



WISCONSIN

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Madison Commons Annual Report 2023-2024 with updated business plan

Prepared by:
Publisher Sue Robinson
Editor Stacy Forster
Managing Editor Louisa Kamps

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Executive Summary

Madison Commons is a hyperlocal news site providing information and connections throughout the community.

Led by Publisher Sue Robinson, Editor Stacy Forster and Managing Editor Louisa Kamps, Madison

Commons is run as a laboratory for innovating journalism, learning engagement practices and

collaborating with community partners. It is powered by

undergraduate and graduate students in the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of

Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC), and we also collaborate with local nonprofit

organizations and their community members. We focus on areas that people have told us are

important to their communities, especially positive pieces that highlight grassroots initiatives,

happenings, people, events and issues such as K-12 education, arts and culture, sports,

environment and economic sustainability, health and city life. We think of ourselves as working

within the communities around us, helping to better ourselves, to collaborate in resolving

intractable problems, and to otherwise make life a little easier for all of us. This kind of

journalism is essential as local media organizations – though on paper, prolific in number –

decrease in size, coverage area and resources.



Founded in 2006 under the guidance of Professor Lewis Friedland, Madison Commons is one of the longest-running community-based news sites based in a university setting. The name comes from the idea of a village commons, a place for news, talk, debate —and some entertainment, too — that’s open to everyone. Past Madison Commons reporters have gone on to report at

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prestigious organizations, including the *Wall Street Journal*, Voice of San Diego, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the Guardian, the *Capital Times*, News 3 Now and many more. The site has also won many awards over the years and has been studied by SJMC’s researchers as a model for community-based journalism.¹ Because of its small size and constant cycle of different students who are always eager to experiment with us, Madison Commons fulfills a desperate need in the profession of journalism to be nimble to change, to dare to be revolutionary, to learn from all of it, and then to try again..

2023-2024 Activities Summary

In 2023-2024, we worked to teach students how to build trust and produce content that is not only factual but also solutions oriented. Student reporters dug into big topics impacting the community, writing on environmental issues, including flood-mitigation planning and local arts organizations’ response last summer to poor air quality caused by smoke from Canadian wildfires; pending state litigation, including bills that would limit medical care for transgender youth to receive gender-affirming health care; Dane County’s rising tech industry; and inclusive sports, including assistive hockey and the arrival of Madison’s first women’s softball team. Reporters wrote on topics of interest in Madison and beyond, including vaping shops’ ability, due to a loophole in the federal Farm Bill, to sell hemp products that, when heated, convert to THC, despite state laws banning the sale of cannabis and THC in Wisconsin. Madison Commons’ reporters also interviewed a wide range of community members – some well known, others just leading interesting lives otherwise under the radar – who shared their takes on city life, and they wrote lively profiles, including one about a Black symphony conductor who broke ground leading youth and adult orchestras across the Midwest.

Our reporters demonstrated impressive ingenuity and persistence in their reporting, and, in response to editing suggestions from our intern and staff editors, dug deeper to find additional sources or improve the clarity of their prose. And their hard work paid off: Three of our reporters garnered top-level honors for their reporting in 2023 from the Milwaukee Press Club at the club’s May 2024 awards dinner: In the Collegiate “Best Short Hard Feature Story” category, intern Hallie Claflin won Gold honors for her feature “No longer memorializing problematic figures, some Madison schools are renaming for better symbolism,” and intern Zoe Jaeger won Silver honors for reporting on changing tipping policies in “Pandemic-era changes to the service industry are working for Madison’s restaurants.” In the Collegiate “Best Soft Short Feature” category,

2023 Excellence in Journalism Awardees

Best Short Hard Feature Story

GOLD	SIVLER
Hallie Claflin	Zoe Jaeger
<i>Madison Commons</i>	<i>Madison Commons</i>
No longer memorializing problematic figures, some Madison schools rename for better symbolism	Pandemic-era changes to the service industry are working for Madison's restaurants

¹ See Robinson, S., DeShano, C., Nakho, K. & Friedland, L. (2010). Madison Commons: Experimenting with a Citizen-Journalism Model. In Jack Rosenberry and Burton St. John III. (Eds.), *Public Journalism 2.0: The Promise and Reality of a Citizen-Engaged Press* (pp.162175). New York: Routledge; and, Robinson, S. & DeShano, C. (2011). Citizen Journalists and Their Third Places: What Makes People Exchange Information Online (or Not). *Journalism Studies*, 12(5), 1-16. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2011.557559.

