

# A College Tradition in Peril?

## The State of *The Cumberland* and Recommendations for Its Future

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## Executive Summary

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*The Cumberland* yearbook, a century-long tradition at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, faces mounting challenges that threaten its sustainability. The yearbook has seen declining student interest, reduced page counts, and waning participation in senior portrait sessions. Current operations rely on a small student staff, supplemented by Practicum students whose involvement is usually short-term.

Results of a campus-wide survey ( $N = 92$ ) show that more than two-thirds of Shippensburg students have never seen a copy of *The Cumberland*, and more than a third are unaware of its existence. Most students indicated that they would be even less likely to read a digital yearbook. While students generally see the historical value of a yearbook, very few want to be actively involved in its production.

These trends mirror national patterns. Across the country, college yearbooks have suffered sharp declines in staff size and overall demand. Many schools have stopped publication altogether. Most other universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) abandoned their yearbooks years ago; Bloomsburg and West Chester are the only other PASSHE schools known to still publish a print yearbook. Digital-only formats, thought by some to be a potential solution, have largely failed to gain traction at schools where they have been tested.

Shippensburg University must consider whether *The Cumberland* remains the best vehicle for documenting campus life in the social media era. For the Communication/Journalism Department, which has assigned yearbook advising responsibilities to one of its faculty members, *The Cumberland* no longer aligns well with the department's educational mission and its commitment to provide rewarding student media opportunities.

## Status of *The Cumberland Yearbook*

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*The Cumberland* yearbook marked its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016-17. Launched in 1917, *The Cumberland* is an organization open to all Shippensburg University undergraduate students in good standing. According to the *Cumberland* Constitution, the yearbook's purpose is to "create a record of events of the designated academic year at Shippensburg University and the surrounding community, with a focus on stories that impact the undergraduate university students."

General-interest meetings are held each semester for students who wish to join the staff. The student staff has been supplemented by Practicum students from the Communication/Journalism Department. Comm/Journalism majors are required to take Professional Practicum (COM 355) during their junior or senior year and spend time working in one of the five student-run media organizations on campus: *The Slate* newspaper, SUTV, WSYC radio, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter, or *The Cumberland*.

*The Cumberland* is published by Balfour, one of the nation's leading yearbook publishers. *The Cumberland* enters into yearly contracts with Balfour and works with its representatives in producing the book. Senior portraits, sports candid and action photos, and commencement photos are taken by photographers from Lifetouch.

### Budget

*The Cumberland's* operating budget for 2018-19 is \$46,000, most of which goes toward Balfour's cost of publishing the books. In recent years, *The Cumberland* has not used its full budget allotment because the book's number of pages has been scaled back from original projections.

### Publishing contract

Balfour's proposed contract for 2018-19 is in the amount of \$28,882, based on projections of producing a 120-page book and distributing 1,100 copies. Contracts in previous years generally assumed a much larger yearbook and 1,250 copies.

### Number of pages

The size of *The Cumberland* has shrunk steadily in the past decade, consistent with national trends. The yearbook's size remained stable, at 254 to 272 pages, between 2002-03 and 2007-08, then declined in every subsequent year. (See Figure 1.) By 2016-17, the book was only 96 pages.

## Senior portrait photos

Each year, a Lifetouch photographer visits campus in November and February to take senior portrait photos, which are published in the yearbook. Lifetouch emails all seniors with instructions on signing up for senior portrait appointments. Yet only about 12% to 17% of seniors typically have their photos taken.

## Staff size

In 2017-18, *The Cumberland* had a student staff of three, plus eight Practicum students. The Student Association requires that student clubs and organizations have at least 15 members to remain in good standing. Based on staff lists and staff photos published through the years, *The Cumberland* has met the 15-member requirement only once in the past decade (18 members in 2008-09). The yearbook staff was quite large in 2002-03 (39 members), 2003-04 (24), and 2004-05 (27), but it has dwindled ever since (Figure 2).

## Student interest and involvement

Like other college yearbooks across the country, *The Cumberland* has seen student interest wane. Few students show up for the general-interest meeting at the start of a semester, and many of those who do show up disappear as the year goes on. Practicum students assigned to *The Cumberland* are required to attend weekly meetings and complete assignments given to them by the editor. In some semesters, no Practicum students have expressed an interest in being assigned to the yearbook.

The Practicum students complain that they are asked to complete assignments that do little to build their skills in journalism or public relations. In recent years, the editor has involved the Practicum students more directly in the book's design and layout. However, the Web-based software used to produce the book is Balfour's proprietary, Java-based StudioWorks rather than industry-standard software such as Adobe InDesign. The design experience students gain at *The Cumberland* will do little to help them land jobs or internships in newspaper, magazine, or web design.

