

2007-2008 *Technician* Advisory Board

Advisory Board Members | April 15, 2008 | Notes from Dec. 5, 2007

MEMBERS

- Patrick Clarke, designer, 96 Studios; former Technician managing editor, patrick@96studios.com
- Ben McNeely, reporter, Concord *Independent Tribune*, former Technician managing editor, bmcneely@independenttribune.com
- Jose Picart, vice provost for diversity and African-American affairs, jose_picart@ncsu.edu
- Anna Rzewnicki, director of communications, College of Management, anna_rzewnicki@ncsu.edu
- Andrew Williams, freshman, electrical engineering, anwilli5@ncsu.edu
- Spencer Williams, freshman, electrical engineering, sewill10@ncsu.edu
- Nancy Wykle, managing editor, Durham Herald-Sun, nwykle@heraldsun.com

APRIL 15, 2008

Present: Patrick Clarke, Ben McNeely; Andrew Williams; Spencer Williams; Nancy Wykle; Josh Harrell, *Technician* editor; Saja Hindi, managing editor; Bradley Wilson, adviser

We started the meeting looking over the *Technician's* declining income this semester and how the average income per issue continues to decline. We talked briefly about potential ramifications of that. Then we discussed the improvement in the number of sources per issue (improving) and the percentage of the time the staff has made deadline (not improving) and how these two things have an impact on the quality of the paper.

Then we talked about retention. Patrick said the focus should be on how to get people up in the office before 5 p.m. The expectation for people joining Student Media should be that they're in the office before 5 p.m., not late hours. The quality of the paper on a day-to-day basis is reflected in what time people get out of here. Sure, have a little fun. But at 9 p.m., stop goofing off and focus on getting paper out.

Considerable discussion of cross editing, having folks who are bored because there aren't stories to look at or pages to design being another set of eyes on a page or a story. Patrick asked if the designers were copy editing. Josh said the experienced ones were. The new ones are struggling just to get the pages designed.

Patrick said he would come in to the office at 2 p.m. or 2:30 p.m. to focus with folks on the front page of the next day's paper, looking over story options, etc. The first deadline was 7:45 p.m. for page 1. Push writers to hit deadline targets.

Ben said no one should be turning in stories after 7 p.m., unless it's a late event. That gives you time to fix it and work on it before you have to move on. If it's too late to make the next day's paper, retool for a day later. You've gotta hit deadline.

Nancy emphasized that writing is a process. Being late is completely unfair to their colleagues. It drives me up the wall when people are late. It's really inconsiderate and rude, quite frankly. They need to understand expectations from the beginning.

Patrick suggested that when new people join staff that they should have them come up in the evening and just witness the entire process.

Ben said reports should come in the office and write stories, especially when they're working on them around 5 p.m. There is so much down time during the day.

Move budget meeting to 3 p.m. YES. It would aid considerably in retention efforts.

Game stories are often late. Just run a brief recap in paper. Maybe run a photo, which can be transmitted from location before the game is over, with some alt copy with results. The rest can go online. Sports fans like stats. Sports is the easiest section to predict.

Josh said they could get game stories posted online right after the game and could use more alt copy, absolutely. More quick reads.

Ben said the sports page needs to be one, self-contained sports page. Contain it to just the back page. Then use page 7 for features. Idea of having a business page was very well received.

Nancy said they too were seeing the demise of the classifieds section. Consider the use of calendars and other similar material that provides useful information about events on campus.

During budget meeting, editors need to be advocates for readers. Section editors should advocate for the stories that will be the most informative, entertaining and useful for the front page. She said they plan the centerpiece stories for the front page sometimes a month in advance.

Andrew said he enjoys the behind-the-scenes look at sports. He wants stories that enrich the experience with the team, not just recap. He also said he gets frustrated with the reproduction quality of the puzzles from time to time.

Spencer said people need to see the Web site. We need to do a better job of promoting the *Technician* Web site. Patrick said people like the instant gratification of the online material. Ben said we should market and promote the Web independent of the paper. Do more Web exclusives. Patrick suggested running Web logos in the paper to refer people to online material. Publish audio of interviews online. Excerpts.

Josh said they were doing more with blogs, audio and slideshows and that we learned a lot this week doing a slideshow a day during Ag Awareness Week. Now there is focus on where to take online presence. Focus should be what is the best way to tell the story.

Moving to a discussion about science and tech, Ben said it should be at the forefront of the paper. School in China. Specialized pages. Do more. Centennial Campus. So many great stories over there. Maybe set up an engineering blog. Get beat writers to regularly cover CALS and

Engineering. Find out, “What are you doing that’s cool?” Get beat person to have a beer with a dean or something to establish a positive working relationship on a regular basis.

