



Annual Report 2020

Investigating and elevating higher education

We believe more thoughtful, aggressive coverage of all parts of the American higher education system can help decrease public cynicism. College, like journalism, is a public good that needs to be fostered and held up to high standards. Its best chance to reclaim the confidence of more Americans is through greater transparency and accountability.

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From the Co-Founders

In the end, we didn't just weather this terrible year, we set Open Campus up for the future — with lots of help.

Plenty of our friends have said, "It must be hard to start something in the middle of a pandemic." We're sure it is, but we don't know any different. We'll admit we had some moments in the early spring — when the world seemed turned upside down — when we wondered if 2020 would get the better of us.

With tremendous help from donors, friends, contributors, and some key foundations, we persevered. We're ending this crazy year with reporters in seven markets, a stream of stories about colleges in their communities, and excitement about what 2021 will bring.

Each week, the idea we first had is taking shape: use the knowledge we gained from 20 years in the trade press to help citizens get better coverage of colleges in their communities. Longtime editors, we're now back to talking to reporters about their ideas, helping them sharpen headlines, and figuring out the best sources. Perhaps even more transformative — they're beginning to help each other.

During this trying year, higher ed often found its way to the center of the news. Will colleges close? Should they bring back students? Are Halloween parties turning into superspreaders? Community-college



SARA HEBEL



SCOTT SMALLWOOD

enrollments down. Admissions a trainwreck amidst the pandemic. Digital divides fueling inequality. The Trump administration shifting the sand underneath international students.

All of that means, it's never hard to pitch the idea behind Open Campus: Covering these stories and institutions in the states and cities where they matter is important. National stories are great, but Pittsburgh and Cleveland and El Paso deserve coverage of what matters to them as well.

If we managed in this topsy turvy 2020 to learn to walk, next year we're ready to start running. Thanks to our donors, supporters, and readers. We can't do any of this without you.

Year In Review

In 2020 we launched our local network and worked to secure a solid foundation for our organization. We experimented with new ways to engage with readers and meet the information needs of students and families.

6 Reporters, 4 Fellows, 7 Newsrooms, 6 States

Our first reporter, Jason Gonzales, started in Denver in April through our partnership with Chalkbeat. And now, as we begin the new year, our local network includes a total of six reporters and four college journalism fellows working in seven newsrooms across six states.

These reporters and fellows come from diverse backgrounds. Several are first-generation college students. More than half are Black or Hispanic. They've graduated from community colleges, regional publics, and state flagships.

They've probed the poor record of Colorado's flagship university in educating low-income students and explored the struggles of Pittsburgh's international students under Trump and why they are vital to the city. They're reporting stories about the makeup of campus police in California and why it matters when they don't look like the students they serve and about how higher education has failed Black Americans in Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago.

Major Support from Gates, Joyce, Lumina, and Ascendium

Our local collaborations are made possible by the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and Lumina Foundation** — all of whom provided new support to Open Campus this year.

We're working with our newsroom partners to leverage those national funds to tap local support for higher-education reporting. That approach has already helped fund our work with **Mississippi Today**, where the **Woodward Hines Education Foundation** has provided a grant to support our collaboration.

In 2020, we won a grant from the **Facebook Journalism Project** to hold a series of community forums about navigating college in New Orleans, in partnership with **The Lens**. Through that project, we're producing an online guide for city residents that will help us assess opportunities for building consumer-oriented resources about college in other markets.

Timeline

January

We add a third newsletter, Next, by Jeff Selingo. We receive a grant from the Facebook Journalism Project to hold community forums about navigating college in New Orleans.

February

We add a fourth newsletter, First Gen, by Zipporah Osei.

April

Our first local reporter, Jason Gonzales, starts with Chalkbeat Colorado.

July

We receive a \$150,000 grant from the Joyce Foundation to add a reporter in Cleveland.

August

We receive a \$300,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to expand our local network.

September

We start our partnership with CalMatters, working with a team of reporters in their College Journalism Network.

October

Amy Morona, our reporter in Cleveland, starts with Crain's Cleveland Business.

November

Naomi Harris, our reporter in Pittsburgh, starts with PublicSource. Our partner newsroom Lookout Santa Cruz begins publishing. Nick Ibarra is our new reporter there.

December

We receive an \$85,000 grant from Ascendium for an event about technology and prison education. Our partner newsrooms El Paso Matters and Mississippi Today hire reporters who will begin working with us in 2021.

The **Education Writers Association** awarded Sara a fellowship for a reporting project about how the pandemic has shifted power dynamics in town-gown relations.

And we're closing out the year with a grant from **Ascendium Philanthropy** to partner on an event about technology and prison education in 2021.

Coffee Hours, Callouts, and Definitive Data

We've experimented this year with new ways to connect with our audience and meet their needs, especially as the pandemic took hold.

We analyzed data and created interactive charts to help people understand what was happening

and to see trends more definitively.

- As Congress quickly moved in the spring to deliver stimulus relief we built a searchable database so people could see how much each institution would get from the CARES Act.
- As the economy faltered, we created a state budget tracker for people to follow cuts to higher education and help them put those in context of longer-term funding trends.
- After the election, our interactive charts illustrated just how much of a fault line the college degree has become in U.S. politics. You can search by state and see how educational attainment and voting patterns have changed in every county between 2000 and 2020.

