

High School Journalism Matters

NAA Foundation's 2008 Research Study Shows a Positive Link
Between High School Journalism and Academic Achievement

Question

Students who work on
high school newspapers
and yearbooks:

Answer

- ☐ Get better grades
in high school
- ☐ Earn higher scores
on the ACT
- ☐ Get better grades
as college freshmen
- ☒ All of the above





Introduction

High school journalism is under fire across the United States as educators face budget cuts and pressure to improve scores on tests that are intended to measure the performances of students and their teachers. However, new research commissioned by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation suggests that if student achievement is the goal, then schools would be well-served if they offer students the opportunity to work on high school newspapers and yearbooks.

The research, conducted by Jack Dvorak, Ph.D., director of the High School Journalism Institute and a professor of the School of Journalism at Indiana University, compares academic achievements and scores on the ACT college entrance examination of students who were on the staffs of high school newspapers or yearbooks with those who did not have those journalism experiences.

Formerly known as The American College Testing Program Inc., the ACT is universally accepted for college admission and is administered annually to more than 1 million high school students.

Although the ACT did not address whether or not the students took an actual journalism class in high school, it measured the performance of students who had journalism experiences – including writing, photojournalism and publication design – through work on high school newspapers or yearbooks.

The findings show that the roughly 20 percent of students who worked on their school newspapers or yearbooks achieved higher grade point averages in high school, scored better on the ACT and demonstrated better writing and grammar skills in college than students who did not have those journalism experiences.

The sample includes more than 31,000 students from all 50 states and some foreign countries who took the ACT during the last five years as either juniors or seniors in high school. Their test files contain data not only on their ACT performance, but also information on their high school grades and extracurricular activities, as well as follow-up details on how they fared in their early college years.

The sample is large enough and the results are clear enough to demonstrate a statistically significant difference in performance of students involved in journalism compared with those who had no

journalism exposure. In research of this sort, statistically significant results mean that the variance in the findings actually is caused by the factor being studied, not by chance or an unrelated element.

The latest results mirror findings of research conducted 21 years ago that also concluded that students with journalism experience in high school did better than non-journalism students in terms of both high school grades and ACT scores. The new study involves a larger sample than the original and includes a more diverse set of students, but key findings in both the 1987 and the 2008 studies are the same.

The 2008 study shows that students with journalism experience scored higher than non-journalism students in these areas:

- * High school overall grade point average
- * ACT Composite score
- * ACT English score
- * ACT Reading score
- * College freshman English grade
- * College freshman grade point average

Journalism students also earned higher grades in high school mathematics, social studies, science and English courses than non-journalism students.

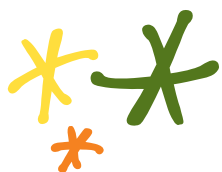
In addition, the study indicates that high school newspaper or yearbook participation is a positive factor for minority students, who constituted about 20 percent of the

survey group. Those students achieved higher scores than non-journalism minority students in overall high school grade point average and in high school English, social studies, science, foreign language, mathematics and art courses.

Minority students with journalism experience did better than non-journalism minority students on ACT Composite, Reading, English and Science scores. They also had higher overall grade point averages as college freshmen and received higher grades in their first collegiate English courses than minority students without high school newspaper or yearbook experience.

The study does not resolve the issue of whether students do better because of their journalism work or because students involved with journalism are better students. But it does show conclusively that high school journalism experience translates into better college performance in several key areas, such as the ability to express oneself clearly and reason incisively.

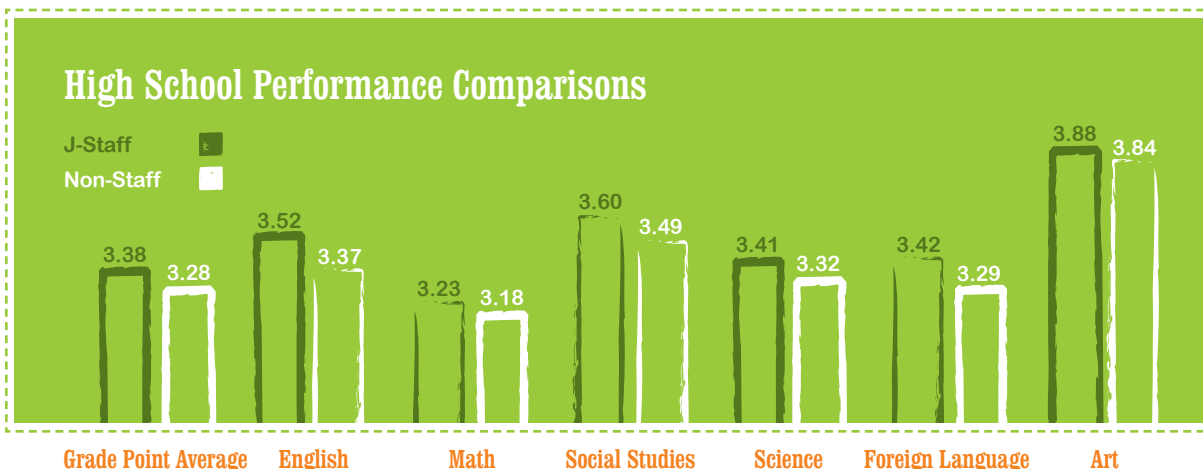
“If nothing else, we can conclude that high school newspaper or yearbook staff involvement is an excellent outlet for talented, active and involved students,” the researcher concludes. “It also gives them a chance to apply their natural leadership abilities while also exercising their critical thinking, designing and writing skills.”



