

Institute for Nonprofit News

Broken Ladder: ‘It seemed like a no-brainer to pursue.’

Introduction

Nonprofit newsrooms in the Midwest are investigative powerhouses and no strangers to working together. After previously working together on multiple collaborative projects covering [rural healthcare](#), [climate change and the Great Lakes](#) and more, a new cohort of Midwestern members united to answer the question: How are community colleges, which often serve first-generation students, students of color and low-income students, faring during the pandemic?

[Five stories](#) were published between Dec. 15 and Dec. 17, 2021.

The series generated a range of impacts, including:

- Multiple outlets reported that lawmakers, policy advocates and environmental change makers saw and appreciated these stories, reaching out with feedback and enthusiasm.
- Reporting on Milwaukee Area Technical College, which was republished by multiple well-known outlets in the region, generated a considerable amount of **republication and attention**. As a result of the reporting, Wisconsin Watch was able to shed light on an undercovered aspect of the education conversation — a sentiment deeply shared by multiple partners. “We have never reported on community colleges...though it’s an important topic for the communities we cover! (Our editor/founder attended a community college.) This INN collab provided the catalyst to jump in and find an angle that matched our editorial mission.”
- Newsrooms reported **deep reader engagement and gratitude** poured in, including at least one offer of assistance. “A reader reached out by email to share his own community college story and to ask if he could offer some financial support to the nursing student who talked about his experience with food scarcity. (The benefactor comes from a similar area of south India, too.)”
- The series was **active on social media**, with links to the stories posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with more than 433,000 total followers and posted on Facebook pages with more than 166,000 total followers.

This project was made possible with support from INN's Amplify News Project, whose funders include the Joyce Foundation in the Great Lakes region, and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

Four INN newsrooms — Borderless Magazine, Bridge Detroit, Sahan Journal and Wisconsin Watch — spent several months reporting on community colleges in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and Minneapolis/St. Paul to create the series.

Content reach

In addition to publishing stories on their websites and in print, collaboration partners shared links to the series on social media and in newsletters.

Newsrooms reported that these stories engaged readers and audiences often otherwise underrepresented. For Sahan Journal and Wisconsin Watch, the story was an opportunity to dive into an important story that hadn't been covered before. "I literally cannot think of a mainstream media story that has reported on basic needs (like food) among immigrants at Minnesota community colleges." A full metrics breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

We found that at least 21 outlets republished at least one story from Broken Ladder, notably Yahoo News, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee. Meltwater estimates the potential reach of these outlets combined is more than 83 million unique visitors, excluding 11 smaller outlets not found in Meltwater.

Some recirculation highlights from the series:

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the largest paper in the state of Wisconsin by circulation, ran the regional story online and in its edition Sunday, Jan. 9. The conservative estimated print audience: 126,733.
- Open Campus, an INN member covering higher education, partnered with this collaboration to republish four out of five stories, introducing these stories to a wider-ranging, education-focused audience.
- More than other INN-led collaborations, these stories reached a broader swatch of types of media orgs. This series saw republication by not only online outlets, but in print, radio, and TV broadcast as well.

Social media distribution

The series caught the attention of a number of influential accounts on social media, with the reporting posted on pages with more than 166,000 followers on Facebook and posted and retweeted by Twitter accounts with more than 433,000 total followers.

- Links directly to collaboration partners' stories appeared on 15 Facebook pages and two groups.
- The stories were shared on Facebook 114 times and received more than 490 interactions (comments and reactions).
- In addition, the stories republished by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee were shared on Facebook pages with a total of more than 573,000 followers.
- A story appeared a Reddit subreddit r/milwaukee with a total of 74,600 members.

Significant social sharing included posts by public officials and political organizations; advocacy groups; and journalists from outlets including Minnesota Public Radio and Iowa Watch. More information on social sharing is available in the [appendix](#).

