

# **The Higher Ed Beat**

  

# **The Second National Survey of Higher Education Media**

**Conducted by the Education Writers Association**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What do media representatives think are the key issues in higher education, and how do the media cover colleges and universities? Late in 2005, the Education Writers Association (EWA) surveyed newspaper, radio and television reporters, editors and producers to find answers to these questions. The survey, funded through a grant from Lumina Foundation on Education, marked the second national survey (the first was done in 2002) in a long-term project with a goal of raising media awareness and knowledge of higher education issues. A total of 167 reporters and editors from 125 newspapers and other media responded to the 2005 survey.

The second survey provides a unique opportunity to examine how the media considers and covers trends in higher education.

- Stories written—More than 60 percent (up slightly from 2002) of the stories written in 2005 were about personnel/institutional issues, academics, and finance. Tuition, the rising cost of college, major campus renovations, and enrollment were written about the most. Grade inflation, class size, and faculty unionization were written about the least.
  - More stories were written about personnel and institutional issues (22 percent of the stories vs. 15 percent in 2002).
  - Fewer stories were written about faculty issues (8 percent vs. 14 percent in 2002).
- The following topics were written about substantially less in 2005 than in 2002:
  - Racial diversity.
  - Academics and sports.
  - Alcohol and drug abuse.
  - Teacher education.
  - Tenure or the lack of tenure.
- Most important issues—The survey asked respondents to name the five most important issues in higher education.
  - Finance-related issues were cited most often as most important, followed by academics, and institution/personnel issues. The order was the same in 2002.
  - Institution/personnel issues were cited as most important at twice the rate that they were in the 2002 survey.
- Stories written vs. importance of issues—How did the list of stories written stack up against what reporters thought were the most important issues? Six of the top 10 most important issues were included in the top 10 stories written, but there were major gaps between actual coverage and the perceived importance of some of the issues.
  - Retention/attrition/completion and remedial education were substantially under-covered issues, as they were in 2002.
  - Student housing, international programs/foreign students, and college rankings were substantially over-covered issues. The same was true in 2002 except for student housing, which was a new topic in the 2005 survey.

- Issues by circulation size—Did reporters from different size newspapers have different ideas about the top 10 important issues?
  - There were few differences of opinion about four issues: tuition costs, financial stress, retention/attrition, and campus culture. These were also dominant in the 2002 survey.
  - However, reporters from smaller newspapers focused more on alcohol/drug abuse and advice for high school seniors while reporters from larger papers focused more on academic freedom, affirmative action and the SAT.
  - Among smaller newspapers, crime and safety were among the top 10 issues in the 2002 survey, but these issues were not in the top 10 in the 2005 survey.
- Unwritten stories—What stories were on reporters' to-do lists?
  - Academic and financial issues were most likely to be found there.
  - Many of the unwritten stories were topics that require more research, such as transfer students, translating academic research into commercial business ventures, the return on investment from education; quality and effectiveness; and the role of community colleges in workforce development.
- Impediments to coverage—What are the roadblocks to more effective coverage?
  - Nearly all respondents cited the lack of time.
  - The roadblock cited next most frequently was difficulty in getting information from colleges. Why?
    - The top reason was the refusal of institutions to provide information. This was especially true of private colleges. There were also differences of opinion over news value between reporters and college information officers.
    - Problems with the public relations/public information staff.
    - The complicated bureaucracy of the institutions.
- Structure of the higher education beat—Does higher education tend to be a full-time beat or part of a larger one?
  - Three-fifths of the respondents said that they spend less than half of their time on higher education issues. Twenty-one percent said that they spend 51 to 90 percent of their time on higher education issues, and 20 percent said they spend more than 90 percent of their time on the topic.
  - Reporters were much more likely to spend over half of their time on higher education than editors.
  - Larger newspapers were much more likely than smaller ones to have reporters who spend more than 90 percent of their time covering higher education.
- Professional development.
  - Only 24 percent of the respondents attended any training, workshops or professional meetings about higher education in 2005.
  - Most of those attended sessions sponsored by the Education Writers Association or by the Hechinger Institute.

## INTRODUCTION

Late in 2005, the Education Writers Association (EWA) surveyed media representatives across the nation about higher education issues and the way colleges and universities are covered. The survey, funded through a grant from Lumina Foundation on Education, marked the second such national survey in a long-term project whose goal is to raise media awareness and knowledge of higher education issues.

The survey was sent to 1,171 journalists, including education editors, at daily U.S. newspapers with a circulation over 25,000, to EWA media members, and to radio and television outlets in the top markets. A total of 167 reporters and editors from 125 newspapers and other media responded. The survey was designed to provide better knowledge about the structure of reporting on the higher education beat, to identify factors that inhibit the coverage of colleges and universities, to determine issues reporters are writing about, and to learn what reporters and editors think are the most important issues in higher education. Follow-up interviews were conducted early in 2006 with a sample of reporters who had filled out the questionnaire and said they were willing to be interviewed. This second report on the higher education beat provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on changes in the beat during the last three years.

The survey results will be used to design seminars for news directors, editors and reporters from all media.

## HIGHER EDUCATION STORIES WRITTEN

The general focus of higher education coverage in American newspapers remained fixed on financial issues in 2005, but the emphasis shifted from institutional fiscal stress and budget cuts that dominated the headlines in 2002 to tuition increases and the rapidly escalating cost of attending college (see Table 1).

Tuition costs/rising cost of college rose to first place in stories written in 2005 from second place in 2002, while financial stresses/budget cuts fell from first in 2002 to fourth in 2005.

The shift seems predictable. According to The College Board, the average tuition and fees at public four-year institutions rose by 40 percent from 2000 to 2005.

