

Grading Students in the Journalism Workshop Course

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There has been very little written about the publications workshop course in the journalism curriculum, a staple in many smaller programs that struggle to keep the newspaper and/or yearbooks sufficiently staffed. To provide teachers with greater information about what is being done across the country—and thus a better understanding of how they might consider changing their own courses—we conducted a survey of more than 500 college media advisers. The survey examined such matters as grade distributions, work required, grading criteria, and grading systems. Focusing on the issue of grading/evaluation, we analyzed the data and relay insightful comments from advisers about their strategies and misgivings about grading student work they often did not see until after that work had been published.

INTRODUCTION

While much attention has been paid to other journalism and mass communication offerings—news writing, copy editing, internships, public relations, media ethics, advertising and so on—one type of course has received little attention in the academic literature: the publication workshop course. Designed to give credit to students for completing work on campus media such as a student newspaper or yearbook, this workshop course (sometimes also called a laboratory course or practicum course) has had an interesting history. However, not much has been written about the publication workshop course, and the few references to it in the journals have focused on its prevalence and its effect on the independence of the campus press. The dearth of scholarship regarding the publication workshop course is troubling, in part because it is a

staple in smaller programs, but also because of the difficult nature of teaching and administering it. Quite simply, those who teach the class have little reliable information about how others across the country conduct similar classes. Perhaps the most difficult facet of the publication workshop course, evaluation of student work, has received virtually no attention at all.

In this paper we will try to fill that gap and provide information about evaluation methods used in the publication workshop course. We will examine grading scales, grade distributions, grading criteria, grading systems and the amount of work required. We will analyze data from a survey of more than 500 college media advisers and relay insightful comments from advisers about their strategies and misgivings about grading student work they often do not see until after that work has been published.

Keywords: grading, journalism education, newspaper, practicum, workshop

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LITERATURE REVIEW

How prevalent journalism workshop courses may be depends upon the survey methodology used and the year in which the survey was conducted. Estimates of the percentage of journalism workshop courses at universities with newspapers have ranged from one-quarter (Kopenhaver & Spielberger, 2000) to one-third (Kopenhaver & Spielberger, 1993; Spevak, 1977; Bodle, 1997), to 38.5 percent (Kopenhaver & Spielberger, 2008), to nearly two-thirds (Reuss, 1975). It should be noted that these articles deal solely with the newspaper publication course. Virtually nothing has been written about workshop courses for other media, such as yearbooks, magazines, broadcast or online publications.

The other main area of research devoted to newspaper workshop courses is its impact on the independence of the campus press. That attention is rooted, in part, in the problematic nature of evaluation of students. If there is an adviser or other academic person assigning grades related to work done for a student publication, there is always the concern that the power that accompanies grading will have a conscious or subconscious effect on the decisions made by editors and reporters. Regardless of the evaluation methods employed, students may be concerned that their grades could be lowered for taking an unpopular stance or making a decision with which the adviser might not agree. This may explain why Louis Ingelhart (1979), in outlining his 25 criteria for determining the independence of the campus press, specified that a truly independent newspaper cannot “grant course credits for work on the staff not awarded in a similar manner for work on commercial publications,” nor have a university adviser.

Professors at publications that offer course credits can turn to studies about other journalism courses to ground grading methodology in theory and research. One evaluation method used by classes with ties to newspapers is to have sources evaluate the work of the reporter. Weston (1981) sent a survey to sources quoted in the newspaper

published by his students in the workshop course, querying the person about accuracy in the story and the professionalism of the reporter. Thomason and Wolf (1986) also used surveys of sources quoted in the TCU student newspaper to help evaluate stories, although they cautioned that problems with surveys and sometimes faulty recollection of the sources “substantiated our conviction that these evaluations should not be used in grading.” Dodd, Mays, and Tipton (1997) also used an accuracy survey as a teaching and evaluation device for a class associated with the newspaper.

