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### **St. Cloud Times Coverage of Higher Education in Comparison with Coverage by National Media Outlets**

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This starred paper submitted by Kimberly A. Haiman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science at St. Cloud State University is hereby approved by the Graduate Faculty.

ST. CLOUD TIMES COVERAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN COMPARISON  
WITH COVERAGE BY NATIONAL MEDIA OUTLETS

by

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B.S., St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, 2001

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LIST OF FIGURES ..... iii

Sections

ABSTRACT ..... 1

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT ..... 2

LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 3

METHODS ..... 25

RESULTS ..... 25

Coverage Rate Between Local and National Coverage ..... 25

Rate of Exposure For ..... 25

Positive, Negative or ..... 31

Comparison of Local and National Coverage ..... 35

Major Themes Throughout Coverage ..... 36

CONCLUSION ..... 38

WORKS CITED ..... 41

APPENDICES

A. The St. Cloud Files ..... 45

B. USM Files ..... 48

C. The New York Times ..... 51

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
Sections	
ABSTRACT.....	1
INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	2
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	5
METHODS .....	25
RESULTS .....	28
Coverage Rate Between Local and National Newspapers .....	28
Rate of Exposure Per Section Analyzed .....	29
Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage.....	31
Comparison of Local and National Coverage .....	35
Major Themes Throughout Coverage .....	36
CONCLUSION .....	38
WORKS CITED .....	41
APPENDIXES	
A. <i>The St. Cloud Times</i> .....	45
B. <i>USA Today</i> .....	48
C. <i>The New York Times</i> .....	51

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Total Coverage of Higher Education .....	29
2. Rate of Exposure Per Section Analyzed .....	31
3. Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage from the <i>St. Cloud Times</i> .....	33
4. Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage from the <i>USA Today</i> .....	34
5. Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage from <i>The New York Times</i> .....	34
6. Comparison of Local and National Coverage.....	36

## ABSTRACT

This study focused on newspaper coverage of higher education and whether or not the *St. Cloud Times*, a local paper, has a comparable attitude toward higher education as *USA Today* and *The New York Times*, both national newspapers. The majority of material for this study was found through secondary research. In addition to the secondary research, an analysis of the *St. Cloud Times*, *USA Today* and *The New York Times* newspapers was conducted by this author to determine if the local and national newspapers have the same coverage (positive, negative, or neutral) regarding higher education topics. The analysis was conducted on newspaper issues from March 17 through April 6, 2003. The results of the research determined whether or not there was a noticeable difference in the two types of newspapers.

## INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Newspapers, radio, television, and other forms of mass media provide information in the form of 'news' to the general public. Of these, newspapers are perhaps more directly associated with news in the public's mind. Newspapers tend to be found in doctors' offices, at restaurants, airports, and are delivered to people at their homes. A newspaper is small enough to fit in a briefcase, yet large enough to be read with ease. It is the one of only forms of media from the list above that can be used over and over again. Monday's news can still be read on Thursday. Newspapers also can be found on the Internet. "Not only can news hounds in Ames, IA, read *The New York Times* or the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* online, they can just as readily read the *Jerusalem Post* or *Le Monde*" (Wiggins). For this reason, it is extremely important to those about whom articles are written, and to advertisers who pay for advertisement space in them, for these news sources to be as accurate as possible and non-biased. One area that mass media have covered over the years consists of stories dealing with higher education. In these stories, some universities and colleges are shown in a positive light, while other universities and colleges struggle with negative publicity. In these cases of negative publicity, some public relations officials believe that the articles are not a true reflection of the nature of higher education.

Some members of the higher education community assert that articles written about universities and colleges tend to be negative in nature and one-sided. In an article about news coverage of public education, the author “blames the public skepticism in large measure on the news media, which covers the bad news about school performances and ignores the good – even in the comics” (Gough). One of the possible reasons for this one-sided coverage could be the budget cuts the newspapers are facing.

Newspapers are often under pressure to cut spending. Some reporters who have the educational beat are also being assigned additional beats to cover or are simply not covering higher education unless for a significant news story. This type of coverage on higher education tends to find the negative stories and point them out but leave the positive stories and events uncovered (Gough).

“An ABC News ‘20/20’ segment on February 16, 1996 described tenure as a ‘lifetime employment’ guarantee that ‘enshrines mediocrity’ and makes removing bad teachers difficult or impossible. A balanced report? Hardly” (Winans). Coverage such as this gives the public who listen to or read it the wrong impression. While one-sided reporting can be positive in nature (for example, in exposing wrongdoing on campuses), it can also create barriers that universities and colleges have to overcome with the public. Misconceived notions are hard to change and public relations officials in higher education try to overcome this by sending out positive press releases on accomplishments of the college or university.

The purpose of this research is to look at how some local and national media compare in coverage of higher education. The following research questions will guide



the study: (1) Does the local newspaper have the same amount of coverage about higher education as the national newspapers? (2) Are the coverage attitudes similar? For three newspapers used for this research, we will use the following guidelines to answer the questions: (a) Was the coverage rate between local and national newspapers comparable; (b) Was the exposure per section comparable; (c) Was the coverage in the articles positive, negative or neutral in nature; and (d) Was there a difference in the presentation of the coverage at a local level compared to a national level?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“Higher education is undergoing higher examination” (Stepp).

Everyone wants positive media coverage about his or her event. Whether it is a local company that just opened a new store, wing, or department, a movie star premiering a new movie, or higher education introducing the next set of graduates, positive coverage is key to success. When a public relations official is setting out to gain positive media coverage, it is important that the mission of the institution be kept in mind. The mission of a higher education institution is the foundation or stepping stone to how and why classes, events, and public relations in general are completed the way they are. Education has two important components. First is to educate students who attend. The second is to have a working relationship with the community. This community can be the faculty and staff, the university community and the community surrounding an institution. To communicate and bring higher education and the surrounding community together, it is important to understand how society changes.

As society changes and evolves, coverage can be hard to achieve. According to David Maurrasse, higher education is changing. “As higher education appears to be moving toward involvement in local communities, the institutions also are becoming increasingly corporate in nature” (11). Change can be a positive way for any

organization or corporation to have stability. Maurrasse quotes Ron Manson, former director of the Center for the Urban Community in New Orleans, as describing higher education in this way,

Higher education is built on a theory. Let's say higher education is a stool, and the stool has three legs: research, teaching, and service. There's a reason that it has three legs. The service is there because it keeps the teaching and research honest. It keeps them connected to everyday problems that people have to address. And that is part of what the role of an institution of higher education ought to be. (22)

To help the service with the community, it is important that the community buys into the idea. "Higher education/community partnerships historically have often been inconsistent and uncoordinated, leaving neighborhood residents wary of even the most well-intentioned outreach efforts" (Maurrasse, 7).

It is within these outreach efforts and others that the media and higher education can get into problems. Some of the problems facing the higher education community are the credibility and ethics surrounding payments to and from mass media sources. The public is interested in what foundations and media outlets are providing for each other. "Without doubt, media credibility and confidence, especially as they relate to the ethics of journalists, editors and media organizations, is on the public's mind" (Pratte). Private foundations can help supplement money for research and other conferences that reporters and writers attend. The article by Pratte focused on the ramifications of these donations and the impact they have on the public. When funding and/or perks (not necessarily monetary) are offered to a writer, an ethical dilemma presents itself. If the writer accepts the offering, will others perceive that as a bribe to write a "better" article? If the perks

continue, will the articles begin to become more and more one-sided and begin to lose benefit to the general public?

On the other hand, if the writer is not given benefits will the articles continue to be written? Pratte quotes David Johnson, a writer for the Chicago Tribune Foundation and Corporate Philanthropy Report, who states, "Newspapers need to understand that nonprofit groups play a major role in their local communities and have a great deal of influence on them." The same holds true for articles about higher education. Many of the events or topics covered by the press impact the communities in some way. Whether it is an event a community member can attend or tuition increases, they all affect the community. For example, if tuition increases occur, there is a possibility that fewer people will be able to attend the institution and the community could face layoffs and loss of revenue at local businesses.