On the other hand, most states had rebounded somewhat from the deep financial troubles of a few years earlier. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “State support for postsecondary education crept higher nationwide this fiscal year (2004-2005), marking a reversal from the year before, in which overall appropriations for higher education had fallen for the first time in more than a decade.”

As a veteran higher education writer at a major metro New England paper put it, “A couple of years ago, budgets at higher education institutions were under a real strain. To a certain extent, that has eased a bit.”

Some higher education reporters noted the skyrocketing costs, listened to their readers and responded. In some cases, they had extra incentive.

“Four-year colleges are so much more expensive and the process of applying for financial aid is so much more confusing than when I was going to school,” said a reporter for a 25,000-circulation newspaper on the California coast. “The fact that I had a high school senior who was looking at colleges meant I could relate to the confusion of parents.”

At her urging, her paper published a special report on the increasing cost of college and how people are dealing with it. “We tried to make people realize the growing amount of debt students are taking on just to complete college,” she said.

While there was some shifting in the rank of the top 10 topics covered in 2002 vs. 2005, there were many similarities. For example, among the 41 topics listed in the 2005 survey, the second most written about was major campus renovations, which ranked third in 2002.

Enrollment was another popular topic for stories written in the 2005 survey, ranking third (it was not a survey topic in 2002). According to the U.S. Census, colleges and universities enrolled 17,383,000 students in 2004, an increase of nearly 900,000 from 2002.

“For the two years I have been covering the beat, all of the schools around here have seen pretty dramatic enrollment gains. With so many of our readers sending their children to college

locally, that makes enrollment a big story for us,” said a reporter at a 25,000-circulation paper in southwestern Pennsylvania.

There were proportionately fewer stories about endowments in 2005. In the two years before the 2002 survey, the S&P 500 stock index had declined about 20 percent. However, since December 2003, the S&P index has risen substantially, nearly regaining all of the losses incurred since 2000.

Campus culture and campus life, as well as new programs and curriculum trends were also popular among reporters last year.

“I’m always looking for stories about campus culture and campus life and youth culture,” said an education writer for a small New Jersey paper. “Some of my story ideas come out of meetings, such as a new high-tech service a school decides to provide to its students. Then I go to campus and find students to talk about how that affects their lives.”

“We have five good-size four-year colleges here,” said a reporter for a 40,000-circulation newspaper in New York State. “Some are adding teacher education programs, which is a good story because of the teacher shortage here and elsewhere. Others are taking advantage of our proximity to the Hudson River and adding environmental science programs. We try to do as much as we can to visit the campuses and see how these courses are being attended and taught.”

Others struggle to cover campus life even though they want to. “It’s not that I don’t like campus life—I do,” said one Texas editor in charge of education coverage at a large daily. “I am aware we are not doing it... Given the size of our staff, there’s too much other news to do right now.”

Rounding out the top 10 were stories about college presidents, searches, endowments, fundraising, campus amenities, and features on faculty research and programs.

Topics that fell out of the top 10 in popularity since the 2002 survey were college rankings, international programs and foreign students, crime and safety, and racial diversity. Racial diversity ranked ninth in the 2002 survey but 20<sup>th</sup> in the 2005 survey. Five topics dropped 10 or more positions from the 2002 survey to the 2005 survey: racial diversity, academics and sports, alcohol/drug abuse, teacher education, and tenure/lack of tenure.

At the bottom of the list of stories written in 2005 were stories about pre-paid tuition/private savings plans, which ranked 37<sup>th</sup>, followed by tenure/lack of tenure, class size, faculty unionization/militancy, and lastly, grade inflation.

**TABLE 1: Rank Order of Higher Education Stories Written in 2002 and 2005, By Topic**

Topic	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Rank	Number	Rank	Number
Tuition cost/rising cost of college	2	95	1	123
Major campus renovations	3	90	2	110
Enrollment (item not in 2002 survey)	NA	NA	3	105
Financial stresses/budget cuts	1	96	4	103
Campus culture/campus life	NA	NA	5	102
New programs/trends in curriculum	4	79	6	95
College presidents/searches	11	58	6	95
Endowments/fund raising	6	77	8	94
Features on faculty/research/programs	5	78	9	82
Adding campus amenities	11	58	10	81
College rankings	8	69	11	72
Use of SAT/ACT tests	20	48	11	72
Student housing	NA	NA	13	71
Salaries/perks	18	48	14	70
Student loans and debts	19	48	15	68
Crime/safety/security	10	60	15	68
International programs/foreign students	7	73	15	68
Scholarships/merit & need-based aid	17	50	15	68
Advice for high school seniors/parents	24	44	19	66
Racial diversity	9	66	20	65
Campus activism	16	52	21	62
Academics and sports	11	58	22	61
Distance/online learning	15	56	23	57
Natural disasters	NA	NA	24	56
Retention/attrition/completion	20	48	25	54
Alcohol/drug abuse	14	57	26	53
Faculty gender & race issues	23	45	27	52
Business ventures/research parks	27	41	28	51
Application process	26	42	29	49
Teacher education	20	48	30	41
Academic freedom	31	32	31	37
Affirmative action	29	35	32	36
For-profit institutions	35	24	32	36
Remedial education	32	30	32	36
Health issues	33	27	35	33
Student gender issues	34	26	35	33
Pre-paid tuition/private saving plans	28	36	37	28
Tenure/lack of tenure	25	43	38	27
Class size	36	24	39	19
Faculty unionization/militancy	30	33	40	18
Grade inflation	37	17	41	16

To further analyze the topics of stories written in 2005, the topics are divided into six broad categories shown in Table 2. The subject categories written about most often in 2005 were personnel/institutional, finance, and academics. Each of these categories accounts for about one-fifth of the stories written. The proportions represented in several categories shifted from 2002 to the 2005 survey. In 2005, the proportion of stories about personnel and institutions rose considerably while the proportion of stories about faculty issues declined. Within the institution/personnel category, the topics most often written about were major campus renovations and campus culture/campus life. Those topics were followed in frequency by stories about college presidents/searches and adding campus amenities.