We also created new venues for readers to connect with us. Karin Fischer — who writes our latitude(s) newsletter — held **coffee hours** in the summer to talk informally with her subscribers and answer their questions about the confusing, and fast-changing, landscape for international students. **Several hundred people attended each of those, with nearly 600 people registering for one of the sessions.**

Higher education issues can quickly become wonky, and we're working with our local reporters to zero in on work that centers the people whose lives hang in the balance. At PublicSource, one way we've done that is through **a callout to readers.**

Naomi Harris, our reporter there, sought Pittsburgh residents' personal stories about student debt, and more than 40 people responded. Their experiences will become the center of a package of stories and graphics that will explore the question: For whom is student debt really a crisis?

National Expertise, Local Intelligence

The core of our idea has always been about collaboration. Our approach was featured in an article this fall, by the Medill Local News Initiative, about how national news organizations' hub-and-spoke models are transforming local news.

Sara talked there about how this approach helps rebuild trust in communities because of the in-depth, knowing coverage that national and local journalists can produce together.

"There's a real power in combining the strength of national news organizations that know the subject really well with the knowingness of a community news organization that knows its local area very well," Sara said. "We are hoping that we can be part of the answer to both the problems of diminishing local [news] ecosystems but also specifically the lack of coverage of an important actor in many local areas, in many cities, in many states, which are its colleges and universities."

Financial Highlights

Major Grants

\$300,000

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave us a grant that allows us — through leveraging other local support — to expand our network of local reporters to six new markets.

\$150,000

THE JOYCE FOUNDATION

- The Joyce Foundation awarded us a two-year grant to expand local higher ed reporting in the Midwest. We're using the money to partner with Crain's Cleveland Business and build tools for other reporters.

Other Supporters

- FACEBOOK JOURNALISM PROJECT / THE LENFEST INSTITUTE FOR JOURNALISM
- LUMINA FOUNDATION
- EDUCATION WRITERS ASSOCIATION
- ASCENDIUM EDUCATION PHILANTHROPY

Leveraging Local

In a model we plan to replicate elsewhere, we collaborated with Mississippi Today, one of our new partners, to secure a grant from the **Woodward Hines Education Foundation** to support reporting in the state.

Individual Donors 134 donors | \$23,000



Plus a \$20,000 matching donation from the NewsMatch campaign.

Local Network

Combining a national newsroom that knows higher ed deeply with local newsrooms that know their communities deeply.

El Paso



ALMOST 30 YEARS WITHOUT ANYONE ON THE BEAT

85 percent of the high school grads who attend college go to UTEP or El Paso Community College.

Santa Cruz



A COMPANY TOWN

UC Santa Cruz employs more people in the county than the the next three top employers combined.

Mississippi



RACIAL AND RURAL EQUITY

Only 13 percent of the University of Mississippi's students are Black, compared with 45 percent of the state's 18-to-24-year-olds.

Pittsburgh



CENTER OF RENAISSANCE

"Eds and Meds" have been at the heart of the city's post-industrial rebirth.

In most major American cities, no reporter is dedicated to covering higher education. Of the top 50 media markets, just 18 have a reporter who is focused primarily on covering colleges. Meanwhile, national outlets often skew their coverage to elite universities.

We focused on three things when selecting this pilot group of partner newsrooms: (1) a region where higher education matters; (2) one lacking as much dedicated reporting as it deserves; and (3) a news organization dedicated to enterprise, public-service journalism.

CalMatters

Lookout
Santa Cruz



PublicSource

A nonprofit news organization dedicated to serving Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. Founded in 2011.

Chalkbeat Colorado

One of seven locations for Chalkbeat, a nonprofit news organization dedicated to covering education and equity.

Crain's Cleveland Business

Reaches business and civic leaders throughout Northeast Ohio.

El Paso Matters

A nonprofit newsroom serving the El Paso Region. Founded in 2019 by longtime local journalist Bob Moore.

Mississippi Today

A nonprofit news organization dedicated to reporting that equips Mississippians to engage in community life.

Lookout Santa Cruz

The first of a new network of digital-only, locally-focused media outlets offering community-focused news and resources.

CalMatters

A nonprofit newsroom committed to explaining California politics. We work with a team of fellows who are part of its College Journalism Network.