Overall, "If journalism is to retain what is left of its credibility it might begin through better reporting of all institutions that surround it, including...the workplace and the school place, and their ethical implications" (Pratte). Credibility is the foundation of a well-respected media outlet. Many strive to achieve the highest level of credibility with the readership; however, some media outlets will never achieve it.

To achieve credibility it is important to cover topics that are interesting to the readers, as well as to give information that is perceived as nonbiased. Some articles about higher education that receive attention are budget, attendance, events, and student interest stories. Of these, budget can be a very difficult issue. Even with support from the community, students, and alumni, funding a college or university can be challenging.

With state-funded budget cuts being made across the board, public schools in higher education have taken a large hit.

The budget for higher education goes to many things. First and foremost, funding is given to professors to teach the classes. Then funding needs to be provided for building maintenance, support staff, office supplies, and so on. For public institutions, financial support from the state plays an important role. The more money provided by the state, the lower the tuition that must be charged. "Legislatures looking for budget cuts have targeted higher education" (Douglas). These budget cuts have left officials scrambling to find different forms of revenue. One way of increasing revenue is to increase the fees students are paying to attend college. However, raising the fees that students pay has caused the demographics of the average student to change. "It is people from lower- and middle-income families, single parents, returning students who have to work, and many people of color who will have to sacrifice more, work harder, or just not go to college at all" (Douglas). With this change in demographics in higher education, public perception of the tuition increases may differ. And public perception can be attributed to some of the articles that are written in newspapers or magazines. According to Susan Douglas, recent coverage "of higher education is a prime example of go-with-the-flow pack journalism." In the next quote she states some of the misconceptions of higher education:

First, I have the cushiest job in America. What's my line? Why, I'm a college professor. You know what that means. We work only six hours a week. We have all our summers off. We get to indoctrinate our students with politically correct, Marxist feminist dogma, much of which we transmit through films and videos so we don't have to teach. And we get paid \$120,000 a year. Not bad. (Douglas)

While some of these comments seem farfetched, public opinion, at times, does reflect this frame of mind. For instance, headlines like "Thought Police," and "Academic Bullies," have a negative effect on public opinion of how funding is being spent at higher education institutions.

Realistically, professors are not making large amounts of money. Many are overworked, underpaid and underappreciated. Many professors are "putting in sixty-hour work weeks and constantly battling their administrators' efforts to cut the library budget, cut financial aid, and freeze faculty and staff positions" (Douglas). Douglas further says "overpaid, irresponsible, tenured faculty" do exist at every institution, but excluding those, most professors "speak animatedly about teaching, about developing new courses," and "about nurturing their students."

Douglas isn't alone in her thoughts about the budget issues facing higher education. In an article by Carl Stepp, he notes higher education is being examined very closely by university officials, legislators, students, parents, alumni, and the general public. "In an age of accountability, as tuition surges and consumers squeal, colleges have begun sliding off the pedestals they once occupied as privileged, seldom-challenged local shrines" (Stepp). Due to the fact that reporters have begun to take on different beats and less attention is being given to the everyday stories in higher education, the focus has turned to the "wow" stories and features. This change in coverage is also coming because the newspapers are cutting back staffing. Mark Seibel of the Miami Herald states, "We're pretty much at the beck and call of people in the universities who call and alert us to something, because we don't have anybody who works the beat"

(Stepp). Similar to other articles, Stepp's focused on accountability of the newspaper to the readership. Public money is funding the higher educational institutions. Because everyone is "investing" his or her money into higher education in some form, some scrutiny needs to be maintained. As budgets become tighter, coverage of higher education and where public dollars are being spent will become more and more critical to the public. Overall, coverage of higher education is "one of those classic half-empty, half-full topics—it's getting better, but it's still not where it should be. As colleges become ever-mightier economic and cultural forces, readers deserve more and better coverage" (Stepp). One of the reasons for the lack of coverage is that K-12 affects more people and many papers have substantial coverage on that area of education, so higher education is given whatever room is left. Since the public has a higher interest in K-12 education, coverage on higher education can be limited to stories that have a negative emphasis.

In an editorial, Pauline Gough calls attention to the fact that reporters are focusing on negative aspects of higher education. She quotes Gene Roberts, managing editor of *The New York Times*, "Editors who lack both staff and space start taking shortcuts, making guesses as to the newsworthiness of events...and then cramming important stories into newsholes so tight that readers don't get all the details and, as a result, don't understand what really happened" (Gough). Gough also notes Jack Jennings' thoughts on media scrutiny: "Jennings blames the public's skepticism in large measure on the news media, which cover the bad news about school performances and ignore the good" (Gough). Overall, this editorial discussed the importance of letting go of old stereotypes

about higher education to focus on the new concepts that universities are trying to implement. Through these new implementations, the universities are trying to improve the image of higher education.

Similarly to Gough, Dave Winans describes how media are focusing on the negatives in higher education. "Mass Media have unwittingly become a tool of enemies of public schools who unfairly denounce the mediocrity of the system" (Winans). In his article, Winans focuses on several media outlets that have broadcast negative publicity about higher education. Two of those mentioned are *ABC News 20/20* and *US News*. The article in *US News* focused on unions and the impact they have in hiring teachers. The overall tone of the story was that unions do not support higher standards for teachers, but rather are interested in contracts and provisions. In addition, both stories reflect negatively on the National Education Association (NEA). Members of NEA are fighting back by writing letters to these media outlets to let them know that they disagree. Keith Geiger, Association President, wrote, "No organization has done more than NEA to set high standards for teachers, make sure they have the skills to be effective, or to work to improve the teaching of children" (Winans).

In the *ABC News 20/20* story, teachers who were tenured were the topic of discussion. The story talked about how professors who are tenured have guaranteed employment, and that because of this mediocrity is acceptable. It also focused on how removing bad teachers is "difficult or impossible" (Winans). Media coverage like this coverage by *ABC News 20/20* and *US News* creates public perceptions. Whether these perceptions are accurate is left up to the readers to ascertain.



Perceptions can create very real problems for higher educational institutions. Public opinion is based around the information given and received. Whether press coverage is positive or negative, the general public tends to remember the negative. To look closer at the trends in public perceptions, we look to a study done by A.C. Gunther and C.T. Christen. The study focused on mass media influence on public opinion. Using a random-digit dialing procedure, the study conducted a telephone survey of 760 respondents aged eighteen and older. The survey was conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Survey Center. Each respondent was asked a number of questions and asked to rank them on a 1-5 scale. There were four topic areas: potential health hazards, genetically engineered foods, whether the earth had been visited by aliens, and finally physician-assisted suicide. If the respondents had not heard about a specific topic, then that set of questions would be skipped. After the respondent's own opinion had been recorded, a follow-up question would be asked. The follow-up question would be identical to the first question but would ask how most Americans would rank the question. "The two-part item was used to measure the perceived slant of news coverage" (Gunther and Christen). An example would be, "Would you say news coverage on the whole has been favorable or unfavorable towards genetic engineering of foods, or has it been pretty much neutral?"

From the responses, the results proved that physician-assisted suicides was the most prominent topic: 96 percent were familiar with the topic; however, the personal opinions were polarized. The other categories had lower levels of polarization in personal opinions.

As a result of these findings, Gunther and Christen found that public perception and persuasion differ from person to person. What might be a positive push to one respondent, had a negative affect on the next. "For some issues, people appear to view mass media as an independent and powerful arbiter, but by no means a sympathetic one. At the same time, people are generally prone to see other people as sharing their own views" (Gunther and Christen). This study can offer insight to future studies on persuasion and the effects. Since each person views mass media differently, public relations officials need to find a balance when presenting information about higher education.

