

WORKFORCE PATHWAYS FOR LOCAL JOURNALISM IN COLORADO

Working Group Findings and Exploration of Solutions

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Executive Summary

Local newsrooms have long struggled to attract workers — journalists, editors, digital producers, business leaders, sales and revenue professionals, and more — who represent the diversity of their communities. In recent years, as the local journalism workforce has contracted, Colorado newsrooms also have struggled to retain workers, provide training and mentorship opportunities, and develop career paths for advancement. These long-standing workforce issues in journalism have only been exacerbated in the wake of the pandemic, political polarization, and “The Great Resignation.”

In 2023, Colorado Media Project (CMP), Colorado Press Association (CPA), and Colorado News Collaborative (COLab) formed a working group to examine these issues and identify opportunities for addressing them collaboratively with newsrooms, colleges and universities, and other partners. The working group was one of five supported by grants from CMP and the [Colorado Workforce Development Council](#).

Long-standing workforce issues in journalism have only been exacerbated in the wake of the pandemic, political polarization, and “The Great Resignation.”



Photo courtesy of Bucket List Community Cafe

The initial phase of the Workforce Pathways working group focused on how newsrooms might attract and support a more diverse group of students to develop the interest and skills needed for a modern newsroom. Working group members contributed to and were informed in real-time by:

- **Landscape research** on best-in-class examples from Colorado and national higher-ed and newsroom-led workforce development programs — especially those successfully recruiting and retaining students of color and/or those with diverse skill sets that are most needed in modern newsrooms.
- **Development of a COLab-led cohort structure** to support 2023 interns, to help ensure that BIPOC interns recruited by newsrooms receiving grants via CMP’s Advancing Equity in Local News program had a positive experience and were not isolated within mostly white newsrooms.
- **CPA support** for an ongoing working group to explore and design ways that newsrooms and higher-ed leaders might recruit and place more students who are from diverse backgrounds and/or who are seeking experiences beyond reporting to include revenue, marketing, digital and other business-side roles that more holistically meet needs of newsrooms.

This white paper aims to capture takeaways from the 2023 Workforce Development working group, CMP-supported internships, and COLab support for a cohort of students placed in Colorado newsrooms in summer 2023. It is published to contribute to ecosystem learning and continuous improvement of Colorado’s journalism workforce pipeline.

In early 2023, Colorado working group leaders began meeting to design a summer internship program that would help bring new perspectives to local newsrooms while also providing more than two dozen students — including some students of color — with cohort support, training, and mentorship. CMP also provided a total of \$45,000 to support paid internship positions at four newsrooms, as part of its 2023 Advancing Equity in Local News grant program.

Prior to the summer-long pilot project, the working group — which included representatives from CPA, CMP and COLab, as well as newsroom and higher education leaders from across Colorado — looked at innovative programs around the country for inspiration.

Along the way, the group spoke with Colorado journalism students, faculty at higher-education institutions, and local newsrooms to get a sense of what they want, what they need, where disconnects might exist, and developed recommendations for how to mitigate them.

Some Notable National Models with Elements to Emulate

It is crucial for Colorado newsrooms to recruit and retain younger, more diverse workers into the field if they want to better reflect the communities they serve.

“The lack of adequate pipelines into journalism for candidates from different backgrounds has contributed to the fact that newsrooms too often don’t look like the communities they cover — a refrain often repeated ... but rarely addressed,” Clio Change [wrote](#) for Nieman Reports in 2022. “Much of the pipeline problem has to do with retention issues — how journalists from different backgrounds are treated when they enter institutions that were not made for them. But it’s also about how, and whether, journalists can even enter the industry in the first place.”

Meanwhile, Generation Z, the first to grow up as digital and social media natives, are now entering the workforce and represent different values than millennials and those older. “This is a generation that looks beyond salaries and personal growth and expects much more from its workplace,” noted [The Fix](#) about what newsrooms need to know about younger people they might employ. “Gen Z is the generation that worries the most about mental health and is not afraid to talk about it openly in the workplace. And there are a lot of reasons for that.”

A cluster of higher ed journalism programs could collaborate with a local organization like COLab or the Rural Journalism Institute of the San Luis Valley, and/or partner with a national POC-led organization like the [Emma Bowen Foundation](#) to focus on Colorado internship placements.

