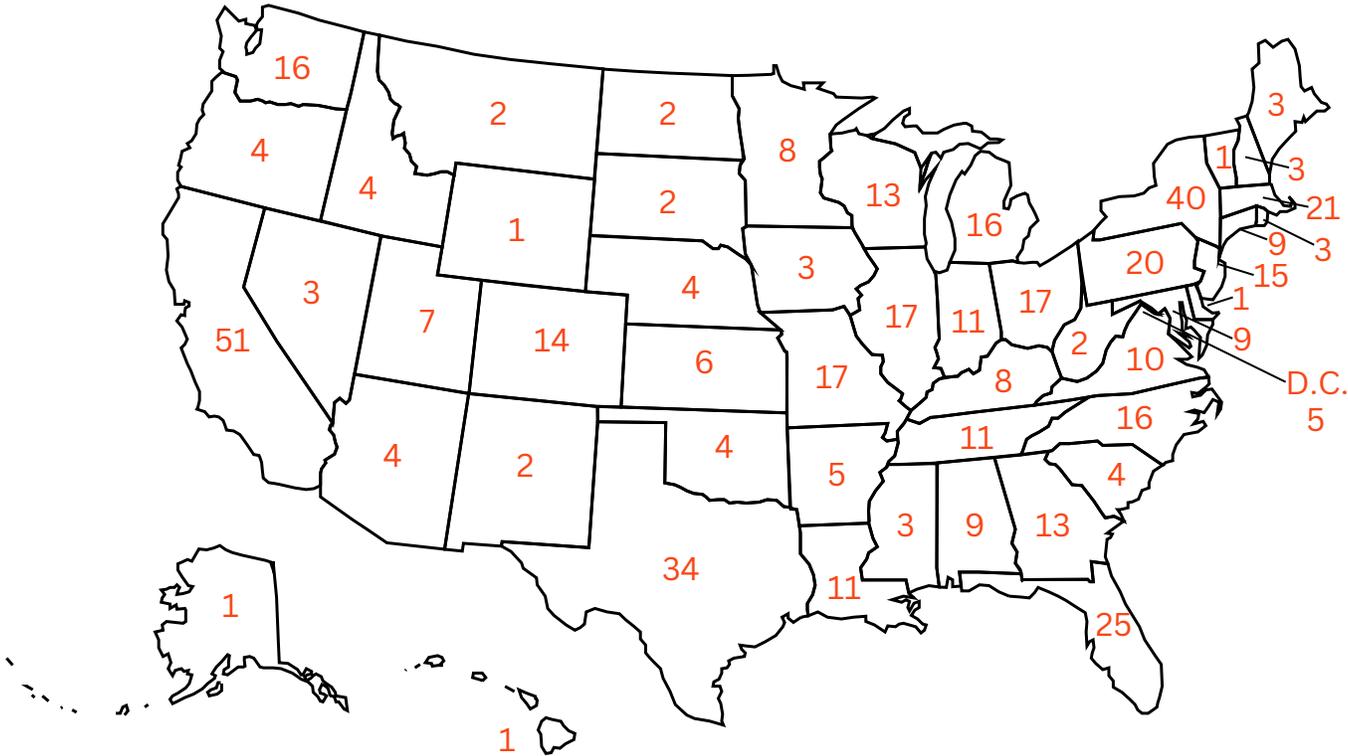
# Trends in financial and editorial structures of college newsrooms

## Methodology

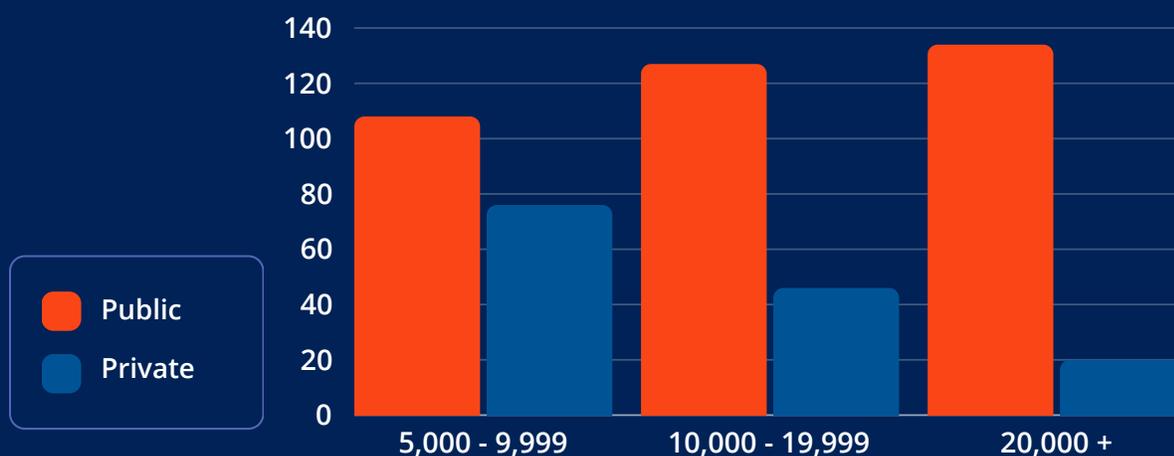
To identify the outlets analyzed in this study, researchers at the Brechner Center’s Freedom of Information Project used a list of all public and non-profit private colleges and universities in the United States with 5,000 or more students enrolled. This list of 655 institutions was filtered to 525 with identifiable “papers of record.” These outlets primarily published text-based news in print or online format. While there are several award-winning broadcast news outlets run by college students, this report focuses on newspapers and news websites. From the time this was completed in 2021 to the culmination of this report, 13 student news outlets in the original set were found to have halted production. **The final count of outlets in this study was 512.**