Madison Commons' reporter Mike Hall won Silver honors for his piece on restoring pollinator-friendly prairie habitats in "A pollinator predicament: How community members are mitigating bumblebee declines in Madison." As a whole, the reporters and staff of Madison Commons also received the Press Club's Collegiate "Best Local News or Feature Website" award for 2023.



This year we nurtured a budding relationship with The Odyssey Project, team teaching an English class with Literacy Instructor Erin Ceello and working with the 10 continuing education adult students on op-eds. Only one of them ran – in part because we ran out of time, and in part because Madison Commons was still building trust with the program and participants felt shy and wary about publishing at all. But the one that ran – [titled "Rise Up" by Ontario Frazier telling the story of a Black man in white Madison](#) – serves as an exemplar for how the site can pay tribute to the lived experiences of its communities. We will revamp the approach for Fall 2024's incoming class.



Also in 2023-2024, we revived our partnership with Madison's Community Shares of Wisconsin, which had been a part of the site during its early days in the 2010s. In Fall 2023, the partnership involved \$5,000 in annual money in exchange for a series of profiles and Q&As about their 70+ nonprofits. Our content synergies work to push forward the community-based nature of the site. The contribution will go directly to pay for the interns who can showcase local "Backyard Heroes" and "Change Makers." In addition, as a (re)newed nonprofit member of Community Shares, Madison Commons participated in the Big Share Day that Community Shares organizes for its members in early March each year. This year, our first fundraiser in a long time, netted \$2,500 for Madison Commons. We will participate again in March 2025 and hopefully top \$3,000.



TOGETHER WE TRANSFORM
OUR COMMUNITY

2023-2024 Statistics

*June 1, 2023 - June 1, 2024

- Average monthly views during the school year: 4,414
- Total number of stories: 116
- Number of producers total:
 - Number of intern producers: 8
 - Number of classes contributing: 3
 - Number of other freelancers: 1
- Most read story: "Legalizing cannabis in Wisconsin: Do the benefits outweigh the costs?" with 7,759 views
- Awards/Honors: The Milwaukee Press Club named Madison Commons the Best Local or Feature Website in its collegiate contest. The story "No longer memorializing

problematic figures, some Madison schools rename for better symbolism” by Hallie Claflin won gold for Best Short Hard Feature Story, while “Pandemic-era changes to the service industry are working for Madison’s restaurants” by Zoe Jaeger won silver in the same category. The story “A pollinator predicament: How community members are mitigating bumblebee declines in Madison” by Mike Hall won silver for Best Short Soft Feature Story.

2023-2024 Financial Summary

Although Madison Commons is operated out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s School of Journalism & Mass Communication, the site is not funded by the School. It relies on one fund from the UW Foundation of about \$7,000 a year annually. In Fall 2023, the revived partnership with Community Shares guaranteed another \$5,000 a year in exchange for highlighting local volunteers and community change makers. For several years now, Madison Commons has been enjoying a surplus of a mix of residual grants and donations over the years. Some of this money has come from The Evjue Foundation and the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment.

Here is the breakdown of the 2023-2024 funding and expenditures:

- Expenditures for the year: \$20,500
- Revenues for the year: \$17,661 (plus about \$10,000 in surplus from a leftover grant)
 - UW-Madison Foundation Newspapers Fund: \$10,000
 - Madison Commons Fund: \$161
 - Community Shares: \$5,000
 - Big Share Day Fundraiser: \$2,500

2023-2024 Madison Commons Team

**Interns cycle out every year*

Publisher / Sue Robinson

Sue joined the UW-Madison faculty at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in January 2007 and now holds the Helen Firstbrook Franklin Professor of Journalism endowed research chair. As a scholar, she explores how journalists adopt new information technologies to report on public affairs as well as how audiences and individuals can use the technologies for civic engagement. Central to her work is the consideration of power dynamics such as areas of marginalization in information flows as content moves through media ecologies at the local community level. She has published three books about journalism and does what is called “applied research” that works in collaboration with journalists and newsroom training organizations such as Solutions Journalism Network, Hearken, Trusting News, Spaceship Media, Agora Journalism Center, and Journalism That Matters. Locally, she advises, is a consultant for or has had collaborations with the Minority Student Achievement Network, The Black Voice, the National Association for Black Journalists, Goodman Community Center, Freedom Inc., Simpson Street Free Press, Lussier Community Education Center, Centro Hispano, Community Shares, The Odyssey Project, and LEAP 2 College. Sue joined Madison Commons as publisher in 2023.