*The Cumberland* competes with other student media for students' interest and attention. For students interested in news reporting, editing, or photojournalism, *The Slate* is usually a better fit. For students interested in public relations, PRSSA is a better fit. And for students interested in broadcasting, SUTV and WYSC are the logical student media choices.

Figure 1: Number of Pages (2002-2018)

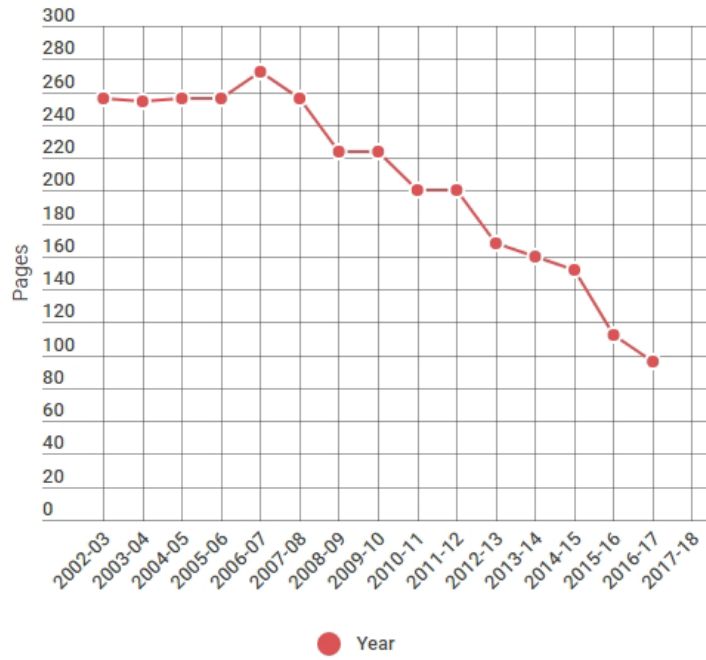
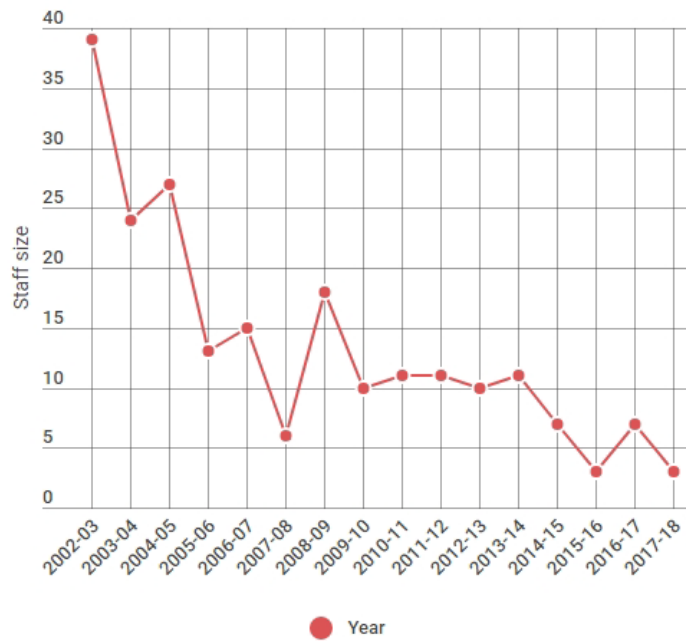


Figure 2: Student Staff Size (2002-2018)



## Status of Yearbooks Statewide and Nationally

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College yearbooks have been shrinking in number and size since the 1980s, a trend that has only accelerated since the arrival of social media. **More than 1,000 U.S. colleges and universities have stopped publishing yearbooks** after failing to attract enough students to continue operating.

### Status of yearbooks at PASSHE universities

**All 14 Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) universities have had yearbooks, but only three are definitely still publishing one — Shippensburg, Bloomsburg, and West Chester.**

The yearbook at **Bloomsburg University** is produced by the Community Government Association (CGA), a 501(c)(3) company that functions as an affiliate of the university. The *Obiter* is advised by the fiscal coordinator and comptroller of the CGA with assistance from a student staff of four to six.

The yearbook at **West Chester University**, advised by a tenure-track English faculty member, has been struggling to rebuild during what the adviser calls “a difficult couple of years.” In an email and subsequent phone interview, the adviser said the *Serpentine* staff consists of about four students. The yearbook has been plagued by staff attrition and missed deadlines.