In 2021, the Brechner Center distributed a survey of the original 525 and got responses from 126 outlets at that time. In addition, researchers conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with outlets to better understand the findings from the survey. The results of this research are described in a 2023 article in the Newspaper Research Journal. In 2023, researchers pursued the mission to identify the financial and editorial structures of the full set of news outlets, which culminated in this report and in [an interactive map on the Student Press Law Center website](#).

Figure 1. Number of outlets analyzed by state.



## Public/private status and size of schools included in the data



### School enrollment and public/private status

Out of 512 schools, 142 (27%) were private, not-for-profit higher education institutions. Private schools often are not required to uphold the same standards of student journalist autonomy as public institutions. Some states, such as Rhode Island, have protections for student journalists at private schools. Findings suggest size of the institution also matters for student independence.

## Financial Independence

The ultimate goal of the final phase of data collection was to identify threats to student media independence in the financial and editorial structures most common on United States campuses.

With the main goal of threat identification in mind, outlets were first classified as having a 501(c)(3) status. To be classified as 501(c)(3) status, researchers located the 990 forms from the Internal Revenue Service for the outlet. Researchers then sought to identify the people listed as responsible for the non-profit to determine whether it was financially tied to the institution.

While some of the advisory boards had members of the faculty or staff of the universities on them, most were made up of a variety of professionals including alumni, community members and students. For example, Boston University's *The Daily Free Press* has a list of its Board of Directors [on its website](#) and specifically states that the board is comprised of former editors of the publication and is responsible for oversight of the outlet. However, despite holding 501(c)(3) status, some outlets do still get some funding from the university in some capacity. For example, *The Independent Florida Alligator* at the University of Florida [received two payments](#) of \$100,000 from the College of Journalism and Communications for the purpose of supporting the outlet in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 fiscal years. Since then the outlet has received some form of funding every fiscal year, but not at the same level. While the current structure does not explicitly affect the way the students report or select their news and the alumni association for the publication is fervently against any interference from administrators, the future of this funding is vulnerable to conflicts about coverage.

**Out of 512 outlets, 52 were classified as self-sustaining 501(c)(3) organizations.** A list of the 52 outlets, their schools and the names of the non-profits are on in Table 2 on pages 12-15.

## Table 2. College Media Outlets with 501(c)(3) status

Student Outlet	School Name	501(c)(3)
The Heights	Boston College	The Heights Inc
The Daily Free Press	Boston University	Back Bay Publishing Company Inc.
The Brown Daily Herald	Brown University	The Brown Daily Herald
The Banner	College of Staten Island CUNY	College of Staten Island Association, Inc.
Rocky Mountain Collegian	Colorado State University-Fort Collins	Rocky Mountain Student Media Corporation
Columbia Daily Spectator	Columbia University in the City of New York	Spectator Publishing Company, Inc.
The Cornell Daily Sun	Cornell University	Cornell Daily Sun Alumni Association Inc.
The Dartmouth	Dartmouth College	The Dartmouth Inc.
Duke Chronicle	Duke University	Duke Student Publishing Company, Inc.
The Fairfield Mirror	Fairfield University	Valley Publishing Company Inc.
FSView & Florida Flambeau	Florida State University	Gannett Co. Inc.
The GW Hatchet	George Washington University	Hatchet Publications Inc
The Harvard Crimson	Harvard University	The Harvard Crimson Inc
Iowa State Daily	Iowa State University	Iowa State Daily Publication

**Table 2. College Media Outlets with 501(c)(3) status continued**

Student Outlet	School Name	501(c)(3)
Collegian	Kansas State University	Student Publications, Inc. D/B/A Collegian Media Group
The State News	Michigan State University	State News
The Spectrum	North Dakota State University-Main Campus	The Spectrum Student Periodical, Inc.
The Huntington News	Northeastern University	World Series Way Publishing Co., Inc.
The Daily Northwestern	Northwestern University	Students Publishing Company (SPC)
The Oakland Post	Oakland University	Oakland Sail, Inc.
The Daily Princetonian	Princeton University	The Daily Princetonian Publishing Co.
The Exponent	Purdue University-Main Campus	Purdue Student Publishing Foundation
The Daily Targum	Rutgers University-Camden	Targum Publishing Co
Stanford Daily	Stanford University	The Stanford Daily Publishing Corp.
The Statesman	Stony Brook University	Statesman Association Inc.
The Daily Orange	Syracuse University	The Daily Orange Corporation
The Paisano	The University of Texas at San Antonio	The Paisano Educational Trust
The Towerlight	Towson University	Baltimore Student Media Inc.
The Spectrum	University at Buffalo	The Spectrum Student Periodical Inc.