The results in this study found that public persuasion was different for each individual who participated in the study. Since public opinions are so different, journalists have a difficult time writing stories that appear to be neutral in nature and still interest readers. Aleta Watson wrote an article about the newspaper's responsibility in news coverage. The article is written from the perspective of the journalist and focuses on some of the concerns in writing stories for the public school system. "Journalists cannot allow themselves to be swayed by consideration of whether a story will be good for the image of public schools. The job of journalist is to tell the truth and help readers understand the challenges that society is facing" (Watson). Many journalists find themselves receiving calls or emails arguing the nature of news coverage of education. For most journalists, "Isn't it time someone wrote something positive about schools?" (Watson) is a line often heard. The feeling of many people in education is that "while the media seem quite willing to report bad news about our schools, they are much less

willing to report news about the strengths of American education” (Watson). Watson argues that it is not so much that there are more negative articles on higher education than positive articles, but that the public remembers the negative stories at a higher rate.

A concern by Jay Rosen, a New York University professor, that is featured in Watson’s article, is that “newspapers are still not giving their readers what they need in order to make informed decisions about education policy.” Rosen continues by stating, “Reporters spend too much time writing about the school board and not enough time writing about the schools” (Watson). Since newspapers may not be focusing in the areas that the readership is interested in, that could also play a role in the public’s negative perception in reporting.

Another factor that comes into play for a journalist is the speed in which an article is written. Newspapers focus on timely issues and many have limited time and space to write in-depth stories. “So, at even the best papers, complex stories on all topics become oversimplified more frequently than reporters would like” (Watson). When it comes to articles that are not public interest stories, journalists typically have a few hours to cover the event, write an article about it, and get it to the press in time for printing. These articles tend to have less background information to them and deal with what was seen or heard at that time. Even under these conditions, newspapers will argue that they “remain the most complete and objective general source of information on education for the public, producing as true a picture of schools as is possible in limited space and time” (Watson). With these limitations, it is still important for newspapers to remember who the target audience is.

Newspapers should focus on topics that their readership is interested in and studies show that public education remains one of them. In a 1996 Mercury News poll, “88% of the people were concerned with the quality of public schools in their community” (Watson). Even with a poor economy, many are still in favor of passing legislation to increase the quality of public education. While this is not in the realm of higher education, it indicates a broader public interest.

Watson concludes by stating that journalists cannot let the voices of a few dictate the coverage a story will have. The public needs to know the truth about public education and by being truthful; the newspapers will help the readership understand some of the challenges society is facing. “And the truth is often unpleasant” (Watson).

Journalists have many obstacles to face when writing an article. Some of these obstacles include making the article newsworthy, timely, and interesting to the general readership. While these are all important to look at, the next hurdle the journalist is faced with is the editor or the “gatekeeper.” If the gatekeeper cuts a story or parts of the story, the journalist is faced with few options to persuade the gatekeeper otherwise.

A journalist can also be considered a gatekeeper. Some journalists decide which stories they will cover. Higher education officials can send out hundreds of press releases and due to the number of press releases from other organizations and companies, only a handful will grab the attention of the journalists and make it into the newspapers. For a higher education institution, reaching the public is important. However, to effectively accomplish this, “We must think of gatekeepers as more than a medium to reach audiences” (Morton). Gatekeepers, editors and journalists alike are an important

audience to reach, in addition to the general public. By learning the demographics of the journalists, public relations officials can improve their odds of getting coverage for their higher institutions.

Morton suggests finding out demographic, psychographic, and sociographic characteristics about the gatekeepers will help in understanding how to create a better foundation for a working relationship. By finding out this information, the public relations professionals can "increase gatekeepers' knowledge of and improve their attitudes about our organizations" (Morton). By increasing the knowledge of higher education in gatekeepers, awareness of it in other areas of the newspaper may be affected. Increased coverage and more editorials may arise from it. "All of these are worthwhile objectives" (Morton). By creating bridges between the gatekeepers and higher education, improvements in coverage can occur. However, improving coverage can only occur if officials in higher education settings take an initiative to work together with the media.

In the article *1992 Education Report Card*, Judith Phair outlines four areas to improve education coverage. The four areas are: reinforcing belief values, having the presidential role expand, having fewer dollars but having greater expectations, and keeping diversity in sight.

To reinforce the belief values, education officials need to focus on spending budgets wisely and to improve productivity in academia. In an economic atmosphere where budget cuts are occurring, administrators need to help create strategies that will convince the public and legislators that budget dollars are being invested wisely in

education and are being well spent. By working with media outlets, public relations officials can work to improve the public perception of education. It is important to “respond to media stories about high-priced faculty members teaching just one course” (Phair).

The next area focused on in this article was the role of the institution’s president. It is important for the president to take on a more visible role when it comes to communications. By being available for questions and speaking about issues on campuses, the president can improve the general public’s trust and perceptions. Another way the president can improve relations is to work together with neighboring colleges and universities. Roger Williams of Pennsylvania State states, “Presidents need to have more interaction with Congress and with each other.” He continues, “The frequent presence of college and university presidents in Washington, working to build ties with legislators and policymakers, can be an extraordinarily potent force to helping restore public confidence in American higher education” (Phair). If colleges and universities support each other, all the institutions will continue to grow and prosper.

Prospering can be difficult, however, with budgets continually being cut. As the budget becomes smaller and smaller, institutions are asking their constituents to take on more and more. One suggestion to improve diminishing budgets is to look to the corporate world for additional funding. Creating opportunities that are inviting to the business world include creating spaces on or around campus that can create revenue. For example, Penn State built a research park outside of its main campus. The research park included a conference center, hotel, offices, and laboratories that were used to “attract

companies that want to affiliate with a major university to increase their own profitability” (Phair). While these positives are available to the university, it also opens up some underling issues such as undue influence, conflict, or appearance of conflict of interest and loss of academic freedom.

Another avenue to generate income is to fundraise. Finding donors who are willing to provide funding for scholarships or have buildings named after them can generate additional revenue for universities. With the additional funding, tuition cost can be maintained and a college education can remain attainable for most.

Keeping college attainable presents many challenges. To accomplish this, institutions need to be committed to diversity. Diversity on campus is continuing to increase. “Colleges and universities cannot afford to lose sight of their commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in these tough economic times” (Phair). Demographics at institutions are changing dramatically. It is important that institutions accompany these changes by increasing the minority participation on campus. While awareness of diversity issues is increasing, it is also important for verbal and written communication and interaction between faculty, staff, administrators, students and different organizations on college campuses to increase at the same time. By working together, changes on campus will have smoother transitions.

Communicating with the general public is important, however: “Our employees shouldn’t read about things going on on our campuses in their newspapers before hearing from us” (Phair). The employees of an institution can be its best public relations tools. The employees are the ones who interact with other community members, prospective

students and students who come into the office. When university officials inform and listen to the internal communication within the college or university environment, external communication can also improve.

Gail Conners, author of the book *Good News! How to Get the Best Possible Media Coverage for Your School*, offers fifteen steps to help public relations officials at a college or university create a positive relationship with media outlets. The first few steps are fairly easy. First, officials should introduce themselves to the education reporter at the paper in their area. By learning about his or her styles, needs and wants, it will become easier to create a connection.

Step number two involves sending the media “copies of your newsletter or other appropriate materials” (Conners, 55). Many topics might not be classified as “hard news” stories, but still appeal to the general public. By having the information, the media can use the “soft” stories as filler when spacing allows.

Developing a media list is the next step. By learning the names, telephone numbers, and deadline for stories, public relations staff can avoid frustrations. Once a rapport with media in the community is established, crisis management and other areas of interest can be handled with relative ease. To help the reporters with deadlines, press releases and photo opportunities can be faxed, emailed, or mailed to them in advance. Sending out the information in advance is step number four and allows the media outlet plenty of time to get the background information about a story ready before coming to any event.



Step number five is simple: follow up with a telephone call. Make sure the media outlet received the press release that was sent. If it was not received, offer to send another copy. "Press releases can easily get lost in the 'black hole' of a newsroom, and a call serves as a reminder" (58).