While little has been written about grading methods for publication workshop courses, the literature offers a good deal of information about the introductory news writing course, in part because it is ubiquitous—a standard early course at many schools, often sharing assignment types, textbooks, number of credit hours, and so on. Two common themes running throughout the early literature are that grading is both difficult and time-consuming. Saalberg (1975) believes grading is not easy because “no clear-cut criteria exist for distinguishing the excellent from the good, the good from the mediocre, and the mediocre from the poor story.” Stovall (1986) laments “grading writing assignments is one of the most difficult tasks that journalism and mass communication instructors face.” The sheer numbers in large journalism classes can make assigning and grading writing difficult, but not impossible, according to Bostain (1983). At schools with multiple sections of the introductory news writing course, grading standardization is also a concern (Blanchard, 1984). Garrigues (1980) takes an even more pessimistic viewpoint, as evidenced by his title “Five Proven Ways to Ease the Chore of Grading” and his subsequent tips on how to reduce the amount of grading workload.

One of the shortcuts he espouses is the use of a coding system (ex: “OQ” for Orphan Quote), a system also promoted by Holgate (1980) in a broadcast writing course. This coding system rebels in part against an approach that 30-40 years

ago was arguably more common: simply placing a grade on paper without specific comments. That the title of one article is “Be Specific When Marking Papers” (Lent, 1976) is testimony to the frequency of such practice. Several authors have outlined their own techniques for providing feedback that is more specific. Files (1984) suggests a detailed checklist, in which points are deducted in several different content and mechanical areas. Seeger (1986) also endorses the use of a checklist in a feature writing class, in addition to a coding system like those mentioned above.

One interesting evaluation strategy employed in a newswriting course that could find application for the journalism workshop course is the performance review. Cote (1992) suggests that performance reviews can serve dual purposes: to evaluate student work, and to better prepare students for the performance reviews they will face in their first year on the job.

The performance review, like the internship and accuracy surveys, can be used to involve those outside of the classroom in the evaluation process. For some teachers, however, the easiest and best resources for evaluation come from inside the classroom: the students themselves and their peers. In discussing evaluation in journalism courses, Masse (1999) recommends using student journals to help evaluate both a writer’s progress and a teacher’s effectiveness. Pitts (1988) used peer evaluation to provide more feedback to the writers and to allow peer evaluators to look at their own writing in a new light. Pasternack (1981) actually takes peer evaluation a step further, having his students place grades on their peers’ papers. He, too, noted the side benefit of the graders improving their own writing because of doing the peer editing and grading. Peer response has an even more lengthy history in composition studies, as evidenced in such textbooks as Bruffee’s *A Short Course in Writing: Practical Rhetoric for Teaching Composition Through Collaborative Learning* (1972).

Research on composition also has a more extensive history in using portfolios, a common

assessment tool used in journalism workshop courses. Burnham (1986) espouses using portfolios in the composition classroom, and many others, such as Clark (1993) and Anson and Brown (1990), note its value as a more valid assessment tool when conducting exit and entrance exams.

Primary-trait scoring methods, which look at individual aspects of writing, also can be utilized to evaluate journalistic writing. Burkhalter (1995), after noting the difficulty journalism teachers face in providing good feedback on and assessment of editorials, suggests the use of a primary-trait system to accompany a holistic approach when judging the quality of an editorial.

Finally, one evaluation and feedback technique employed in some introductory news writing courses is especially applicable to the publication workshop course: coaching. Steinke (1995) suggests an “absentee” coaching method for supplying feedback, assigning grades based on improvements, on the final copy of an article or at the end of the semester after writers have revised their articles. In an article that has ramifications for yearbook publication workshop courses, Schierhorn (1991) complains of the lack of teaching the process of writing in journalism and promoted the use of coaching methodologies in the magazine curriculum. McKeen and Bleske (1992) advocate an approach that combines coaching and the peer evaluation methods discussed above, by “coaching editors to coach writers.” By instilling a coaching mentality in the student editors, “future editors learn how to build confidence in writers and to create an environment of trust and cooperation in the newsroom.”

Addington (2006) also encourages the use of student editors in evaluation, mainly in the hiring and firing process. In “You’re Fired! A Study of the Best Practices for Evaluating the Job Performance of Student Media Staff Members,” he focuses evaluation on the termination process, noting that students are dismissed from their positions most often for absenteeism, failure to

complete work, plagiarism, and editorial content, in that order.