Below are some efforts from around the country:

Fresno-area Journalists of Color training program / Central Valley Journalists of Color

- The aim is to help build a pipeline of journalists of color who could work for media outlets in the San Joaquin Valley of California after graduation.
- The program includes multiple higher-ed institutions and a youth media organization as partners.
- The students earn \$300 monthly during the academic year and can remain in the program for up to five years, from their high school senior year through four years of college.
- Students got support from local journalists and the Fresno Metro Black Chamber of Commerce.
- Initial funding included grants from the James B. McClatchy Foundation, The California Endowment, and the Institute for Media and Public Trust.

Amplify Utah

- A nonprofit hub that allows students to create an account, log in, and submit their work for possible publication among a network of media partners.
- Students earn byline credit along with Amplify Utah and published stories are free to access.
- The first project included The Salt Lake Tribune and Salt Lake Community College. Amplify Utah called it “a success, with nearly 20 students publishing more than two dozen (paid) stories in the Salt Lake Tribune and other local media.”
- Support came from The Google News Initiative.
- The organization published a playbook for others looking to replicate such a project, which noted that media partners should have a “dedicated team member to coordinate with partners, select stories and potentially work with authors” and financial resources for stipends.

In 2023, COLab launched **Amplify Colorado** — a database to connect sources and journalists — but it doesn't so far have a mission for content creation and might learn from our neighbor to the West. AP StoryShare in Colorado works similarly to Amplify Utah but without a student-journalist element. Colorado has a strong network among high schools for student journalism via the Colorado Student Media Association, but lacks such connective tissue at the higher-ed level.



Institute for Local News at the State University of New York (SUNY)

- The program “engages students in university-led reporting programs with local media partners to bolster local news coverage while giving students real-world learning experiences in multi-media storytelling and communications.”
- SUNY campuses give journalism students academic credit or funding “to report under the supervision of a professional in collaboration with a media outlet. The student gets experience and the outlet gets news coverage it might not be able to offer otherwise.”
- The initiative’s community news [programs](#) are “academic partnerships with local news outlets where student reporters — under the management of a faculty member — publish their work outside of their college paper.”
- Richard Watts, who is leading the effort, [said](#) “programs like this can help reverse the growing loss of local news that experts say is contributing to a lack of trust in and engagement with democracy.”

A \$25 million state-funded journalism program in California

- Standing out because of its large support from public funds, the California Local News Fellowship is a two-year program for up to 120 early career journalists over three years with a focus on underserved communities.¹
- Fellows receive a \$50,000 annual stipend to supplement their salaries while they work in a variety of California newsrooms.
- The fellowship program, run out of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, is guided by a 17-person advisory board that “represents the state’s newsrooms and journalism education institutions. The advisory board, together with the fellowship staff, reviewed more than 90 newsroom applications and 170 fellow applications and selected a cohort that is reflective of the state’s diversity.”
- A lawmaker led the legislative effort, and Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the public-funding law in 2022.

¹ “California Local News Fellowship Announces Inaugural Cohort,” Aug. 22, 2023.

Colorado Colleges and Universities Could Benefit from a Statewide Internship Hub — and Ensure Interns are Paid

Journalism faculty and internship coordinators at colleges and universities in Colorado have some steady partnerships with a handful of local newsrooms, but often students who can't find an internship on their own rely on the personal networks of faculty.



TREND: For journalism internships, payment is typically up to a newsroom when a student is getting credit. Some pay, others don't.

Unpaid internships can be a barrier for students from lower-income families, said one Colorado journalism professor who oversees interns. Some of them might be first-generation college students who are less likely to pursue an unpaid internship or job that might be temporary.

Not offering pay could result in a less diverse talent pool, one in which only those who can afford to take a summer “off” can qualify.



TENSION POINT: One journalism faculty member expressed frustration with a problem described as the “internship before the internship” as well as a potential newsroom bias that favors students at four-year schools. Because some newsrooms that hire interns might want to see demonstrated work, some students might not yet have it — the reason they are applying for an internship in the first place. At least one faculty member has set up a campus news organization to try and mitigate this problem so students have clips or work to show.



IDEA: Creating an online hub or landing page that serves as a clearinghouse for newsrooms that offer internships, including their schedules and how to apply, would be helpful for Colorado journalism programs to match students with employers. Organizations like COLab, CPA, or Denver's Open Media Foundation Career Engine might consider whether such an initiative fits with their mission.



Photo courtesy of Bucket List Community Cafe

Three Colorado journalism faculty members said they've noticed students seeking internships in public relations, advertising, or marketing rather than in a newsroom. Such internships (including, one instructor said, at a local real estate firm) might be easier to get, illuminating a potential barrier in Colorado's college-to-newsroom pipeline.