Collaboration feedback

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to provide feedback on their experience through a survey. Several important themes emerged:

- **INN funding makes previously unreported journalism possible.** Participants said their reporting would not have been possible without the project funding. "We were able to spend more time on this story and do a deeper dive than we typically would do on something of this subject." All participants said this series opened their eyes to an area of reporting that had otherwise been uncovered, by their organization or by any media organization in their respective markets. "The idea of examining the performance of MATC had not occurred to us prior to our invitation to join the collaboration. But once the idea was presented, it seemed like a no-brainer to pursue. Milwaukee has among the cities with the worst racial disparities when it comes to the economic and social well-being of its Black residents. MATC could be a key to turning that around." At least one participant already has a follow-up story in the works.
- **There are certainly more stories to be told here.** After creating a baseline with this reporting, the door is open for clearer, more comprehensive coverage on a topic that is widely undercovered. "The project helped us understand some of the legislative, political and other hurdles Wayne County Community College manages. This will allow us to cover the issues of community college funding and workforce development better."

- **Management matters.** The leadership provided by INN was regularly cited as a positive element for the participants. “I really appreciate Sharon’s (and INN’s) knack for including partners in some decisions...providing a few guide rails and then allowing newsrooms to set their own editorial course.”

Participants were asked to rank different aspects of the project management from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). The responses were largely positive, with rankings of 3.25 and above. The full breakdown is available in the [appendix](#).

Challenges & Observations for the Future

The partners reported that they faced bureaucratic and political struggles in working with official sources at community colleges, who have to navigate multiple layers of bureaucracy themselves.

The timing of the collaboration was limiting, especially in terms of distribution and audience attention. Especially in 2021, the outlets reported that their audience numbers had dropped off during the holiday season.

Mutual respect was evident in the feedback of the partners surveyed, and opportunities for more direct collaboration were reported. “I would like to follow up with the news outlets and talk to them more about potential collaborations, particularly republishing opportunities.”

While there was no immediate large-scale impact to report, this series uncovered a coverage gap, as reported by all of the outlets. “Before we reported the story, I discovered that no reporters were regularly covering MATC. The main impact of our reporting was to shine a light on both the struggles of MATC and its students but also its potential to lift up a portion of Milwaukee’s population that suffers from generations of discrimination and disadvantage.”

Appendix

Story performance by outlet:

Outlet	Number of stories	# of unique page views on original	Average active/engaged time on the story page	Cumulative Facebook shares	Cumulative Facebook comments	Twitter impressions

		site				
Borderless Magazine	1	396	3:20	20	1	Unknown
BridgeDetroit	1	481	1:07	17	12	15
Sahan Journal	1	1,225	2:26	57	25	Unknown
Wisconsin Watch	2 (one by Wisconsin Watch, one overview story with authors from the three partners)	714	6:23	20	16	1,758

Outlets that republished stories:

[Block Club Chicago](#)

Elkhorn Independent

[HNGnews.com](#)

[Madison365](#)

Milton Courier

[Minnesota Public Radio \(KNBJ-FM\)](#)

[Milwaukee Independent](#)

[Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service](#)

[Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#)

[Open Campus](#)

Palmyra Enterprise

[PBS Wisconsin](#)

Twin Lakes Report

[Urban Milwaukee](#)

[Wausau Pilot and Review](#)

Whitewater Register

[Wisconsin Public Radio](#)

[WTMJ-TV](#)

[WUWM](#)

[Yahoo! Lifestyle \(US\)](#)

[Yahoo News](#)

Social sharing highlights:

Public officials and political groups

- [Freedom Road Socialist Organization - Twin Cities](#)
- [Itasca County DFL](#)
- [State Rep. David Bowen](#)

Advocacy organizations

- [Achieve Mpls](#)
- [Community College Research Center](#)
- [Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#)
- [Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota](#)
- [MDRC](#)
- [Minnesota Central Kitchen](#)
- [Office of Community College Research & Leadership](#)
- [Second Harvest Heartland](#)
- [Stacy Ybarra, Ed.D](#)
- [Water Warriors - Twin Cities](#)

Media and notable figures

- [Julia Larson](#), editorial intern at VinePair
- [Lyle Muller](#), Daily Iowan Ethics & Politics coach; former director of IowaWatch
- [Minnesota Public Radio](#)
- [Olivia Lewis](#), writer and researcher