METHODOLOGY

To determine which of these methods were being used by journalism workshop teachers/media advisers, we considered case studies, interviews, and informal solicitations on the listsev of College Media Advisers, the largest group in the country of journalism educators working with journalism workshop courses. However, we believed that given the lack of broad-based, quantitative research about publication workshop courses, a full-fledged national survey was the best choice. We conducted a survey of more than 500 advisers of college newspapers and yearbooks. To reach our target audience, we used a CMA membership directory. From the more than 800 names, we eliminated those who did not indicate they advised a newspaper or yearbook, cutting the total of those surveyed to 555. Of those 555 sent surveys, 164 people returned them, for a 29.5 percent response rate. The data, while collected in 2004, remains very relevant today, as the problems faced in evaluating student work have changed little in the past several years. In addition, the percentages of universities offering the courses have remained relatively stable in the last decade, as evidenced by the 2000 and 2008 Kopenhaver and Speilberger studies.

Our survey contained 36 questions. Nine were demographic questions, which we used to separate out the data based on school type (private or public, two- or four-year) and student enrollment (five categories: under 2,000; 2,001-5,000; 5,001-10,000; 10,001-20,000; and over 20,000). Five additional questions were for those at institutions without for-credit publication workshop classes, and the remainder were for those at institutions offering a for-credit publication workshop class. Each of those remaining questions was split into newspaper and yearbook lines so that we might determine if there are meaningful differences between publication types.

RESULTS

Approximately 44 percent of survey respondents were from public four-year schools, 35 percent from private four-year schools, and 20 percent from public two-year schools. One respondent was from a private two-year school. Respondents were distributed fairly evenly across the size categories: 18.9 percent in the under 2,000 category; 17.1 percent in the 2,000-5,000 category; 18.9 percent in the 5,001 to 10,000 category; 21.3 percent in the 10,001-20,000 category and 23.8 percent in the over 20,000 category (See Figure 1).

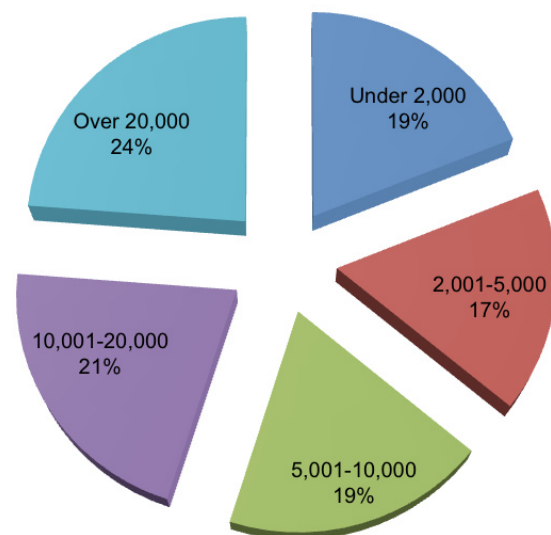


Figure 1. Distribution of schools by size.

Grading Scales

Exactly how advisers evaluate students in journalism workshop courses is of interest, because it sets the stage for the kinds of expectations these advisers have of their students and how students may respond to those expectations. The grading scale question gave respondents four options: Pass/Fail, A-B-C-D-F, Credit Only and Other.

Not surprisingly, the traditional A-B-C-D-F scale was the overwhelming choice for newspaper advisers at 82 percent. Thirteen percent indicated that they used the Pass/Fail scale to evaluate their newspaper staffs. “Credit Only” and “Other” each drew 2 percent of the responses.

On the yearbook side responses to grading scales were strikingly similar in preference for traditional A-B-C-D-F grading. It was used by nearly 86 percent of the advisers. Seven percent each selected the “Pass/Fail” option and the “Other” option.

Grade Distribution

The survey also examined grade distributions, looking specifically at the percentage of A’s awarded. The advisers’ responses to traditional grading were divided among five categories: under 10 percent, 10-25 percent, 51-75 percent, and over 75 percent. Again, the question was split for newspaper and yearbook adviser responses.

Responses from newspaper advisers clearly revealed a tendency toward awarding high grades. Four out of 10 respondents said they awarded A’s to more than three-fourths of their students. About two in 10 awarded A’s to half to three-quarters of their staffs. One of four awarded top grades to 26-50 percent of their students, while one of eight gave A’s to 10-25 percent. Just under 2 percent of newspaper advisers awarded A’s to under 10 percent of their students (see Figure 2).

