



SFAC SPECIAL REPORT: Cougar Readership & Revenue Update

UNIVERSITY of
HOUSTON
CENTER FOR STUDENT MEDIA

Last year, the Cougar received several infusions of funding from the Student Fees Advisory Committee to help the newspaper and the Center for Student Media make big improvements to the operation of the newspaper and its dissemination across campus.

In its recommendation to fund The Cougar’s initiatives, SFAC asked The Cougar to come back with “detailed data on increased readership and increased revenues.” While most of this data is already reported through the CSM and The Cougar’s SFAC Questionnaires, this report is being submitted to consolidate the highlights for SFAC’s members.

While the transformation of the Cougar to a weekly print product is only in its second month, data from this period and the performance of last year’s Cougar staff have yielded encouraging signs that, with smart investment of funds and energy, The Cougar can garner more awareness and engagement among UH students, faculty and staff. Without high levels of readership and engagement, revenue will not have a chance to grow to a point of sustaining The Cougar long-term.

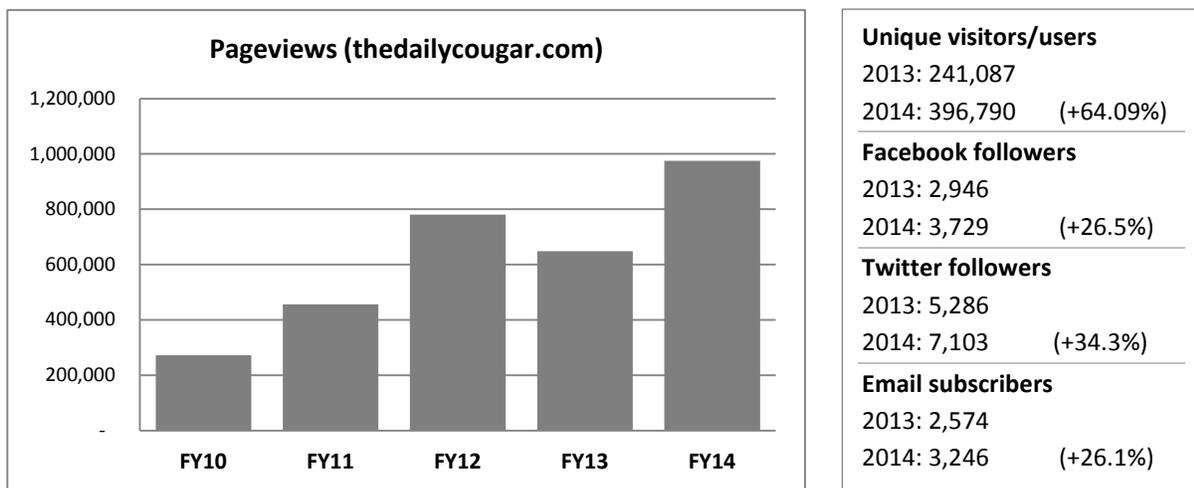
Revenue – Print and digital

The Center for Student Media is responsible for generating revenues to support The Cougar. In FY 14, the CSM managed to hold revenues flat, an achievement in comparison to the last 7 years that have seen double-digit declines. The strategy in FY 14 was to hold print level while increasing digital revenues. While the CSM fell short of its goal, it is encouraging to see a healthy increase in online revenue.

| The Cougar revenue, Sept. 1-Aug. 31 | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | +/- |
|---|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Total revenue, The Daily Cougar print | \$231,416.79 | \$224,477.64 | -\$6,939.15 |
| Total revenue, The Daily Cougar online | \$24,448.89 | \$29,393.17 | +\$4,944.28 |
| Total Cougar revenue | \$255,865.68 | \$253,870.81 | -\$1,994.87 |

Readership – Print and digital

The Cougar’s digital readership has never seen better days, with annual pageviews, unique users and social media followership setting new records in 2014. Social media and subscriptions also continue to grow at a rapid clip.



The challenge with increasing online readership is that online advertising revenue, while increasing every year, does not come close to bringing in enough volume to cover the costs of producing a daily news website.

Print readership, a long-challenged metric for the Cougar, is showing signs of revitalization in the weekly format. With a new strategic partnership with UH Printing and Postal, the Cougar is now receiving accurate reports on newspaper pickup rates broken down by rack. Each month, CSM management will review distribution performance and reallocate distribution numbers and locations to optimize for less waste and more readership.

In the new weekly format, 10,000 papers per week are printed, and the following chart indicates the percentage of papers being recycled each week – an indicator of how many copies are not being picked up. (Note: All returned copies are recycled.)

| Issue date | FY 14 avg. | 3-Sep | 10-Sep | 17-Sep | 24-Sep | 1-Oct | 8-Oct |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| Return % | 18% | 34% | 24% | 19% | 24% | 23% | 22% |

In terms of physical results, even with unsatisfactory pick-up rates, this means that a typical weekly issue of The Cougar is read by about 7,600 people (not including pass-along and shared papers), compared to about 3,250 readers of a daily print issue. In other words, readership per print issue has more than doubled.

The Cougar street team distribution began with the Sept. 24 issue, reducing the average return rate by 3 percentage points. As the street team becomes a more reliable and consistent distribution vehicle, more quantities will shift from rack to hand-to-hand. This, coupled with smart management of the rack inventory, will reduce print returns to 10% or less without reducing circulation.

The street team has proved to be a powerful distribution mechanism – in one case, 3,000 papers were pushed out in less than 2 hours. If this can be sustained with SFAC support, the Cougar’s print readership will increase.

Better promotion, distribution and engagement over the course of the next year will yield more data for consideration of long-term funding needs. In spring 2015, the CSM will conduct another round of surveys to determine if a widespread impact can be measured in terms of students’ self-reported readership habits and awareness of the Cougar. In Fall 2015, the CSM and the Cougar will have a fuller picture to present to SFAC.