**TABLE 2: Higher Education Stories Written in the Past Year by Category**

Subject Category	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Institution/personnel	289	14.8	550	21.5
Finance	403	20.6	535	20.9
Academics	448	23.0	487	19.0
Students	365	18.7	453	17.7
Admissions	134	6.9	292	11.4
Faculty	273	14.0	216	8.4
Other	40	2.0	27	1.1
Total	1,952	100.0	2,560	100.0

Many papers covered the financial stresses in higher education, endowments, student debts, and rising tuition. These stories were almost as prominent as academic-related coverage, representing more than 20 percent of the topics covered. In the latter category, stories about new programs and trends in curriculum were most frequent. Other stories in the academics area had to do with college rankings, academics and sports, and distance learning.

Student-related stories made up almost 18 percent of the total. The topic cited most frequently in this category was student housing (a new topic in the 2005 survey), followed by international programs/foreign students crime/safety/security and racial diversity.

The strong showing in student housing stories seemed to be related, at least in part, to coverage of burgeoning college enrollments.

“Every campus in our area has built new dorms but they still don’t have enough space to house all of their students on campus,” said a reporter for a New York State newspaper. “This means more students are living off campus in apartments or condos, which leads to stories about traffic congestion, pedestrian issues and just over-crowding in general.

“Another part of the story for us is affordable housing. We are close to New York City and the cost of living here is very expensive, especially for students forced to live off campus.”

Stories about admissions made up 11 percent of the total, while stories related to faculty claimed about 8 percent. The top stories in these two categories were about enrollment and the use of SAT/ACT tests, as well as features on faculty members, research, and programs, and faculty gender and race issues.

## **MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The volume of stories written told only part of the story. The EWA survey listed 41 higher education topics in six broad categories and asked reporters and editors to name the five most important topics in higher education in 2005.

Table 3 shows the most important issues, by category. Respondents ranked finance and academics as the two most important issues, as they did in the 2002 survey. Issues involved with institutions and personnel ranked third in importance. In the 2005 survey, 19 percent of the respondents cited institution/personnel topics as most important. However, in the 2002 survey, only 9 percent of the respondents cited this area as most important.

**TABLE 3: Most Important Issues in Higher Education by Category**

Subject Category	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Finance	154	30.3	272	27.5
Academics	117	23.0	213	21.5
Institution/Personnel	46	9.0	189	19.1
Students	75	14.7	124	12.5
Faculty	60	11.8	89	9.1
Admissions	35	6.9	84	8.5
Other	22	4.3	18	1.8
Total	509	100.0	989	100.0

## COMPARISON OF STORIES WRITTEN VERSUS IMPORTANCE

News organizations didn't always publish stories that reporters and editors felt were most important (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

**TABLE 4: Stories Written Versus Most Important Issues by Category, 2005**

Subject Category	Stories Written		Most Important Issues	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Finance	535	20.9	272	27.5
Academics	487	19.0	213	21.5
Institution/Personnel	550	21.5	189	19.1
Students	453	17.7	124	12.5
Faculty	216	8.4	89	9.1
Admissions	292	11.4	84	8.5
Other	27	1.1	18	1.8
Total	2,560	100.0	989	100.0

For example, while about 21 percent of the stories written about higher education in 2005 dealt with finance, finance constituted nearly 28 percent of the items checked by reporters as most important issues. And while 18 percent of stories written in 2005 were about student matters such as student housing and crime and safety, these issues accounted for only about 12 percent of the reporters' top issues. The proportions of stories written in comparison with important issues were similar in the other categories. (The term "stories written" reflects the number of times reporters checked that topic on the survey. Therefore, a check mark on enrollment might have reflected several stories written on that topic).

How did the list of stories written in 2005 stack up against what reporters and editors thought were the most important issues? See Tables 5 and 6. Tuition cost and the rising cost of college was the #1 topic for stories written and it was the #1 issue of importance. While six of the top 10 most important issues were included in the top 10 stories written, there were some major gaps between newspaper coverage and the perceived importance of issues.

In the cases below, the issues listed were considered to be more important than the amount of coverage given. In other words, reporters think student retention and remedial education are well worth writing about, but, generally, they're not reporting on these issues. The rank can range from 1<sup>st</sup> as the highest and 41<sup>st</sup> as the lowest.

- Retention/attrition/completion (3<sup>rd</sup> in importance vs. 25<sup>th</sup> in stories written).
- Remedial education (14<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 34<sup>th</sup> in stories written).
- Affirmative action (18<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 32<sup>nd</sup> in stories written).
- Academic freedom (18<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 31<sup>st</sup> in stories written).

An editor at a large Texas newspaper offered her explanation for this discrepancy. "I may be intellectually interested in a subject like academic freedom or tenure and think it's important, but that doesn't necessarily mean it has presented itself as an issue here," she said.

In the following cases, the issues listed were considered to be less important than the amount of coverage given:

- College rankings (40<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 11<sup>th</sup> in stories written).
- International programs/  
Foreign students (38<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 14<sup>th</sup> in stories written).
- Student housing (34<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 12<sup>th</sup> in stories written).
- Use of SAT/ACT tests (30<sup>th</sup> in importance vs. 12<sup>th</sup> in stories written).

Many reporters are skeptical of the yearly college rankings of *U.S. News & World Report* and other magazines, but feel compelled to report them – or they say they’re forced by editors to do so.

Issues of national higher education policy are rarely covered or cited as being most important in this survey. Topics such as the massive Pell Grant financial aid program and the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act seem to fly under the media radar. Out of 155 reporters and editors who responded to the survey, only one mentioned the Pell Grant program.

