



University of Vermont
Center for Community News

Faculty tip sheet: Covering your statehouse

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets. CCN has created a series of sample templates and tip sheets for faculty to help their students contribute local news to their community.

For questions about this template, contact CCN Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.

Why cover your statehouse?

As local newsrooms across the country have fewer resources to cover policy and politics, community reporting programs at U.S. colleges and universities have stepped up to provide dedicated reporting on this critical beat.

Under the direction of professional journalism educators and editors, college students now provide a meaningful portion of statehouse, elections and democracy reporting in news outlets across dozens of states.

These news-academic partnerships are a win for students, communities and the future of civic information. Notably, students gain incredible experience that they can bring to any future job. It makes them competitive when applying for local or out-of-state internships and significantly elevates the profile of your journalism program.

How to start

1. Identify the need in your state

CCN has identified 35 different programs across 30 U.S. states as of 2025. [This report](#) outlines each program, including how it operates and how to contact its lead faculty member.

The 20 states without a program are Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

If a school is already covering the statehouse, you can collaborate or provide a coexisting class. There is no shortage of news that needs to be covered at your state legislature.

2. Identify potential partners in your area and start small

Some programs successfully work with just one or two students reporting for one or two outlets per semester.

See here: [Tips on Getting Student Reporting Published by Local Outlets](#)

3. Identify potential logistical issues, e.g., transportation

Some schools have gotten creative with transportation and housing when the statehouse is far away from campus. Consider public transportation (it can be free for students) or carpooling. The University of Florida has an agreement with Florida State University to house UF students on FSU's campus in Tallahassee — a three-hour drive away — when they are covering the statehouse. The University of Washington in Seattle helps subsidize housing for a group of students in Olympia during the session, which adds an extra layer of experience for students who can immerse themselves in reporting and gain lasting experience.

4. Gauge student interest and consider working across departments

Students may be intimidated by the idea of covering state politics and student recruitment varies in success across schools. It is your choice whether to make the class an elective or a requirement, but many schools have had success making the class a capstone for upper-level students to get used to reporting off-campus.

Some faculty have also recruited from other departments, such as political communication or political science. However, these courses are most successful for students familiar with deadlines, fact-checking and AP Style.

Our [Democracy, Governance & Elections Initiative](#) includes a cohort of faculty who meet regularly to discuss common interests, as well as free assignment templates for faculty to direct their students on what to cover.

We also have a two-page [CCN Guide on Student-Led Political Reporting](#).

5. Make the case to your administration

Of course, it helps to have your higher-ups on board. Our team at CCN, which does extensive national research on this topic, can help reach out to your administrators about the importance of these programs.

6. Reach out to us

If you have additional questions, we're here to help. Contact CCN Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.

Tips for a successful statehouse program

The following is advice we have gathered from existing, successful programs covering statehouses.

1. Treat it like a real newsroom

Deborah Howlett, Rutgers faculty member heading the NJ State House News Service, found success by creating stickers and other items with the news service's logo on them so that readers and sources who see the logo understand theirs is a legitimate news-gathering organization.

Howlett has encouraged students working in the statehouse bureau to put stickers with their logo on their laptops so people see the logo when they are working and become familiar with it.

"Because we're student-journalist-driven, that's another hurdle we have to overcome is to convince people that we're serious, we're not just a rinky-dink organization," she said.

2. Explore legal protections for students

The primary source of legal help for student journalists is the national [Student Press Law Center](#), which boasts several useful resources, including a free legal hotline.

Some schools have found broader legal protections by working with their university. For example, Louisiana State University journalism professor Chris Drew was concerned about legal protections for his students if they were sued for a story they wrote, so he raised the question with the LSU General Counsel Risk Management Office. Their solution was that if a LSU student working either in the statehouse program or in any other journalism class or internship is sued for a published story, LSU will defend that student under the university's broader, multi-million-dollar liability policy.

3. Don't just recruit the politically inclined journalism students

Successful programs have pulled from across departments, including political science, pre-law, or public relations. In fact, students in these courses don't just go on to be successful journalists.

They can take the experience to plenty of other fields. Take the example of D.C.-based attorney Justin DiCharia, who took a statehouse reporting class as a political communications major at Louisiana State University in 2016. Despite not expecting at the time that he would enjoy the capstone class, he now credits the experience for his success in law school and the legal profession. Now, his legal practice focuses on white collar criminal defense, government and internal corporate investigations, and litigation.

"The skills I gained from this experience transferred to law school, my career and everyday life. Statehouse reporting taught me to feel competent in a room with politicians and subject matter experts. Most lawyers (maybe most professionals, for that matter) suffer some form of imposter syndrome. My time at the Statehouse gave me the skills to overcome that, which allows me to represent clients competently and zealously in high-stakes litigation or government investigations."

"At the Statehouse, a reporter learns to listen carefully to the answer instead of thinking ahead to the next question. This skill is priceless in the preparation of witnesses for depositions or government interviews, as well as for the taking of depositions and interviews in corporate internal investigations. And, of course, I learned how to write quickly and succinctly about complex topics – a skill that worked wonders on law school final exams and has stayed with me through the practice of law."

