



**School of Journalism
and Mass Communication**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

**Madison Commons Annual Report
2024-2025**

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



**MADISON
COMMONS**

Dane County's student-led community news source

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

School of Journalism & Mass Communication

5115 Vilas Communication Hall University of Wisconsin–Madison 821 University Ave. Madison, Wisconsin 53706
608-263-4898 Fax: 608-262-1361 Email: info@sjmc.wisc.edu www.sjmc.wisc.edu

easier for all of us. This kind of journalism is essential as local media organizations 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 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 – always, always learning.

2024-2025 Activities Summary

In 2024-2025, we taught students how to build trust and produce content that was factual and solutions oriented. Student reporters dug into big topics impacting the community, highlighting pressing local concerns like youth mental health, housing stability, and community issues. Through these narratives based on thorough reporting, our team was able to elevate voices that are frequently underrepresented, especially those of Madison community members. In 2024-2025, we traversed all over the city, writing about [the 150th anniversary of Madison's Public Library](#) and [the history of our city's ubiquitous little free libraries](#) as well as [how rain gardens work to mitigate flooding](#), [how peer support is having to stand in for declining mental health funding](#), and [coverage of a bimonthly running club for athletes who identify as LGBTQ+](#) – more than 80 stories all together! From [breaking news pieces about the 2024 election](#) to a host of profiles of Madisonians doing good work and a special investigative series and project on housing insecurities, we were informative, reaching solid public engagement and sparking thought-provoking conversations across Madison.

Our reporters demonstrated impressive ingenuity and persistence in their reporting, and, in response to editing suggestions from our intern and staff editors, participated in



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.

a rigorous fact-checking and revision process that would ultimately serve them well in the “real world.”

In 2024-2025, we continued building or creating new partnerships with community organizations, and our content synergies with these entities worked to push forward the community-based nature of the site. In 2024-2025, the Commons was supported by or had a working partnership with the following:

TOGETHER WE TRANSFORM
OUR COMMUNITY

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

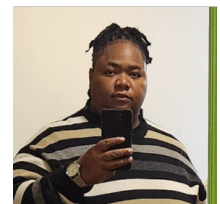
Through these collaborations, we could truly be immersed in our communities and work to advance dialogues and solutions to some of the most pressing problems that plagued Dane County. We were particularly thrilled to deepen our relationship with UW Odyssey Project, which is a transition program for low-income adult students seeking to get their degrees. In addition, we invited some Odyssey students to write personal essays for the site, and we had four



UW Odyssey Project

overcoming adversity and achieving dreams through higher education

of them do so; [you can find their stories under “Your Own Stories.”](#) One example was this commentary by Jasmine Benton (pictured right), [“The places that shape us: Looking for people ‘like me’ in Milwaukee and Madison.”](#) Click [here](#) to see recent stories about volunteers in our communities with [Community Shares of Wisconsin](#), all of which are written by Madison Commons interns



The year was characterized by intense trust building around the topic of **housing insecurities**. We worked with UW Odyssey Project’s Brian Benford and charged ourselves with creating a huge repository of resources, stories and information for people interested in the housing insecurities arena in Madison. [You can find our coverage here](#), and [the explanation for what we did and how we did it, here](#).

As one example of how we are rethinking the role of journalists as caregivers within our communities, we sent two of our Madison Commons reporters to Kentucky with UW Odyssey representatives to research a possible solution to nontraditional, low-income students who struggle with finding affordable housing. [You can watch their 9-minute documentary here](#).

For this work, in addition to UW Odyssey Project, we developed partnerships in this topic with:

- Housing Last – a podcast interviewing unhoused people in Madison. We were able to conduct several episodes.
- OWNIT: Building Black Wealth – an organization that helps families achieve home ownership through downpayment support. We were able to profile three families who were served by the organization.
- The City of Madison’s Community Development Authority Housing Operations Division– This organization facilitates several programs to help Madisonians find stable housing. We were able to work with the organization on their website and other public-facing materials.
- Forward Learning Youth and Young Adults (FLYY) – a Madison-based nonprofit that connects young people with housing and other support services. We were able to work with the organization on their website and other public-facing materials.



And, finally, we also held two events in April 2025 with our community partners. The first one, called [“How to Bring Family Scholar House to Madison,”](#) brought together Odyssey students seeking higher degrees but struggling with housing costs with nonprofits to discuss a solution. The second event partnered with the University of Wisconsin Law School on an event titled [“Know Your Rights”](#) for people experiencing wrongful eviction and other problems with property owners. Both were well attended and a huge hit.