"Create a weekly 'tip sheet' for slow news days" (58) is step number six. When there is not a lot of news going on in a community, reporters will look for 'filler' stories. By having a prepared tip sheet, media can devote some extra attention to stories on higher education.

Step seven involves finding niche areas of the paper to place your stories. "Not everything your school does will excite everyone. Learning how to niche activities can bring huge dividends" (58).

Avoid using educational jargon. This step simply means write press releases with terminology that is understandable by all readers. Not everyone is going to understand the industry's terminology. If the media are unfamiliar with what is being presented, the story may be passed over.

Understand the media outlet you are using. Television, radio, and print media all use different formats to communicate the news. It is important that each release sent fits the format for each media outlet.

Step ten is to look for opportunities. "The media themselves are often an excellent resource for opportunities" (63). Educational segments, special sections in newspapers and special advertisements on radio stations are just a few ways to find additional opportunities through the media.

In step number eleven the suggestion to receive positive news coverage is to write an editorial piece for the newspaper. This form of media coverage gives the writer the opportunity to express a certain opinion about a topic in higher education.

Writing thank-you notes to reporters is step number twelve. If the press is doing a good job on covering the information sent to them, let them know. "Most often than not, reporter are criticized for what they did not write or cover, and they need to know when they've done a good job" (64).

Step thirteen is to share resources with other local universities and colleges. Understanding how other institutions are handling press releases can aid in receiving coverage. It also creates a connection between the institutions. By working together, institutions can eliminate repetition and reduce cost factors.

If there is a local television station, public relations staff should try "appearing on morning or weekend talk/call-in shows" (64). This step is number fourteen and many stations have public interest shows that are well suited for higher educational issues. Creating the opportunity to appear on one can give an institution the opportunity to express concerns and/or breakthroughs on campuses.

The last step that Connors recommends is to offer written or recorded information to reporters who were unable to make it to an event. Providing them with the information for the event allows for a story to be written. It also shows the media that the institution is willing to help.

In addition to these actions, it is vital that universities and colleges have assessment programs available. "We need to improve our accountability and assessment

programs to measure more accurately our schools' strengths and weaknesses" (Dennis, 79). An accountability system should be utilized to highlight reports on performance, incentive programs, management of the budget, and quality of programs offered. Public relations staff cannot measure the success of a campaign without knowing how the public has received it. According to the book *Higher Education and the Public Trust*, written by Richard Alfred and Julie Weissman, colleges and universities are working on enhancing their stature:

Most institutions have attempted to enhance stature through short-term marketing practices designed to improve the position of the institution with multiple constituencies: prospective students, parents, alumni, state legislators, representatives from business and industry, congressional officials, and civic organizations. (62)

Alfred and Weissman suggest the following five-step approach to improve stature. First is to publish materials that emphasize educational programs, practices, services and policies of the institution to show interest in what the general public wants. By showing interest in the programs, professors, staff, and students, institutions can create a basis for further support from these constituencies.

The second approach is to create involvement at institutions for the constituents. By participating in activities and events on campuses, the constituents walk away with a better understanding of the operations of the institution. Involvement can be volunteer opportunities, events that can be attended, and the like.

Creating outreach programs is the third step. Having activities "that bring the campus directly to constituencies at times and locations dictated by convenience" (62) shows interest in the communities where higher educational institutions are located.

The fourth approach is to publish assessment surveys that show how the institution is striving to improve the educational outcomes of the students. By having public relations staff provide survey results, the general public can receive a better understanding of institutional performance.

The final approach is to have the behavior of leaders on campus reflect the public opinions the institution is striving to accomplish. If leaders are representing the university in an unfavorable light, the public is going to see that. When everyone is working collectively, the stature of the campus will be enhanced.

Jerrold Footlick offers suggestions in times of crisis management. "In times of crises universities should be as open with the media as they possibly can. And be open as quickly as possible" (166). Creating an open line of communication with the media can alleviate miscommunication or one-sided stories. When public relations staff keep details about an issue secret or offer little information, reporters will look to other sources. In the search for other sources, "reporters are more likely to get its [the institution's] side wrong, or get someone else's version of what purports to be its side" (Footlick 167). When public relations staff work with a reporter and are helpful, the likelihood of an understanding story being written is higher, as well as future stories.

Overall, key issues to public relations officials need to focus on in higher education are communication, awareness, and image. As the economy changes the perceptions of the general public are also changing. Colleges and universities are being held to a higher standard in terms of how budgeting is completed, how staff are conducting business and how students are being educated. The articles in this section

have laid the foundation for how higher education is perceived and the rest of this study will focus on how three newspapers reflect these perceptions.

#### METHODS

The *St. Cloud Times*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times* will all be used in this study to determine how the media cover higher education. The main focus of the study will determine whether or not the *St. Cloud Times*, as the local newspaper, has more coverage than the other two national newspapers.

The *St. Cloud Times*, the local newspaper, has a circulation of 28,200. *USA Today* (readership of over million) and *The New York Times* (readership of 15.7 million) were the national newspapers. The content analysis was conducted covering newspapers that were published from March 17 to April 6, 2007.

The *St. Cloud Times* was the only local paper used in this study due to the circulation number it reaches. The *St. Cloud Times* is a local newspaper used by a number of cities in the area and the newspaper is produced in a city with multiple higher educational institutions in the area. Papers like the *Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* were not used in this study due to the fact that they are seen as statewide newspaper, rather than a local newspaper. Two national newspapers were selected due to the different styles of each newspaper. The *USA Today* was selected since it was designed to be a "quick read." It offers readers the opportunity to quickly find stories and then move on. The articles tend to be shorter and there are more pictures with each story. The *New York Times* was selected as an alternative to the *USA Today* since it is designed to take more time to read. In *The New York Times*, articles tend to be longer and there are

## METHODS

An analysis was conducted by the author using three newspapers to determine how local coverage of higher education compared with national coverage. The three newspapers were the *St. Cloud Times*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*. The *St. Cloud Times*, the local newspaper, has a circulation of 28,200. *USA Today* (readership of nine million) and *The New York Times* (readership of 15.7 million) were the national newspapers. The content analysis was conducted covering newspapers that were published from March 17 to April 6, 2003.

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fewer photographs. In addition to the size and style of the newspapers, contrast was an important issue. The three newspapers were selected in order to contrast extremes.

In the *St. Cloud Times* and *USA Today*, the primary focus was in the Headline page, the Nation/World pages and the Life/Entertainment pages. Any additional pages that mentioned Higher Education were also noted.

In the *New York Times*, the Headline page and the Nation/World pages were also used, however, instead of a Life/Entertainment section, the Art section was used.

The *St. Cloud Times* was analyzed Sunday through Saturday. *The New York Times* was analyzed Sunday through Friday since it is not published on Saturdays. Since the *USA Today* is a daily newspaper, it was analyzed Monday through Friday.

In this study, higher educational coverage is classified as articles that mention higher educational institutions. Examples of this included stories about administrators, budget issues facing institutions, special events presented by a individual or group on campus and any other miscellaneous articles about higher educational institutions.

Articles not included in this study include small articles announcing an upcoming event but only offer ticketing information and contact numbers; articles about a student from an institution, but which had no relation to an event sponsored by the university; and any articles about college athletic teams that specifically cover a game or match.