The status of the yearbook at **Mansfield University** is unclear. Mansfield revived its yearbook in 2014-15, after a 25-year absence, but it is uncertain whether any editions have been produced since 2015. Emails to the adviser and director of student activities were not returned.

### Status of yearbooks nationally

The number of college yearbooks nationwide has declined dramatically. **According to Rich Stoebe of yearbook publisher Jostens, about 1,000 colleges were still printing a yearbook in 2010, down from about 2,400 in 1995.**<sup>1</sup> That represents a decline of about 58%, and the trend has only worsened in the years since then. Not only are college yearbooks shrinking in number; they are shrinking in size. Elias Jo of Entourage Yearbooks said in a 2014 *Boston Globe* article that page counts had declined about 10 percent during the previous five years.”<sup>2</sup>

The decline began decades ago. In a 2010 *Washington Post* article, Richard Stoebe of Jostens said college yearbooks had been in slow decline since campus life changed in the 1960s and '70s.<sup>3</sup> When social media entered the picture, giving students the opportunity to share photos and memories via their phones and computers, yearbooks took an even bigger hit. A 2008 article in *The Economist* likened the traditional yearbook to “a bit of a dinosaur.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet the decline in college yearbooks is not entirely the fault of social media. Lori Brooks, former president of the College Media Association, advised the yearbook at the University of Oklahoma from 2004 to 2012. In a 2013 *Pitt News* article, she said Oklahoma's yearbook had faced poor student interest since the 1980s. "The Internet did not kill college yearbooks," Brooks said. "It just gave students a reason to say why they weren't buying them."<sup>5</sup>

## Is going digital the answer?

Schools that have tried to salvage their yearbooks by going online only have had little success. The University of Pittsburgh's experience illustrates the challenge of going digital. In 2012, only 114 of Pitt's more than 3,500 seniors registered to receive a free online copy of the yearbook.<sup>5</sup> The following year, Pitt decided to scrap the yearbook and offer a free digital photo album, produced by TreeRing of San Mateo, Calif., to chronicle student events and allow students to upload personal photos. According to the *Pitt News* in 2013: "Despite the expectation that this would be a big hit among students, it was poorly received."<sup>5</sup> A similar experiment failed at Oregon State University. A 2013 report noted that the university's director of student media was resolute about transitioning to a digital-only yearbook.<sup>6</sup> Those plans apparently didn't work out because a news article two years later declared: "After a 120-year run, the Oregon State University yearbook is done."<sup>7</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> "Yearbooks no longer 2 Good to Be-4-Gotten," *NPR*, March 14, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124667610>

<sup>2</sup> "In the Facebook era, will printed yearbooks survive?" *Boston Globe*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.betaboston.com/news/2014/05/23/in-the-facebook-era-will-printed-yearbooks-survive/>

<sup>3</sup> "Yearbooks ending at University of Virginia, other colleges," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/26/AR2010012602540.html?noredirect=on>

<sup>4</sup> "The death of yearbooks: A tradition in decline," *The Economist*, July 3, 2008, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2008/07/03/valette>

<sup>5</sup> "Elimination of University yearbook fits trend," *Pitt News*, Nov. 14, 2013, <https://pittnews.com/article/8483/archives/elimination-of-university-yearbook-fits-trend/>

<sup>6</sup> "Oregon State yearbook may have digital future," *Yamhill Valley News Register*, Jan. 2, 2013, <https://newsregister.com/article?articleTitle=oregon-state-yearbook-may-have-digital-future--1359314557--6167--state/region>

<sup>7</sup> "Oregon State yearbook dead; students try magazine," *Statesman Journal*, Jan. 21, 2015, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2015/01/21/oregon-state-yearbook-dead-students-try-magazine/22120813/>

## Student Survey: Awareness, Perceived Value, and Format

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An 11-question online [questionnaire](#) was developed in SurveyMonkey to measure Shippensburg University students' yearbook awareness, interest, and content and format preferences. The survey was administered by the Student Government Association (SGA), which sent email invitations in May 2018 to all university students. A total of 92 students clicked the link and completed the online survey.

**Results suggest that the primary challenges facing *The Cumberland* include limited awareness, low engagement, and weak participation pathways.**

### Awareness

More than a third of respondents (35.2%) were unaware of the yearbook's existence, and only 28.3% said they had ever seen a copy of the yearbook. Clearly, the yearbook is not highly visible in students' day-to-day campus experience.