**Table 2. College Media Outlets with 501(c)(3) status continued**

Student Outlet	School Name	501(c)(3)
The Daily Bruin	University of California- Los Angeles	Associated Students UCLA
Knight News	University of Central Florida	Knight News Inc.
The Independent Florida Alligator	University of Florida	Campus Communications Inc D/B/A The Independent Florida Alligator
The Red & Black	University of Georgia	Red & Black Publishing Company Inc.
The Daily Illini	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	Illini Media Company
The Daily Iowan	University of Iowa	Student Publications Incorporated
Kentucky Kernel	University of Kentucky	Kernel Press Inc
The Diamondback	University of Maryland-College Park	Maryland Media Inc.
Massachusetts Daily Collegian	University of Massachusetts-Amherst	Collegian Inc.
The Minnesota Daily	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	The Minnesota Daily
The Daily Nebraskan	University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Daily Nebraskan
The Daily Tar Heel	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Dth Publishing Corporation

**Table 2. College Media Outlets with 501(c)(3) status continued**

Student Outlet	School Name	501(c)(3)
The Mirror	University of Northern Colorado	Student Media Corporation
The Daily Emerald	University of Oregon	Emerald Media Group Inc.
Daily Pennsylvanian	University of Pennsylvania	The Daily Pennsylvanian Inc.
Cavalier Daily	University of Virginia-Main Campus	The Cavalier Daily
Badger Herald	University of Wisconsin-Madison	The Badger Herald Inc.
The Vanderbilt Hustler	Vanderbilt University	Vanderbilt Student Communications Inc.
Collegiate Times	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	Educational Media Company at Virginia Tech Inc.
Student Life	Washington University in St Louis	Washington University Student Media, Inc.
Yale Daily News	Yale University	Yale Daily News Publishing Co Inc

## Institutional Funding

**Out of 362 outlets in the study whose funding structures could be verified, 203 (56.1%) were allocated funds through student activity fees or something similar.**

Generally, student activity fees account for only one of several sources of revenue for college news outlets. However, survey data and interviews with student outlets revealed that these funds accounted for a slightly larger portion of student media budgets than they did prior to the pandemic.

As compared to other forms of institutional funding (such as direct allocations or classroom fees), student activity fees are usually divided by a board or the student governing body. Problematically, this opens student media outlets to the possibility of losing their allocations if the student government members or administrators do not like the coverage they get from the outlets.

In fact, several outlets in the country have reported instances in which this exact scenario has happened. For example, Wesleyan University's student government voted to cut

\$17,000 in funding for its student paper, The Argus, after it published a column critical of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2015.

In 2018, Wichita State University cut the budget of its student newspaper, *The Sunflower*, after reporters published several articles critical of university administration. In 2019, Florida Atlantic University's *University Press* reported that its budget was cut significantly immediately after it covered controversies in the student government. In 2020, Florida International University's *PantherNOW* reported that the student government cut the budget of the student media in favor of increasing Greek life funds.

**Another 52 news outlets received other forms of funding from their institutions including direct allocations from the school administration or classroom fees applied to the newspaper through class instruction.**

While many outlets also have at least some advertising revenue, donations, grants, or other forms of funding, school-tied money often helps keep these outlets afloat.

“All editorial decisions are independent (what to cover, how to cover, who to talk to, how to structure your staff), but the hiring of staff, providing of space and services, fundraising, etc. is university-driven.”

**ABIGAIL RAMSEY,  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
THE DAILY BEACON,  
THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE- KNOXVILLE**



*Editorial board of The Daily Beacon, Spring 2024. Photo courtesy of Abigail Ramsey*

## Financially Independent Outlets Without 501(c)(3) Status

A final category of news outlets are those that are not 501(c)(3) status but also do not receive funding from their associated college or university. Some outlets are not, themselves, 501(c)(3) properties but are supported by non-profit entities. For example, *The Daily Texan* at the University of Texas at Austin is supported by the *Friends of The Daily Texan*, which helps fundraise for scholarships and other support for the news outlet. Others, such as *The Tech* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, are fully funded through advertising and donations.