High School Grades

The 2008 NAA Foundation research reveals that the high school grade point averages of students with journalism experience on school newspapers or yearbooks were higher across the board than those of students with no journalism exposure. Along with high school grade point averages, the study findings include grades in high school English, mathematics, social studies, science, foreign language and art courses.

SOURCE: ACT/NAA Foundation (2008)
J-Staff n=6,137
Non-Staff n=25,038
Differences in grade points for these categories are all statistically significant.



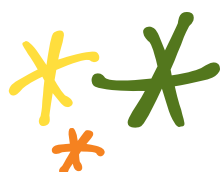
For example, students who were on newspaper or yearbook staffs had an overall high school grade point average of 3.38 compared with 3.28 for students without journalism experience. In the individual courses, the differences were greatest in English (3.52 compared with 3.37), social studies (3.60 compared with 3.49) and foreign language (3.42 compared with 3.29). The smallest differences were in art (3.88 compared with 3.84), math (3.23 compared with 3.18) and science (3.41 compared with 3.32).

Although the comparative edge found among students with journalism experience may seem slight, the findings all are considered statistically significant. In layman's terms, that means the differences found in the research are the result of the factor

being studied – journalism experience versus no journalism experience – as opposed to chance or a random factor.

The researcher also compared high school academic performance based on community size and found that students with journalism backgrounds had higher grades than students without journalism experience, regardless of whether they were from large, small or midsize communities.

The latest findings are markedly similar to those from a smaller study conducted in 1987 by the Journalism Education Association. In that study, students on the staffs of their school yearbooks or newspapers also had higher grade point averages and higher grades in English, mathematics, social studies and science. Foreign language and art were added for the 2008 study.

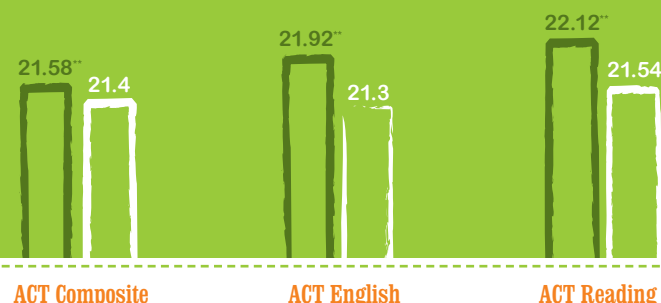


College Entrance Exam

The ACT is one of two widely used and universally accepted college entrance examinations. It is administered annually to more than 1 million high school students.

ACT Scores by Journalism Staffers and Non-Staffers

J-Staff
Non-Staff



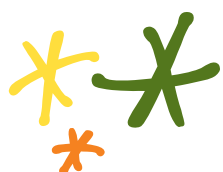
SOURCE: ACT/NAA
Foundation (2008)
J-Staff n=6,137
Non-Staff n=25,038
**Difference significant
beyond .01

In this study, students with high school newspaper or yearbook experience scored higher in ACT Composite, English and Reading, but lower in ACT Math and Science. The results were the same in 1987, with two exceptions: the ACT Reading score, which was not included in the earlier research; and the ACT Science score. In 1987, there was no difference between the ACT Science scores of journalism and non-journalism students.

The biggest performance difference in 2008 between the two groups of students comes with the ACT English results, followed closely by the ACT Reading scores. Journalism students registered a 21.92 score in ACT English compared with 21.3 for their non-journalism counterparts; the reading results were 22.12 compared with 21.54. Overall, journalism students achieved a 21.58 ACT Composite score compared with 21.4 for non-journalism students.

In terms of percentiles, the differences are clearer. Students with journalism experience scored in the 64th percentile of the ACT Composite compared with the 56th percentile for non-journalism students. In ACT English and Reading, journalism students were in the 65th and 59th percentiles, respectively, compared with the 59th percentile and the 56th percentile for non-journalism students.

However, results for ACT Math and Science are sharply reversed. In ACT Math, journalism students finished in the 54th percentile (with a 20.49 score), compared with the 59th percentile and a score of 20.88 for non-staffers. In ACT Science, non-journalism students averaged a 21.37 score (61st percentile) compared with a 21.26 score (58th percentile) showing for the journalism staffers.



College Performance

The research also measures college performance of the two groups and determines that high school journalism experience has a positive impact on both overall college grades and grades in college English courses.

Overall First-Year College Grade Point Average and English Course

J-Staff

Non-Staff



2.80**

2.73

3.05**

2.94

Overall First Grade Point Average

Grade in English Course

SOURCE: ACT/NAA
Foundation (2008)
**Difference significant
beyond .01 (T tests)
Overall first-year
grade point average:
J-Staff n=6,137
Non-Staff n=25,038
Grade in English course:
J-Staff n = 5,867
Non-Staff n= 23,923

For students with high school journalism experience, the first-year college grade point average was 2.80, compared with 2.73 for their non-journalism counterparts. In English courses, the journalism-experienced group had a 3.05 grade point average, compared with 2.94 for non-journalism students.

