Our purpose

Thirty-four years ago, the Los Angeles Times launched an innovative training program for journalists called Metpro — the Minority Editorial Training Program. Originally started as a way to build a pipeline and provide opportunities for journalists of color, the program has since changed to include journalists from diverse backgrounds.

In recent years, as The Times newsroom dwindled, the program became one of the only ways to get hired at the newspaper. The release of the Guild pay equity study confirmed what many who graduated from the program assumed: graduates of the program have experienced depressed wages. Some former Metpros say they feel like second-class journalists in the newsroom.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the program and evaluate how it has operated over the past three decades. We conducted a survey of Metpro graduates from the past 20 years and received 50 responses.

We hope this report will provide context and guidance for newsroom leaders moving forward. To be clear: The Times should continue the Metpro program. The Metpro program has brought much talent to The Times. Anyone who walks through the newsroom will see current and former Metpros throughout almost every department. Former Metpros have played crucial roles in some of the Times’ most important, award-winning work, including coverage of the 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino.

But Metpro cannot continue in its current form. To become the prestigious job training fellowship it was designed to be, the program requires a significant overhaul. An improved, well-structured Metpro program will allow The Times to continue hiring — and retaining — motivated, ambitious journalists who are crucial to the newspaper’s success.

This report was written by a subcommittee of the Equity and Diversity Committee of the Los Angeles Times Guild.
Program history

The Metpro program began in 1984 as a way to increase the number of minority journalists in the Los Angeles Times and Newsday newsrooms, both owned at that time by the Times-Mirror Co. In 1983, a year before the program began, non-white employees comprised only 5.6% of daily newspaper employees nationally, according to the Society of Newspaper Editors, which conducts an annual survey on race in newsrooms. By 2001, that figure had risen to 11.6%.

Frank Sotomayor, who was an assistant director of the program from 2001 to 2005, said then-Metro editor Noel Greenwood (who would go on to serve as deputy managing editor) was looking for ways to “grow the pipeline” of journalists of color. Starting in the 1970s, UC Berkeley hosted a Summer Journalism Program run by the Maynard Institute. According to Sotomayor, Greenwood liked the program and thought The Times could conduct similar training in-house.

The program was originally two years long, with the first year spent training in the L.A. Times newsroom. Metpro trainees reported on mock press conferences and took Associated Press style quizzes. They received varied training from seasoned journalists. The fellows met with representatives from the L.A. County coroner’s office, the LAPD and the District Attorney. After the first six weeks, fellows were assigned a city to cover. The goal was to give fellows a crash course in the inner workings of local government.

The paper provided housing for fellows and the training was expected to be rigorous. The selection process occurred over several rounds of interviews and at one point potential fellows were flown to Los Angeles for an in-person interview.

During their second year, fellows were placed in Times-Mirror newspapers across the country, including the Los Angeles Times, and guaranteed at least one year of employment.

A full-time director and assistant were dedicated to the program, providing one-on-one editing and mentoring.

A 1999 advertisement for Metpro touted it as a program that offered training to the nation’s “most talented entry-level journalists” and combined “classroom and on-the-job experience in an intensive, individualized course of instruction.”

Some editors in the newsroom were skeptical of the program, and the newspapers that participated wanted candidates who would perform well in their newsrooms once placed. This kept the program rigorous and selective, as program directors were tasked with making sure the fellows developed their skills. At the same time, this had the effect of changing the pool of candidates selected — the program began recruiting candidates from minority backgrounds from Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale. Even to be named as a finalist for the program — in 2000 there were only 10 finalists from across the country — was a big deal.
As ownership of the newspaper changed, so did the program. Training was shortened to six months with a nine-week education period with various workshops from newsroom veterans. As the newsroom lost veteran reporters, the program was tasked with filling vacancies and lending extra bodies for large news events. Former director Randy Hagihara said that it became difficult to train Metpros as he didn’t want to deny fellows the chance to cover big breaking stories.

Even as the program was truncated, there were regular evaluations — about every six weeks. And after the “training” portion was over, fellows were moved from the “Metpro-Intern” job title to Reporter I with a bump in pay.

Over the years the program has shifted, and broadened to include journalists from diverse backgrounds. This has allowed program directors to recruit candidates who speak languages such as Farsi and Arabic. It has also meant that the program now includes white journalists.
The current Metpro program, and its challenges

The Metpro website presents the program as an opportunity for recent college graduates and journalists with limited experience. Once accepted into the program, however, Metpros find the program lacks structure, discipline and leadership. The program has regressed from one that invests in young journalists to one used to exploit members of under-represented communities.

Training — And Lack Thereof

According to the website:

“Each participant can expect:
● Formal mentoring.
● Frequent performance evaluations and coaching.
● A thorough grounding in journalism ethics and relevant laws pertaining to libel and privacy.
● An opportunity to cover communities, including cops, courts and city councils.
● A thorough understanding of public records and research tools.
● An opportunity to prepare stories for the Web and build digital skills.”