However, these organizations are becoming less able to sustain themselves. A survey of 126 student outlets found that there were major changes in the way several outlets kept financially afloat after the pandemic.

**Advertising revenue declined an average of 8.5% among survey respondents from 2019 to 2021.** A direct correlation was found between outlets that had declines in advertising revenue and increases in funding from the university- either directly or indirectly. Outlets hit hardest by this decline had reported budgets of \$100,000 - \$499,999 a year. Meanwhile, **these groups saw the largest increase in budget shares coming from indirect university funds, such as student fees allocated by the student government association.** Outlets with budgets between \$50,000 and \$99,999 saw an average increase of more than 10% of their budgets come from direct university funding.

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## Other Forms of Institutional Support

**These statistics do not take into account other forms of support institutions provide student publications.** For example, the outlet might not receive a direct budget line or student fee allocation, but they could be housed in an academic building without rent or utility bills to pay.

The outlets might also receive technological equipment, software and support for these production tools through the school. More modern issues also include having a website hosted on a university server, access to internet services, or using email addresses designated through the university system for communication.

These “soft” benefits can also be imperative to the workflow of a student publication, and the threat of losing them could affect students’ willingness to report on controversial issues. This set-up also creates issues for students if they need access to sites or platforms deemed insecure by the institute.

For example, in *Texas* and several other states, universities have banned the use of TikTok on state-owned Wi-Fi networks and on university-owned equipment. This ban could potentially prevent a student journalist whose outlet is housed on the campus from using the platform for the purpose of journalism, constituting a threat to student expression and press freedom.

Given the wide spectrum of ways outlets fund and produce their work, the policies on the editorial side also hold a bearing on the full autonomy and independence of student journalists.

“I would classify us as independent. Right now, we receive funding from the university for basic necessities, but we would like to be financially independent one day. We have pure editorial freedom over what we write and cover as an organization and the university has no input on that aspect.”

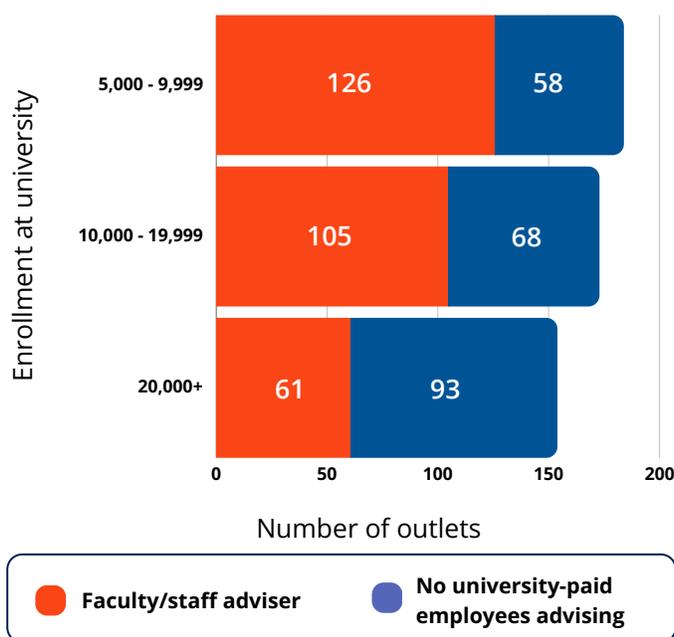
**MARIE WHITE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
EASTERN ECHO, EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY**

# Editorial Independence

When conducting reviews of student publication websites, the word “independent” is a regularly occurring theme. However, in the traditional sense of journalistic independence, student publications often cannot say they are truly untied to the institutions. Beyond financial support, students often rely on resources the university provides: a newsroom in an on-campus building, technological equipment, software, and tech support. Additionally, many newsrooms get direct access to the knowledge and support of a faculty or staff member as an adviser, or in some cases instructor, who can help with editorial questions as they arise.

## Faculty/Staff Advisers

**Out of 495 outlets verified for this study, 292 (59%) had university-paid faculty or staff who acted as advisers to the publication.** The smaller the school enrollment, the more likely this was the case.



Faculty and staff advisers are not inherently a threat to student autonomy; however, without several safeguards in place, they can have a major influence on whether student work is pursued and published without university interference. Even the most hands-off adviser serves as a contact point for faculty peers and administrators who have concerns or complaints about student-made decisions in the newsroom. These university officials are also often implicitly or explicitly threatened with career-based retaliatory actions.

For example, if a tenure-track faculty member is going up for tenure, their willingness to support school initiatives through the work of their student journalists might come up in conversations about their future at the university. There are many documented instances of faculty members being

punished for refusing to censor or halt student journalists in their work. In September 2023, a faculty adviser at a small private university in Ohio said his contract had not been renewed because he refused to censor student work.

A similar scenario occurred at Diablo Valley College in 2019, when the newspaper adviser was not rehired after a particularly contentious year for the campus. A long list of instances was named in a joint statement from the American Association of University Professors, the College Media Association, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the Student Press Law Center, in 2016.