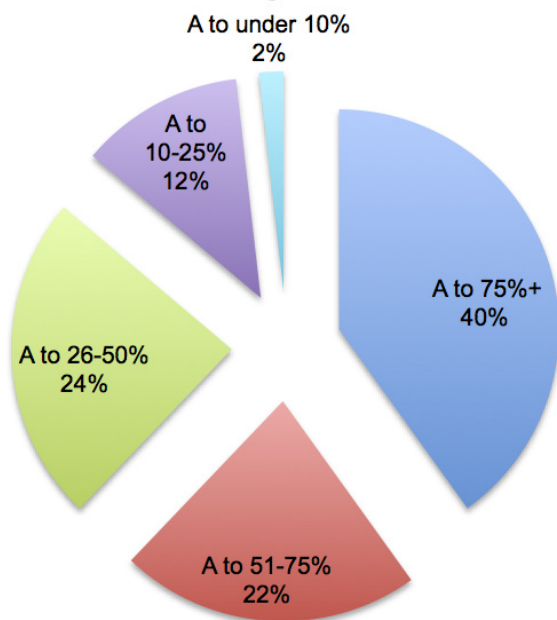


Figure 2. Percentage of A’s newspaper advisers assign to workshop students.

Yearbook advisers weren’t quite as generous with high grades as their newspaper counterparts. One in three respondents assigned top grades to more than 75 percent of their students. Only about a quarter reported A grades in the 51-75 percent range, and one-third in the 25-50 percent range.

Amount of Work Required

Another criterion examined was the number of stories, graphics/layouts, photos or ads that were required over the course of the semester. Newspaper advisers’ responses to the number of stories required, typically of their reporters, were put into four categories: more than 10, 8-10, 4-7 and 1-3. More than half required at least eight stories (see Figure 3).

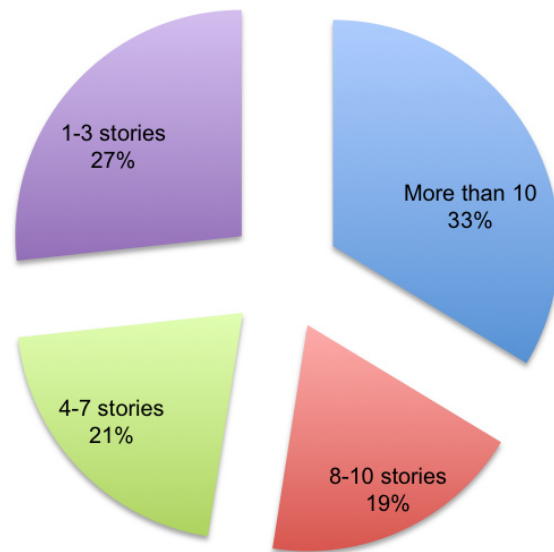


Figure 3. Number of stories required in newspaper publication workshop courses.

The minimum number of graphics/layouts that newspaper advisers required of designers used the same categories as indicated:

- 39 percent required more than 10.
- 17 percent required 8-10.
- 8 percent required 4-7.
- 38 percent required 1-3.

Business staffers were expected to secure the following number of ads:

- 59 percent of advisers required 8-10.
- 30 percent required 4-7.
- 11 percent required 1-3.

The minimum number of photos that advisers asked photographers to complete was as follows:

- 48 percent required more than 10.
- 18 percent required 8-10.
- 6 percent called for 4-7.
- 28 percent required 1-3.

In most instances, correlations of school size to work required suggested that the smallest schools expected more work while the largest schools expected less. For example, advisers at colleges under 2,000 were more likely than those at larger schools to ask reporters to write more than 10 stories, while advisers at schools in the 2,001-5,000 category tended to ask reporters to complete four to seven assignments. Most of the newspaper advisers from schools over 20,000 required three or fewer stories.

That pattern generally held for number of graphics required. However, enrollment had little bearing on how many ads student staffers were supposed to sell: Most schools expected 8-10. Likewise, photographers at schools of all sizes needed to produce more than 10 photo assignments.