2024-2025 Madison Commons Statistics

*June 1, 2024 - June 1, 2025

- Average monthly views during the school year: 4,996
- Total number of stories: 81
- Number of intern producers with the core Madison Commons: 4
- Number of intern producers with the Special Projects for Housing: 4
- Number of classes contributing: 3

- Number of non-UW community members producing: 4
- Number of Community Partnerships:
- Most read story: *A new kind of teen scene: If I could buy East Towne Mall...* by Tanisha N. Milligan, one of our UW Odyssey Project community member essays
- Awards/Honors:
 - 5,000 views in the last year
 - 3,800 visitors in that time period
 - 81 stories published
 - **1 national honor from the National Finalist for Best Independent**

Madison Commons Board of Advisors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abigail Becker ● Lewis Friedland ● Steven Wang ● Kynala Phillips ● Nora Hertel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sophia Vento ● Andrea Wenzel ● ananda mirilli ● Enjoyiana Nururdin

Website from the Society of Professional Journalists, as well as regional awards

2024-2025 Madison Commons New Board of Advisors

We were excited to announce our new Madison Commons Board of Advisors and thank them for their commitment to making Madison Commons the best it can be with their advice and support for our team. A huge welcome to our new Madison Commons Board of Advisors! (See the table).

2024-2025 Madison Commons Financial Summary

Our budget for 2024-2025 was about \$25,000. We must pay for the following: a professional editor to work part time with all of our reporters and community members, scholarship stipends for five students (a managing editor intern, a legal studies intern and three reporters/producers), the two events, and freelance money for community-member content. Both Publisher Sue Robinson and Editor Stacy Forster volunteer their time for this MC work.

Although Madison Commons is operated out of UW–Madison’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the only guaranteed money the site receives is about \$7,000 a year from the UW Foundation. Additional funds come from a hodgepodge of fundraising and grants as well as carefully budgeted rollovers from the year prior. In 2024-2025, we received the following:

- SJMC Law and Media Management Grant: \$7,000
- Community Shares: \$5,000
- Morgridge Center for Public Service for Community-Based Learning Development: \$5,000
- Total Individual Donations (includes Bucky Badger Day, Giving Tuesday and Big Share Day): \$7,000

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.

2024-2025 Madison Commons Core Team

**Interns cycle out every year*

Publisher / Sue Robinson

Becoming Madison Commons publisher in 2023, Sue joined the UW–Madison faculty at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in 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. 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, and Agora



Journalism Center. 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.

Editor / Stacy Forster

Stacy is a distinguished teaching faculty member 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. This was her 2nd year with Madison

Commons.

Managing Editing Intern / Meaghan Chase

Maegan is a senior in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, studying reporting and strategic communication. She has had a number of wonderful internships, including being a “public affairs intern” at AbbVie. She loves to travel and has enjoyed finding an eclectic set of opportunities through her sorority. She has accepted a job with Edelman’s Corporate Reputation team in New York City.



Reporting Intern / Lily Spaunbauer



Lily is a senior in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, studying reporting and multimedia journalism. When she’s not drafting music reviews for The Daily Cardinal or talking too much in her writing classes, she is probably going for a run or getting tackled at rugby practice. Above all else, Lily believes in the power of storytelling and is excited to show that here at Madison Commons. Click [here](#) to read “The

Art of Reciprocity,” Lily’s most recent story about Madison-based artist Lesley Anne Numbers and her printmaking endeavors in the city!

Reporting Intern / Whitney West

Whitney West is an award-winning journalist and photographer who served as a reporter for Madison Commons from 2024 through 2025. Her work focuses on the intersection of community, culture, and social policy in Dane County, with a particular emphasis on human-interest narratives and local advocacy. She double majored in Journalism and Environmental Studies B.A.



Legal Studies Intern / Noah Maze



Noah double majored in journalism at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and legal studies at the UW Law School, with a certificate in criminal justice. He was an intern for two different criminal defense firms, including Strang Bradley in Madison. Noah ran the Madison Marathon for the last two years and hopes to attend Wisconsin or Loyola Chicago’s law school, so that he can run it for a third time. He loves sports, politics, snowboarding and cheering for the Badgers. As Madison Commons’ Legal Reporting Intern, Noah represented Madison Commons at the Big Share Day on March 4 along with Maeghan Chase, our managing editorial intern. The two co-lead Madison Commons’ initiative on housing insecurity for 2024-2025.

And we would like to shout out to the amazing Special Projects Team who worked during Spring 2025 on our housing insecurity pilot program: **Alyssa Lutker, Maneeya Leung, Maggie Cleary, Sreejita Patra, Kiesen Williams**. We worked closely with the **UW Odyssey’s Success Coach and social worker Brian Benford** and his dog Duke.