The threat of faculty control and influence over student content is even greater in classroom-based publications (which were identified at 37 outlets, or 7.5% of the verified newsroom structures in the study). In these settings, grades can easily be tied to content decisions, and faculty are expected to guide students through the editorial process, meaning writing style, sourcing, idea generation, and other aspects of news-making are prone to faculty control.

## Advisory Boards

Student media advisory boards are becoming increasingly common for outlets, as they can often be used as a buffer between administrators and students in the newsroom. However, the structure and mission of an advisory board play a major role in determining whether the group can proactively divert any administrator or faculty interference in student news production.

Outlets with 501(c)(3) structures often rely on a Board of Directors to oversee operational and financial decisions. Advisory boards at non-501(c)(3) outlets also serve similar roles. For example, at the *Daily Trojan* at the University of Southern California, a student media board oversees the publication. The student media board includes the current editor of the *Daily Trojan*, as well as the adviser, the general manager of the radio station KXSC, the director of the Student News Service, members of the faculty and staff from the School of Journalism and the Office of Student Affairs, and the president of Student Senate. The vice president of student affairs at the University of Southern California serves as chair of the board.

Bylaws for the boards often have a statement of independence for the outlet. For instance, Kent State University's student media board administrative policy specifically states that the student media should not be censored or subject to prior review. The University of Wyoming's Student Media Board is also tasked to preserve student press freedom. These are just a couple of several examples of board structures and policies present among institutions with this structure. However, **media boards and their structures vary greatly on campuses throughout the country, and this variation makes generalizations about their ability to ensure general student independence at publications impossible.**

### Editors Chosen by Faculty

Another form of control faculty regularly exert over news outlets is the determination of who leads the student news outlet. While less overt than other forms of influence, this process of selection is vulnerable to issues of faculty will over student preferences.

## Dissemination Methods

Out of 512 schools observed, **185 outlets publish their news content primarily through an official website.** A total of **325 schools still produced a print edition** circulated on campus.

During the pandemic, university newspapers hastened long-planned transitions from printing papers to primarily publishing content on branded websites. This transition has the potential to directly impact the previous revenue streams and established level of independence, as outlined in a 2023 mixed-method study of college media outlets.

The change in revenue and advertising methods changes the financial setup at many university newspapers, as it has in professional journalism properties. According to a 2023 National Bureau of Economic Research study conducted in Norway, transitioning from print to digital publishing decreases viewership and the opportunity for advertising revenue. Overall, eliminating print editions lowers production costs, causing outlets to be less financially reliant on the associated university. **Of the 185 outlets that publish primarily on the web, 37 (20%) were considered both editorially and financially independent.**

# Implications of New Voices Legislation

The broad application of the *Hazelwood* framework changed the way courts and schools articulate student expression in both the K-12 and collegiate education systems.

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Student press rights were severely curtailed by the *Hazelwood* decision, along with several other court cases that have chipped away at the freedoms acknowledged to students in *Tinker v. Des Moines*. While the justices specifically note in the decision that *Hazelwood* was not a test of college media freedom, recent court cases have tested that exact scenario as a possibility.

Because so few cases at the Supreme Court level have taken on college media rights, courts must determine whether they will view these distinct outlets on whether they resemble scholastic journalism or professional journalism more, which can truly change the outcome of any case for a college outlet. For example, in *Hosty v. Carter* (2005), the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals determined a university-subsidized college outlet served more as an educational tool than a public news entity and applied the *Hazelwood* framework to its decision of whether administrators could censor the students' publication. On the other hand, the Sixth Circuit took the stance in *Kincaid v. Gibson* (2001) that college news outlets are more similar to public forums, and thus are protected from content-based censorship.

To counteract the negative impacts of *Hazelwood* and other cases that chip away at student press freedoms, many states have passed New Voices legislation and other statutory protections for student media. The New Voices template legislation was developed by the Student Press Law Center for the purpose of encouraging lawmakers to protect student journalists and their advisers from the multiple forms of censorship and retaliation they encounter in pursuit of journalism. These laws generally only permit censorship of student media if "it [the media] is libelous or slanderous, contains an unwarranted invasion of privacy, violates state or federal law, or incites students to disrupt the orderly operation of a school."

**As of January 2024, 17 states had adopted some form of official legislation to protect student journalists' First Amendment rights.** Some are very specific: Virginia adopted a law that only protects college media, but not K-12. Iowa and Kansas don't specifically protect college press, only K-12. Others are not full legislation: Pennsylvania and Washington D.C. adopted regulations to protect these outlets, but not laws. Still others are extremely broad and ensure freedoms for students at both public and private schools (i.e. Rhode Island). In addition, Michigan and Ohio tend to lean in favor of student media based on court precedent.