In addition, a subset of the overall group of students took the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) as college sophomores. This test measures students' skills in six areas – essay writing, writing objective skills, mathematics, reading, critical thinking and science reasoning.

In each of the six CAAP areas, students with high school journalism experience scored better than students who did not have that experience. However, the results are statistically significant in only four areas – writing objective skills, essay writing, reading and science reasoning.

The researcher also looked at the entire sample to compare the academic performance of students from communities of different sizes once they arrived in college by studying their first-year college grade point averages and their grades in their first English courses.

In both comparisons, students from midsize communities received higher grades than students from small communities and did considerably better than those from larger communities. In terms of overall first college grade point average, students from midsize communities averaged 2.76, compared with 2.75 for those from small communities and 2.63 for students from large cities.

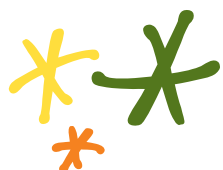
Individuals involved with high school journalism education say midsize communities, which often are suburban areas, are under less budgetary pressure than inner-city and small communities in terms of journalism offerings and overall academic programs at their schools.



Characteristics of Student Journalists

When the students filled out the interest inventory and student profile sections of the ACT, some interesting differences emerged between those with high school journalism experience and those without that background.

- * Student journalists were more than twice as likely to be headed toward a journalism or mass communications major in college than non-journalism students, but non-journalism students were twice as likely to be heading toward engineering-type majors.
- * Nearly half of the high school journalism students were enrolled in advanced placement (AP), accelerated or honors courses in English, and slightly more took AP, accelerated or honors courses in social studies and foreign languages.
- * Significantly fewer journalism students than non-journalism students said they were concerned about their ability to express their ideas in writing, their reading speed and their comprehension levels as they prepared to enter college.
- * Significantly more high school newspaper or yearbook staffers than non-staffers expressed concern about their mathematical skills as they prepared to enter college.



Extracurricular Involvement and Leadership

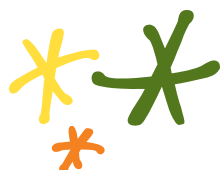
Based on responses to the interest inventory and student profile sections, the young people who were on the staffs of their high school newspapers or yearbooks were more active in extracurricular activities than the non-journalism students.

The student journalists were decidedly more active in student government, special interest clubs, dramatic and theater troupes, religious groups and political organizations than their non-journalism counterparts. They also were more involved in school or community service organizations.

The ACT profile section also showed that students with high school journalism experience were more likely to engage in activities that required or encouraged leadership characteristics, including: being appointed to or running for school office; organizing a school political group or campaign; participating in a student movement to change school rules, procedures or policies; taking part in a non-school political campaign; or receiving an award or recognition for leadership.

High school journalism students also were more likely to take part in the following community activities: volunteering in a hospital, clinic or care facility; assisting children or adults with disabilities; participating in a program to boost community or neighborhood pride; holding a part-time job during the school year; working full-time at a paying job during the summer; and volunteering with civic improvement or voter education projects.

These findings build on previous research by the NAA Foundation showing that students who worked on their high school newspapers or student-oriented sections of their hometown newspapers and who used newspapers in class or for homework were more engaged in civic activities, better educated and more involved citizens as they grew older.

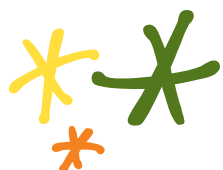


Conclusion

Although this study does not prove that association with high school journalism on a newspaper or a yearbook staff improves a student's grades or ACT scores, it does show a strong positive relationship between journalism and a student's grades and entrance-exam performance.

Given the similar findings in the 1987 study, there is no question that journalism skills gained from involvement with high school publications augment the high school language-arts curriculum and can have a significant impact on how well high school students do in areas such as English, composition and courses involving critical thinking once they reach college.

To the extent that high school journalists become more aware of the issues in their schools and home communities and involve themselves in programs to address critical needs, the high school journalism experience also can translate into better citizenship as students leave school and take their place as young adults in their home communities.



Methodology

This study was conducted with the cooperation of ACT personnel, who provided test results, high school backgrounds and follow-up information for 31,175 randomly selected students who took the ACT in the last five years. Students were not identified by names, Social Security numbers or other personal information, but the researcher could determine that they were attending or had attended colleges and universities in all 50 states and some foreign countries.

The ACT is not an aptitude or IQ test; rather, it is designed to show what students have learned in their high school studies of English, mathematics and science. It also measures reading skills and includes a student profile section that provides a comprehensive look at a student's work in high school, areas of interest and plans for college and beyond.

One of the questions in the student profile section of the ACT asked students to respond to the following statement: "Worked on the staff of a school paper or yearbook." In this study, 6,137 of the students – roughly 20 percent – responded "Yes, applies to me" to that statement.

Using the data collected for the entire group of students, it was possible to compare the outcome for journalism and

non-journalism students in a number of areas, including scores on the ACT, collegiate performance, final high school grade point averages and grades in the last high school courses taken in various subjects.

A smaller subset of the overall group also had taken the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency exams as sophomores, making it possible to compare the results of journalism and non-journalism students for those tests as well.

Jack Dvorak, Ph.D., of Indiana University, who prepared the study for the NAA Foundation, was part of the research team behind the 1987 study "High School Journalism Confronts Critical Deadline." It also compared the performance of high school journalism students with non-journalism students.

Is It the Chicken or the Egg?

There is no question that students in this study who worked on either their high school newspapers or yearbooks earned higher grades in many subjects and did better on the ACT college entrance exam than their peers who lacked such journalism experience.

But the question remains: Are these students smarter because of their involvement with high school journalism, or does high school journalism attract smarter students in the first place?

"It is one of those chicken-and-egg situations," says Esther Kang, editor of *Chicagomag.com* and a former staff member of the A-Blast student newspaper at Annandale (Va.) High School. "I'm not sure why, but the types of students the field of journalism attracts tend to be a little bit more edgy and have a more critical way of viewing the world."

"At the same time, being involved in journalism also makes them more able to think critically and look at situations and different academic subjects in a smarter way."

Stacey Marin, another A-Blast veteran, notes that "at Annandale, the kids that tended to get better grades were more in journalism, but I don't know which was the cause of the other. I do know one thing. I really like to read the newspaper now and know what's going on in the world. I like to be informed, and that was part of my journalism experience in high school."


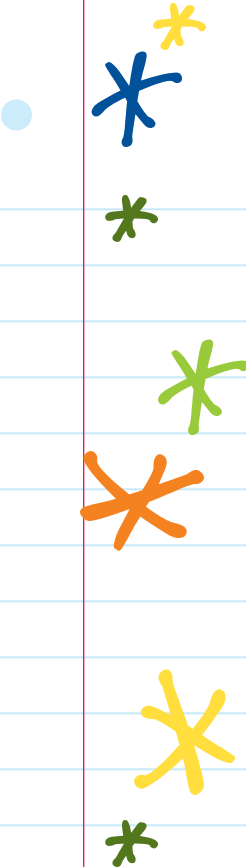
Katie Dolac, 26, features editor for the Potomac News in Woodbridge, Va., says high school newspaper or yearbook work naturally attracts students who have better writing and grammar skills.

"Anyone who's interested in journalism, especially from a young age, is probably someone who excels at English and writing and is naturally inclined to do so," says Dolac, who cut her journalistic teeth on the A-Blast. "You also have the common attribute with yearbook and high school newspaper students of working very hard. It is a tough profession, and you have to work hard."



"The types of students the field of journalism attracts tend to be a little bit more edgy and have a more critical way of viewing the world. At the same time, being involved in journalism also makes them more able to think critically and look at situations and different academic subjects in a smarter way."

Esther Kang,
editor,
Chicagomag.com



Curiosity may have something to do with it, says Caroline Friedman, a 2008 graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and a former A-Blast staffer. “To want to go into journalism, you have to be curious, and that carries through to other academic areas. I think the nature of being involved in journalism makes you organize yourself and your brain in a way that I don’t think necessarily other activities do.”

“Journalism students have a level of critical thinking and analytical skills that really help them think about things thoroughly and question,” agrees Kang, who also is an adjunct lecturer at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Evanston, Ill. “I think journalism students tend to be a little more detail-oriented and thorough, and their reading level and writing also helps. Journalism students are probably better than most students in general.”

Heather McDonald, who also worked on the A-Blast at Annandale, now teaches composition to freshmen at American University in Washington, D.C. She thinks a “little of both” the chicken and the egg are involved.

“I think you have to have a certain level of intelligence to want to do something that requires so much intellectual work in addition to your other classes,” she says. “In journalism, you are constantly trying to research ... and make sense of something, but it works both ways because journalism teaches all those skills that translate to other classes, things like making sense of arguments and writing more clearly.”

Whether journalism students are brighter because of their newspaper or yearbook work or whether they go after that experience because they are better students, the message may be the same to schools.

“If a school can say if we have a journalism program, chances are this is what the performance differential will be, it really doesn’t matter because it attracts students who will participate at that level or creates students at that level,” says Mark Goodman, the Knight Chair in Scholastic Journalism at Kent State University in Ohio. “What it ultimately means is students who perform better will be created.” ○

Why Don't Math Scores Add Up for Student Journalists?

Caresse Johnson, a sophomore at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, looks back fondly on the writing, editing and design skills she learned from her work on the high school yearbook at Chantilly (Va.) High School.

But unlike many high school journalists, she also excelled in math and science. At one point, she considered a career in civil engineering.

Johnson subsequently moved into landscape management, choosing to focus on design and plants rather than on concrete and steel. But she says she always knew she preferred the solid facts and answers one finds in math and science to the grayer areas of journalism.

"I have always done well at science and math and English," she says. "I think the way my mind works isn't quite as artistic or creative, maybe, as a lot of the other students I was in journalism with. I like concepts to be concrete and I like solid facts. That is the way my mind thinks, but I don't think that is necessarily the norm in journalists."

Caroline Friedman majored in marketing at the University of Pittsburgh and is launching her business career with a Pittsburgh public relations firm. She also did well in high school math and science, but her writing and verbal skills, which she honed while working on the A-Blast newspaper at Annandale (Va.) High School, were better.