This is a highly questionable claim. The training portion of Metpro has diminished in recent years, to the point where many trainees feel they are not receiving sufficient training before working.

Earlier Metpro participants described a robust training period that lasted six months to one year. A Metpro participant who completed the program more than 10 years ago noted in the survey: “I was part of the METPRO class when it was run by Efrain Hernandez and Frank Sotomayor. The first couple of months were highly structured, with van tours of the L.A. region, in-person chats with newsmakers like Sheriff Lee Baca and LAPD Chief William Bratton, tours of the court system, and the coroner’s office. We would have in-depth chats with veteran Times people to get ideas on stories and learn how they approached their work. We would also be assigned cities to cover, and be allowed a month to develop stories out of a particular neighborhood or intersection and be personally coached by Efrain or Frank on that story. Then we were given six-week rotations in various departments.”

Those who have gone through the program in more recent years say there is little to no training. Survey results show that about one-third of respondents received “sporadic and unpredictable” training. About 28% said their training lasted less than a month. Another 7% said they received no formal training.
Since the program is marketed as a training program, the erosion of this element is of concern. Many who came to The Times through Metpro in recent years, having been promised a training program, came to believe that they were sold a bill of goods. Training was limited to a few workshops, some of which was software training that would be given to any incoming employee. Participants were quickly pushed into the newsroom to “sink or swim.” As one Metpro noted in their survey: “The program was described as a fellowship that would teach me how to do quality journalism of the sort the LA Times was known for. But the training sessions were poorly organized and infrequent. When I was given opportunities to work on LA Times work, I was negatively judged because I wasn't already doing LA Times quality work. There was no room to learn, yet we came in unprepared. Editors and reporters traded gossip about how well we were doing, which we inevitably became aware of.”

Survey results suggest that the erosion in the training portion began about 10 years ago. That is likely, in part, because of how little time editors and reporters have to spend with Metpros. Our newsroom staff has continued to shrink, only adding to the responsibilities placed on staff. Metpro no longer has a full-time director, although the program has seen a recent staffing change. On August 10, it was announced that Steve Padilla, enterprise editor for Foreign and National, would serve as Column One editor and take on overall responsibility for the MetPro program. Previously, Tracy Boucher was overseeing the program while also running the Times intern program and overseeing contest entries, among other responsibilities.

Additionally, respondents expressed frustration that what’s left of the Metpro training component is largely focused on being a reporter even as the program recruits for a variety of newsroom jobs. (This year’s Metpro class has 10 fellows, of whom only three are reporters. The rest work in photography, design, video and other roles)

**Poorly Defined Roles**

Metpros are frequently referred to as “interns.” The way the Metpro program is currently structured contributes to that idea. From an editor’s perspective, having an intern and having a Metpro can feel similar: you do not get to select them, you get them for about 10 weeks, you try your best to assess their skills and help them grow, and then they’re gone.

This year’s Metpro class includes three reporters, two photojournalists, one video journalist, one copy editor, one designer and two data journalists (one assigned to the graphics desk, one assigned to the data desk).

Many Metpros bring some local, regional and even national experience to their jobs, yet are often treated like college students with no professional credentials.

Moreover, without formal mentors, Metpros are left to navigate the Los Angeles Times newsroom alone, which can be particularly difficult for people of color in a workplace that is predominantly white.
Stalled Pay

Metpro compensation has not kept up with the cost of living in Los Angeles.

In an article titled “Should you move to L.A.?” published by Curbed on May 18, 2018, the authors note:

“Depending where you’re relocating from, you might find the cost of housing, gas, groceries, and going out exorbitantly expensive. Compared to most places in the U.S., it is. In 2017, a survey of urban living expenses figured out that the income an individual needs to live comfortably in Los Angeles is $76,047. The survey factors in discretionary spending and savings. You can certainly get by on less—and many Angelenos do. The median income here is $64,300.”

Current and recent Metpros (up to five years ago) described salaries, paid hourly, of between $40,000 and $45,000 during the first year of training, and $45,000 to $48,000 during the second year. Those in the program six to nine years ago described similar starting salaries, though some said they were hired after six months or one year at a salary of $57,000 to $58,000.

In addition, those who were in the program more than a decade ago described receiving stipends of about $330-$420/week, plus paid housing during the first six to nine months of the program. They were then hired at around $52,000 or $53,000. (A $53,000 salary in 2008 is the equivalent of more than $63,000 today, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

Most people reported receiving the same health insurance, 401(k) and expense reimbursement benefits as other staff, but some said they lost out on other benefits that were standard for employees, such as a company car for a video journalist or being able to expense costs without pre-approval from a supervisor.

This year’s Metpro class makes $850 a week, or $44,200 per year. The average cost of rent in Los Angeles for a one-bedroom apartment is $1,676, according to a study published in Curbed on July 5, 2018.

Metpros frequently struggle to pay for rent, groceries and other bills. “There were a couple times I couldn't afford my groceries,” a recent Metpro wrote in our survey. “The cashier had to take my cart of food away because my card was declined.”