Photo courtesy of Rossana Longo Better

Where Some Colorado Higher-Ed Students are Currently Producing Local News in Internships or for Course Credit

Colorado College Journalism Institute, Colorado Springs

Students at the small, private liberal arts school take only one class at a time for three-and-a-half weeks on a schedule called the Block Plan. An internship is required for the journalism minor. Students can complete an internship during a block in the spring or fall, or spread one over the course of a semester, summer, or year. Colorado College students might also partner with a local Colorado news organization in classes to publish an in-depth feature or a multi-part series. To satisfy their practicum, students can pitch or accept from news outlets long-form freelance stories, podcasts, documentaries, and more.

Contact: Corey Hutchins, Co-director
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Colorado Mesa University, Grand Junction

Students at CMU have completed successful internships with Denver Hispanic Broadcasting, Japanese Film Prod in New York, as well as local broadcasters and newspapers throughout the state.

Contact: dludlam@coloradomesa.edu.

Colorado State University, Fort Collins

CSU's Department of Journalism & Media Communication has existing relationships with local newsrooms that include TV stations and newspapers where they place students. While those relationships are strong, the department is always looking for more.

Contact: Jenny Fischer, journalism instructor
Jenny.Fischer@colostate.edu

Colorado State University, Pueblo

The university's Media & Entertainment internship program began in 1963-64 and CSU Pueblo believes it could be the "oldest journalism/communications internship program in the state." Student interns work in public broadcasting for TV and radio through internships, including production and post-production.

Contact: Jonathan Pluskota, Department of Media & Entertainment | jon.pluskota@csupueblo.edu

Community College of Denver, Denver

Students in two classes are responsible for securing journalism-related internships for credit.

Contact: Adam C. Glick, journalism chair
Adam.Glick@ccd.edu

Metropolitan State University, Denver

MSU partners with the NBCUniversal Academy. Journalism and Media Production internships provide students with "hands-on experience at a mass media outlet or public relations setting where students are able to use the skills learned in the classroom in a supervised, professional environment." Interns "work as writers, reporters, editors, public relations practitioners, convergent media specialists, and photojournalists at newspapers, magazines, agencies, corporations, nonprofit entities, and other media outlets."

Contact: Department Chair Christopher Jennings
jenninct@msudenver.edu

Pikes Peak State College, Colorado Springs

The small but mighty journalism program in Colorado Springs has partnered with local news organizations like the former city alt-weekly. Its broadcast program has an internship program with public radio and would seek partnerships with hyperlocal news organizations in the Pikes Peak region.

Contact: Sarah McMahan, journalism department chair
Sarah.McMahan@pikespeak.edu

University of Colorado, Boulder

The university’s journalism department has a handful of local media partners and uses Handshake to help connect newsrooms with students. Students in the school’s CU News Corps program, led by former Denver Post editorial page editor Chuck Plunkett, have partnered with local news outlets on big projects and long-form, in-depth journalism. CU News Corps has some existing partnerships including print and digital outlets. In 2024, CU Boulder’s Beth Potter is piloting a new class that aims to become a statewide student news service, pairing students with smaller rural and BIPOC-serving newsrooms across Colorado.

Contact: Jacob Jedamus-Denu, Employer Specialist
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University of Denver, Denver

Journalism students often seek out their own internships, which is a savvy skill to learn, but some will lean on a professor or the Career Center to help place them with a newsroom.

Contact: Erika Polson, associate professor,
director of internships | Erika.Polson@du.edu

University of Northern Colorado, Greeley

The school’s Journalism & Media Studies offers credit for full-time and part-time internships, and students must be majoring in journalism to earn credit for an internship.

Contact: Lynn.Klyde@unco.edu

WHAT’S MISSING? Few newsrooms or higher-ed programs appear focused on placing business students, law students, digital production or technology students in local newsrooms. Most of Colorado’s college journalism programs appear to still be primarily focused on content production while most newsrooms seem to reserve their internship positions for reporting and production interns.

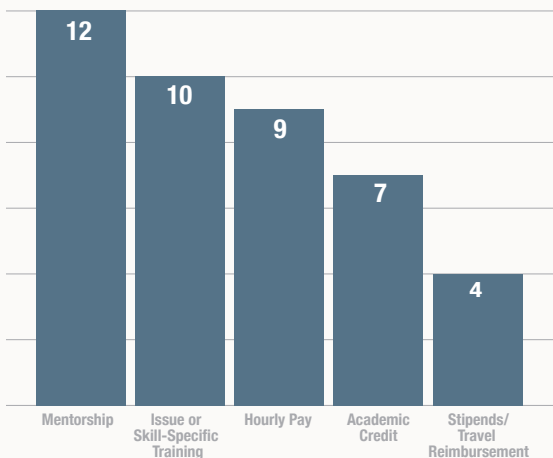
When Colorado Newsrooms are Looking for Interns

From a sampling of roughly a dozen Colorado newsrooms that responded, many said they begin recruiting interns in the spring and host them until August. Multiple newsrooms said they are open to hosting interns year-round whenever interns are available.