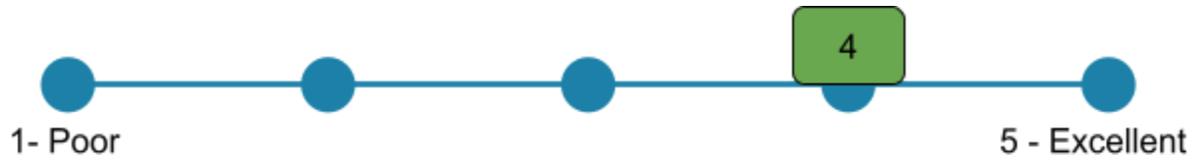
Communities impacted by the reporting

- [414: Brew City](#)
- [David G. Martínez, Ph.D.](#)
- [Detroit Developments](#)
- [Dr. Francesca Catalano](#)
- [MATC Alumni Network](#)
- [Minneapolis Federation of Teachers 59](#)
- [Ryan Atkinson](#)

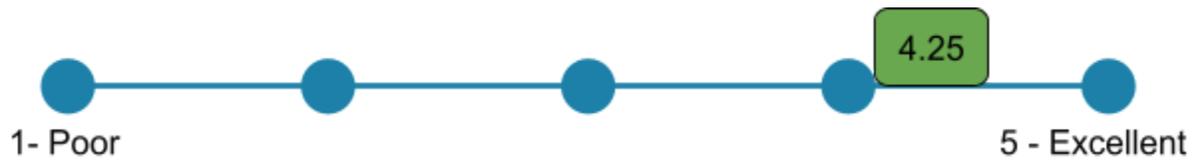
Collaboration feedback

Below are the average responses from the nine INN newsrooms asked to rank their experiences on a 5-point scale:

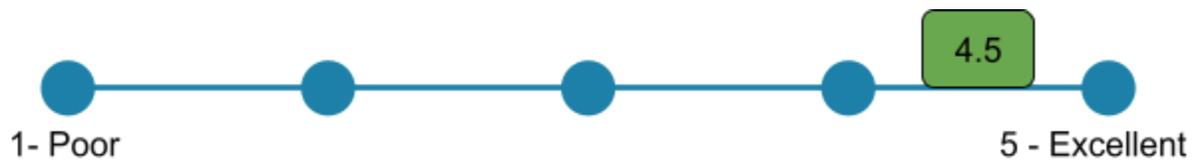
Quality of journalism overall:



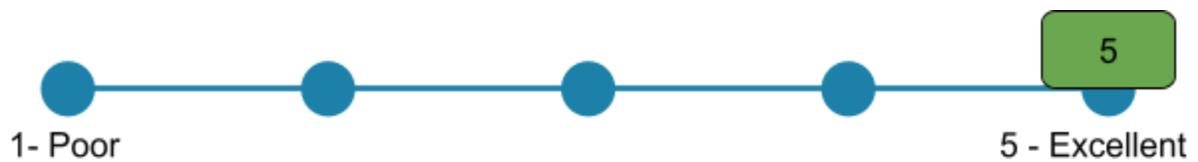
Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom:



Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.):



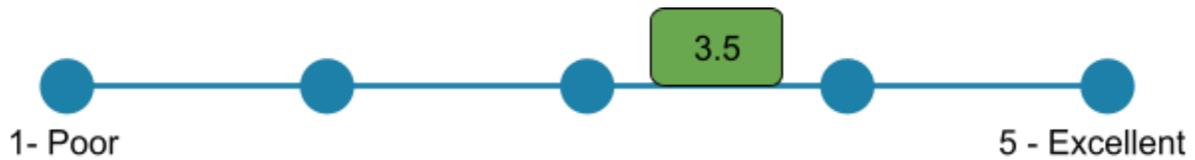
Ability to get questions answered:



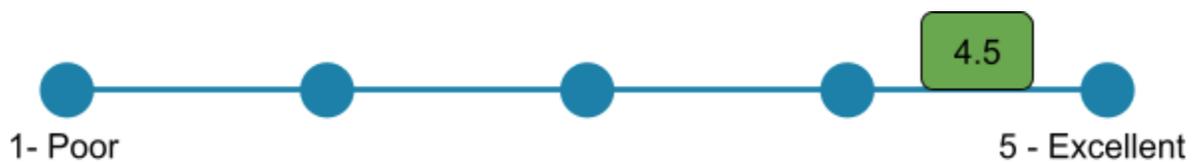
Pickup by news organizations within the collaboration:



Likelihood that you will follow up on this series:



Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future:



How did we find this data?

We asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts for web metrics and qualitative feedback via a survey.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of the series title and variations of the series attribution. We also searched for the first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater's social feature using the same search terms as well as the first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension.