Student Media
READER INPUT SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP
Fall 2006

Top | Process | Comments | Recommendations | Stand-out Findings | Goals

PROCESS
This was a four-step process.

1. Conduct a survey open to any student to respond. 112 students responded.
2. From those who responded, pick 30 or so students who fit demographic picture of the University for a focus group to do a content analysis of paper. 19 students completed the process.
3. Have staff members analyze the paper at the same time as the focus group for comparison.
4. From the input from the focus group, have the staff write goals to make changes as necessary.

The results of the survey and the focus group seem both to be very valid. The group was generally representative of the campus. It was a typical week in almost all respects in terms of coverage, sources, content, etc.

A complete copy of the report is available HERE in PDF form.

FOCUS GROUP COMMENTS

Photography
Students: lowest priority (94.1; VG94.1)
Staff: second priority

If you should share one piece of advice for improving the PHOTOGRAPHY, what would it be?

- Nothing. Keep doing what you're doing, because it looks great.
- Have more pictures of students actually studying or participating in activities and not just random pictures.
- A couple of the photographs in Friday's paper really caught the emotion of the event that the story was portraying. Many times a reader will see a picture that just shows what was happening, but nothing in the subject's demeanor says anything about how that event or story is effecting him. It always makes a difference in the reading experience to see a picture that captures the essence of what is happening and how it is impacting those involved.
- The photography is wonderful. I saw nothing less than quality pictures in the paper all week, and that is pretty impressive. My only piece of advice would be to make sure you aren't putting pictures in places where they don't make sense. I remember (maybe not in this week's set of papers) seeing a picture of the NCSU rifle team in the paper that was nowhere near an article about the rifle team.
- Photography sometimes can be blurry and hard to see. They may be a printing error more than the Technician staff though.
- Better content in the pictures.
- Be more artistic. It's kind of plain and general
- Not so cliche. Also I know one day that I read it was extremely blurry.
- I don't have one. I constantly ranked photography an 'A' this week.
- I have no problems with photography
- NC State boasts of students from all over the world. However, most subjects in the photographs are Americans. Also, most of them are undergraduate students. Also, Centennial Campus is generally avoided being shown in the photographs. Tip: better coverage of the wide variety of students and campus locations.
- Try to take more interesting photographs that are worth covering half the page.
- Photography is pretty good as it is. I always see photographers at lots of events and feel that they cover a wide range of events on campus.
- Search for direct eye-catching photos and angles.

Design
Students: fourth priority (82.3; VG23.5)
Staff: third priority

If you should share one piece of advice for improving the DESIGN, what would it be?

- The design is one of the best aspects about this paper. Just make sure you're not filling spaces with ads/promotional content sideways. I noticed that at least once this week. It doesn't look professional and it makes it very difficult to read.
- Make it more eye appealing.
- Less is more.
- The design is wonderful. My only suggestion would be putting a couple whole articles on the front page, instead of piping them all inside the paper.
- The front page needs catchy. I am now older so I want to read the paper in the past what made me read the paper was how the front looked. Sometimes there are too many huge pictures and not enough material on the front page.
- Make it easier to read articles so we don't have to be a distraction in class when we turn the pages to finish an article
- The design I think is pretty good, it just needs some more pictures.
- As with photography I consistently ranked this with an 'A' so I don't have any tips.
- Keep up the good work.
- No tips.
- Experiment more with graphics and photo placement.
- Watch what is placed above the fold on the front page. Last week there was a large picture on the front page but it appeared below the fold. It seems that for a picture to be as large as it was in the paper and on the front it would be better placed above the fold.
If you should share one piece of advice for improving the COVERAGE, what would it be?

- Cover more stories that would interest the ENTIRE campus community. I’d like to see more news, less ‘human interest’-type stories.
- Cover more stories that are interesting to all types of students.
- I’d love to see more national and international events being covered. If this isn’t part of Technician’s job, then I think it should be. Sometimes we get so caught up in the State bubble when there is a whole other world out there.
- I understand that Amato getting fired is huge news and a very hot topic for campus, but when things like that happen it’s not necessary to spend 75 percent of the paper talking about that single event. It was on the front page, the ‘front page’ of the sports page (the back page) and then those articles both linked to articles inside. And there was an article about it in the editorial page. That’s too much. My one piece of advice would be, don’t let big news narrow the scope of your paper.
- Some of the events do not get enough press. I remember when the anniversary of the first four African Americans who graduated from state. Stories like these I feel don’t get written about too much. The article I saw about them was very small.
- You are doing a great job with coverage
- Do not focus on just male sports. Also try reaching out to other groups on campus not just the big ones.
- Have different groups send in a request if they’d like to be in the paper. Of course everyone cannot but at least there will be lots to choose from and more diversity.
- Pare down stories to include only relevant details; sometimes, they’re too long.
- Tip: Cover the news in Centennial Campus as well. It is the most ignored part of the campus.
- Have a few more stories about Raleigh or surrounding areas; don’t limit coverage to the campus only.
- Try to cover more events that student groups put on. It seems that there are always events going on around campus, but many of them do not make the paper. If this is because the Technician has not been informed of the events maybe try getting the word out that all a group needs to do is send an e-mail. Also trying to cover events that are going to happen and not just after they have happened would be good.
- Make sure you try to reach out to as many people as possible when writing the papers so that there is something for almost everyone to enjoy.

If you should share one piece of advice for improving the WRITING, what would it be?

- Watch out for cliches and other verbiage that makes your writing look unprofessional. The fact that the Technician is a college paper isn’t an excuse for sloppy writing.
- Write Better!
- Strive to tell stories in a way that no one else has, write like you are interested in the story—it’s the only way the reader will be too.
- Put the facts in the front. If the paper is about a play coming to the Thompson theater, I want to know when that play is going to be, first thing. If the article is about SG trying to extend dining hall hours, I want to know how long they want to extend them first thing. One of the head editors of the High Point Enterprise told me that a good article should have EVERYTHING the reader NEEDS to know in the first paragraph. After that’s done, the rest of the explanation is usually good. And please, make sure your article flows, and stop using unnecessary brackets.
- I wish the writer’s opinions could be more broad. Most of the articles are written to a white audience. I do not feel other minorities or alternate opinions are brought forth in some of the articles.
- Nothing. It’s great.
- Include more series. The sex series was good, but be careful of language and crude subjects. Also, the girl that wrote about relationships was great last year.
- Have more interesting stories. Not just things that we can look up online.
- I think the writing is fine, but taking classes (English/grammar) can help.
- Read national papers like the New York Times to see examples of good journalism, and strive to mimic the quality.
- Tip - Show some respect even if writing against something or somebody.
- Pare down stories to include only relevant details; sometimes, they’re too long.
- Make sure that facts are correct and when interviewing people make sure you have their title correct. Too many times do I read an article where a person has been mislabeled as to their title or affiliation with the article.
- It is a well written paper, with different styles for every reader.
- Cover more stories that would interest the ENTIRE campus community. I’d like to see more news, less ‘human interest’-type stories.
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- I understand that Amato getting fired is huge news and a very hot topic for campus, but when things like that happen it’s not necessary to spend 75 percent of the paper talking about that single event. It was on the front page, the ‘front page’ of the sports page (the back page) and then those articles both linked to articles inside. And there was an article about it in the editorial page. That’s too much. My one piece of advice would be, don’t let big news narrow the scope of your paper.
- Some of the events do not get enough press. I remember when the anniversary of the first four African Americans who graduated from state. Stories like these I feel don’t get written about too much. The article I saw about them was very small.
- You are doing a great job with coverage
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- Have different groups send in a request if they’d like to be in the paper. Of course everyone cannot but at least there will be lots to choose from and more diversity.
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- Tip: Cover the news in Centennial Campus as well. It is the most ignored part of the campus.
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- Make sure you try to reach out to as many people as possible when writing the papers so that there is something for almost everyone to enjoy.

If you should share one piece of advice for improving the EDITING, what would it be?

- Better accuracy in finding typos/grammatical errors. It’s very frustrating to read the headline then find out that the story is totally different because the headline was badly written.
- Read and re-read everything before you print it.
- Edit more!
- Pay more attention. What the consumer sees is really the ‘editor’s’ paper. It’s up to the editors to make sure that the paper is good, all the way through, word for word. It happens too often that things get through to printing that shouldn’t. I’ve copied the list from question 8 for easier reference to a more specific account of the problem. Badly-written articles (mechanically and otherwise) dropping sentences in mid thought which makes the reader ask, ‘what?’ (happened twice) incorrect information (typos, misspellings, incorrect information) articles should have the important information in the first paragraph, or at the very least as close to the beginning as possible. (I made note of a couple examples of this in Thursday’s paper)
- Look for semantic errors, and I saw errors about where things took place.
- Nothing. It's great.
- Do better editing. Some articles look like they weren't edited at all, and weren't even proof-read, while others seem like a middle schooler wrote them.
- I thought the editing was overall good.
- Proofread and proofread again. It seems the staff works until the wee hours of the morning so they are probably tired and miss things. Maybe write the article the day before or earlier in the day and proofread then. Then come back later with fresh eyes and proofread again.
- Make sure the articles are worthy of being printed in the first place. I understand that under the crunches of time this is probably impossible.
- Tip - do not go overboard on some subjects. I specially remember the Technician sex series some weeks ago. Statements like, 'I live to shave my balls because girls don't like hairy balls in their mouth' are totally inappropriate and should be avoided as far as possible.
- Just double check the final print and make sure everything is fine. No major gripes.

Overall
Grade 3.41 (students), 2.91 (staff)
Before the analysis, 55% of respondents thought the paper was very good or good. After, 88% thought it was very good or good.

If you should share one piece of advice for improving the OVERALL paper, what would it be?

- Focus more on news, less on human-interest stories and stories that only affect a small segment of campus.
- More informational tidbits within stories (in those little informational block things) make those stories even easier to read and relate to.
- It would be nice if a few cartoon strips could be incorporated just to get a little humor in the paper.
- Just have a nice paper that is enjoyable to read.
- I realize you spend hours working on the paper every night but if you go back just one more time and find those small errors, it'll make a huge difference.
- the editing needs to improve. As the writing in the technician gets better, the paper overall will improve drastically.
- More informative articles i.e. student senate, tuition changes, events around campus, world issues.
- more interesting topics, and more colors.
- More articles about things that all college kids can relate to
- More pictures
- Keep doing surveys like this, maybe twice a semester, to get feedback from the student body since we're the ones reading the paper.
- Make viewpoint editorials more relevant to current events on a national, world and campus scale.
- Keep a separate page for leisure activities like puzzles and Sudoku.
- Maintain the current quality of the paper while expanding coverage.
- Make sure that articles have been well prepared and looked over before they are published.
- It would be the same as coverage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students...

- believe the photography and design are good.
- generally believe the coverage of the paper is adequate.
- believe the editing and writing of the paper is poor quality.
- DO notice when the design is better.

Credibility

- Conduct a thorough credibility study modeled after the UNC study to compare the credibility of the Technician to other professional papers and the Daily Tar Heel.
- Formally invite one student to participate in the budget meeting day during the spring semester. Start by inviting the people who signed up for the focus group. Have a sign-up sheet in the business office.
- Engage in more marketing to educate the campus about how the paper works and how they can have input.

Editing — the absolute highest priority

- All training in the spring semester should focus on editing for all staff members.
- Institute a day-long training workshop for all staff members before the fall semester.
- Restructure the training class for new staff members so classes focus more on entry-level skills including editing.

Other recommendations

- Decrease the number of stories that jump.
- Increase the amount of alternative copy and short reads.
- Decrease the amount of game coverage in the sports section.
- Decrease the amount of sports coverage in the paper.
- Focus more on newsworthy events and investigative features and less on fluffy features.

STAND-OUT FINDINGS FROM STAFF

At the fall retreat on Jan. 9, 2007, the staff members reviewed the findings again, and made some notes about findings that stood out in their minds.

- The staff grades the paper harder than the general readership.
- The readers view our photography as our strongest asset.
- The thing we need to work on the most is editing.
- Students are more likely to get their news from the print edition than the online edition.
- Students do depend on the Technician for campus news. They get their world and national news online.
- The paper covers too much sports, and sports is the least-read section in the paper.

SECTION GOALS

After reviewing the focus group findings, comments and recommendations, as well as the survey results, the section editors wrote goals specifically targeted at weaknesses identified by the focus group and/or survey. These goals are still being modified as the spring semester begins but will be set by Monday, Jan. 15.

Photography

The photo editor will increase his involvement with section editors, which will allow for better planning. With meetings scheduled at specific times, the sections editors would hold me accountable for missing one. If he misses a meeting (without a legitimate excuse), he'll be held responsible for the lack of planning by the section editors and Tyler.

To uphold the contract that every photographer signs stating that a peer edit with a senior photographer is required for every assignment. If a photographer is found putting any image on the Photo Server without discussing it with a photo editor or senior photographer, they will not be paid for the assignment.

Viewpoint

To edit every column with every writer in the office as outlined in the staff manual.

a. Why? To enhance their writing skills and help them understand their mistakes so they don’t keep making them and also to get them more interested and involved in the Technician by being in the office.

b. How? The writer and I will set up a time to meet in the office two days before the column is scheduled to run and we will go through it thoroughly not only to edit the basics, but to check the content and relevancy of the material.

c. Who? The columnists

d. Accountability? The column will not run and the columnist will not get paid until they come up to the office and edit per the staff manual.

Design

Designers will attend weekly design staff meetings at a regular time and location to be set by the editor on or before Jan. 10, 2007. Staff members who attend all staff meetings in a given month will be rewarded with a staff dinner. Further, staff members who attend all meetings will be given priority when selecting pages to design.

At least three times per week, in the paper, a package will appear that shows evidence of the reporter, editor, designer and photographer (PRED) working together. Regardless of which section it is in, the package will show integration of these ideas. Each month, the designer with the best planned packages will be awarded the designer of the month and given a $20 "bonus" in the form of Board Bucks.

Features

Writers will adhere to a more stringent, personalized and long-term editing process to improve the quality of features content. The features editor will track the compliance of features writers in meeting a three-part requirement for turning in stories with a chart. They will (1) turn in the first-draft of stories at least one week in advance of the run date, (2) schedule and attend an initial one-on-one editing session with the section editor during that week and (3) schedule and attend a one-on-one editing session with the section editor. These editing sessions will be completed in addition to any outside editing (by the student media adviser or writing coach). The writer is responsible for meeting this goal and the section editor will hold them accountable for reaching this goal. If the writer meets all three of the requirements for each of their stories in a given week, the section editor will invite them to an advance section meeting to get first pick of the stories for the following cycle.

The features editor will be responsible, in collaboration with a senior photographer, deputy features editor and science and tech editor and designer, for sketching out the dominant art for pages in advance to facilitate more well designed and entertaining content. The features editor will orchestrate brainstorming sessions with a senior photographer and designer to produce sketches of the dominant art for pages at least one week in advance. The features editor will also be responsible for distributing copies of these sketches, again at least a week in advance, to the editor for review. The features editor will be responsible for meeting this goal and the editor will hold them accountable for reaching this goal. If the features editor meets the goal and consistently submits sketches to the editor for an upcoming week, the editor will allow the features editor to select one design to run front page for that upcoming week. The features editor may also take into account the performance of individual features writers in adherence to goal one when making this decision.

News

The focus group and reader survey continue to show that our readers are concerned about bias in our stories and lack of accuracy in stories, leading to a lack of trust in the paper. To help reporters work toward improving accuracy and editing out bias, reports in the news section will meet with writing coach Lee Williams twice per month to discuss a story in progress. They will meet with Lee in time to utilize the feedback he gives in editing/rewriting the story and changes based on his feedback (as well as the feedback from all other editors) will be reflected in the published piece. Reporters will receive a “ticket” each time they visit with Lee which must be attached to their payroll forms or their payroll won’t be processed.

Based on reader feedback, readers get their news about campus from the Technician, print edition. And they want more news coverage of campus issues. To that end, the goal of the paper is to be 12 pages on average this semester. With
news being 40 percent of that, and maintaining 40 percent, the number of news stories written per day must increase from an average of 3.2 pages of the paper to 4.8 pages. If the news staff maintains 40 percent on average with a 12-page paper on average (at least) from Jan. 8 until April 15, each member of the news staff who have been on payroll the entire semester will receive a $20 bonus in the form of Board Bucks.

Sports

None received

Copy editing

Copy editors will meet once per week to review the papers of that week and examine any errors in coverage, grammar or any other mistakes. During these meetings, I will also seek to further their training by giving them editing exercises and reviewing grammar, word use and any other relevant topics. If they come to the meetings each week and corrections are printed in less than 20 percent of the papers during a two-week timespan, I will buy them lunch every other week. If a person misses a meeting, he or she will not receive the lunch. I will also ask that any people I notice having problems meet with me individually to review problem areas, and if they do not do so in a timely manner, they will not receive lunch. If I do not make one of these meetings, I will buy them all lunch regardless of their performance.

Editor

By Jan. 10, the editor, in conjunction with the section editors, will develop a production schedule that gets copy into the editing process sooner for more stringent editing. Each section needs to make production schedule timelines at least 80 percent of the time. Section editors who fail to meet this goal, as tracked by the editor, will receive a deduction in their salary. However, if they meet the 80 percent goal, the section editor will receive $40 in Board Bucks to be used for a staff treat.

The editor will meet weekly with each section editor (news, features, sports, design, photo, copy editing) to plan to do long-term planning and enterprise stories that will give our readers more useful and engaging information. At the beginning of the following week, the editor will distribute to the staff notes from the previous week’s meetings and will include a monthly summary in his Board report posted online. One outcome of these meetings will be to plan at least one “enterprise” story per week.