

STUDENT FEES ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SFAC)
FY2026 PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTIONS: *Please respond to all questions. **An electronic copy of your responses in PDF format should be sent to the SFAC Committee via the Dean of Students Office, at dlyoung4@central.uh.edu by 1:00 p.m., Friday, October 18, 2024. It should be noted that only electronic submissions will be considered. Only those requests submitted by 1:00 p.m., October 18, 2024 will be guaranteed full consideration.***

1. Please provide a one-page executive summary of your questionnaire responses. This summary should include, in brief terms: your unit's mission, goals that support your mission, and a justification of your unit's student fee allocation in terms of benefits for students.

The mission of The Cougar is: 1) to provide students, faculty, staff and alumni with accurate, relevant news in a timely fashion and through as many media formats as possible; 2) to serve as a public forum and a voice for the student body; and 3) to function as a practical learning environment for student journalists.

This year, UH enrolled the largest freshman class in recent history. As The Cougar, we are responsible for representing over 40,000 students on campus and this number will only continue to grow. It is The Cougar's ongoing goal to provide relevant news and information to students in the most convenient medium for the reader — whether it's in our bi-weekly print edition, monthly lifestyle magazine, online, on social media or through our newsletter. In our unique position, we can show the best of the University, or ask it to do better.

The Cougar is the avenue for several student journalists to gain real-world experiences at a working newsroom and build practical skills for their professional development. The Cougar hosts workshops with reputable local Houston journalists and provides a space for its members to gain relevant experience in digital media, data journalism and leadership. With our new collaboration with the Valenti School of Communication, our new liaison provides us with an external perspective and critical feedback on our newspaper editions so we can improve.

We prioritize speaking face-to-face with the UH community and building strong relationships with sources that writers can rely on. Foundational concepts of journalism like reporting, analyzing data and transcribing interviews are also introduced.

Student journalists have won several awards that recognized their talent and commitment to excellence in journalism. In 2023 we won a 1st place Pinnacle Award for Best Investigative Story and in 2024, we won an Apple Award Honorable Mention for Best News Website, and 3rd place Apple Award for Best Editorial and Best Opinion Column. This year, we will attend the Fall College Media Association in New Orleans where we will attend panels on leading a newsroom, enterprise reporting and make connections with journalists all around the country.

On campus, we take part in several student engagement activities including Weeks of Welcome events like Cat's Back and Glow party. This is the place where The Cougar can introduce their mission and role on campus to incoming freshman and let them know that we are their eyes and ears. To add on, we hold weekly tabling sessions where we pass out our newspaper editions, merchandise, and ask students for questions that are answered in our new column called "April's Angle" that was jumpstarted by a freshman.

Student fees help maintain and grow a rich tradition of student journalism that dates back to the University's founding. The Cougar is the only organization on campus that provides students with the foundation needed to succeed in the journalism field. The Cougar serves a vital mission as the only organization focused on providing UH students with information about the University with accuracy and consistency while adhering to ethical standards, directly from the student perspective.

2. Please discuss the means that you are utilizing to evaluate both your success in achieving the DSA strategic initiatives and/or action steps and their importance as compared to others that you might pursue. Where data exists, discuss any assessment measures and/or learning outcomes used to evaluate program success. Please provide the method for collecting this data.

Professional Development

- a. **Hosting Workshops: The Cougar will host at least 3 professional workshops each semester.**

A key component of our evaluation process involves the professional development workshops hosted with industry professionals from reputable institutions such as the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Houston Press*. So far, we have hosted Houston Chronicle's UH Athletics Big 12 reporter Joseph Duarte, Houston Chronicle's Latino communities reporter Jhair Romero, Houston Chronicle's higher education reporter Samantha Ketterer, Houston Chronicle's Harris county reporter Jen Rice, and the editor of the Houston Press Margaret Downing. These workshops provide both practical skills and networking opportunities for students, directly contributing to their career preparedness—an essential DSA objective. Evaluating the success of these workshops involves tracking attendance and assessing the integration of learned skills into students' work over time.

- b. **Weekly Meetings: The Cougar will host weekly meetings with staff.**

The Cougar requires editors to host weekly meetings with their staff members. Editors not only critique the work but provide personalized guidance, allowing us to monitor individual progress toward professional readiness. As editor in chief, I lead weekly editorial board meeting where we plan the print two weeks in advance, and I provide organizational updates as needed. I also host one-on-one sessions between editors and writers to offer continuous feedback. This ongoing feedback serves as a qualitative measure of the students' development in real-time.

- c. **Valenti Liaison: The Cougar will work alongside the Valenti School of Communication have an external form of feedback.**

A new addition to our professional development initiative is a collaboration with the Valenti School of Communication where Professor Geoffrey Roth serves as our liaison during our editorial board meetings. He provides critiques of our newspapers and an external, academic perspective on our articles, suggesting areas for improvement. The critique process helps us measure the effectiveness of our editorial content against professional standards, serving as an important tool for assessing student growth and learning outcomes in terms of journalistic quality, accuracy, and creativity.

- d. **Conferences:**

The Cougar attends the College Media Association conference in the Spring & Fall to expand our networking opportunities and learn more from professional journalists all across the country. The students who go to these conferences come back and teach the editorial board what they learned on the trip and pass down information that benefits everyone. Recently, we attended the Texas Tribune Festival in Austin, Texas two years in a row where we joined a conversation with other students and working professional in the political landscape about the state of our media in Texas. This year, we were able to interview Lesly Briones, speak to Lina Hidalgo, Texas Tribune Founder Evan Smith, and Christian Menefee.

Readership

a. Increasing Engagement: The Cougar will post 15 stories across all sections every week.