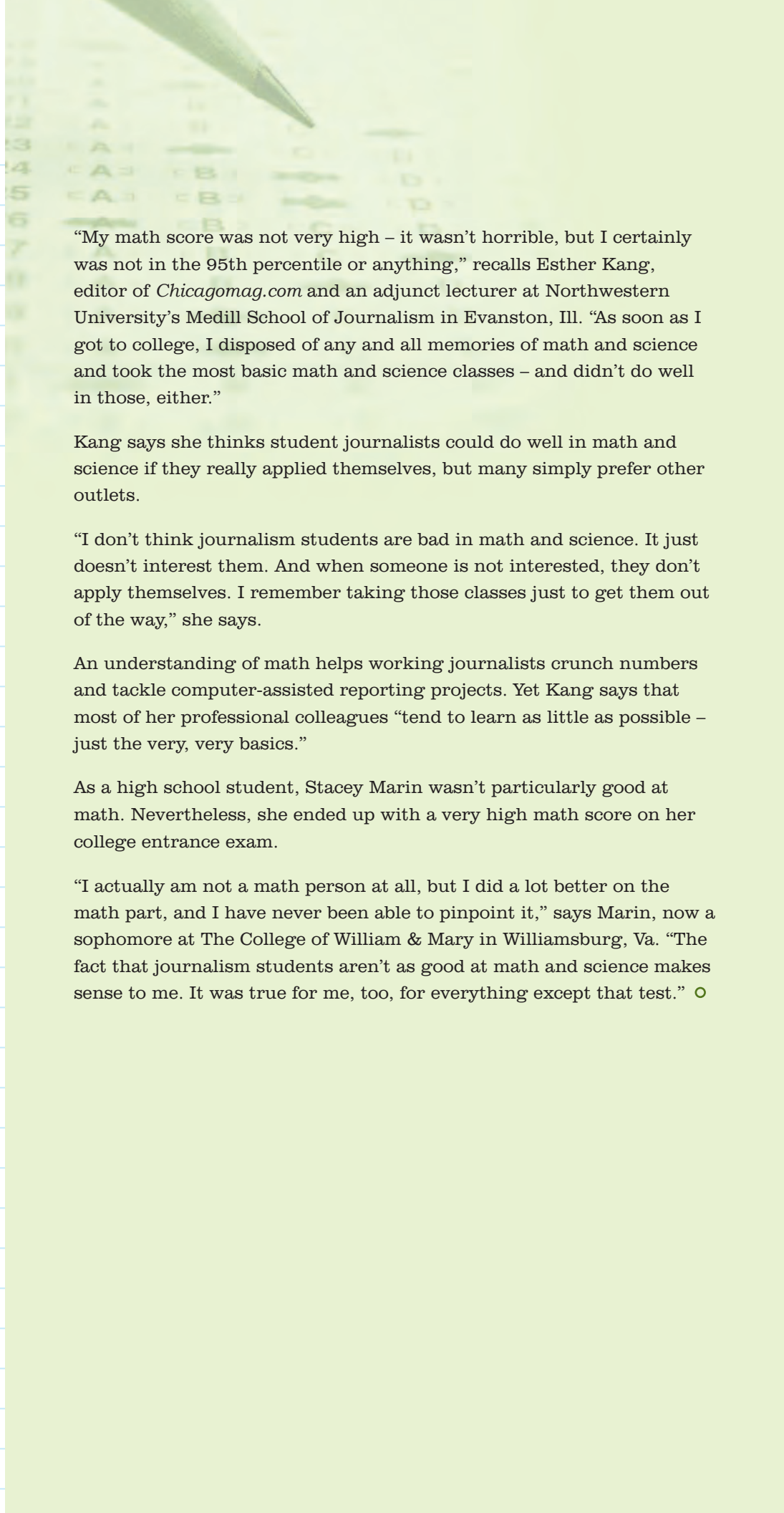
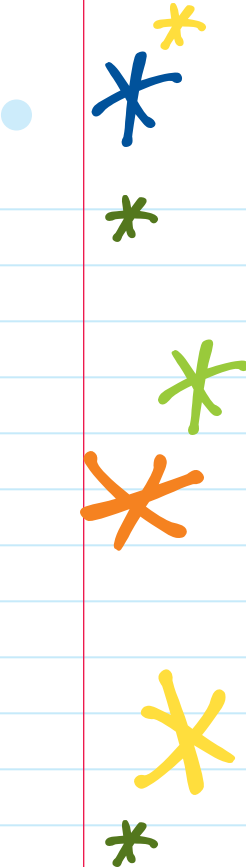
"My language skills are definitely stronger than math and sciences," Friedman says. "I honestly don't know if it is just because I like it better or if [math and science are] not as much fun. But if the choice was a math project or a newsletter, more of my energy would go to the newsletter."

There is no question that some high school journalism students do very well in math and science. However, former high school newspaper and yearbook staffers interviewed for this report were not surprised at all to learn that in the NAA Foundation's recent research, students with high school journalism expertise often fell short in math and science compared to non-journalists. After all, that was their experience, too.



"I like concepts to be concrete and I like solid facts. That is the way my mind thinks, but I don't think that is necessarily the norm in journalists."