To guide this investigation, the following research questions were used: (1) Did the local newspaper have a higher coverage rate than the national papers? To determine this, the number of articles found in each section determined coverage rate. (2) Was higher education coverage found more often in specific sections? (3) Was the coverage

found positive, negative or neutral in nature? Positive coverage included articles that commended higher education and/or institutions in some manner. Examples of positive headlines include "SCSU Research May Help Skier Improve Muscle Use," "Harvard Law School Gets First Female Dean," and "High School Students Flourish in College Setting." Negative coverage included articles found criticizing higher education and/or institutions. Examples of negative headlines include "Scandal Leaves Red Faces in Georgia, and It Could Happen at Your School," "Study Questions Educational Benefits of Campus Diversity," and "Seven Arrested After Michigan State Loss." Neutral articles mentioned higher education and/or institutions, but did not commend or criticize. Examples of neutral articles include "SCSU Students Living in France Feel Safe, Respected," "University Offers Defense Class," and "AOL and Harvard Plan Film Grants." (4) Was there a difference in the presentation of the coverage at a local level compared to a national level? To determine this, the number of positive, negative, and neutral comments in *The St. Cloud Times* were compared to those in the *USA Today* and *The New York Times*.



## RESULTS

In this section, the results from the author's analysis of three newspapers will be discussed. The analysis determined if local and national media compare in coverage of higher education by looking at the amount of coverage in each of the newspapers, as well as the type of coverage found. These results were taken from newspapers published March 17 through April 6, 2003.

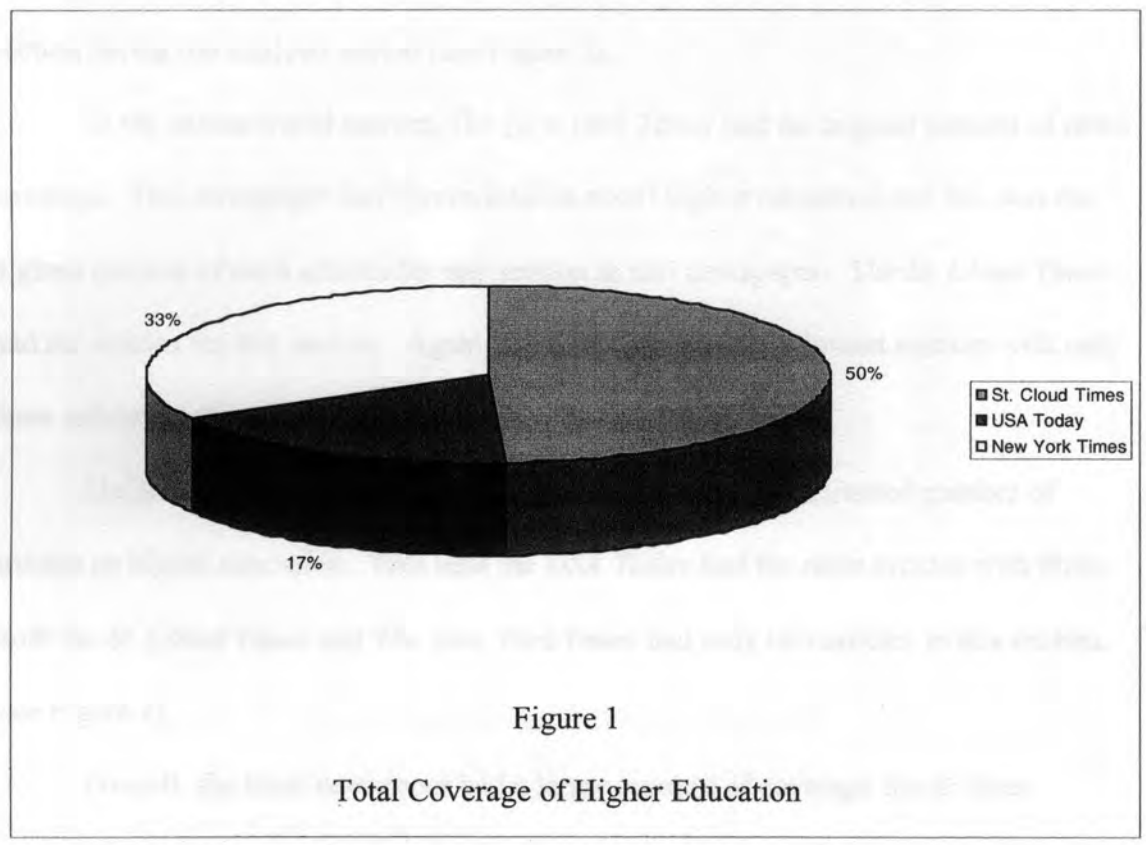
The three newspapers were compared on four different aspects of coverage pertaining to higher education. The first part of this section will discuss the coverage rate of local and national newspapers. It will then discuss the rate of exposure per section. The third part will discuss the nature of the article, whether it was positive, negative or neutral in nature. And the last section will discuss if there were any biases found. (See Appendixes A, B, and C for total analysis.) After the four aspects are discussed, major themes found throughout the articles will be covered.

### Coverage Rate Between Local and National Newspapers

As indicated by the newspaper coverage data collected between March 17 and April 6, 2003, research question number one found that the *St. Cloud Times* had the greatest amount of coverage about higher education. The *St. Cloud Times* had thirty-four mentions of higher education and twenty-one of those mentions were in the local section. The *USA Today* had the fewest articles written about higher education with twelve. Of

those twelve, five were in the sports section. The *New York Times* was in the middle with twenty-three mentions, eleven of which were found in the Nation/World section.

Overall, the *St. Cloud Times* had 17 percent more coverage than *The New York Times* and 33 percent more coverage than the *USA Today* (see Figure 1).



Rate of Exposure Per Section Analyzed

In research question number two, there were three categories identified. The three sections included the headline page, nation/world section, and the lifestyle section for the *St. Cloud Times* and *USA Today* and the art section for *The New York Times*. An

alternative page section was also included to list any articles that did not appear in one of the areas listed above.

The headline section consisted of the first page of each newspaper. In the headline section, the *St. Cloud Times* had three articles, while *The New York Times* had two. The *USA Today* had no articles pertaining to higher education in the headline section during the analysis period (see Figure 2).

In the nation/world section, *The New York Times* had the highest amount of news coverage. This newspaper had eleven articles about higher education and this was the highest number of such articles for any section in that newspaper. The *St. Cloud Times* had six articles for this section. Again, the *USA Today* had the lowest amount with only three articles in this section (see Figure 2).

Unlike the nation/world section, the life/art section had a limited number of articles on higher education. This time the *USA Today* had the most articles with three. Both the *St. Cloud Times* and *The New York Times* had only two articles in this section. (see Figure 2).

Overall, the local newspaper had a larger amount of coverage for all three sections. In the alternative pages, the *St. Cloud Times* had the highest number of articles in the local section. One fact that could explain the high number of articles in the local section is that the *St. Cloud Times* is printed in a city with several higher educational institutions in the area.