- a. In 2022 to 2023, there was a 25% decrease in website views. However, this year, from 2023-2024 there was only a 14.6% decrease in website views, not considering that there are 2 more months left in the year. We were made aware of our declining views and implemented a new hosting site to redesign the site to enhance the user experience. We also hired more assistant editors to push for more undergraduate student involvement and increase our workload to write more stories.



- **Digital-first newsroom: Increasing newsletter subscriptions and social media engagement.**
 - o **Constant Contact:** As of October 2024, The Cougar has 15,000 students subscribed to its newsletter which is a 66% increase from last year due to our partnership with Media Mate. This year we had a 36% open rate which is above the national average of 15-25%. We also have a 5% click rate which is on the high end of the national average of 2-5%. This is due to shifting the role of our Web Editor position to focus solely on social media engagement and newsletter subscription. Our newsletter is sent out every day from Monday-Friday at 6 p.m. with social media posts going out at 9 a.m., 12 p.m., 3 p.m., and 6 p.m.
 - o **Instagram:** As of October 2024, there has been a 10.5% increase in followers in the past 90 days. We reached a milestone of 5,000 followers earlier this semester with our current following standing at 5550. This highlights the importance of reaching our audience where they are at which is on popular social media sites like Instagram. The Cougar will continue to prioritize digital media to showcase the UH community vital information.
- **Engaging Readers:**
 - o **Tabling:** We host weekly tabling sessions on Wednesday where we distribute the paper and ask students what they want to hear from us. We also pass out merchandise to increase our presence on campus.

Collaboration

- **Increasing CoogTV and CoogRadio collaborations:** Cindy Rivas Alfaro hosts a biweekly news show called The Morning Roar where she talks about everything UH related and participates in other radio shows like "The State of Things." This was an effort to expand multimedia projects across the Center for Student Media

and provide students the opportunity to expand their journalism skills. As for CoogTV, The Cougar plans to partner with them to make multimedia packages about UH News on campus.

- **Within the organization:** There has been more of an effort to engage photojournalism into our news articles, especially considering the historical importance of having photography in our archives. Capturing the stories of UH students and campus through snapshots highlights the history of campus and gives students a chance to understand the importance of archival research.
- **External organizations:** Like a real-world newsroom, we work closely with other UH departments like media relations, the public information act office, and the Valenti School of Communication. Building these relationships with other UH departments help student journalists navigate a shifting media landscape where our paper relies on external sources of information to confirm or deny claims that goes through our newsroom.

- b. Please discuss any budget or organizational changes experienced since your last (FY2024) SFAC request, their impact on your programs, and your reason for implementing them. SFAC recognizes that some programs did not receive the funds that they requested, that some programs were impacted by additional expenses after the conclusion of the budget cycle, and that some programs may be ahead of or behind their self-generated income projections.

Since the last FY2024 SFAC request, The Cougar has implemented a budgetary and organizational change aimed at expanding opportunities for undergraduate students and enhancing the quality of our editorial operations. The most significant change was the addition of more assistant editors to the editorial board. This organizational adjustment was designed to increase student participation in leadership roles, especially for undergraduate students, who are seeking hands-on experience in journalism and media production.

By adding more assistant editors for the Web Editor, Opinion Editor, and Creative Director we have been able to create additional leadership positions that allow undergraduates to engage more deeply with the editorial process. These roles provide valuable experience in overseeing news coverage, managing reporters, and making editorial decisions. The decision to expand the editorial board aligns with our mission of fostering professional development among students, as it ensures that more students are given the opportunity to develop essential skills such as writing, editing, and leadership. This change also helps ensure a more balanced workload for our editors, which, in turn, improves the overall quality of our news coverage and the educational experience of our staff.

While this expansion required some budgetary reallocation to accommodate stipends or additional resources for the new positions, the long-term benefits for student growth and program quality outweighed the costs. We believe that by investing in student leadership and offering more pathways for professional development, we are supporting the DSA's strategic initiatives and enhancing the overall value of our program to the university community. Furthermore, these positions help us attract a diverse pool of student talent, which is essential for maintaining a vibrant and inclusive newsroom.

- c. Recognizing that the potential to generate additional Student Service Fee income for FY2025 base funding is extremely limited and recognizing that it is likely that some units will not be allocated the new base budget and/or one-time funds requested. Please provide a narrative of how your unit would accommodate a reduction of 5.0% in your total FY2025 base Student Service Fee budget request and provide a line-item explanation of where budgetary cuts would be made.
- d. To accommodate a 5% in our total FY2025 budget, we would have to remove two assistant editor.
- e. What are the other possible sources of funding available to your unit and what efforts are being made to access them (e.g. grants, donations, etc.)? **If you receive funds from other sources, please briefly describe the source,**

purpose, and duration of the funding and report the amounts received in the appropriate rows/columns on the SFAC Spreadsheet.

The Cougar receives a percentage of revenue from digital marketing and social media advertising through CSM.

- f. Please use the following file naming conventions when submitting your pdf files to the Dean of Students:

FY26Q_DepartmentName	Questionnaire
FY26AOT25a_DepartmentName	Add'l One time request - change "a" to "b", "c", etc for additional one-time requests
FY26WS_DepartmentName	Excel worksheet
FY26BA_DepartmentName	Base Augmentation request
FY26OTa_DepartmentName	One time request - change "a" to "b", "c", etc for multiple one-time requests
FY25PRES_DepartmentName	Presentation

NOTE: *The totality of your responses to these questions should give the members of the Committee a comprehensive understanding of the role and function of your unit(s). To the extent that your responses do not accomplish this, please revise them accordingly.*

Questionnaire completed by (please include name, title, email, and phone number): Cindy Rivas Alfaro, editor in chief, editor@thedailycougar.com, 832-654-5273