## Effects of New Voices are subtle

The findings of this study do not show major differences in the experiences and structural setups of student media organizations in states with New Voices protections and those that do not have them.

**Out of 512 outlets in this study, 207 (40.43%) are in New Voices states. About half of all 501(c)(3) organizations (26 of 53) are in New Voices states.**

About 50% of outlets in New Voices states receive some form of financial support from the institution. The New Voices laws give them added protections from financial cuts as a form of censorship by universities and/or student governments. However, this represents only 20.31% of all student outlets that receive funding from their associated institutions; thus, about 80% of student outlets that get institutional funding are extremely vulnerable to financial retaliation for their work.

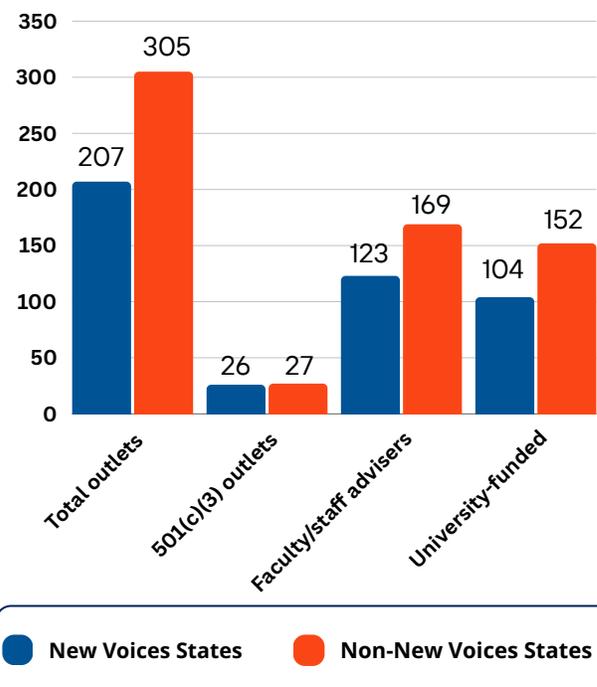
About 60% of outlets in New Voices states have university-paid faculty or staff as advisers. The protections New Voices legislation provides to advisers against retaliation are pivotal to ensuring the outlets with this structure are fully protected from administrative interference. Too often, faculty and staff must act as a heat shield for students who are investigating a sensitive issue at an institution.

These protections provide more leverage for advisers to be advocates for the students who work at these outlets. On the other hand, the 76% of outlets in this study that have faculty/staff advisers but are not in states with statutory protections are highly susceptible to pressures and retaliation toward these university-paid employees, which could have a ripple effect on students at these outlets.

Although New Voices laws provide a baseline standard to protect student press rights, these laws do not eradicate all potential attempts at censorship. The laws are not all-encompassing and should not be regarded as a solution to every potential infringement on students' First Amendment rights. For example, In *Corder v. Palmer* (D. Colo. 2008), the court determined that the Colorado Student Free Expression Law applied only when the expression was in a publication, not for other forms of expression such as a valedictorian speech.

Additionally, the protections given to students in New Voices states should be freedoms provided to all at a federal level. Federal legislation to protect student media would help these outlets as they navigate new challenges they face at universities and other institutions of higher education. Without these protections, these communities risk losing an important source of information for the students, as well as another front for oversight focused specifically on the ongoings of higher education.

## Comparing Outlets in New Voices and Non-New Voices States



### Table 3. Breakdown of outlets in New Voices states

State	Laws Protecting Student Journalists	Total outlets covered	501(c)(3) outlets	Outlets with faculty/staff advisers	University-funded outlets
<b>Arkansas</b>	Arkansas Student Publications Act (A.C.A. § 6-18-1201-1204 and A.C.A. § 6-18-1101-1103)	9	0	4	3
<b>California</b>	Cal. Educ. Code Section 48907 (one of several)	51	3	33	23
<b>Colorado</b>	Colorado Student Free Expression Law (C.R.S.A §22-1-120)	14	2	10	6
<b>Hawaii</b>	Student Journalism Press Act	1	0	1	1
<b>Illinois</b>	Illinois Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act (2016) & College Campus Press Act (2008)	17	2	12	10
<b>Iowa</b>	Iowa Student Free Expression Law (I.C.A. §280.22)	3	2	1	1
<b>Kansas</b>	Kansas Student Free Expression Law (K.S.A. 72-7209)	6	1	4	4
<b>Maryland</b>	New Voices Maryland Act (MD EDUC § 7-121)	9	2	5	2
<b>Mass.</b>	Massachusetts Student Free Expression Law (M.G.L.A. 71 § 82)	21	5	13	10