Instead, local and state issues predominate. Simply put, local newspapers respond to local stories, and that affects their coverage of higher education. For example, the higher education writer for a major New Jersey paper spent much of 2005 chasing two major local stories—a Medicaid billing fraud scandal at the state dental school and a major reorganization of Rutgers.

“In years like this with big breaking stories, I concentrate on the news making the most noise,” she said. “Obviously a lot of my schools got ignored this year. Hopefully I hit them for the big stories when they needed them, but a lot of the trend and issue stories didn’t get covered.”

It is also interesting to note the very few times that community colleges were mentioned, given that the 1,157 community colleges in the United States enroll 6.5 million undergraduates, 46 percent of all undergraduates in higher education.

A mid-sized paper in Oregon stood in sharp contrast to this trend, even though there is a private four-year college in town and a public one 25 miles away.

“Three years ago, when we formed our education team...we made a decision to concentrate on covering the local community college because it’s a vibrant local institution and we thought we could hit a larger swath of the community this way,” said the editor in charge of the coverage. “I am very happy with our decision and I have never looked back.”

**COMPARISON OF STORIES PUBLISHED VERSUS MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES**

<b>TABLE 5: Stories Published, 2005</b>			<b>TABLE 6: Most Important Issues, 2005</b>		
Issue	Rank	#	Issue	Rank	#
Tuition cost/rising college cost	1	131	Tuition cost/rising college cost	1	91
Major campus renovations	2	115	Financial stresses/budget cuts	2	67
Enrollment	3	111	Retention/attrition/completion	3	55
Financial stresses/budget cuts	4	109	Campus culture/campus life	4	47
Campus culture/campus life	5	106	Major campus renovations	5	43
New programs/curriculum trends	6	101	New programs/curriculum trends	6	42
College presidents/searches	7	98	Student loans and debts	7	41
Endowments/fund raising	8	97	Enrollment	8	31
Features on faculty/research	9	85	Salaries/perks	8	31
Adding campus amenities	10	84	Racial diversity	10	30
College rankings	11	77	College presidents/searches	11	26
Student housing	12	75	Advice for HS seniors/parents	11	26
Use of SAT/ACT tests	12	75	Crime/safety/security	13	25
Student loans and debts	14	73	Remedial education	14	24
Crime/safety/security	14	73	Scholarships/financial aid	15	23
Int'l programs/foreign students	14	73	Endowments/fund raising	15	23
Advice for HS seniors/parents	17	72	Faculty gender & race issues	17	21
Salaries/perks	18	71	Affirmative action	18	20
Scholarships/financial aid	18	71	Alcohol/drug abuse	18	20
Racial diversity	20	70	Academic freedom	18	20
Academics and sports	21	65	Features on faculty/research	21	19
Campus activism	21	65	Teacher education	22	18
Natural disasters	23	62	Tenure/lack of tenure	22	18
Distance/online learning	24	59	Business ventures/research parks	22	18
Retention/attrition/completion	25	57	Distance/online learning	25	17
Alcohol/drug abuse	26	56	For-profit institutions	26	16
Faculty gender & race issues	27	54	Adding campus amenities	26	16
Business ventures/research parks	28	51	Application process	28	14
Application process	28	51	Grade inflation	28	14
Teacher education	30	44	Use of SAT/ACT tests	30	13
Academic freedom	31	39	Academic and sports	31	12
Affirmative action	32	38	Faculty unionization/militancy	32	11
For-profit institutions	32	38	Campus activism	32	11
Remedial education	34	37	Health issues	34	10
Health issues	35	34	Student housing	34	10
Student gender issues	36	33	Student gender issues	34	10
Pre-paid tuition/private plans	37	31	Pre-paid tuition/private plans	37	9
Tenure/lack of tenure	38	28	Int'l programs/foreign students	38	8
Class size	39	19	Class size	38	8
Faculty unionization/militancy	39	19	College rankings	40	7
Grade inflation	41	16	Natural disasters	41	6

## ISSUES BY CIRCULATION SIZE OF NEWSPAPER

The survey also looked at the most important issues by size of newspaper, dividing the field into four categories, from small (circulation 25,000 to 50,000) to very large (over 250,000). See Table 7 for the top 10 issues and their rank order. In the case of ties, the rank order is shown as the same for each issue.

Tuition costs and financial stress dominated coverage in all four categories, which is not surprising, given the number of reporters and editors who included these issues in their top five picks of most important issues. Two other issues, retention/attrition and campus culture, appeared in the top 10 list for newspapers of all sizes. Other than those four issues, however, no other issue found itself on the top 10 lists for every size of newspaper. Smaller papers (25,000-50,000 in circulation) were the only size group that listed alcohol/drug abuse and advice for high school seniors and parents in their top 10 most important issues. On the other hand, larger papers (over 100,000 in circulation) were the only size group that listed academic freedom, the use of SAT/ACT tests, and affirmative action in their top 10 most important issues. These latter issues often require more research and analysis, and could be more easily tackled with the greater resources available at the larger papers.

**TABLE 7: Top 10 Issues by Circulation Size of Newspaper**

25,000-50,000	50,001-100,000	100,001-250,000	Over 250,000
1. Tuition costs	1. Tuition costs	1. Tuition costs	1. Tuition costs
2. Financial stress	2. Financial stress	2. Financial stress	2. Financial stress
3. Student loans	3. Retention/attrition	3. Retention/attrition	2. Retention/attrition
3. New programs	4. New programs	4. Major renovations	4. Campus culture
5. Retention/attrition	4. Major renovations	5. Campus culture	4. Student loans
5. Campus culture	6. Campus culture	6. New programs	6. Salaries/perks
7. Salaries/perks	6. Student loans	7. Enrollment	6. Use of SAT tests
7. Major renovations	6. Racial diversity	7. Academic freedom	6. Affirmative action
7. Alcohol/drug abuse	9. Enrollment	7. Salaries/perks	9. Racial diversity
10. Advice HS grads	10. College presidents	10. College presidents	9. Enrollment

## THE UNWRITTEN STORIES

EWA also wanted to get an idea of the stories reporters wanted to write but, for whatever reason, never did. Every reporter, of course, has a to-do list, and higher education writers are no exception. The survey sought to determine the stories on those to-do lists and uncover the impediments to writing them.