Editor / Stacy Forster

Stacy is a member of the teaching faculty in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. She spent more than a decade as a reporter, working in Madison as a state Capitol reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and in New York for the Wall Street Journal Online. She also did strategic communication and public relations work for UW-Madison's Office of University Communications. Stacy has served as the editor of Madison Commons since September 2021.



Managing Editor / Louisa Kamps

Louisa Kamps is an award-winning writer and editor whose profiles, essays, reviews and reporting have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *On Wisconsin*, *Real Simple*, *Martha Stewart Living* and *ELLE*, where she was a contributing writer and editor for 21 years. She is a regular contributor to *Oprah Daily* and writes and edits personal and business histories for private clients.

Assistant Editing Intern / Cate Schiller

In 2023-2024, Cate was a senior in SJMC also pursuing a certificate in sports communication. She had been a part of the Madison Commons team for a year and a half, doing both reporting and sports media. Cate loves the community perspective of Madison Commons and has enjoyed seeing the publication progress over time.



Engagement Intern / Morgan Legret



Morgan, a senior at SJMC in 2023-2024, works in the arenas of digital content strategy, audience development, and community engagement. She graduated in 2024 with a certificate in Digital Studies and a certificate in Creative Writing from New York University. Her wide-ranging experience includes being Content Manager at Atelier Legret, an architecture firm that produces digital content for clients, and also as a Reporter at The Fire Island News. Fluent in French, Morgan is passionate about journalism, storytelling, and social impact.

Reporting Intern / Hallie Claflin

Hallie was a senior in SJMC in 2023-2024, also majoring in political science. Additionally, she was an investigative intern for The Badger Project. She grew up in western Wisconsin. Hallie has a passion for political, investigative and local journalism in Madison. After graduation, she hopes to cover the competitive 2024 elections coming up in Wisconsin.





Reporting Intern / Ruby Rothman

In 2023-2024, Ruby was a senior in SJMC. She majored in multimedia reporting and pursued a certificate in sports communications. Her role included writing feature stories and covering local sporting events in the area. She wanted to join the Madison Commons team in order to get field experience covering sports and to become more invested in the community.

Reporting Intern / Rachel Sokolow

In 2023-2024, Rachel was a senior in SJMC and also majored in environmental studies. She was interested in covering a variety of stories and hearing from the voices that make up the Dane County Community. Even after three years in Madison, Rachel knows there is more to explore here and that is why she was so excited to work as a reporter for Madison Commons.



Current and Past Partnerships and Sponsors

The Commons is currently supported by or has a working partnership with the following:

- [The UW-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#)
- [Community Shares of Wisconsin](#)
- [The Odyssey Project](#)
- [The Solutions Journalism Network's Midwest Hub at the Northwestern University's School of Medill with Director Deborah Douglas.](#)

For 2024-2025, we are working with Madison365 and Wisconsin Latino News on additional collaborations.

In the past, the site has accepted funds or other resources from the Morgridge Center for Public Service, WISC-TV/Channel 3000, J-Lab, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment.

Conclusions: 2024-2025 Agenda

The 2024-2025 year for Madison Commons will be a transition year for the site as we formalize more community partners and boost the engagement journalism practices currently adopted by the profession in the United States.

The following currently comprise Madison Common's agenda for 2024-2025:

- Continue the relationship with Managing Editor Louisa Kamps. We are overjoyed to announce that the experienced professional journalist and editor has agreed to stay on

another year as we transition the site into a few different activities. She will continue to work with the interns and other content producers to make sure everything published in MC is fact checked and otherwise edited closely.

- Hire, train and supervise 3 SJMC interns as reporters and one SJMC intern as an editor-in-training.
- Build on the relationship with The Odyssey Project, perhaps expanding into the Odyssey Juniors program in Spring 2025 in collaboration with a specific SJMC community-based learning class called Practicing Communication for Social Change taught by SJMC Professor and Madison Commons Publisher Sue Robinson.
- Undertake the application to become a part of the Institute for Nonprofit News to have access to additional resources and participate in the NewsMatch their members conduct every year.
- Apply to the Evjue Foundation for an annual contribution in February 2025.
- Begin laying the foundation for listening sessions, followed by content production and some kind of a collaborative event that connects stakeholders around a specific problem local Madisonians face.
- Participate in the Big Share in March 2025.
- Apply for more grants and seek additional funding (both projects-based and consistent annual opportunities) to expand the convening and listening work and get MC into a more stable, sustainable organization.