BENEFIT OF TWO TEAMS



LOCAL NEWSROOM

Understands the context and community

OPEN CAMPUS NETWORK

Brings sophistication from day one on complicated topic

Our Local Reporters

Covering colleges that matter
to their communities

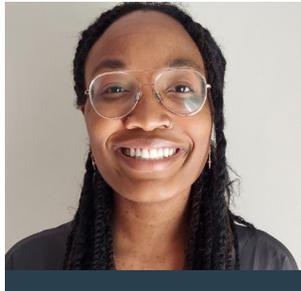


**Jason
Gonzales**

COLORADO

@ByJasonGonzales

Chalkbeat Colorado

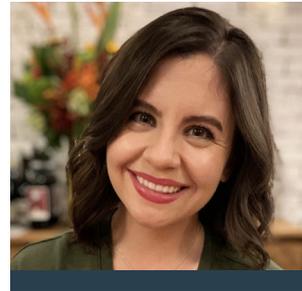


**Naomi
Harris**

PITTSBURGH

@NaomiJayHarris

PublicSource



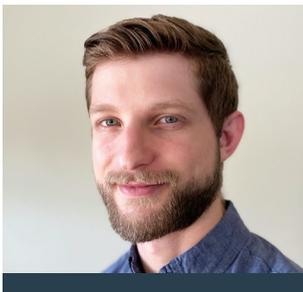
**Amy
Morona**

CLEVELAND

@amymorona

Crain's Cleveland

Business

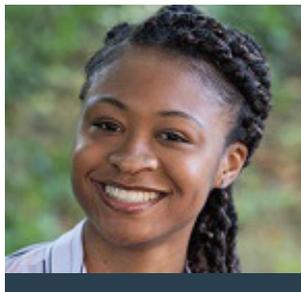


**Nick
Ibarra**

SANTA CRUZ

@nickmibarra

Lookout Santa Cruz

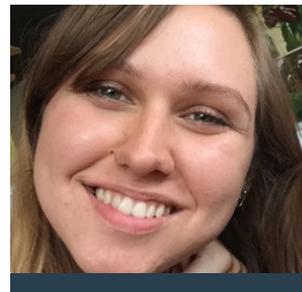


**Jewél
Jackson**

EL PASO

@JewlJackson1

El Paso Matters



**Molly
Minta**

MISSISSIPPI

@mintamolly

Mississippi Today



Naomi Harris, PublicSource

The reason I was drawn to Open Campus was because it felt like my stories could receive that level of attention and detail from editors who knew the higher education landscape and could help craft my story telling in a more interesting way. That was one thing I was missing.... It was important for me to find editors/newsrooms who have that infrastructure in place so I can make it my own but not feel like I'm thrown out to the sharks.



Amy Morona, Crain's Cleveland Business

Working at Open Campus is an exciting opportunity that's unique in today's media landscape. I've worked at both national and local news organizations, and the position offered an appealing chance to combine the best of both of those worlds. I'm able to do in-depth work grounded in reporting on one region while also having colleagues across the country within the Open Campus network as well as a national platform for my pieces.



Jason Gonzales, Chalkbeat Colorado

Open Campus is an invaluable part of the work I do as Chalkbeat Colorado's higher education reporter. Scott and Sara bring a wealth of experience and they have helped me fast-track my beat knowledge. The relationship is one that most reporters usually only dream about — a resource that can be called on for whatever you might need.

Newsletters

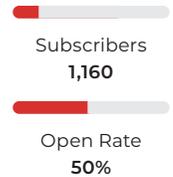
Expert analysis about important aspects of higher education, from experienced journalists.



The Weekly Dispatch

HIGHER'S ED ROLE IN SOCIETY

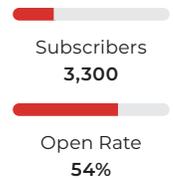
From a reader: "Even though I read a massive amount of higher ed-related news, there is inevitably a fresh comment or take to consider. It's also well-written and summarized. Not a have-to but a want-to-read."



latitude(s)

WHAT MATTERS IN GLOBAL HIGHER ED — AND WHY

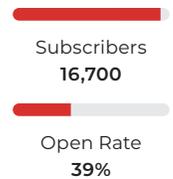
From a reader: "Your tireless work has been so valuable to all of us in the international education field. Kudos to you and thank you so much for helping us stay informed, cut through the noise, and mythbust."



Next: The Future of Higher Education

JEFF SELINGO'S LOOK AT WHAT'S AHEAD

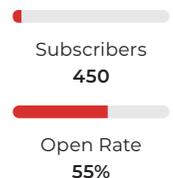
From a reader: "Great to hear such honest assessments and interesting future predictions of higher education." Another: "Consistently eye-opening."



First Gen

BEING A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT

Limited-run newsletter by recent graduate and journalist Zipporah Osei. From a reader: "Keep it up Love the on-the-ground perspective you're bring to conversation."



FIRST GEN

What's Ahead in 2021

Town/Gown Investigation

Funded through an Education Writers Association fellowship, we'll be examining shifts in the relationship between colleges and their communities.

Podcast Series on Merit

A planned audio collaboration to report stories about how our obsession with the idea of "merit" shapes education at all levels.

Prison Education Forum

With support from Ascendium Education Philanthropy, we'll be hosting a virtual forum about technology and prison education with key stakeholders.

National Partnerships

Our growing network will allow us to partner with national news organizations as well on cross-newsroom reporting projects.

More Reporters

Local reporters start on the beat in El Paso and Mississippi. We're looking for support to expand the network into more markets later in the year.

In-Person Summit

In second half of 2021, we hope to be able to bring our local network reporters together for the first time in person for training.

Support Us

If you are interested in supporting Open Campus or connecting with our team, we'd love to hear from you.

Reach us at info@opecampusmedia.org



Open Campus

 www.opencampusmedia.org

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