Caresse Johnson,
sophomore,
Brigham Young University



“My math score was not very high – it wasn’t horrible, but I certainly was not in the 95th percentile or anything,” recalls Esther Kang, editor of *Chicagomag.com* and an adjunct lecturer at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism in Evanston, Ill. “As soon as I got to college, I disposed of any and all memories of math and science and took the most basic math and science classes – and didn’t do well in those, either.”

Kang says she thinks student journalists could do well in math and science if they really applied themselves, but many simply prefer other outlets.

“I don’t think journalism students are bad in math and science. It just doesn’t interest them. And when someone is not interested, they don’t apply themselves. I remember taking those classes just to get them out of the way,” she says.

An understanding of math helps working journalists crunch numbers and tackle computer-assisted reporting projects. Yet Kang says that most of her professional colleagues “tend to learn as little as possible – just the very, very basics.”

As a high school student, Stacey Marin wasn’t particularly good at math. Nevertheless, she ended up with a very high math score on her college entrance exam.

“I actually am not a math person at all, but I did a lot better on the math part, and I have never been able to pinpoint it,” says Marin, now a sophomore at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va. “The fact that journalism students aren’t as good at math and science makes sense to me. It was true for me, too, for everything except that test.” ○

Veterans Recall High School Journalism Lessons

More than a decade has passed, but Heather McDonald still vividly remembers the day she missed a deadline and caused her high school newspaper to publish late.

"I was editor-in-chief, so everything came down on me," recalls McDonald, who now teaches freshman composition at American University in Washington, D.C. "I think we had gotten the paper to the printer a day late because I had not made sure one of the other writers had come through with what would be the front-page story."

Her newspaper adviser at Annandale (Va.) High School "could see it coming a mile away," she adds. Because his teaching style involved being there for guidance but letting students actually control the process – and take responsibility for the outcome – he did not intervene.

"I don't remember ever feeling as badly as I did when we walked in the next morning and he was so disappointed in all of us," McDonald says. "And then it was made worse because everybody at school said, 'It's Friday – where's the paper?' I will never forget that. I never missed another deadline, and I don't think anyone on that staff in future years did, either."

Time management and accountability are frequently cited by former high school journalists when they are asked about the life lessons they took from their newspaper or yearbook work.

"Journalism does give you the skills you need to do better," says Caresse Johnson, a sophomore at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, who worked on the yearbook at Chantilly (Va.) High School. "It was important for me to have that time commitment. Without it, I wouldn't have managed my time nearly as well."

"Being under deadline pressure and still being able to put out a good product – probably a better product – was one of the best lessons," agrees Katherine Lehr, an Annandale newspaper veteran who now is on the staff of The Hotline, the online political publication of the National Journal in Washington, D.C. "Being able to work with time limits and restraints was very important."



"I took a couple of [advanced placement] classes in high school and did better on the essay part because of my journalism background.

I never really liked writing essays, but once I got involved with the yearbook, it became something that felt natural."

Tim Chapman,
Editor-in-chief,
The Breeze,
James Madison
University

Another major benefit, she adds, was learning about teamwork.

“Annandale is one of the most diverse high schools in the nation, and our paper was fortunate because we had people from every different kind of background, both economic and race-wise,” Lehr says. “So, we were able to work with a different group of people, people I might not normally have associated with on a frequent basis.”

McDonald agrees that high school journalism promotes teamwork. “We really did have to work with other students with very different personalities who weren’t in our friends circle,” she says. “We had a lot of people in the popular crowd, some jocks and others, and we all had to make nice with each other and communicate. It was a great lesson to learn before going to college.”

Caroline Friedman, a recent graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, says teamwork and accountability are “the biggest things” she learned in her high school journalism experience at Annandale. “As I got older, I realized the benefits of ... how you work with people you are trying to get to do what you want them to do.”

These former high school journalists also say they profited from the practice of thinking and expressing themselves more clearly.

