

Editing University Research Magazines: A View from the Top

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Labors of love and learning, university research magazines soldier on, usually with part-time staffs and freelance contributors, to convey to the larger community the accomplishments and discoveries of their institutions. The magazines range from those devoted solely to research in science or medicine to those charged with covering all research undertaken by a college or university. And many such magazines may see themselves as their universities' "flagship for a convoy of improved and heightened communications devices and techniques", as Joseph Aoun, dean of the University of Southern California College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, put it in his campus's fall 2002 issue.

What is it like to edit a university research magazine, and how can an editor best succeed in this venture? Nine veterans of the process shared experiences, observations, and advice.

Staffs, Editors' Preparation, and Approval Processes

All the editors polled were members of the University Research Magazine Association (URMA), but most count their duties as magazine editors as just part of their overall job. The magazines typically have small staffs, ranging from one to three professionals, who, again, devote only part of their time to their magazines. These editors and writers are usually supplemented by other university personnel who contribute articles, artwork, and proofreading services and by freelancers who sometimes provide the same services.

Rosanne Spector, editor of *Stanford Medicine*, has no full-time staff: "About five staff members of the Stanford University Medical Center Office of Communication

and Public Affairs contribute to the production, spending 10% or less of their time on the magazine. Their tasks range from writing stories to proofreading to mailing and delivery."

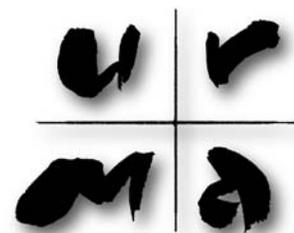
Dennis St Germaine, manager of publications and editor of *Report on Research* at the University of Arizona, says, "The magazine staff is me (although the magazine is not my only job), plus whomever I can wheedle a story from. I pay supplemental pay to in-house writers and have a few freelancers as well."

With full responsibility for all aspects of his institution's magazine, published twice a year, St Germaine edits all stories, writes some, contracts with freelancers for writing and artwork, coordinates with designers, supervises prepress and press work, and then coordinates the mailout.

Most of the editors interviewed had a little more help in getting out their publications. For example, Jeff Worley, editor of *Odyssey* at the University of Kentucky, has a more typical staff of three—an associate editor and an office director in addition to him—and uses a freelance photographer and a freelance designer.

Melissa Blouin, science and research communications manager at the University of Arkansas, has a bigger staff, including two science writers, a photographer, a lead designer, and three other designers. However, the magazine is "only a fraction of our jobs", she says. And Neil Caudle, assistant vice chancellor for research and director of the Office of Information and Communications at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, has six full-time professionals and three graduate assistants, although "only a fraction of their time is devoted to our magazine, *Endeavors*."

Conrad Storad, director of the Office of Research Publications at Arizona State University and editor of *ASU Research* magazine, says, "in essence, using standard publication titles, I function as many people rolled into one. I am the executive editor, managing editor, copyeditor, senior writer,



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and circulation and marketing manager", although he does have the help of an art director-designer and a science writer.

The different editors came to their positions by disparate career paths. Most, however, have master's degrees—usually in journalism or science writing, although one is in creative writing (poetry). And most have worked in other media or public-relations positions before taking on university research magazines.

Tiffany Inbody, editor of *Advance* at Texas A&M University (and designer of *Science Editor*), has learned much of what she knows on the job. She also holds a master's degree in science and technology journalism and gives much credit to workshops attended at annual URMA conferences.

Worley says, "I have no formal training as a science writer whatsoever. I do have an MFA in creative writing. As an undergraduate, I took only one science class and never took a journalism class. However, I have done various types of editing for the past 25 years, including editing of scholarly papers, friends' theses and dissertations, fiction and poetry manuscripts, and technical articles."

In contrast, Blouin has an undergraduate degree in chemistry and a master's in science communication from the University

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of California, Santa Cruz, and worked for 6 years as lifestyles editor for a newspaper.

Publication lengths varied from 32 to 52 pages per issue. The number of issues per year ranged from one to three; most respondents publish two issues each year—one in the fall and one in the spring. Reported preparation times, from concept to publication, ranged from 3 to 6 months, and editors who published three issues per year sometimes found themselves working concurrently on separate issues.