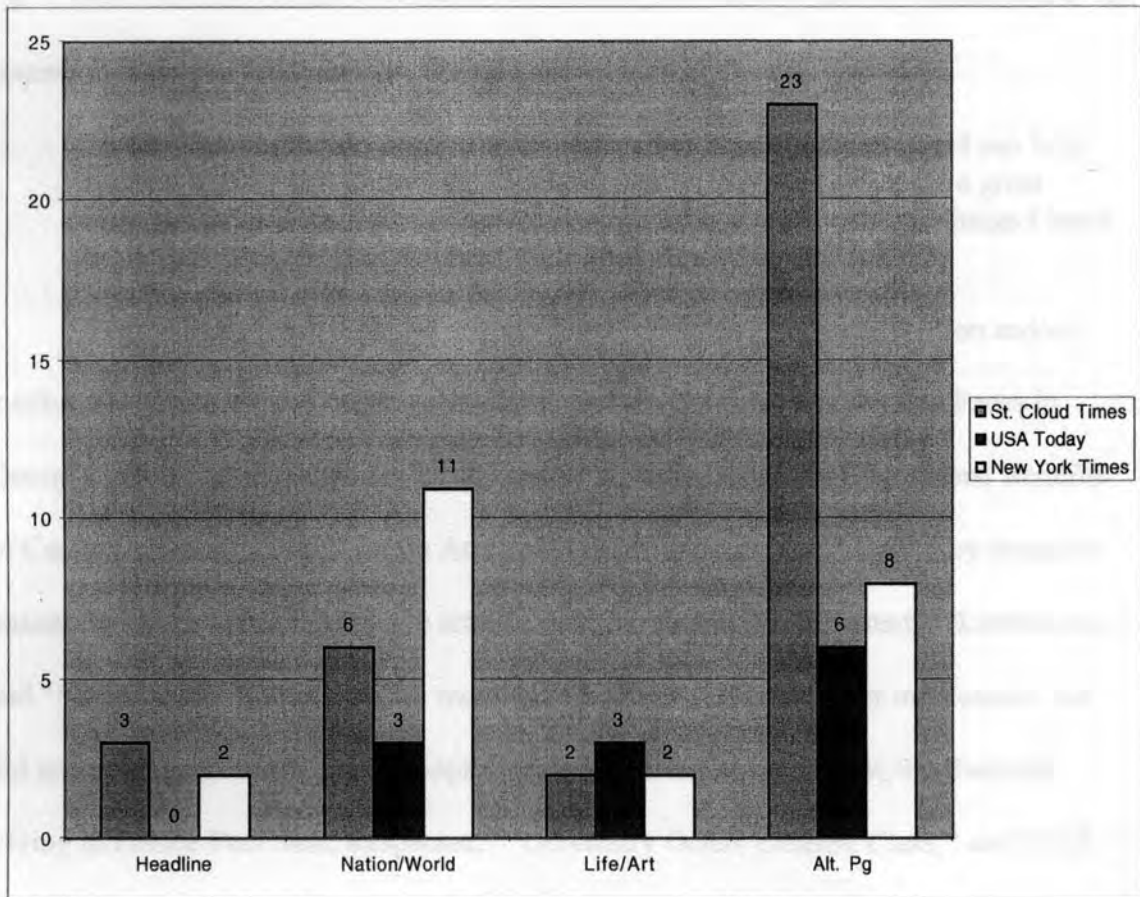


Figure 2

## Rate of Exposure Per Section Analyzed

Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage

In research number three, all three newspapers found stories that were positive, negative, and neutral. Positive coverage included articles that commended higher education and/or institutions in some manner. As mentioned previously, examples of positive headlines include “SCSU Research May Help Skier Improve Muscle Use,” “Harvard Law School Gets First Female Dean,” and “High School Students Flourish in College Setting.” Key words or phrases that were found in positive articles include “help,”

“St. Cloud State has probably published more on Alpine skiing than any institution in the country,” “Campus Programs Do Well,” and

“While I’m in school I hope to learn as much as possible about how I can help children for the rest of my life...Working in a hospital has given me a great opportunity to learn from professionals and really complement the things I learn every day in class” (Carissa Neis, *St. Cloud Times* March 23, 2003)

Negative coverage included articles found criticizing higher education and/or institutions. Examples of negative headlines include “Scandal Leaves Red Faces in Georgia, and It Could Happen at Your School,” “Study Questions Educational Benefits of Campus Diversity,” and “Seven Arrested After Michigan State Loss.” Key words or phrases that were found in negative articles include “Scandal,” “Arrested,” “Limitations,” and “Suspended.” Neutral articles mentioned higher education and/or institutions, but did not commend or criticize. Examples of neutral articles include “SCSU Students Living in France Feel Safe, Respected,” “University Offers Defense Class,” and “AOL and Harvard Plan Film Grants.” Unlike positive and negative articles, neutral articles can be seen as positive in nature even though they do not directly commend higher education. This is due to the fact that they provide information about higher education but it is not in a negative setting.

Out of the three newspapers, the *USA Today* had six negative articles. This is the highest amount of negative coverage of the three newspapers. The *USA Today* had four neutral articles in addition to those negative articles and only two positive articles. Overall, the coverage in the *USA Today* was predominantly either negative or neutral.

*The New York Times* had eleven positive articles about higher education. In addition to these articles, it also had eight neutral articles and four negative. Overall, the coverage in *The New York Times* tended to be either neutral or positive in nature.

The *St. Cloud Times* had sixteen neutral articles during the analysis period. This was the highest amount of neutral articles out of the three newspapers. It also had fourteen positive articles and four negative articles. Overall, the coverage in the *St. Cloud Times* was mostly neutral or positive (see Figures 3, 4, and 5).

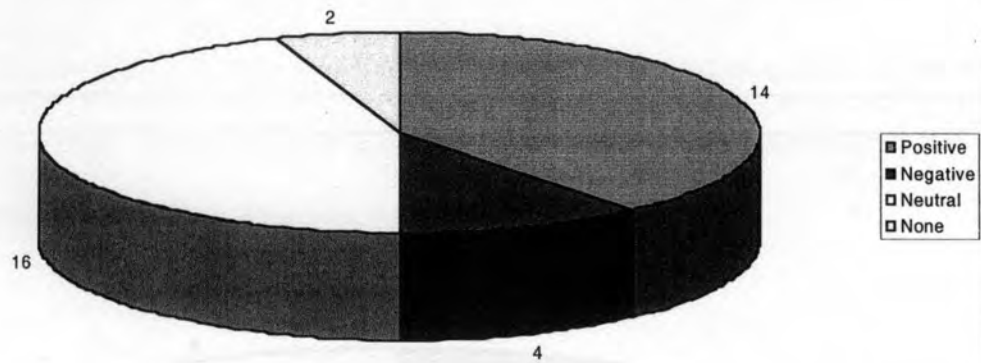
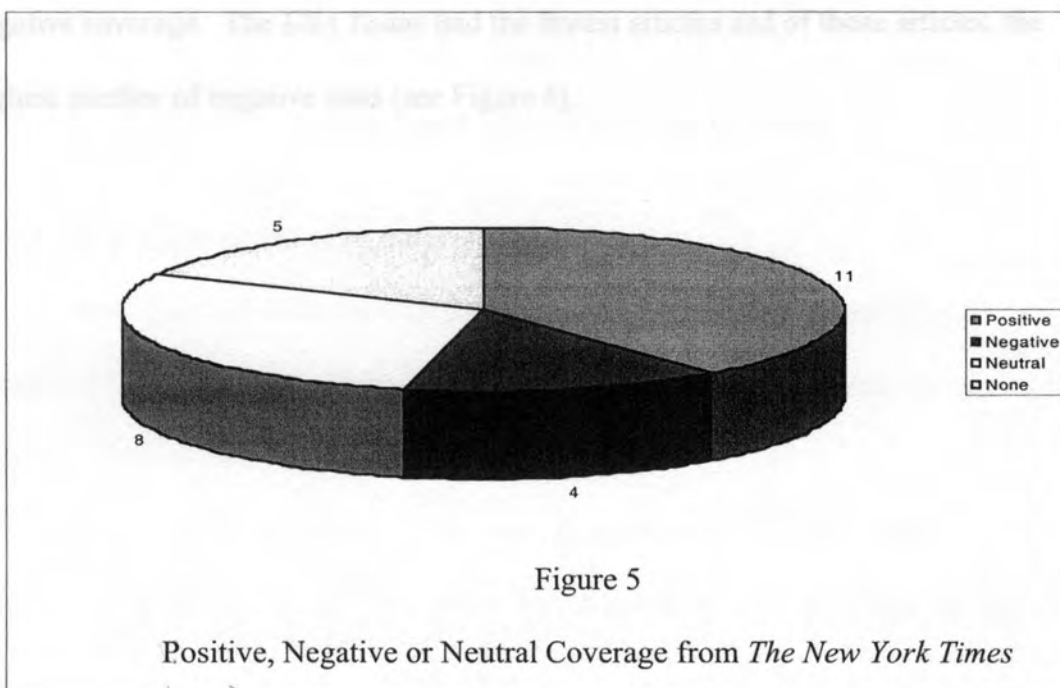
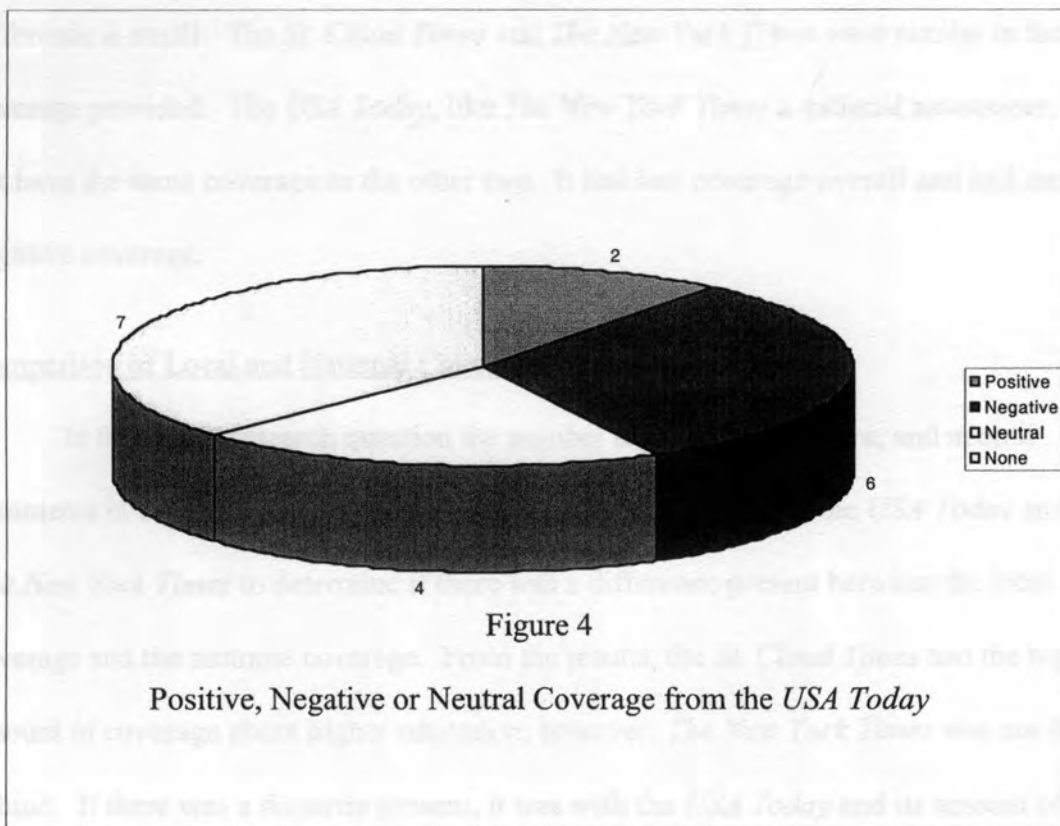