### Table 3. Breakdown of outlets in New Voices states continued

State	Student Journalist Protections	Total outlets covered	501(c)(3) outlets	Outlets with faculty/staff advisers	University-funded outlets
Nevada	NRS 388.077	3	0	1	2
New Jersey	N.J. Stat. § 18A:36-45	15	2	7	8
North Dakota	John Wall New Voices Act (NDCC 15.1-19-25)	2	1	0	1
Oregon	OR ST § 350.260	4	1	2	3
Pennsylvania* (regulation)	Pennsylvania Administrative Code; 22 Pa. Code § 12.9.	20	2	12	8
Rhode Island	RIGL 16-109 et seq	3	1	1	1
Vermont	16 V.S.A. §1623	1	0	0	0
Virginia	§ 23.1-401.2. *Only covers college journalists	10	2	4	7
Washington	RCWA 28.600.027 and RCWA 28B.10.037	16	0	11	12
West Virginia	Student Journalist Press Freedom Protection Act	2	0	2	2
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>207</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>104</b>

# Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that the majority of student media outlets are not truly independent of university control. The majority of them are either dependent on some form of university funding (243 out of 512 student outlets), subject to a faculty adviser (292 out of 512 student outlets), or both (179 out of 512 student outlets).

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## The Role of the Federal Government

The most effective way to address the current state of unprotected student journalism is for the Supreme Court to overturn the precedent established in *Hazelwood*. The likelihood of this happening, though, is fairly low given the Supreme Court's diminishing views of the press in recent years and its authority to exercise discretionary review.

Because of this, the New Voices movement should turn to Congress.

It has the authority to enact a federal New Voices law and, thus, protect the editorial independence of student news publications nationwide. Currently, 17 states and the District of Columbia have enacted a New Voices law, meaning 34 states have not and their student journalists remain unprotected from university censorship. While Congress has introduced several bills and resolutions aimed at protecting student press freedom, none of them have passed.

## The Role of Student Publications and Student Journalists

Given the lack of federal protection for student press freedom, it is up to local student journalists, advisers, and advocates for free speech to advance the New Voices movement. Student publications can do this by being transparent about their financial and editorial structure. Such journalistic transparency can arguably highlight the different levels of independence and press freedom among states with and without New Voices legislation, demonstrating the need for a federal New Voices law.

When it comes to financial transparency, student publications can disclose their sources of funding on their websites. If possible, they should also disclose the percentage of each funding source and specify how their funding is allocated.

For example, at the College of William and Mary, *The Flat Hat* has a page titled "Financial Transparency," where the publication explains that its advertising comprises less than \$1,000 in revenue per year and that the majority of its budget is derived from the university's Media Council. As another example, *The Daily Campus* at the University of Connecticut regularly posts updated statements regarding its use of student activity fees and operating expenses and budget.

In regards to editorial transparency, it is recommended that all student publications with a faculty adviser clarify both who the faculty adviser is (with their credentials to help advise a newsroom), as well as a clear statement on the ways in which their adviser intervenes or participates in the editorial process.

Student news outlets should especially address whether their adviser has the right to choose, review, or censor content prior to publication on their websites. For instance, the [Flor Ala at the University of Northern Alabama](#) has a page titled “Student Media” that defines the role of the paper’s adviser as a “coach and educator, but not an editor.” Moreover, the *Daily Universe* at the Brigham Young University-Provo explains that the [paper functions as an educational lab](#) tied to the curriculum of the BYU School of Communications and is committed to the mission of BYU as its sponsoring institution on its website.

There are many student publications that, when asked, clarified that their faculty adviser(s) exercise very limited roles in the newsroom. For example, the chief editor for *el Don* at Santa Ana College said that the faculty adviser cannot make assignments or keep students from reporting or publishing information. The adviser is restricted from prior review and other censorship practices by an Administrative Regulation on student media.

However, these clarifications about the adviser’s role are not reflected on their website. Some student publications like the *Daily Campus and Racquet Press* have a constitution or bylaw that outlines the faculty adviser’s role in the editorial process uploaded to their website.

Below is a list of questions that student publications should ask themselves as they think about their independence structure. It is also advisable to provide answers to these on publication websites to better communicate the role of the publication to its audiences:

**Does the faculty adviser have the right to**

- **Choose content?**
- **Assign stories?**
- **Exercise prior review?**

Unfortunately, though, most student publications do not explicitly explain their relationship with the adviser. Organizations, such as *el Don* and other student publications with similar provisions in place, should make pertinent policies and documentation easily available to the public on their websites so their audiences can better understand how the newsroom is structured.

If outlets are considering the 501(c)(3) route, it can provide the much-needed barrier between university administrators and student journalists. However, this decision might cut off any funding or services the university could offer the student outlet. For example, a student publication that is a registered student organization at the university could lose access to funds for groups of that status, as well as resources for recruiting students to participate (such as an activities fair).



The editorial board of PantherNOW at Florida International University. Photo courtesy of Elise Gregg.