Newsrooms overwhelmingly said they were recruiting college students; some said they would consider high school students. One said they would also consider adults in the workforce.

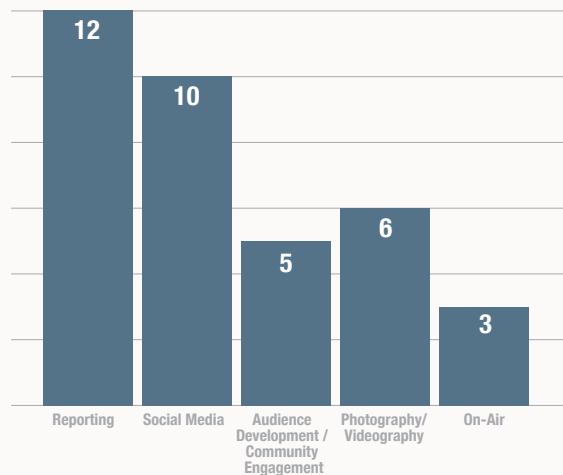
WHAT RESOURCES ARE COLORADO NEWSROOMS OFFERING INTERNS?

The Workforce Pathways working group surveyed roughly a dozen Colorado newsrooms:



WHAT TYPE OF ROLES ARE NEWSROOMS RECRUITING FOR INTERNS TO FILL?

The Workforce Pathways working group surveyed roughly a dozen Colorado newsrooms:



Small Outlets Can Serve as a ‘Farm Team’ for Colorado Journalism

In Colorado, retention is particularly hard for smaller hyperlocal newspapers and community radio stations because the pay is often very low and journalists will quickly jump to larger outlets after learning the ropes. But such newsrooms play an essential role in the journalism pipeline.

Linda Shapley, publisher of Colorado Community Media, which publishes roughly two dozen small newspapers in the Denver suburbs, says she sees the news organization as the “farm team” for Colorado journalism.

“It’s incumbent on us at a time when newsrooms are contracting and putting less emphasis on development of the next generation of journalists,” she said for this report. “The smaller news orgs, which often are giving emerging journalists their first job, need to make sure we are giving them the skills they need to move up or move on.”

And while she knows her papers can’t pay what the larger organizations do, she is dedicated to ensuring journalists know “I will do everything to get them where they want to be. That can be our reputation.”

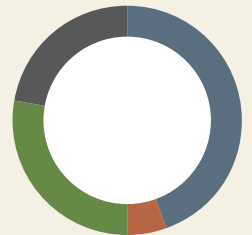
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Colorado College students at the Crestone Eagle, a newspaper that has provided internships for CC students.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF INTERNS WHO RESPONDED

- 8 White/caucasian
- 1 Black/African American
- 5 Hispanic/Latinx
- 4 Asian/Asian American



Pilot Project: Support for a Diverse Cohort of Colorado Summer Interns in Journalism

The working group started with a question: What would an equitable summer internship look like and how might creating one help build a pipeline for more diverse newsrooms in Colorado?

In response to a call for applicants for its 2023 Advancing Equity in Local News grant program, Colorado Media Project received a handful of proposals from Colorado newsrooms seeking to bring more diverse perspectives into their newsrooms by hosting students of color as interns.

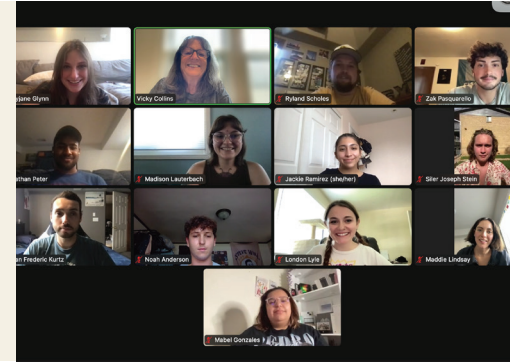
Colorado Media Project had received applications from white-led newsrooms that said they wanted to address diversity, equity, and inclusion by hosting students of color as interns. With a pilot program, the working group sought to create an excellent internship opportunity for a cohort of students that would take some of the training and support burden off newsrooms and provide students of color a sense of belonging, camaraderie, third-party support, training, and mentorship along the way.