The survey asked each reporter to list up to four stories at the top of his or her to-do list. Reporters listed 341 such stories. Not surprisingly, stories relating to academics and finance,

which often require time-consuming research and analysis, were most prominent. See Table 8. These two categories accounted for nearly half of the stories on the to-do list. The distribution of stories on the to-do list in the 2005 survey was somewhat different from that in the 2002 survey. There were slightly more to-do stories related to academics than finance in 2005. There were fewer stories about governance and more unwritten stories about students and institution/personnel than in 2002.

Academic issues were highest on the to-do-lists, accounting for nearly one-quarter of what might be called the unwritten stories. Remedial education and student retention dominated in this category. Some of the interesting future projects in this category included the transfer of students from two-year colleges to four-year institutions; translating academic research into commercial business ventures; the return on investment from education; quality and effectiveness; and the role of community colleges in workforce development. Clearly, these are issues that require a great deal of research and they are all time-consuming projects.

Among the interesting unwritten stories in the institution/personnel category were environmental compliance, scandals, lawsuits, and religious colleges. In the area of governance, reporters mentioned oversight, the “future of the university system,” disputes among colleges, and “money and politics rule with (our state’s) weak coordinating board.”

Asked what kept his staff from completing the unwritten stories, an editor in Utah summed up the answers of many: “The need for daily copy.”

**TABLE 8: “To-Do” List Stories by Category**

Subject Category	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Academics	43	20.8	82	24.0
Finance	48	23.2	79	23.2
Students	26	12.6	63	18.5
Institution/personnel	24	11.6	51	15.0
Faculty	18	8.7	27	7.9
Other	16	7.6	18	5.3
Admissions	8	3.9	14	4.1
Governance	24	11.6	7	2.0
Total	207	100.0	341	100.0

## IMPEDIMENTS TO GOOD COVERAGE

The survey also asked reporters about the roadblocks to effective coverage. A vast majority, over 88 percent, cited lack of time, especially in covering stories at the top of their to-do lists (see Table 9). In the 2005 survey, 140 persons responded to this question, and respondents could check as many reasons as they found applicable; thus, the columns do not add to 100 percent. The percentages shown represent the proportion of the 140 respondents who checked that item. Difficulty in getting information from colleges was the second-most cited impediment to good coverage, followed by lack of support from editors. Lack of reader interest was rarely cited.

**TABLE 9: Factors That Impede Coverage**

Reason	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Lack of time	80	87.0	124	88.6
Difficulty getting information	31	33.7	38	27.1
Lack of support from editor(s)	13	14.1	33	23.6
Other reason	11	12.3	31	22.1
Knowledge/information on issues	18	19.6	29	20.9
Lack of reader interest	5	5.4	7	5.0

The number of colleges and universities to cover can be one factor in the lack of time. At the extreme, one reporter said that he was expected to cover 25 community colleges, 60 public four-year colleges and universities, 10 private four-year colleges, and 5 for-profit institutions.

Others balanced higher education coverage with pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade coverage.

“I cover pre-K through 16,” said a reporter for a 90,000-circulation paper in Virginia. “The public schools are the most demanding part of the beat because there are always things happening there.”

A reporter at a 47,000-circulation newspaper near Los Angeles, who also covers kindergarten through college, said her readers have a clear priority: “K-12 is the stuff you have to do. People think K-12 is a must.”

She added, “I think for the most part, editors really respond to what readers say. A lot of parents and teachers call in about K-12 issues. We never hear from college students or professors and definitely not from college parents.”

The second most critical factor, cited by over a quarter of the newspaper reporters and editors, was difficulty in getting information from colleges and universities. In the 2005 survey, an open-ended question was added to learn more about the reasons behind this difficulty. Sixty-one comments were made in response (see Table 10). While a number of the factors are related,

the simple refusal to provide the information was cited most often (17 times) by reporters and editors. This intransigence is related to the “difference of opinion over news value,” which was cited 10 times. Private colleges were especially likely to just say no to reporters.

Sometimes the problem in getting information rested with the public relations/public information office. A lack of staff, an inexperienced staff, and an unresponsive staff all created problems for reporters, who made this point 15 times.

Finally, battling with the college and university bureaucracy was noted in nine instances. As one reporter put it, “The City Colleges of Chicago have a bureaucracy that makes the Chicago Public Schools look like a cakewalk.”

**TABLE 10: Reasons for Difficulty in Getting Information from Colleges**

Number of Times Cited	Category	Typical Comments from Respondents
17	Refused to give it.	“Privacy claims. I don’t believe them.” “Bunker mentality. A culture of secrecy.”
15	Problems with PR staff.	“PIOs who stall and roadblock requests.” “No calls back. No follow up. Inexperienced staff.”
10	Difference of opinion over news value.	“Reluctance of college officials to talk about the trouble.” “Concerns about how a college would be portrayed.”
9	Bureaucracy.	“Tracking down experts in a specific subject.” “There is no central clearinghouse for data.”
8	Private college prerogative.	“Private colleges don’t have to give you the data.”
2	Other reasons.	“Information not available.”

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION BEAT

A new question in the 2005 survey asked respondents to describe the percentage of their time spent covering or editing higher education issues. The majority of the newspaper respondents (59 percent) said they spend less than 50 percent of their time on higher education issues (see Table 11). Twenty-one percent said they spend 51 percent to 90 percent on higher education issues, and the balance (20 percent) reported spending more than 90 percent of their time on higher education issues.