Most of the editors reported being subject to some type of outside approval process: Usually senior administrators (such as a vice president for research or a vice chancellor for university relations) or an editorial advisory committee approved initial story lists, and sources vetted stories for accuracy. But several editors stressed that they retained final editorial control of the magazine.

Producing the Magazine

Blouin presents the following timeline for producing her institution's magazine: 6 months in advance, meet to discuss story ideas, outline various parts of the magazine, and plan interviews and images; 3 months out, receive drafts of stories and meet with designer and photographer to discuss imagery and layout; 2 months before production, edit copy; 1 month before, send all edited material and photographs to designer for layout.

Caudle notes a similar timeline, spanning about 4 months: After an initial story-planning meeting where assignments are made, stories are due in about 6 weeks (10 weeks before the publication date). Once the stories arrive, 3 weeks are spent in editing them and finalizing art; then come 3 to 4 weeks in design, 1 week in prepress production, and 2 to 3 weeks at the printer, including two to three page proofs and a press check.

Inbody's editorial process begins in late summer for spring magazine publication. First, communications professionals from each college in the university meet to discuss story ideas. Stories—approved by their deans and, usually, written by the commu-

nicators—are due in the fall, when editing begins. Artwork and edited copy go to the designer in January, and the issue goes to the printer in early March. “The greatest challenge in putting out a university research magazine is the shortage of hours in a day”, Inbody says. “We could not produce *Advance* without the help of the writers on campus.”

Tips for Successful Research Magazines

The editors had a variety of tips for those who may find themselves suddenly in charge of bringing a research magazine to life:

- Know your university and its research mission.
- Cultivate an open mind and a powerful appetite for new ideas. (Michael Hagelberg, art director of publications at Arizona State University, uses a broad knowledge base to “find and produce high-quality images within limited budget, time, and other resources to craft a result that is creatively satisfying and a worthwhile contribution in its content and purpose.”)
- Work closely with relevant administrators, such as the vice president for research, and be mindful of “university politics”.
- Set editorial policies at the beginning, giving the editor final authority on all content, and have a thick skin, recognizing that one can't please everybody. (“Scientist-faculty sources in each story have one opportunity to review final copy for technical and scientific accuracy only. That is our only approval process. Administrators stay out of our way. We have total creative control of our published products, but we do not abuse the creative freedom at our command”, Storad says. “However, be ready to fight for what is right, and remember: the very best research magazines are not published by committee. Someone has to have the power to make the final decisions, and that someone should be the editor.”)
- Identify main authors, start strong with “story ideas that dig deep”, and make

assignments that match authors' interests with story ideas.

- Cultivate good time-management skills and learn to stretch typically strict budgets. (Kelli Whitlock, who edited *Perspectives* magazine at Ohio University before recently leaving for a position at the Whitehead Institute, lists “doing a quality magazine with a tight budget” as one of the greatest rewards of her former job.)
- “Learn how to write, learn to love the language, and learn how to listen to sources”, says Worley—and expand your editorial skills to become conversant with photography, illustration, graphic design, and print production.
- Hire a proofreader.
- Create and maintain your own mailing list to help ensure that it is complete, accurate, and up to date. (St Germaine lists doing this as both his greatest challenge and his greatest reward.)
- Join URMA. (“I have attended the URMA meeting each year since 2000”, Inbody says, “and this association is amazing in terms of the support and guidance available to anyone working on a research magazine.”)
- Recognize how fortunate you are to work on a university research magazine, and have fun with it. (“It's an opportunity as well as an obligation to share university research with the public”, Inbody says.)

As those interviewed made clear, editing a university research magazine has both challenges and rewards. Worley seemed to speak for many when he concluded that “[the greatest challenge is] always the same: translating scientific jargon into lay language so that our readers can understand the research being done here—and why it's relevant and important. The greatest reward is publicizing excellent, important work being done here and knowing that we have done our best to make this work understandable, interesting, exciting, and (we hope) entertaining.” 📌