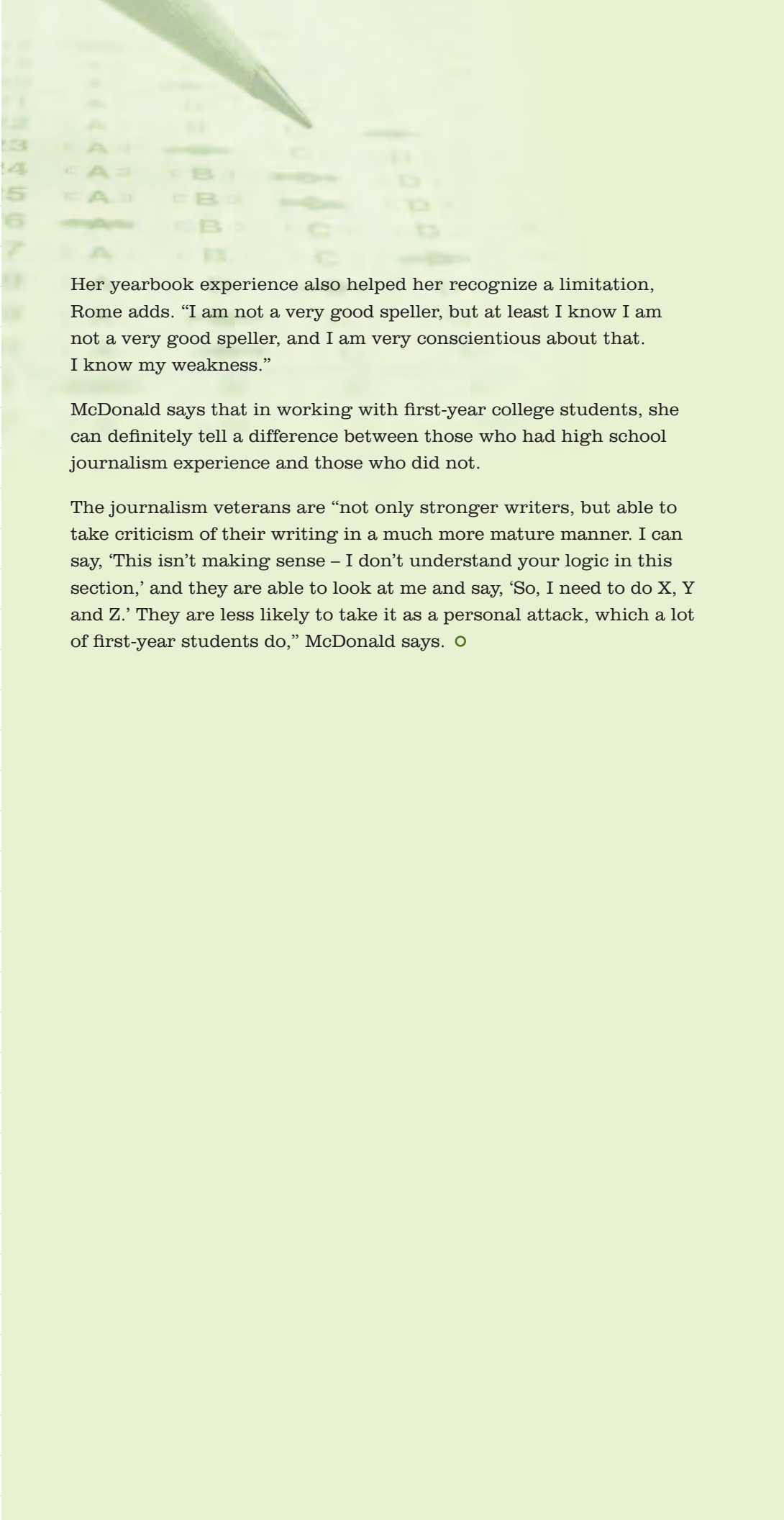
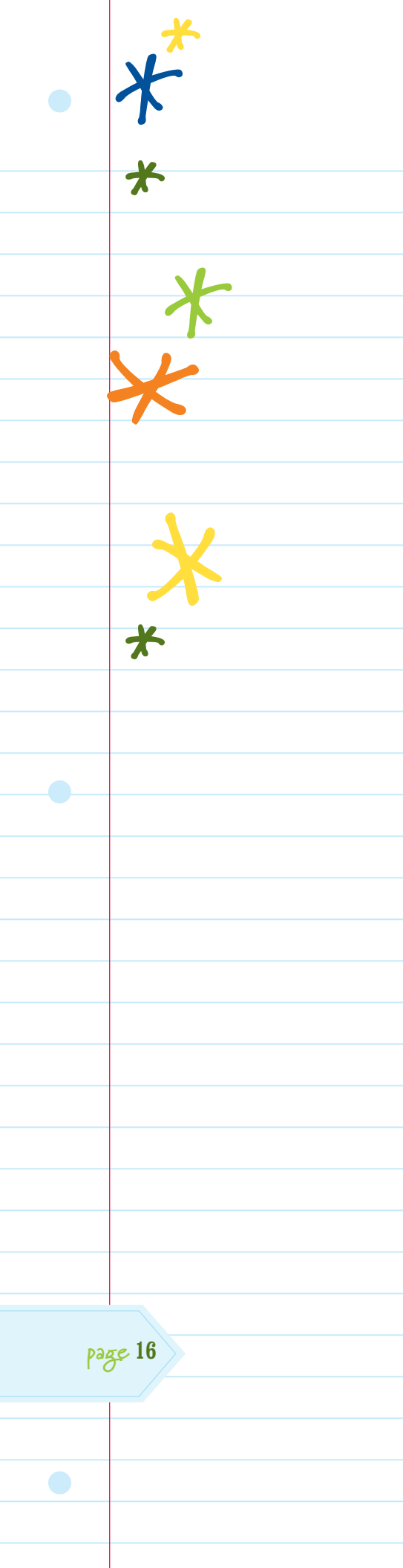
“It was a more direct way to write,” Friedman says. “I remember my first few articles, realizing you don’t need to say all of this to get to the point. ... [T]he nature of being involved in journalism makes you organize yourself and your brain in a way that I don’t think necessarily other activities do.”

“It really helped polish my writing,” said Tim Chapman, a student at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., who recently took over as editor-in-chief of the college newspaper, The Breeze.

“I took a couple of [advanced placement] classes in high school and did better on the essay part because of my journalism background,” adds Chapman, who worked on the Chantilly yearbook, The Odyssey. “I never really liked writing essays, but once I got involved with the yearbook, it became something that felt natural.”