Conclusions & 2025-2026 Agenda

The 2024-2025 year for Madison Commons was a transition year for the site as we formalized more community partners and boosted the engagement journalism practices currently adopted by the profession in the United States. The following currently comprise Madison Common’s agenda for 2025-2026:

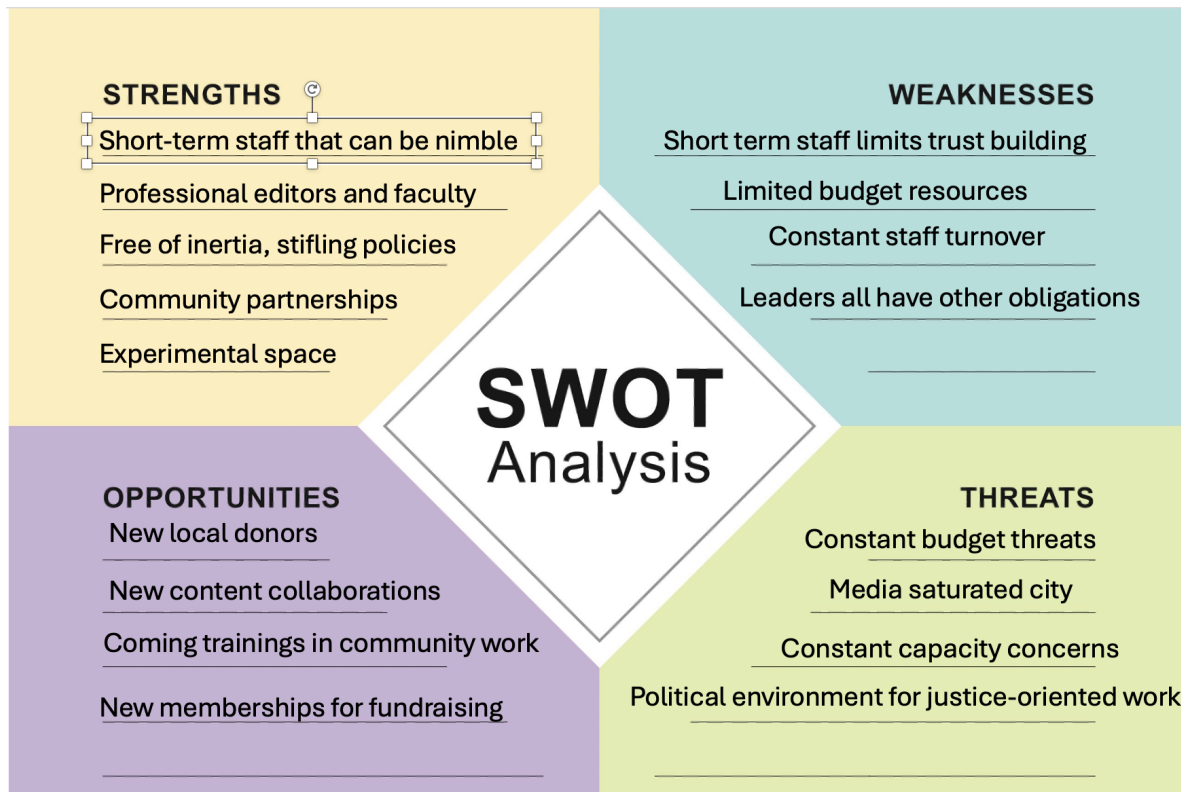
- Continue the relationship with Managing Editor Louisa Kamps. We are overjoyed to announce that the experienced professional journalist and editor has agreed to stay on another year as we transition the site into a few different activities. She will continue to work with the interns and other content producers to make sure everything published in MC is fact checked and otherwise edited closely.
- Hire, train and supervise four SJMC interns as reporters and producers and one SJMC intern as an editor-in-training.

- TEAM HAM is working alongside Madison Commons to create a collaborative reporting initiative that explores the continued work of the intersection between mental health and housing insecurity in the Madison area.
- Build on the relationship with The UW Odyssey Project, working with the Odyssey Juniors program in Fall 2025 and following up with a new community-based learning class called Collaborative Storytelling Skills taught by SJMC Professor and Madison Commons Publisher Sue Robinson in Spring 2026. This class will enroll 15 Odyssey students with 15 SJMC students to produce content about mental health and housing.
- Undertake the application to become a part of the Institute for Nonprofit News to have access to additional resources and participate in the NewsMatch its members conduct every year.
- Reapply to the Evjue Foundation for an annual contribution in February 2026.
- Now that we have laid the foundation for listening sessions, we are diving into the housing insecurity-youth mental health topics content production and will host two collaborative events connecting stakeholders with experts on the topic of youth mental health and housing insecurity.
- Participate in the Giving Tuesday fundraiser.
- 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 Madison Commons 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

Swot Analysis for 2024-2025



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 about 280,000 people and that number doubles when including the greater Madison area. It is growing by about 1.5% each year. The median household makes \$77,000 with 16% in poverty. Although the adult population skews majority white people, the K-12 schools have a majority of Black and Brown students.

Marketing Plan

We center our marketing strategy around amplifying solutions journalism through storytelling and engagement efforts. Our marketing plan is executed primarily by a student editing intern

with help from the content and administrative editors. It entails frequent postings on social platforms, including Facebook, X and Instagram – additionally, sending out newsletters and partner networks to engage both the community and student audience. 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. We expect these kinds of content collaborations to expand over the next three to five years.