Franklin College, which has a longstanding and successful statehouse program, recently started targeting sports communications students to join the bureau by requiring them to cover the statehouse for part of a semester. The lead faculty member, Colleen Steffen, argues that recruiting sports students fulfills more than one purpose: J-schools have found it easier to recruit sports students recently and there are a lot of them; but since focusing just on sports can narrow their focus and abilities, those sports students can greatly expand their skills and world view, making them more versatile in any field they pursue after college. Additionally, recruiting more sports students will widen their partnerships with news organizations that otherwise haven't taken their non-sports content, she said.

"The statehouse is a tough sell for kids who profess not to like politics, which is basically all of them," Steffen said. "So I work really hard to throw them bones--or let's call them transitional assignments--like a sports economic development bill. Or I'll say, you cover these X number of non-sports meetings and I'll get you media credentials for the Colts or something. I consider sports assignments a gateway drug for the statehouse."

Additionally, that same program also recruits public relations students to help run their social media, pitch their work to professional outlets and even write press releases about them when they do something notable.

While some student reporters will be excited to cover their statehouse and readily sign up, many will be resistant at first to enroll or dig into the beat – especially in the program’s pilot phase. But many of those students do get hooked once they go to a few committee hearings.

4. Consider making it a capstone class

The class is much more enticing for students if it fulfills a degree requirement; they can also dedicate more time and energy to it. Otherwise, it’s a tall order to ask students to add a demanding project such as statehouse coverage to their busy schedules of work, full course loads and whatever other reporting projects they are already working on.

5. Use our free assignment templates

We have [several](#) for faculty to copy, paste and use however they like. Assignments range from election coverage, features, group assignments, long-form enterprise and quick turnarounds. These templates exist to help streamline your syllabus and ease your workload when launching a statehouse program.

6. Showcase student work

Submitting student work for awards not only boosts morale but can also help raise awareness about your program to secure future funds.

7. Don’t aim for a ‘teaching hospital’ model

The term “teaching hospital” refers to medical and nursing students who learn on the job through practical training and work at the hospital full-time. While some journalism programs mimic this model as a full-time bureau, not all programs can realistically achieve this.

Students do not have to be at the statehouse full-time to create a successful program. Plan out a class that is as many hours as any other journalism class; instead of being in the classroom, have students go sit in on committee meetings for a few hours a week.

Any coverage is better than no coverage; just one or two clips per student over the course of a semester can go a long way.

8. Prep students before the legislative session

As most legislative sessions begin early in the year (typically January), some programs have a prerequisite class in the preceding fall semester to get students acquainted with the

complexities of local government. During this semester, students can cover the fall election cycle or do Q&As with local lawmakers, lobbying groups, or agencies to get familiar with some of the characters. This can help them hit the ground running once the session starts.

9. Consider having students work for pay to close out the session

Since most legislative sessions begin in January, they end *after* the semester comes to a close, e.g., at the end of June or even later if there is a special session.

Consider creating an opportunity for students who want to continue covering the session through the summer after becoming familiar with the beat. Explore funding options to pay them hourly. They may produce better clips than they would at another internship, since they have been working on the beat all semester. This opportunity can also help make the statehouse program more enticing and prestigious at your school.

10. Find ways to make logistical challenges fun

Transportation and housing are key to the success of many of these programs, especially if the statehouse is far away from your campus. Consider ways to make the transition less painful and instead foster a bonding experience for students who are all learning this wild beat together.

John Tomasic, professor at the University of Washington, has found creative ways to house his three to five participating students in Olympia, which is about an hour's drive from campus, each semester.

Usually, they find short-term rentals for students to live in together, the location changing from year to year. (This past year, Tomasic partnered with a real estate firm managing some Olympia VRBOs.) Their housing plan is made possible through alumni donations and their endowment pays out about \$5,000 a year which they give as stipends to the students who basically use it to pay rent in Olympia during the ten-week winter quarter when the legislature is in session. Additionally, students are paid by the outlets they are interning for.

Most of the students sublet their Seattle apartments or rooms, or give up their lease, Tomasic said.

"The students so far seem to love the arrangement," Tomasic said. "They live and work together but for separate outlets. It fully could be a reality TV show. They get a lot of support from each other. They all have different strengths. It's kind of throwback in a good way, too, because it's like living in a newsroom."

11. If you aren't able to launch a full program yet...

You can join an existing effort. One example is a national collaboration of more than a dozen schools working together to cover state legislative issues, led by the University of Missouri's Mark Horvit. Students in this program collaborate with others across the country, localizing national issues in ways major outlets have not and learning to work with a multi-state team.

Here is a brief overview of that project:

Reporters covering state government and programs have historically existed in silos, often providing deep coverage of their own state's issues but rarely connecting the dots of what is happening regionally or nationwide. As the media presence in state capitols has diminished, any realistic hope of addressing this shortcoming has become more remote.

We tackle this problem by linking the growing number of student-based, professor-led statehouse bureaus. Creating this network will provide the context and broader coverage that has been lacking from state capitol coverage and will serve as a model that can show the industry the power of organized collaboration in better informing the citizenry on state policy and political issues.

We will also look at legislation after it has been implemented, to see what's working and what isn't. And we will examine the impact of decisions made at the federal and state level on communities throughout the country.

The goal: Improve the public's knowledge and understanding of policy decisions by their own lawmakers by putting those decisions in context, examining the forces that drive those decisions and providing the bigger picture.

For more details, email CCN Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.