“We have two faculty advisers, but **they are not involved in our editorial process unless asked.** We consult them as needed for feedback on the quality of articles typically after publication, although **section directors have the discretion to ask for edits as needed before publication.**”

**ELISE GREGG, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
PANTHERNOW**

## The Roles of Alumni and Investors

As this and previous research have shown, most student news outlets depend on some form of institutional funding or in-kind support (i.e. faculty/adviser paid by the university or campus facilities used for production). If these outlets truly want to be independent and less vulnerable to potential censorship by the institution, they need to separate themselves – editorially, financially, and structurally. That means they need other sources of revenue to keep up the work, and alumni networks are a big part of that equation.

Some of the most successful independent outlets get at least some of their funding from alumni donations and endowments. As students move on to careers, keeping a database of contact information, engaging alumni networks through contact and invitations, and other relationship-building activities can help build a group of active and supportive investors for the outlet.

Additionally, as major organizations seek ways to help student media, they should consider grants and funding opportunities for student news outlets to continue operations without university help. Just as non-profit news enjoys its moment in the spotlight, student news outlets could benefit from the same types of funding and support, and they can produce the quality work needed to keep higher education institutions accountable to their public and community.

Other financial structures – such as a subscription model in which the institution pays a fee to the outlet as a contractor for the service of news dissemination to its students – might be a better fit for some outlets. Again, however, these structures are often based on contracts that must be renegotiated after expiration, meaning that changes to the payment structure or editorial requirements might be vulnerable to pressure from the administration during these times.

## Conclusion

On the whole, the results of this study indicate that the majority of student media outlets are not truly independent of university control. **This is due to the fact that the majority of them are either dependent on some form of university funding (243 out of 512 student outlets), subject to a faculty adviser (292 out of 512 student outlets), or both (179 out of 512 student outlets).**

Considering the current trends of financial and editorial independence levels among student media publications, it is advised that the federal government intervene and implement a student media policy that precisely defines the limits of school censorship authority.

Bearing in mind, however, that the federal government is slow to act, student publications are encouraged to take charge and be transparent about their financial and editorial structures. If possible, student publications should advocate for more explicit school policies restricting the role of the university as a funding source and the role of the faculty adviser as an editorial watchdog. Nonetheless, increasing journalistic transparency among student publications, in general, is believed to make great strides in the New Voices movement and in establishing strong student press freedom laws in the future.

# Endnotes

## Denoted by section

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# The Research Team

**Jessica Sparks** is a doctoral candidate in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida. Prior to starting her Ph.D., she was a tenure-track assistant professor and student media adviser at Savannah State University in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications. In that role, she often worked to ensure student journalists could practice their craft and keep the university administration accountable for their decisions and actions. Prior to entering academia, Sparks was a news reporter with a specialization in political news. She has done work with The Herald Bulletin in Anderson, Ind., AnnArbor.com in Michigan, CNN.com, Bluffton Today in South Carolina, The Savannah Morning News in Georgia, as well as some work with The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

**Lila Greenberg** is a first-year law student at the University of Florida Levin College of Law and a legal researcher for the Brechner Center. She has been with the Brechner Center since June 2021 and her work has focused primarily on the First Amendment and Freedom of Information laws. In this role, she has co-authored papers for academic journals, led research projects, analyzed national and local laws relating to the First Amendment and freedom of information, and more. Additionally, Greenberg has done work with the New England First Amendment Coalition and has been published in the University of Pittsburgh Law Review. Greenberg plans to practice Media and Intellectual Property Law. In spring 2022, Greenberg graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida with a B.S. in Media Production, Management, and Technology.

**Abigail Rillo** is a fourth-year journalism student at the University of Florida and legal researcher at the Brechner FOI Center. Rillo expects to graduate in fall 2024 with a B.S. in Journalism, with a concentration in social media and a minor in Innovation via the Innovation Academy. At the Brechner Center, Rillo assists on various research projects under Jessica Sparks and Dr. David Cuillier. As Rillo prepares to graduate, she plans to follow her interest in media law by applying to law school. Prior to joining the Brechner Center, Rillo was a social media director at Innova Leaf Creative Solutions and a communications intern at Lighthouse Vision Loss Education Center, where she managed teams restrategizing marketing initiatives.

**Ashley Alarcon** is a researcher at the University of Florida Brechner Center for Freedom of Information. Alarcon obtained her B.A. in political science from the University of Florida in the fall of 2023 and will attend the University of Florida Levin College of Law in the fall of 2024. Alarcon has served as a congressional intern for Representatives Kat Cammack and Byron Donalds and as a legal assistant for Dickman Law Firm. Through the Brechner Center's Freedom of Information Project, Alarcon has furthered her expertise in the areas of open government and media law. In the future, Alarcon aspires to practice media and public interest law to safeguard citizens' rights to the First Amendment.

**Savannah Rude** and **Gabriel Velasquez-Neira** also made special contributions to this report.