Ultimately, our goal is to grow the different facets of Madison Commons — listening, content and solutions — offering not only a structured space for training in innovative journalism practices but also a partner in community solutions’ work.

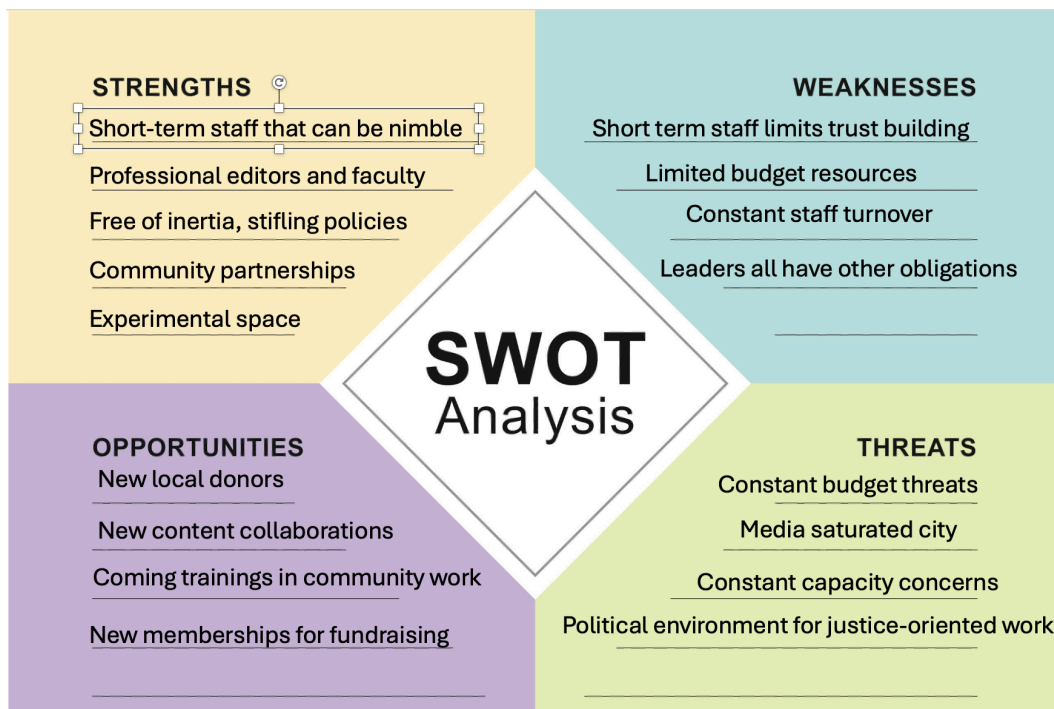
Appendix

Target Market

Madison Commons seeks to reach everyone in Madison who lives in our neighborhoods and takes part in community life. We are not a campus news outlet that focuses on students, however. Our publics will be interested in the topical arenas that local media miss, including K-12 education, community and high school sports, the environment as it impacts Madisonians, small businesses, and micro-level proposals and policies that impact the Madison individual. We strive especially to reach BIPOC people, people in all income brackets, and people who are active in civic life and work within our communities.

Currently we reach about 4,500 people a month, and we seek to increase this to 5,500 with our new partnerships and content collaborations. We are not able to differentiate who uses our site at this time. Madison is home to 273,000 people and that number doubles when including the greater Madison area. It is growing by about 1.5% each year. The median household makes \$73,647 with 17% in poverty. Although the adult population skews majority white people, the K-12 schools have a majority of Black and Brown students.

SWOT Analysis



Marketing Plan

Our marketing plan is executed primarily by a student editing intern with help from the content and administrative editors. It entails frequent postings on on social platforms, including Facebook, X, and Instagram. Each year this plan is adapted and revised according to market

trends and the specialties of the specific editing intern. In addition, reporters are encouraged to send stories to stories, asking directly for the story to be circulated among their networks. And, furthermore, Madison Commons collaborates with Community Shares and The Odyssey Project on cross-posting, with talks with Madison365 and Latino Wisconsin News to do reciprocal publishing on stories that make sense for those publications. As we continue to expand our community partnerships in the next 3-5 years, we expect these kinds of content collaborations to expand.