**TABLE 11: Time Spent by Reporters and Editors Covering Higher Education**

	Number	Percent
Less than 50 percent of time	91	58.7
51 to 90 percent of time	33	21.3
Over 90 percent of time	31	20.0
Total	155	100.0

How much of their time did reporters spend on higher education in comparison with editors? Only about one-tenth of the editors spend more than half of their time on higher education, and none of the editors spend more than 90 percent of their time on the subject (see Table 12). In contrast, nearly one-quarter of the reporters said they spend more than 90 percent of their time covering higher education, and another fifth of them spend from 51 percent to 90 percent of their time doing so.

**TABLE 12: Time Spent Covering Higher Education by Job Title**

	Less than 50% of time		51 - 90% of time		Over 90% of time	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Editors	16	89	2	11	0	0
Reporters	74	56	27	20	31	24

The breakdown of time spent covering higher education correlates directly with the size of the newspaper (see Table 13). At the smallest newspapers, only about 7 percent of the reporters spend more than 90 percent of their time covering higher education. About two-thirds of reporters from these papers spend less than half time covering the subject. At these small papers, reporters seem more likely to be assigned to cover several beats. By contrast, at papers with over 250,000 circulation, more than one-third of the reporters spend over 90 percent of their time covering higher education, and half of the respondents from the largest papers spend more than half of their time covering issues related to colleges and universities.

**TABLE 13: Time Spent Covering Higher Education by Size of Paper**

% of time spent	25,000-50,000		50,001-100,000		100,001-250,000		Over 250,000	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Less than 50%	30	68.2	22	62.9	16	57.1	7	50.0
51 - 90%	11	25.0	6	17.1	5	17.9	2	14.3
Over 90%	3	6.8	7	20.0	7	25.0	5	35.7
Total	44	100.0	35	100.0	28	100.0	14	100.0

## COVERAGE BY REGION

The proportion of the time that reporters and editors spend covering higher education seems to vary somewhat by geographic region in the United States<sup>1</sup> (see Table 14). Over a quarter of the reporters and editors in the South said that they spend nearly all of their time (over 90 percent) covering higher education. In the West, about one-fifth of the respondents noted a similar use of their time. Fewer reporters and editors in the Midwest (13.8 percent) and Northeast (11.8 percent) reported spending nearly full time covering the subject. In the Midwest and the Northeast, over two-thirds of the reporters and editors said that they spend less than half of their time covering college and university issues.

**TABLE 14: Time Spent Covering Higher Education by Region**

% of time spent	West		Midwest		South		Northeast	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Less than 50%	18	52.9	20	69.0	27	50.9	24	70.6
51 – 90%	9	26.5	5	17.2	11	20.8	6	17.6
Over 90%	7	20.6	4	13.8	15	28.3	4	11.8
Total	34	100.0	29	100.0	53	100.0	34	100.0

## NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS COVERED

How many schools do reporters cover, and what are their types? The sheer number of institutions included in higher education beats can be staggering. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, there are over 4,100 colleges and universities in the United States. This includes community colleges and private institutions (see Table 15). Most respondents did not provide a response to the question regarding the number of institutions covered. Table 14 is based upon the responses of persons who did respond to the item, and represents 66 newspapers.

Reporters covered 743 institutions in 2005, including 256 public four-year colleges and universities, 34 percent of the total. In the 2002 study, respondents reported covering 550 institutions. About 30 percent of the institutions covered were private four-year colleges and universities, followed by community colleges, 27 percent. About 8 percent of the institutions covered are for-profit. Because most reporters assigned to higher education devote less than half of their time to the beat, the difficulty of covering individual institutions in depth becomes obvious. Without external resources and support, some reporters often have little time to get beyond press releases issued by institutions.

A complicating factor is the ongoing staff reductions throughout the newspaper industry, which have taken their toll on the number of education reporters. “Not too many years ago, we had one reporter for higher ed and another for K-12,” said one reporter at a major daily in the Northeast. “I am doing everything now, and that spreads me a bit thin.”

<sup>1</sup> The breakdown of states by region is located in the Appendix.

**TABLE 15: Number and Types of Institutions Covered by Reporters**

	Institutions	
	Number	Percent
Community colleges	199	26.8
Public four-year colleges and universities	256	34.4
Private four-year colleges and universities	225	30.3
For-profit institutions	63	8.5
Total	743	100.0

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nearly one in five of the reporters in the survey said they are handicapped by lack of knowledge of higher education issues. Given the breadth of coverage expected of reporters, many do not have the time or background to provide in-depth reporting of complex issues. These reporters need a better understanding of the issues and hints for gaining access to resources and information. This is especially true of those who must cover the entire education beat, pre-kindergarten through the bachelor's degree.

The survey found only 38 reporters attended any training, workshops, or professional meetings about higher education in 2005. This represents 24 percent of the reporters who responded to the survey. By comparison, 32 reporters attended professional development events in 2002 (23 percent of the reporters). Most said they attended seminars sponsored by the Education Writers Association or the Hechinger Institute, an organization housed at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Of the 38 who attended a workshop or professional meeting, 14 (37 percent) participated in an EWA seminar and 22 (58 percent) attended a Hechinger session. Among the other events attended were those sponsored by the:

- Associated Press Managing Editors.
- American Council on Education.
- New York State School Boards Association.
- Latino Education Summit.