Patrick said the staff should go where the population is. CALS. How great would it be to have an editorial board meeting with a rep from various colleges. Get them to buy in to the paper. But Nancy said to be cautious about bringing visitors to budget meetings. Make sure the expectations are clear. They’ll be intimidated by vocabulary, etc.

Andrew said he enjoyed it when there was something different in the paper. He liked reading about stuff going on in different colleges. He encouraged staff to dig deeper for interesting stories.

Sources: Focus on quality of sources. Get better sources. Don’t just get people on the street that don’t know anything. Use the NCSU experts list. Ask the people on the list for the names of students with expertise in various areas. Make connections with folks. Use news services. Yes, they have an agenda. Yes, they push stuff. No, you don’t need to make them happy, but they can serve as a resource for you. Establish a rapport with handlers of various officials, including schedulers, receptionists, and secretaries. Play politics.

Nancy said she noticed a pretty good breadth of coverage in the paper. She noticed, for example, in [SG story on Lock Whiteside](#) that it wasn’t clear what he did to get impeached. Make it clear to the reader. Definitely needed work with copy editors.

Spencer said he liked what he was reading about politics. He said he liked the random stories too.

Andrew said one of the science and tech stories about different types of bottled water stood out. Engineers are partial to this kind of stuff. He’d like to see more tech articles. He also suggested using resources like [stumbleupon.com](#) to increase Web presence of the paper.

Ben said the election was going to be a rare opportunity. He liked the coverage except [story about Michelle Obama](#). He wanted to know what she said and that wasn’t in story.

DEC. 5, 2007

Present: Patrick Clarke, Ben McNeely; Jose Picart; Anna Rzewnicki; Andrew Williams; Nancy Wykle; Josh Harrell, Technician editor; Saja Hindi, news editor; Clark Leonard, sports editor; Maggie Luckadoo, features editor; Bradley Wilson, adviser

The meeting began at 7:05 p.m.

Jose Picart began by saying how much he enjoys the paper. “I think it’s a fabulous paper,” he said. It said the writing was great, he liked the layout and that they appear covered things readers were interested in. He said he wished the paper had more diversity on its pages.

Anna Rzewnicki, who said she had been the editor of a small newspaper in rural Nebraska, said that as a communications director, she often spent time looking to find mentions of students from her college in the paper. She appreciated the identification of students by name, grade

and major. It gives readers understanding of the source's background. It's helped me as a reader. She said she really liked the pull out boxes, sidebars, details, etc. On one early issue, she said she was confused by an "In the Know" that only had one item. Made more sense when there were multiple short-reads in that area. She liked page 2 and said it's important to categorize items.

She said she thinks it's good to use faculty as expert sources. However, if she gets phone calls at 5 p.m. looking for an expert source, they may not be easy to find. "The faculty aren't always sitting around at 5 p.m.," she said. It's important to plan ahead.

She also stressed how important it is to call back to get quotes clarified. She acknowledged that newspapers do not, ever, send a story to a source to be read before publication, however, a reporter should be good enough to know when they don't understand something and should call back to verify information. It helps the paper's credibility. Know how to interview. Know how to take notes. Faculty may not want to talk to the media because they've been burned. Technician reporters should help the experience with the media be a credible one.

Crop photos a little better. Make sure cartoons are readable. Good balance of stories with stories on greater community, school stories, etc. Some phrasing was a little strange with some of the writing.

Ben McNeely said, "Y'all have great ideas. The energy is there. The talent is there. You need to work on execution." He stressed that the paper just doesn't quite have polish, especially in the little things, and some big things.

He cited as an example the childcare story on page 1, a story he said fell short. He said the headline, which mentioned "administrative apathy" was close to being libelous. The story never proves it. The issue was students with children and lack of access to effective childcare. The story never said how many students were affected, how many single parents have children and lacked credible sources. Have students had problems? CORRECTION: Brad Miller is actually a U.S. Congressman, not a "N.C. Rep. Brad Miller" as reporter in the story (and still inaccurate online). A story like this could lead to action. It's compelling. Photo doesn't fit the story.

Patrick Clarke said the photo doesn't fully identify the student.

Ben said a more compelling shot would have been to follow a woman with kids around. He suggested that childcare should have been the topic for "focused" rather than homecoming, "PR fluff."

Patrick said the whole concept of poor execution is a recurring theme. He cited as an example the Science & Tech piece on "Talking Turkey." He said that due to timeliness, that should have been page 1. The staff should spend time questioning content and placement during production, without getting so consumed in production.

Ben said the writing and reporting needs to get back to a focus on basics, namely developing relationships with University, colleges and Student Government. Get actual face time with people.

Saja said they are trying to start using beats next semester.

Ben suggested the staff should push beats, develop a rapport with your sources.

Anna said this would also help reporters develop knowledge.