Colorado Media Project, COLab, and Colorado Press Association met with newsrooms and conducted polling and interviews to learn what newsrooms and students wanted out of an internship program, and they set about building one for the summer. Members of the working group consulted various onboarding guides or handbooks newsrooms use for interns, and created a digital space for shared learning.

All in all, some 30 students stationed in 12 newsrooms along Colorado’s Front Range signed up to join the support cohort. They represented print, online, and radio, with positions that included reporting, digital and audience engagement, event planning, video and social media, newsletter writing, and production and technical operations.

NEWSROOM/# OF INTERNS

Bucketlist Community Cafe:	6	KGNU	5
Boulder Reporting Lab:	1	Sentinel Colorado	1
KRCC	3	Colorado Sun	2
Colorado Public Radio	1	Colorado Newsline	1
Chalkbeat	1	Mountain-Ear	9
MED Lab at CU Boulder	1	Colorado Community Media	1



Over the course of nine weeks, each Wednesday at noon the working group hosted an hour-long Lunch & Learn session on Zoom with a different theme and guest speaker each week.

The sessions covered journalistic research, interviewing, developing local news stories about equity, representation in media, overcoming impostor syndrome, how to land a job in news, data journalism, investigative journalism, entrepreneurial journalism, and more.

While roughly 30 students initially registered as part of the cohort, about a dozen fully participated with sometimes fewer showing up consistently to the weekly Lunch & Learn sessions. Participating newsrooms didn’t prioritize the sessions for interns, and some interns said they missed them because they were on an assignment or otherwise engaged with lunch plans. “With our interns being part-time, their supervisors kept them busy and maximized their hours,” one cohort newsroom participant said of why their interns missed much of the programming.

The interns were also invited to a Slack channel where they could connect and learn about opportunities throughout the nine weeks. Multiple interns got a chance to attend the National Federation of Community Broadcasters conference in Denver for networking opportunities.



RECOMMENDATION:

Students who attended high school or college during the pandemic might be saturated with virtual learning and suffering from Zoom fatigue. Those considering replicating the pilot might consider hosting sessions in person. Newsrooms could consider making them mandatory for participating interns. The format and perceived utility of the cohort sessions – both for newsrooms and for interns themselves – should also be considered.

What Interns Said About the Cohort Pilot Program

High points:

- “I most enjoyed being able to connect with so many knowledgeable people in the journalism community. ... One of the main takeaways I have learned is the importance of networking within the industry. I have made so many insightful contacts who I hope to keep in contact with for the future.”
- “I have most enjoyed getting to make connections and to network.”
- “A lot of the source building and community building will stick with me. I really learned the value of showing up and being there for the community I report on.”
- “I will always highlight stories and people who don’t get coverage.”
- “Gaining a completely new insight that I wasn’t taught in college (digital + social.)”
- “My most valuable takeaway from working in a newsroom is learning to be an advocate for myself and my work.”
- “Before this I heard that journalism was all about connections, and as a first-generation I felt really lost coming into this field. Rossana and the journalists introduced all created a safe space for us to learn and grow and that is so important.”

Challenges:

- “I’d love to be challenged more rather than being given ‘intern’ tasks.”
- “I would have liked more digital media training.”
- “I think more connections to mental health resources within journalism would be helpful.”
- “Most internships tend to forget that students are starting out and they’re not patient. One thing I would like to see is patience.”
- “I was super happy to introduce people and show people what’s going on in my community,” said one intern. But the intern said stories of underrepresented communities that she wrote weren’t always well received, were heavily altered, or turned down. The intern had to advocate for themselves and push for publication.

“Helping these young people, learning from them, carrying out the vision of the Voices Initiative, is not just a professional passion for me, it is a personal one,” said Rossana Longo-Better, a bilingual journalist and contractor for COLab, who led the cohort. “I share a similar background. I am a Latina, a multi-ethnic immigrant from Ecuador, and I have struggled with being the only or one of few women of color in my newsroom. I know how vital it is to create news organizations that represent the communities they cover, and how critical that representation is to building the kind of trust that strengthens local news.”

Conclusion

This research indicates that Colorado is poised for more coordination and collaboration on the local journalism workforce development front. Colleges and universities large and small, public and private, are working hard to ensure their students are prepared for the workforce, while providing them with professional development opportunities in local newsrooms along the way.

Still, more could be done to create a stronger connective tissue among those institutions and newsrooms across Colorado. Building that network won't be too complicated and could go a long way in helping to create a more robust pipeline for journalism in Colorado, while also helping to ensure that newsrooms of the future better reflect our state as a whole.

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