A majority of respondents (62.0%) were unaware that yearbook participation is open to all students. This lack of awareness likely contributes to the low levels of interest in working on the publication. Nearly half of students (46.7%) reported no interest in participating in the yearbook, and only a very small proportion expressed strong interest (7.7% combined for "very" or "extremely" interested). Taken together, these findings point to a structural challenge in recruiting and retaining student staff members.

### Perceived value

Students generally recognize the symbolic and historical value of a yearbook. Respondents expressed moderate agreement that a yearbook is important for preserving the university's history (mean score of 3.83 on a scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree") and serving as a personal memento of the college experience ( $M = 3.84$ ). However, perceptions of the yearbook's role in promoting the university were more neutral ( $M = 3.34$ ), suggesting that students view *The Cumberland* more as a personal or archival artifact than as a strategic institutional tool.

Content preferences further reinforce this interpretation. Students ranked senior portraits highest in importance among seven types of yearbook content, followed by content related to student organizations and commencement. They placed less importance on information about faculty and campus events. Students apparently prioritize content that reflects personal identity, peer networks, and milestone experiences over institutional or administrative content.

Any interpretations regarding perceived value and interest in the yearbook should be treated with caution, however, due to the small sample size ( $N = 92$ ) and the likelihood of self-selection bias. Students who were already aware of or interested in the yearbook may have been more likely to respond to the survey, while those with little familiarity or interest may be underrepresented. These limitations suggest that actual levels of awareness and value across the full Shippensburg student body may be much lower than indicated by the survey results.

## Format

Answers to the questions about format preferences provide additional insight into how students might engage with a yearbook moving forward. Students reported a higher likelihood of reading a physical yearbook (mean score of 3.83 on a scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 represents “very unlikely” and 5 represents “very likely”) than a digital version ( $M = 2.92$ ) or a website ( $M = 3.05$ ), suggesting that the traditional format retains appeal. At the same time, responses to open-ended questions revealed a divide in preferences, with some students emphasizing the importance of preserving a physical artifact and others expressing interest in more dynamic, digital formats that allow for searchability and multimedia features. For example, one student said, “Online versions may be lost or go offline eventually, but a physical version could remain in the possession of alumni in perpetuity.” Another commented, “Making the yearbook online is in the best interest of everyone. Having video and search engines will attract more alum(s) and students AND future students.”

When asked about alternatives, a clear majority of students (63.0%) indicated that they would not want the yearbook to be replaced by another form of student media. This finding echoes the experiences of other universities, where attempts to replace a print yearbook with an online version or other format have failed.

Overall, the survey results suggest that current levels of awareness, participation, and interaction are insufficient to sustain *The Cumberland* in its existing form, yet there is little support for alternative formats.

## Insights and Recommendations

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Survey findings and broader national trends suggest that students continue to see value in the concept of a yearbook, particularly as a personal and historical artifact, but current levels of awareness, participation, and interaction are insufficient to sustain Shippensburg University's century-long tradition. The following four considerations and strategies are offered to inform future university decision-making regarding *The Cumberland*.

### **1. Organizational Fit and Oversight**

Students in the Communication/Journalism Department express less interest in *The Cumberland* than in other student media organizations, and the yearbook fails to provide as robust a learning experience as the other forms of student media. Given the yearbook's limited alignment with the department's educational mission, reconsidering its organizational placement may be warranted. Options might include placing the yearbook under the authority of the University Office of Communications and Marketing, the Office of Alumni Relations, or the Student Government Association. Alternative oversight structures could provide additional resources or strategic direction while allowing academic programs to focus more directly on student learning outcomes.

### **2. Awareness and Visibility**

A substantial portion of Shippensburg students are unaware of the yearbook. This lack of visibility likely contributes to low engagement and participation. Increasing *The Cumberland's* presence across campus through partnerships with student organizations, integration into major campus events, and more consistent promotion might reduce this awareness gap. Without improved visibility, efforts to increase participation or demand are unlikely to succeed.

### **3. Format and Product Strategy**

Survey responses indicate that students generally have stronger interest in a physical yearbook than in a digital version, but opinion is divided. Format alone is unlikely to resolve *The Cumberland's* challenges. However, a hybrid approach, such as a limited print product with expanded digital and multimedia elements, could be a way to modernize the yearbook while maintaining tradition.

### **4. Long-Term Sustainability**

Even with stronger oversight, greater promotion, and a more modern format, the long-term future of *The Cumberland* remains in doubt. Only two other PASSHE universities are still producing a yearbook, and many U.S. universities, big and small, have abandoned their yearbooks because of declining interest and participation. Ultimately, the university may need to explore alternative approaches to documenting student life that better align with contemporary media habits.