Figure 3

Positive, Negative or Neutral Coverage from the *St. Cloud Times*



In comparing the coverage between the local and the national newspapers, the difference is small. The *St. Cloud Times* and *The New York Times* were similar in the coverage provided. The *USA Today*, like *The New York Times* a national newspaper, did not have the same coverage as the other two. It had less coverage overall and had more negative coverage.

#### Comparison of Local and National Coverage

In the fourth research question the number of positive, negative, and neutral comments in *The St. Cloud Times* was compared to the number in the *USA Today* and *The New York Times* to determine if there was a difference present between the local coverage and the national coverage. From the results, the *St. Cloud Times* had the highest amount of coverage about higher education; however, *The New York Times* was not far behind. If there was a disparity present, it was with the *USA Today* and its amount of negative coverage. The *USA Today* had the fewest articles and of those articles, the highest number of negative ones (see Figure 6).



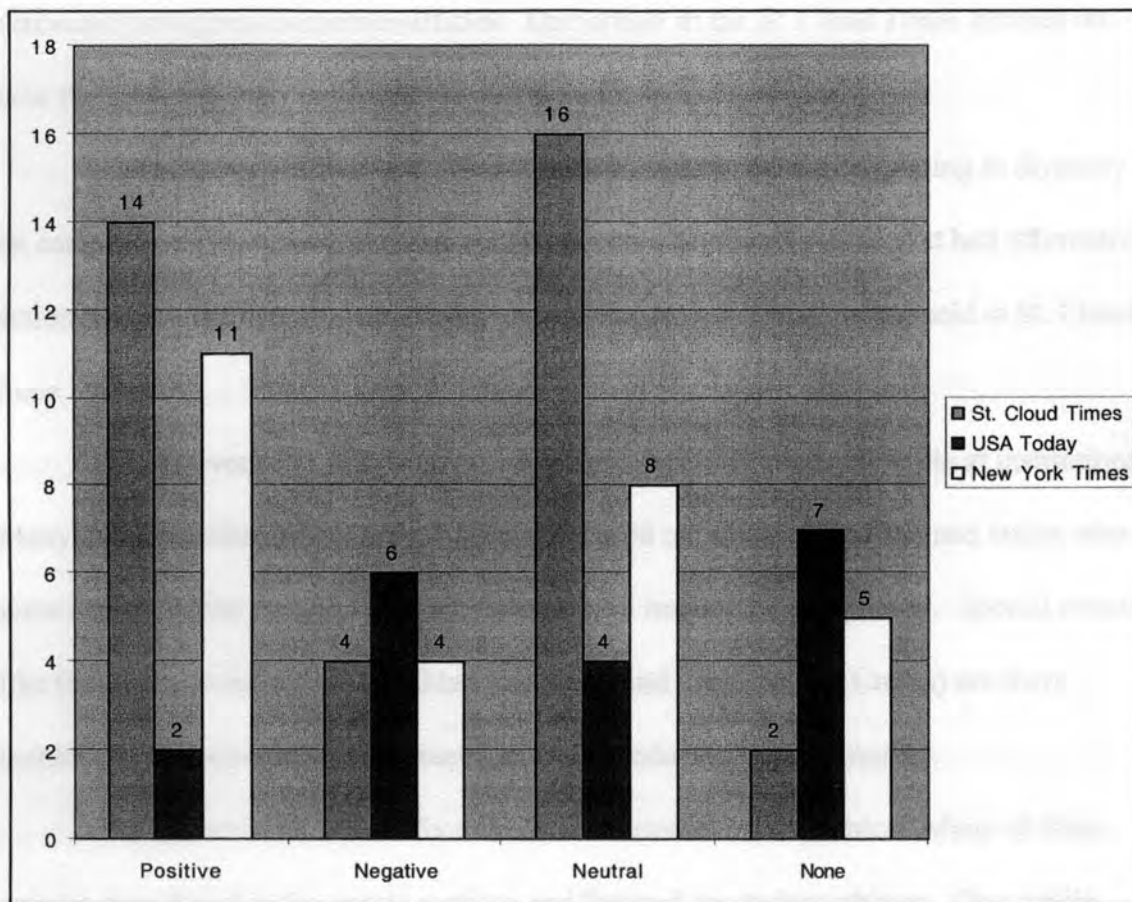


Figure 6

### Comparison of Local and National Coverage

#### Major Themes Throughout Coverage

Throughout all of the newspapers used in this study, four major themes developed. The four themes were budget issues, diversity, special events occurring on campuses, and education of students.

Articles focusing on budgeting issues focused on budget cuts throughout Minnesota and the rest of the nation. Tuition increases, spending cuts and layoffs were

discussed throughout numerous articles. One article in the *St. Cloud Times* focused on how the university was collecting on past debt from students.

Another area of focus was diversity. In these articles, issues relating to diversity on campus were discussed. An example would be a Michigan school that had affirmative action issues. Another article talked about a diversity conference being held at St. Cloud State University.

Special events on campus can always be a positive source of media at institutions. Many of the articles in the *St. Cloud Times* focused on national speakers and artists who were coming to the area and how the event would impact the community. Special events like these (Desmond Tutu's daughter, Ben Stein and the Counting Crows) are ways institutions can provide entertainment, as well as educate the community.