One Metpro who recently went through the program wrote: “I live month to month with no real ability to save. Doing anything that requires a lot of money (such as fixing my car, which I've needed to do since I drove to L.A. for the Metpro program), I'm unable to do.”
The impact of the Metpro program in the Times newsroom

Over the years, Metpro has helped bring much-needed diversity to the LA Times, but it has done so at a cost — one that became more acute in recent years. As years of buyouts and layoffs left the LA Times struggling to fill coverage gaps, Metpro, as one editor put it to a committee member, stopped being a training program and became a low-wage hiring program.

Metpros are among the lowest-paid journalists in The Times newsroom, even after they are hired for full-time staff positions — their salaries often based on the deflated Metpro salary they received as trainees.

The Times’ Reporter I category — workers who are hourly and paid less than their counterparts in the Reporter II category — is made up almost exclusively of Metpro graduates.

One person described Metpro this way: “Currently, there is no real program. It’s just a way to pay young, diverse journalists far less than they’re worth and then keep paying them less than they’re worth.”

Another described their experience in this way: “I thought I would have a more structured training period during which I’d be exposed to more parts of the newsroom and have the opportunity to rotate through different desks. Instead, I took part in a couple of days of orientation/initial training… then was pressed into active duty to fill staffing needs.”

This has created a retention problem among many Metpro graduates: many leave the paper for the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, CNN and other major media organizations.

Those who stay at the Times say they sometimes feel that they are treated as less than equal in the newsroom.

“Metpro remains unique and special in so far as it provides a pathway for young people of color to get jobs early in their careers at a major metropolitan newspaper,” wrote one survey respondent. “That said, management has failed to provide the support — journalistic and financial — which allows program grads to grow at the paper and build a life for themselves as they move into older adulthood and their mid-career.”
How the Metpro program should work

What follows are a series of recommendations for improving the Metpro program — some of which will be addressed in a more formal way in the Guild’s draft contract.

EXPERIENCE: The program should be limited to people with a limited number of years of experience in a professional newsroom, up to three years. Candidates with master’s degrees would still qualify.

LENGTH OF PROGRAM: Metpro is a training program and should last no longer than 18 months. This change should become effective for the class that enters the Times in 2019.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE: The first four weeks will be training. There will be three rotations, each 16 weeks. At the end of the first year, after a comprehensive evaluation, a Metpro will be placed in the final six months of the program. If they’re a reporter, they will be assigned to a specific beat with a specific editor.

ROTATION OPTIONS: Metpros will rotate only within departments in the Los Angeles Times. Metpros will not be placed in other newsrooms within the California News Group, including the San Diego Union-Tribune or Times Community News publications.

TRAINING: A robust four-week training program. Provide a reading list for Metpros before beginning the program with relevant literature about Los Angeles and the newspaper. Provide hands-on experience, such as record searches and assisting reporters with enterprise projects. Keep the street corner assignment, but give Metpros more time to pitch, report, write or photograph the stories they find. When possible, Metpro reporters should be assigned to beats.

COMPENSATION: Metpros should be given a pay increase, as proposed by the bargaining committee. Additionally, Metpros should be provided with a moving stipend. If hired as full-time staff, Metpros should be paid minimum reporter or other salaries as established by bargaining.

EVALUATIONS: Metpros will receive their first formal evaluation at eight weeks of the first rotation with relevant supervisors and Metpro director. This conversation will include how they can improve and how they have excelled. Trainees will leave with a clear understanding of goals for the second part of the rotation. At the end of the first rotation, they will sit down again with relevant supervisors and the Metpro director for a similar discussion. This format shall be repeated in the next two rotations. At the end of a Metpro’s first year, the program director will take the Metpro’s three formal evaluations and then interview the Metpro’s relevant supervisors, providing a comprehensive analysis of the past year. The Metpro will receive this information, and a discussion will follow about the Metpro’s goals for the last six months of the fellowship. The Metpro will have a say on where they go for each of their rotations, along with where they’re placed in their last six months.
**DIRECTOR:** A full-time program director with experience mentoring newsroom talent. Seen as the advocate for Metpros, focused on helping build them up, addressing their weakness and finding ways to help them grow. Only available to someone who has worked at the Times for at least three years.

**INTRODUCTORY SESSIONS:** Any editor supervising a Metpro should undergo a regular, mandatory training session to ensure they understand the program’s purpose. They will hear from former Metpros and be able to ask questions about the program.

**ADVISORY PANEL:** A volunteer panel including former Metpros will form and meet regularly, checking in with current Metpros and hosting events throughout the year to ensure Metpros are meeting a variety of people in the newsroom. The panel will also help the Metpro director in assigning mentors.

**HIRING CYCLE:** Metpros should be notified a minimum of four months before the start of the program to ensure they have ample time to move to Los Angeles. Metpros shouldn’t be publicly announced at this point to ensure, if they have started their professional careers, they can leave on good terms.