Yearbook advisers had higher expectations for their writers:

- Two of five required more than 10 stories.
- One of five expected 8-10.
- Two of five required 4-7.

Seven of the 17 yearbook respondents said they have no minimum requirements for their students.

Additional Materials Required

Newspaper and yearbook advisers often ask their students to submit materials that go beyond the typical assignments they complete for their publications. We considered the following to be the

most likely and asked advisers to circle all that applied: Publication critiques; Individual art/story critiques; Final portfolio; Self-evaluation; and Other.

Responses from newspaper advisers show that more than four of five require a publication critique, and nearly three-quarters want individual critiques. A whopping 95 percent require portfolios, 94 percent self-evaluations and 73 percent other materials, such as story or publication critiques.

Given the size of most yearbooks and the corresponding task involved with critiquing them, only one of the 17 yearbook advisers in the survey required publication critiques. Six of 17 asked for individual critiques, seven required portfolios, three expected self-evaluations and two asked for other materials (see Figure 4).

Criteria for Grading

The next question dealt with the criteria used for grading student work; advisers were invited to circle all that applied from the four criteria: Meeting deadline; Quantity; Quality; and Other. Newspaper and yearbook advisers answered on separate lines.

All but one of the newspaper advisers said meeting deadlines was a key criterion for grading. Quantity was listed as a criterion for grading by 95 percent of the advisers. Interestingly, every respondent considered quality an important aspect of grading newspaper students. About 25 percent of advisers said other criteria played a role in grading.

All yearbook advisers responding to the question used meeting deadlines, quantity, and quality as grading criteria. Like their newspaper counterparts, 25 percent of the yearbook advisers said they used other criteria in grading student work.

Editor Involvement in Evaluation

The next question examined to what extent editors participated in the grading process. Available choices included None, Low, Medium, High and Sole Determiner.

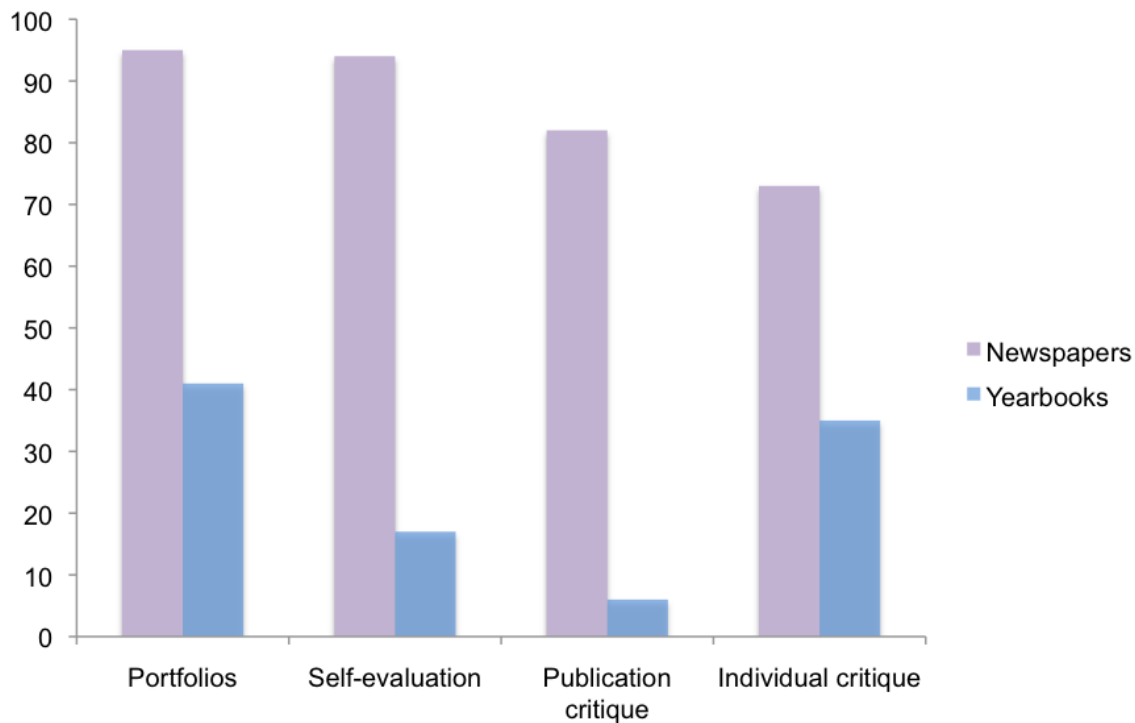


Figure 4. Percentage of advisers requiring additional materials in newspaper and yearbook publication workshop courses.