The last area the articles focused on were stories on academics. Many of these articles were found in the sports sections and focused on student athletes. One article, "Emphasize Student in 'Student Athlete'" was in the *USA Today*. This article focused on how institutions need to put student education before games and practices. It also talked about how the NCAA is creating stricter policies when it comes to athletes and academics.

## CONCLUSION

Newspapers, radio, television, and other forms of mass media provide news to the general public. Of these, the newspaper tends to be the most versatile due to the fact that it can be reused, is found on the Internet and is archived for years in libraries and at the newspapers that printed them (if they are still doing business). This study focused on the news coverage found in the local newspaper versus the national newspapers, since newspapers are used as records and have a greater sense of persuasion. This study compared the *St. Cloud Times*, a local newspaper, to the *USA Today* and *The New York Times* (both national newspapers) to determine if the coverage was different between the local and national newspapers. The results revealed a much higher amount of coverage in the *St. Cloud Times* than in both of the national papers. The results also showed that the *USA Today* highlighted a greater number of negative articles than positive or neutral ones.

Overall, the coverage between the local newspaper and the national newspapers was similar, with 50 percent of the coverage found in the local newspaper and 50 percent found in the national newspapers. All three had coverage on higher education, and all three had positive, negative, and neutral articles. There was no significant difference in the type of coverage between local and national. The main difference between the local and national newspapers is in the number of articles found in the local section of the

*St. Cloud Times*. While the *St. Cloud Times* had coverage in multiple sections, the local section of the *St. Cloud Times* was where the majority of the articles about higher education were located.

This study had several limitations. One limitation was the newspapers used for this study. Levels of local coverage could have been affected since St. Cloud has several higher educational institutions in the area. It is possible that St. Cloud could also have a higher percentage of readership directly or indirectly involved in higher education. For future studies, it would be interesting to see if other local newspapers, towns or cities that do not have higher educational institutions in the immediate area would have similar coverage.

Gathering information from more than three newspapers would increase the amount of data being collected and in return given a better analysis of higher education coverage. By having additional resources to analyze, one could find the number of articles on higher education would change. To find a more precise analysis of newspaper coverage of higher education, a larger sample would need to be utilized.

The second limitation was the war with Iraq. While there are often major news stories, this topic is an important topic to the public and is timely. Due to the extensive news coverage of the war, a typical sample was not achieved. If the country was not in wartime, the coverage could be different.

A third limitation was the NCAA Basketball Tournament. The sports sections had numerous articles related to each of the college teams that made it into the tournament. Due to the unusually large number of articles, a true representation of sports

articles on higher education was not achieved. Only articles that pertained to higher educational issues, such as grades and athletic departments on campus, were included in the analysis. No articles that were strictly articles reflecting game scores and highlights were included in the study.

The main difference in higher education coverage by the local newspaper in comparison to the national newspapers is the amount of coverage about the higher educational institutions in the local area. It is a good starting point for future studies; it leaves an opportunity to find more information about the topic.

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APPENDIXES

*The St. Cloud Times*

*The St. Cloud Times*

Section Key

- Section A: National/World Coverage
- Section B: Local/State
- Section C: Life
- Unlabeled: Thursday insert about celebrities

APPENDIX A

*The St. Cloud Times*

*St. Cloud Times*

Section Key	Headline	Nation/World	Life/Entertainment	Alt. Pg.	Coverage
				1B	Neutral
Section A:	National/World Coverage				Neutral
Section B:	Local/State			3B	Neutral
Section C:	Life				None
Upnext:	Thursday insert about entertainment			1B	Neutral
				1B	Positive
March 21		1B			Negative
March 21				1B	Positive
March 22				3B	Negative
March 23	1A				Neutral
March 23				1B	Neutral
March 23				10B	Positive
		6A			Neutral
				1B	Neutral
March 25		4A			Neutral
				1B	Positive
				1B	Neutral
March 27				1B	Neutral
				1B	Positive
				1B	Neutral
				1B	Positive
March 29		5A			Positive
				1B	Positive
					None
March 31			1C		Positive
				5B	Negative
				6B	Positive
April 1	1A				Neutral
		2A			Negative
				1B	Neutral
				3B	Positive
			Continuity of Upnext		Positive
April 4				1B	Neutral
April 5			2C		Positive
April 1		2A			Neutral
				6B	Positive

*St. Cloud Times*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Headlines</b>	<b>Nation/World</b>	<b>Life/Entertainment</b>	<b>Alt. Pg.</b>	<b>Coverage</b>
March 17				1B	Neutral
March 18	1A				Neutral
March 18				3B	Neutral
March 19					None
March 20				1B	Neutral
March 20				1B	Positive
March 21		2A			Negative
March 21				1B	Positive
March 22				8B	Negative
March 23	1A				Neutral
March 23				1B	Neutral
March 23				10E	Positive
March 24		6A			Neutral
				1B	Neutral
March 25		4A			Neutral
				1B	Positive
March 26				1B	Neutral
March 27				1B	Neutral
				1B	Positive
				1B	Neutral
March 28				1B	Positive
March 29		6A			Positive
				1B	Positive
March 30					None
March 31			1C		Positive
April 1				5B	Negative
				6B	Positive
April 2	1A				Neutral
		2A			Negative
				1B	Neutral
April 3				1B	Positive
			Cover story of Upnext		Positive
April 4				1B	Neutral
April 5			2C		Positive
April 6		2A			Neutral
				9B	Positive

*USA Today*

Section Key

- Section A: National/World Coverage
- Section B: Money
- Section C: Sports
- Section D: Life

**APPENDIX B**

*USA Today*



USA Today

Date	Headlines	Nation/World	Life/Entertainment	Alt. Pg.	Coverage
March 17				6C	Negative
March 18			7D		Neutral
			9D		Negative
March 19					None
March 20					None
March 21					None
March 22					Weekend
March 23					Weekend
March 24					None
March 25				8C	Positive
			1D		Neutral
March 26					None
March 27					None
March 28				23C	Negative
March 29					Weekend
March 30					Weekend
March 31					None
April 1		13A			Negative
				8C	Negative
April 2		13A			Negative
April 3				3C	Neutral
April 4		15A			Positive
				1B	Neutral
April 5					Weekend
April 6					Weekend

*The New York Times*

Section Key

- Section A: National/World Coverage, Editorial pages, and Local
- Section B: Nation at Work
- Section C: Business Day
- Section D: Circuits
- Section Art: Arts
- Section SP: Sports

APPENDIX C

*The New York Times*



*The New York Times*

Date	Headlines	Nation/World	Arts	Ab. Pg.	Coverage
<b>Section Key</b>					
	1A				Positive
					Neutral
					Neutral
					None
					None
			1Art		Positive
				15C	Positive
					None
					Saturday
March 23				15B	Neutral
		13A			Positive
			1Art		Positive
March 25		13A			Neutral
				17C	Negative
		13A			Positive
				15C	Positive
		4A			Positive
					None
					Sunday
				25P	Negative
					None
		21A			Positive
		21A			Negative
April 7	15				Negative
		13A			None
		13A			Neutral
				1F	Positive
April 8		13A			Positive
					Sunday
April 9		13A			Neutral
				75P	Positive

*New York Times*

Date	Headlines	Nation/World	Arts	Alt. Pg.	Coverage
March 17	1A				Positive
		15A			Neutral
				6C	Neutral
March 18					None
March 19					None
March 20			1Art		Positive
				15C	Positive
March 21					None
March 22					Saturday
March 23				12B	Neutral
March 24		13A			Positive
			3Art		Positive
March 25		13A			Neutral
				17C	Negative
March 26		15A			Positive
				15C	Positive
March 27		4A			Positive
March 28					None
March 29					Saturday
March 30				2SP	Negative
March 31					None
April 1		21A			Positive
		21A			Negative
April 2	1A				Negative
		12A			Neutral
		12A			Neutral
April 3				1F	Neutral
April 4		12A			Positive
April 5					Saturday
April 6		15A			Neutral
				7SP	Positive