## APPENDIX

### SURVEY RESPONSE

Surveys were mailed in November 2005 to 1,171 journalists, including education editors, at daily newspapers with circulation over 25,000, to EWA media members and to radio and television outlets in the top markets. This distribution of surveys was nearly identical to the mailing for the 2002 survey. The mailing was limited to papers with more than 25,000 circulation because they are more likely to cover higher education on a regular basis than smaller papers. The total number of dailies in the United States, according to *Editor & Publisher*, was 1,457 in 2005. The number of dailies with circulation exceeding 25,000 was 408.

Reporters and editors were invited to complete the paper survey and return it to EWA by mail or to complete the survey online. Of the 167 responses, 79 (47 percent) were mailed, and 88 (53 percent) were completed online. The proportion of respondents who used the online method increased substantially in the 2005 survey; only 29 percent responded online in the 2002 survey. The response rate for the survey was about 14 percent. A list of the newspapers and media organizations responding to the survey is shown at the end of the report. Because the response rate from nonprint media was too small to draw conclusions for that group, only data about newspapers are included in this report. About 85 percent of those who responded were reporters or editors at daily newspapers (see Table 16). This figure is similar to the 2002 survey.

**TABLE 16: Job Title of Survey Respondents**

Title	2002 Survey		2005 Survey	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<u>Newspaper</u>				
Editor	13	13.7	18	11.6
Reporter	92	82.0	132	85.2
Other	0	4.3	5	3.2
Sub-total	105	100.0	155	100.0
<u>TV/radio/other</u>				
Editor	3	25.0	3	25.0
Reporter	4	33.0	9	75.0
Other	5	42.0	0	0.0
Sub-total	12	100.0	12	100.0
Grand Total	117		167	

Of the newspaper responses, almost 37 percent came from papers with a circulation of 25,000 to 50,000 (see Table 17). Nearly a third came from papers with a circulation of 50,001 to 100,000, and nearly a quarter were from papers with circulation between 100,000 and 250,000. The balance (11 percent) was from the largest newspapers, with a circulation above 250,000. These proportions of newspaper respondents by circulation size are quite similar to the 2002 survey.

**TABLE 17: Newspaper Respondents by Circulation Size**

Circulation	2002 Survey		# Newspapers <sup>2</sup>		2005 Survey		# Newspapers	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
25,000-50,000	34	33.7	201	48.0	45	36.6	195	47.8
50,001-100,000	30	29.7	113	27.0	36	29.3	109	26.7
100,001-250,000	22	21.8	65	15.5	28	22.8	67	16.4
Over 250,000	15	14.8	40	9.5	14	11.3	37	9.1
Total	101	100.0	419	100.0	123	100.0	408	100.0

The EWA survey response was skewed toward larger dailies if one looks at the distribution of all daily newspapers by circulation in the United States as reported by *Editor & Publisher*. According to *Editor & Publisher* data for dailies with circulation over 25,000, nearly half of the papers have a circulation of 25,000 to 50,000. However, only 37 percent of the responses were from that group.

The fact that smaller dailies weren't as well represented as larger ones could have been a result of the survey topic. Larger papers are more likely to assign more reporters and provide more in-depth coverage of higher education. These papers also might be more likely to respond to the survey. However, in follow-up phone calls, several smaller papers indicated they provide significant coverage of higher education. Reporters at these papers said colleges in their towns play a major role in community life.

Papers in the traditional Southern states comprised the largest group in the survey, over one-third (see Table 18). Midwestern papers (from Kentucky and Ohio to North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri) made up the smallest share, 19 percent of the total. Papers in the Northeast (Maine to Maryland) and the West each represented 23 percent of the total. A list of the states comprising each region is shown on the following page.

In comparing the regional breakdown of the survey to E&P data for all dailies, the number of responses from the South was higher than the actual distribution of all dailies. Meanwhile, the response from the Midwest was quite a bit lower. Differences in the West and Northeast were less significant.

<sup>2</sup> Number of newspapers in the nation with circulation of 25,000 or more, according to *Editor & Publisher*, 2001 and 2005, respectively.

<b>TABLE 18: Newspaper Respondents by Region</b>								
	2002 Survey		# Newspapers <sup>3</sup>		2005 Survey		# Newspapers	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Northeast	20	19.8	258	17.6	34	22.7	256	17.5
South	40	39.6	441	30.0	53	35.3	436	29.9
Midwest	24	23.8	491	33.5	29	19.3	510	35.0
West	17	16.8	278	18.9	34	22.7	255	17.6
Total	101	100.0	1,468	100.0	150	100.0	1,457	100.0

## REGIONAL BREAKDOWN:

Northeast: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.

South: Virginia, District of Columbia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Tennessee.

Midwest: Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Missouri.

West: Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii, and Alaska.

<sup>3</sup> Number of newspapers in the nation, according to *Editor & Publisher*, 2001 and 2005, respectively

### Newspaper/Media Organizations Responding to Survey

Name of paper/media	City	State
Associated Press (2 respondents)	Boston Columbia	MA MO
Gannett News Service	Washington	DC
Freelance (Boston Globe, Prism Magazine) (2 respondents)	Washington	DC
Advocate (2 respondents)	Baton Rouge	LA
Albany Herald	Albany	GA
Altoona Mirror	Altoona	PA
Anniston Star	Anniston	AL
Arizona Daily Star (3 respondents)	Tucson	AZ
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Little Rock	AR
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Northwest Arkansas edition	Lowell	AR
Battle Creek Enquirer	Battle Creek	MI
Bellingham Herald	Bellingham	WA
Bonita Daily News/Naples Daily News	Bonita/Naples	FL
Boston Globe (2 respondents)	Boston	MA
Bristol Herald Courier	Bristol	VA
Catalyst Chicago	Chicago	IL
Charleston Gazette	Charleston	WV
Chattanooga Times Free Press	Chattanooga	TN
Chronicle-Telegram	Elyria	OH
Citizens' Voice	Wilkes-Barre	PA
City Paper <sup>4</sup>	Nashville	TN
Columbus Dispatch	Columbus	OH
Connecticut Post	Bridgeport	CT
Courier	Waterloo	IA
Courier-Journal	Frankfort	KY
Daily Breeze	Torrance	CA
Daily Press	Newport News	VA
Daily Press	Victorville	CA
Daily Press	Williamsburg	VA
Daily Progress	Charlottesville	VA
Daily Record	Parsippany	NJ
Dallas Morning News (3 respondents)	Dallas	TX
Dayton Daily News	Dayton	OH
Daytona Beach News	Daytona Beach	FL
Detroit Free Press	Detroit	MI
Eagle-Tribune	Lawrence	MA
East Valley Tribune	Mesa	AZ
Federal Way Mirror	Federal Way	WA
Florida Times-Union (2 respondents)	Jacksonville	FL

<sup>4</sup> Article "The" is omitted from media having it in the title.