Ben said it would help reporters gain an understanding of the politics on campus. He said reporters have to have the context. He acknowledged that reporters have to spend time on AP style, etc., but you must spend time on getting things in context. Reporting is the key.

Patrick suggested starting with the basics of reporting. You have the talent to do the writing. Develop your writing style. Good to see fewer bylines from top editors.

Ben said it is important for top section editors to be prepared when the big stories come down to write them but that it's good to train younger reporters.

The discussion turned to discussion of the incident on campus when an apparent noose was found in a building on campus in a bathroom stall. Andrew said he definitely read about it, and that anything he knew about it he got from the Technician. The newspaper he said did a good job of presenting the facts. He felt like he had a good understanding of the issue.

Nancy Wykle said the noose feature page was very effective. It was a powerful page that communicated instantly the issues and how shocking they were. It was handled well without being over the top.

Jose said the hatred "Focused" was well written with balanced viewpoints. It was good to note that University policies are not separate from law.

Nancy said the *Technician* is really a good paper. She said show knows how demanding producing such a product is on the time of students. She said she really enjoys the "Football Fridays." Quick and easy. Really inviting. Good for hard core and casual fans.

Headlines need work across the board. Odd phrasing. Bigger headlines. We're in the business of selling papers and getting people to read our stuff.

I found a lot of pictures of white guys.

Good story selection, everything from features to news to meetings. It gets a little lighter inside. Some photos are too static.

You try a lot of stuff that is exciting. At least you're trying it. "Boring is going to end up killing our business."

You do have a challenge in dealing with multiple elements on a page (page 1, 10/29/07). Take some time to mess around with pages. It takes some experience.

She said editing was pretty clear. You handle a lot of copy. She also liked the "nuggets" throughout.

Resources: [Testy Copy Editors](#) and [News Page Designer](#) Web sites.

Ben acknowledged that people are spending less and less time with newspapers.

Spencer said he enjoys the paper, but there is only a certain amount of cold, hard facts he can handle. He said he liked the “do it yourself” features. They were cost effective and interesting. He also noted that he didn’t live on campus and had to drive 35 minutes to get to campus so he appreciated the information on what is going on in the area.

Anna asked how the online edition was done. Laura said it’s basically a dump of the print editing done in the evening. Spencer suggested publicizing online subscriptions.

Anna then asked if the staff gets feedback from students. Laura said that they don’t get as much feedback on coverage as they’d like, but do get a lot of feedback daily on commentary in columns and editorials. Josh said there are responses to columns on a daily basis.

Jose said he would like to see more in terms of diversity and diversity activities on campus. “It’s something you have to be really aggressive with, and need to have connections with those communities.” For example, he asked if the *Technician* had anyone covering the Kwanza celebration downstairs tonight. Several hundred people dressed up and celebrating Kwanza. These kinds of events are going on quite often. He invited students to check out the [Diversity@NC State](#) Web site.

He said there were nice stories and nice photos in the paper, but that the staff could put some emphasis on forming relationships.

Ben said staff members need to get out of the building. Walk the bricks. Go in. Talk to people. Anna suggested doing “person on the street”-type articles. It gives young reporters practice talking to people.

Ben said it’s critical to train people to be good reporters. Train them to be journalists.

Patrick said in the spring semester, historically, the staff will produce its best work. Right after the MLK holiday in the spring, there are 6-8 weeks of continuous publication. The staff should have its best complete papers. Start worrying about the paper as a complete package. Nit pick. Strive for the next level in writing/design. Focus on alternative story forms. Communicate stories in non-traditional formats. Refine breakout information. Find a better way to communicate story in print and on the Web.

Nancy cited her experience at the [Virginian Pilot](#) where there is a big emphasis on alternative story forms. Every story over 6” has to have some form of break out. Reporters knew that was part of the expectations. Page designers got information together. At the Herald-Sun, she said that was part of emphasis, having a point of entry for every story. She said sometimes the normal newsroom hierarchy gets short-circuited with the reporter and designer working directly together. It’s helpful to have a conversation with copy editors and designers.

At the end, each person was asked to give the one thing they would advise the staff to focus on or one comment.

- *Nancy*: Beat structure
- *Jose*: I enjoy reading it. I don't always agree. I know the sacrifices you make.
- *Anna*: Beat system... Get to know your sources and the content you're covering.
- *Spencer*: Good job catching my attention. It's fun to find something I didn't expect.
- *Andrew*: Wide variety. It all relates to things around here. The more it relates to NCSU, the better. I do like to hear how all the sports teams are doing, not just football and basketball.
- *Patrick*: Have a little more fun up here. Set lofty goals for your first issue in January.
- *Ben*: Reporting. You are here to inform. The more you report, the more you have face time out there.

The meeting ended at 8:35 p.m.