More than two of five newspaper adviser respondents said their editors did not participate in grading student staff. On the other hand, more than one of five allowed editors high participation in grading decisions. More than one in six gave their editors medium involvement of grading, while fewer than one of six gave editors low involvement. Only one of 20 reported that editors were sole determiners of student staff grades.

Yearbook advisers tended to invite their editors to participate in the grading process. Just over one of eight editors awarded staff grades without adviser input. Two of five editors had high involvement. Combined, three of five editors participated in grading, ranging from medium to sole determiner. One of five editors had low involvement, the same number who didn't participate at all in grading decisions.

As with newspaper editors, yearbook editors at the smallest schools had high participation with their advisers in awarding staff grades; editors at the largest schools were twice as likely

not to help determine grades as to be the sole determiners.

Grading System

Three options were offered for the grading system used by student publication advisers: Each Item Graded Individually, Final Portfolio and Other. Respondents also could offer comments.

More than two in five reported that they graded individual assignments. One-third preferred grading a final portfolio while the remainder used other methods.

Yearbook advisers, on the other hand, were evenly split between grading individual assignments and portfolios, with each represented by nearly two of five respondents. Like their newspaper counterparts, one of five yearbook advisers preferred other grading methods.

Separate Workshop Class for Editors

We sought to find if editors had classes separate from others on their staffs, as well as how they might be evaluated differently, if at all. Advisers

were invited to provide a narrative response to the latter. By a margin of more than three to one, both newspaper and yearbook advisers reported that editors were not in separate publication production/management classes.

Correlating this to school size is of interest. Schools with 10,001-20,000 reported no separate editor classes by a margin of 11 to 1. Smaller schools—those in the range of 5,000 students or less—were nearly six times as likely to have no separate editors classes. In schools with over 20,000 students, the lack of editors-only classes held at nearly two to one. Responses were nearly evenly split in the remaining category (5,001-10,000).

Newspaper and yearbook advisers offered a range of responses concerning separate editors classes. In lieu of a course, some advisers reported, editors must attend one or more of the following:

- Special seminar or workshop, as needed or requested
- Weekly meeting outside of class; editorial meetings
- Prior completion of a copy editing course
- Training workshop at beginning of school year
- Summer workshop, retreat or institute

Adviser Versus Grade-Giver Conflicts

Those who have advised student publications know the task involves several roles, including coach, counselor, supporter, and grader. In those settings where advisers award traditional letter grades, they can run into the problem of having the “grader” role conflict with those other roles.

Nevertheless, well over half said there were no conflicts. Sometimes that is because the newspaper is independent of the department. In other cases, advisers reported, they only supervise and evaluate student work, with faculty reading the evaluation forms and grading students. Another adviser noted that the pass/fail basis for the course, along with its being only one credit, generated few conflicts. Another adviser who taught

a pass-fail course bemoaned that there are “no consequences for sloppy performance. Grades do matter to students, so we are looking at returning to A, B, C, etc.” The use of a contract helps one adviser resolve conflict: “Grades are based on a contract designed by [the] student and adviser/professor, so [the] student is held to his/her own ‘deal.’ I have the same students in other classes. So they are used to the dual-role relationship.”

Yet, it is a challenge for some advisers, as noted in this response: “As adviser, I grow close to the students. It’s tough to award a C or even a D grade to a student I’m close with. But it happens.” Another wrote that it is “tough to balance quality/quantity. Even C students work harder here than [in] most other classes.” A third adviser explained that because practicum classes are more informal with more social interaction, “there is a disincentive to give one a poor grade.” A fourth shared a valuable insight: “It is difficult to separate the ‘job’ from the ‘class.’ My editors have to do more and are given a stipend, but they confuse the two and feel too much is expected for the class.”