Name of paper/media	City	State
Florida Today	Melbourne	FL
Fort Collins Coloradoan	Fort Collins	CO
Gazette	Colorado Springs	CO
Gwinnett Daily Post	Lawrenceville	GA
Hartford Courant (2 respondents)	Hartford	CT
Herald News	West Paterson	NJ
Herald-Standard	Uniontown	PA
Herald-Sun	Durham	NC
Herald-Times	Bloomington	IN
Hispanic Outlook (national)	Paramus	NJ
Honolulu Advertiser	Honolulu	HI
Houston Chronicle	Houston	TX
Houston Press	Houston	TX
Huntsville Times	Huntsville	AL
Journal Gazette	Fort Wayne	IN
Journal Inquirer	Manchester	CT
Journal News/Gannett	White Plains	NY
Journal News (2 respondents)	White Plains	NY
Journal Times	Racine	WI
Kenosha News	Kenosha	WI
Kitsap Sun	Bremerton	WA
La Crosse Tribune	La Crosse	WI
Ledger	Lakeland	FL
Los Angeles Daily News	Los Angeles	CA
Mankato Free Press	Mankato	MN
Messenger-Inquirer	Owensboro	KY
Minneapolis Star Tribune	Minneapolis	MN
Mobile Register	Mobile	AL
Montgomery Advertiser	Montgomery	AL
Morning News	Bentonville	AR
Morning News	Florence	SC
Morning News	Fayetteville	AR
News & Advance	Lynchburg	VA
News & Observer (2 respondents)	Raleigh	NC
News Journal	Wilmington	DE
News-Press	Ft. Myers	FL
News-Times	Danbury	CT
News Tribune (2 respondents)	Tacoma	WA
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal	Tupelo	MI
Oakland Tribune/ANG Newspapers	Oakland	CA
Oklahoman	Oklahoma City	OK
Oregonian	Portland	OR
Orlando Sentinel (2 respondents)	Orlando	FL
Patriot-News	Harrisburg	PA
Pittsburgh Tribune Review	Pittsburgh	PA

Name of paper/media	City	State
Plain Dealer	Cleveland	OH
Post-Bulletin	Rochester	MN
Post-Standard	Syracuse	NY
Poughkeepsie Journal	Poughkeepsie	NY
Press-Enterprise (2 respondents)	Moreno Valley Hemet	CA CA
Press of Atlantic City	Pleasantville	NJ
Press-Telegram	Long Beach	CA
Providence Journal	Providence	RI
Quad City Times	Davenport	IA
Rapid City Journal	Rapid City	SD
Reading Eagle (2 respondents)	Reading	PA
Roanoke Times (2 respondents)	Roanoke	VA
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle	Rochester	NY
Rock Island Argus, The Dispatch, The Leader	Rock Island	IL
Rumbo / Meximerica	Houston	TX
St. Cloud Times	St. Cloud	MN
St. Joseph News-Press	St. Joseph	MO
Salt Lake Tribune	Salt Lake City	UT
San Antonio Express News	San Antonio	TX
San Diego Union-Tribune (2 respondents)	San Diego	CA
San Francisco Chronicle	San Francisco	CA
San Gabriel Valley Tribune	West Covina	CA
San Luis Obispo Tribune	San Luis Obispo	CA
Santa Cruz Sentinel	Santa Cruz	CA
Santa Maria Times	Santa Maria	CA
Savannah Morning News	Savannah	GA
South Florida Sun-Sentinel	Ft. Lauderdale	FL
Springfield Missouri News Leader	Springfield	MO
Standard-Examiner	Ogden	UT
Star Gazette	Elmira	NY
Star-Ledger	Newark	NJ
Star Press	Muncie	IN
State Journal-Register	Springfield	IL
Staten Island Advance	New York	NY
Statesman Journal (2 respondents)	Salem	OR
Tampa Tribune	Tampa	FL
Times Leader (2 respondents)	Wilkes-Barre	PA
Times of Northwest Indiana	Munster	IN
Times of Shreveport	Shreveport	LA
Times of Trenton (2 respondents)	Trenton	NJ
Times Union	Albany	NY
Truth	Elkhart	IN
Tucson Citizen	Tucson	AZ
Tulsa World	Tulsa	OK

Name of paper/media	City	State
Ventura County Star (2 respondents)	Ventura	CA
Virginian-Pilot	Norfolk	VA
Washington Examiner	Washington	DC
Washington Post	Washington	DC
Winston-Salem Journal	Winston-Salem	NC
NPR National Public Radio	Washington	DC
KMOV-TV	St. Louis	MO
KOLR-10 News	Springfield	MO
KPLC-TV	Lake Charles	LA
KWCH-TV	Wichita	KS
WCJB-TV	Gainesville	FL
WITI Fox 6	Milwaukee	WI
WJCL-TV	Savannah	GA
WKRC-TV	Cincinnati	OH
WTSP	St. Petersburg	FL
WTVM-TV	Columbus	GA