Another former Odyssey staffer says that for her, it was all about discipline.

“It was a 400-something-page book and there are so many aspects of it, so much attention to detail – and accuracy,” says Elizabeth Rome, now a reporter for the Daily News-Record in Harrisonburg, Va. “This is something people keep and cherish for the rest of their lives.”



Her yearbook experience also helped her recognize a limitation, Rome adds. “I am not a very good speller, but at least I know I am not a very good speller, and I am very conscientious about that. I know my weakness.”

McDonald says that in working with first-year college students, she can definitely tell a difference between those who had high school journalism experience and those who did not.

The journalism veterans are “not only stronger writers, but able to take criticism of their writing in a much more mature manner. I can say, ‘This isn’t making sense – I don’t understand your logic in this section,’ and they are able to look at me and say, ‘So, I need to do X, Y and Z.’ They are less likely to take it as a personal attack, which a lot of first-year students do,” McDonald says. ○

Under Pressure: High School Journalism Faces Many Obstacles



"In this day and age, when school systems are so concerned about academic performance, no school can justify not having a student newspaper and yearbook."

Mark Goodman,
Knight Chair in
Scholastic Journalism,
Kent State
University

Candace Perkins Bowen, executive director of the Ohio State Organization of High School Journalism, runs a listserv for 900 journalism teachers across the United States. Based on comments she hears, she believes budget cuts and legal pressures are the greatest threats now facing high school journalism.

"There are a whole lot of comments on the legal stuff – 'Our principal says we can't print this' – and that kind of stuff," says Bowen, who also is director of the Center for Scholastic Journalism at Kent State University. "It is the kind of thing administrators are getting [told] in their legal classes. The angle there is protect your tail."

On the budget side, there is continuing pressure to offer the sort of classes that administrators, advisers and counselors think will result in good test scores that make it appear schools and their staffs are doing better.

"It's a combination of what is required for No Child Left Behind coupled with funding issues in a lot of places," Bowen says. "School districts are not passing levies, so the schools are cutting frill stuff and going with bigger classes to streamline things."

Wayne Brasler, who has 45 years of experience in teaching high school journalism and advising publications at University High School in Chicago, says his biggest concern is censorship.

"We are witnessing the demolition of the high school press through administrative prior review and censorship," he says. "This tragedy will one day be regarded as a scandal."

"The community should be seeing the story of the school told by students in the most professional-level work they can attain. Instead, the community gets that story filtered through adult eyes and minds and a concern not to upset parents and patrons of the school for any reason. This approach makes the administrators' lives easier, but it results in a dumbing-down of education," Brasler adds.



“When you kill off a student newspaper, you can kill off some free speech aspects and inhibit free discussion in school. You lose an outlet that can demonstrate the principles of free press, free speech and free expression.”

Gene Policinski,
vice president and
executive director,
First Amendment Center,
Nashville

Mark Goodman, who spent 22 years as executive director of the Student Press Law Center in Arlington, Va., before moving to Kent State in January 2008 as the Knight Chair in Scholastic Journalism, said many school officials see journalism programs as a problem.

“When students are practicing good journalism, they are raising questions and discussing problems, so administrators not only have the budget incentive, but they also figure this could help get rid of a headache or a thorn in our side.”

Alan Weintraut, a high school journalism teacher and newspaper adviser at Annandale (Va.) High School, agrees.

“In my experience, the greater threat to journalism programs comes from administrators who view journalism as a nuisance to their schools. Ironically, the better the programs become, sometimes they are more at risk,” Weintraut says.

“We train students to care about their communities and to ask inquisitive questions about the good and the bad that happens in their schools. Not all administrators are censors, but some want the newspaper to exist solely as a function of publicity for the school. There have been many examples when strong journalism has not only been censored, but censured.”

What also is lost when schools eliminate journalism programs or their school newspapers and yearbooks is an opportunity to develop an appreciation for the First Amendment.

“We know from our work at the First Amendment Center that we don’t educate students well about the Bill of Rights, and the First Amendment in particular,” says Gene Policinski, vice president and executive director of the First Amendment Center in Nashville. “In many schools, particularly those that lack a journalism program, there is no opportunity to see it in action.

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Bowen notes that inner-city and rural schools are the ones most likely to cut back on journalism offerings – sometimes for test scores, sometimes for budget reasons and sometimes for the inability to find qualified journalism teachers. Midsize communities, which are often suburban areas, tend to have better-funded schools that offer both newspaper and yearbook programs, she says.

The irony of the latest NAA Foundation research, Goodman says, is that schools concerned about sending qualified students to college and looking better in test measurements may be eliminating the very activities that can help achieve those goals.

“In this day and age, when school systems are so concerned about academic performance, no school can justify not having a student newspaper and yearbook,” he says.

This study should inspire community newspapers to examine the scholastic media programs at their local schools, Goodman says, and if there aren’t such programs, to start asking why.

“Rarely do schools cut or do away with their athletic program, but they are much more likely to do away with a student publication,” he says. “I don’t want to suggest athletics have no value, because they do, but if this same research was done relating to academic performance and how those students who participated in athletic programs did with grades and college entrance exams, there would be no comparison.” ○

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