Problems Grading Experienced Versus Inexperienced Students

Since many journalism workshop courses serve as both training and production grounds for their student publication, the range of experience among those enrolled can run the gamut. Therefore, advisers, too, must make their teaching, training, and evaluating run the gamut.

That said, the vast majority of respondents answered “no” to this question about problems in grading experienced versus inexperienced staffers. Many qualified that response with a variety of comments, such as “Have to hold experienced to slightly higher standards” and “I tend to be a bit easier on the newer students, easing them into the process. The experienced students usually know what is required of them.”

CONCLUSIONS

That the majority of respondents use traditional grading to evaluate their students is to be expected;

however, that so few programs have moved to pass/fail or credit is revealing. It may suggest that even though attaching traditional grades to such hands-on activities is difficult, it is not daunting enough to push advisers to the other alternatives, where essentially “either-or” choices tend to be simpler. With so few schools opting for alternative grading, it is no wonder that school size says little about such decisions, with the following exceptions: among those newspapers using pass/fail, the majority were at very small schools and that yearbook programs at the largest schools tend to spurn traditional grading.

The grade distribution data show that high grades are given in both newspaper and yearbook programs. This is understandable, given the milieu, but even more so as one takes into account the often close, personal relationships between advisers and their staffs: It’s hard to give low grades in such circumstances.

High grading becomes even more understandable when the amount of work students complete is considered, at least for newspapers. Across staff positions, with only one exception—graphics/layout—the majority of newspaper respondents say they demand much. When we apply school size to these results, though, we find that the smallest schools tend to expect more work while the largest expect less, which can translate into higher grades at the smaller schools. In short, the smaller the school, the smaller the publication staff. The smaller the publication staff, the greater the workload. The greater the workload, the more lenient a sympathetic adviser might be when it comes to assigning grades.

It is intriguing to note that adviser demands on students extend beyond production of the publications and include evaluative efforts, especially for those working on newspapers. A considerable majority of respondents ask students to complete publication critiques, individual critiques, portfolios, and self-evaluations. Given the prevalence of these requirements, it would seem that advisers appreciate that a good deal of their students’ learning and growth comes from

their deeper understanding of the quality of the product—the newspaper—and their own contributions to it. Those demands are much reduced for yearbook staffs, though no evidence is available to explain why.

We had presumed that asking about criteria for grading student publication work—meeting deadlines, quantity, and quality—would yield some preferences for one over another. Such was not the case. Respondents overwhelmingly cited *all of these criteria* as relevant to their awarding student grades.

How much input, if any, that editors have in grades for their staffs drew mixed results in the survey. Patterns that emerged suggest that newspaper advisers tend to consult newspaper editors in determining grades far less frequently than yearbook advisers consult yearbook editors regarding grades. For both publications, size had some bearing on results, with editors at smaller schools more likely to participate in grading than their counterparts at larger schools.

It’s valuable to note that most programs do not have separate workshop classes for their publication editors. However, that void often seems to be filled with alternative training activities, such as workshops and outside meetings.

All educators understand potential conflicts and concerns faced in awarding appropriate grades in the classroom; these pressures often increase for publication advisers. Nevertheless, the majority of advisers reported that they found no conflicts between their role as grader versus the other strategic roles they play (coach, counselor, and supporter, to name a few). Importantly, most claim no problem grading experienced versus inexperienced students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The biggest limitation of our study, outside of the limited literature about publication workshop courses, is our survey methodology. For one, while a 30 percent response rate is respectable for mailed surveys, naturally advisers who do not teach or have any experience with publication

workshop courses may have been less likely to return the survey, perhaps skewing the results. In addition, we used the College Media Association's directory instead of the more extensive Editor and Publisher Yearbook. While the contact information for the yearbook is not as reliable for reaching advisers and response rates would have been much lower—and the Yearbook contains many publications that are not college newspapers—the weakness is that not all college newspapers have an adviser who is a member of CMA, and CMA members may be more likely to be at schools with publication workshop courses.

Yet another weakness and potential area of study is the lack of data relating to schools that are accredited. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism in Mass Communication has stringent credit-hour limitations on its 109 member schools. Given those restrictions, it would be interesting to examine the prevalence of publication workshop courses at those institutions. The field could benefit from updated study with a 2013 survey that included a demographic question about ACEJMC membership.

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