



# Start Spreading THE VIEW



## How Duke University's syndicated op-ed service gains media attention for its faculty members and raises the institution's profile far beyond its North Carolina home

My fellow communicators, please raise your hand if you've experienced the following:

A faculty member emails you late in the day. "I've just written this very important op-ed article. It's a little long. Can you help me get it placed in tomorrow's *New York Times*?

"Or *The Washington Post*? Or *The Wall Street Journal*?"

I'm guessing a few hands just shot skyward.

When Duke University's Office of News and Communications received such requests a decade ago, our response generally was, "Yes, it would be great if *The New York Times* would run your piece. However, *The Times* gets hundreds of op-ed submissions daily, so your chances of being published are slim." (Like winning the Powerball jackpot, we would think but never say.)

We would also explain that it could take a few days to hear back from *The Times*' op-ed page editors, which means if they say no, your piece may no longer be timely.

"Yes, I understand, but I still want it in *The Times*," professors occasionally insisted.

By KEITH LAWRENCE

WS

ISTOCK/THINKSTOCK

Often we would dutifully submit the op-ed just to be helpful. A few days later the expected rejection notice would arrive, and we all would have nothing to show for our efforts. Our office needed a new strategy to end this fruitless cycle—something that would increase our chances of placing opinion pieces while also satisfying our faculty’s wishes for good exposure.

Looking for the “zag”—the subject no one else is writing about, or at least a new perspective on the day’s issues—serves us well.

#### BUILDING AN OPINION NETWORK

In 2005 we created our own op-ed syndicate. Instead of concentrating on the handful of national newspapers that require exclusive publication rights to op-eds, we focused on large regional papers across the United States, including one in Duke’s home state of North Carolina.

We called editors at about 50 newspapers with circulations greater than 100,000 to offer our op-eds, at no charge, with exclusive publication rights in each newspaper’s media market. We asked only that they inform us of their intent to publish within 24–48 hours. They weren’t obligated to run an article, but if they passed, we reserved the right to offer it to a competing newspaper.

We were delighted when 20 editors agreed to try the service. More than eight years later, our op-ed service is still going strong. Some of the newspapers have changed, reflecting both the upheaval in the news industry and the tastes of individual editors, but we continue to offer about 25–30 op-eds a year to approximately 20 newspapers, from the *Contra Costa Times* in northern California to *The Providence Journal* in Rhode Island.

We’re pleased with the results. On average, each piece is picked up by two or more newspapers. (In July five papers ran an op-ed by theology professor Paul Griffiths on the significance of Pope Francis’ visit to Brazil.) We post links to the published op-eds

in the opinion section of the university’s news website, Duke Today ([bit.ly/Duke-opinion](http://bit.ly/Duke-opinion)), and share them on the university’s Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Once faculty members saw our success in getting their op-eds published, many began requesting that we send their op-eds through the service. (However, we still get requests to submit the occasional op-ed to a national newspaper that requires exclusive publication rights.) While we do ask for some op-eds from faculty members, we also frequently receive unsolicited pieces. We publicize our readiness to help writers craft and submit articles and provide online resources to get people started ([bit.ly/Duke-resources](http://bit.ly/Duke-resources)). We also reiterate this offer of assistance in individual meetings with faculty members and during our op-ed workshops.

The newspaper editors also like the arrangement, in part because our authors often cover topics that the syndicated op-ed services neglect. Newspapers typically pay for these services, so editors tend to choose these subscription pieces over a professor’s article on a familiar topic like presidential politics. Looking for the “zag”—the subject no one else is writing about, or at least a new perspective on the day’s issues—serves us well. It’s one of several lessons we’ve learned over the years. Others include:

**Remember anniversaries.** Commemorations of civil rights events, inventions, laws, space flights, and the like are often popular with editors, particularly when they’re a milestone number. This year news outlets published faculty op-eds relating to the anniversaries of the March on Washington, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Family and Medical Leave Act. If you keep track of dates like these, you can submit articles ahead of the actual anniversary—usually two weeks or more. Editors will appreciate you for doing so.

**Think local.** Regional papers battling to survive are increasingly focused on community issues. Localizing an op-ed can increase its odds of publication. If a professor writes about fuel prices, look up how much a gallon of gas costs in the Midwest or New England and plug it into the piece. Also, take advantage of the writer’s hometown connections. If the author grew up, attended school, or used to work in Toledo, Ohio, for



example, submit his op-ed to *The Blade* and identify his ties to the area.

**Be current.** The best way to boost your chances of placing a well-written op-ed is to make it timely. If Congress passes (or defeats) new greenhouse gas emissions standards today, you need to send your op-ed by the next morning. If the piece isn't ready, hold it until the subject comes up again. When that happens, refresh the lead by referring to the latest newsworthy development on the issue, tweak the conclusion, and quickly submit it.

## CARE AND FEEDING OF AUTHORS AND EDITORS

Helping faculty members participate in the public debate through op-eds and other outreach methods is one of our office's bread-and-butter functions. But we're also careful to protect the credibility of the op-ed service with newspaper editors. Therefore, we won't send pieces that we deem unlikely to be published, either because the topic has been covered to death or the piece isn't very strong. We want editors to be excited when we send them something. If they get a few duds in a row, their enthusiasm will dissipate.

This standard also helps us with faculty members. If their writing is unfocused or lacks a solid opinion or conclusion, we'll offer constructive advice to improve the piece, but we'll also tell professors when salvage

# Do-It-Yourself SYNDICATION

## Scaling down Duke's national op-ed model made sense for Elon University

Over the years, a number of Elon University's faculty members have asked news bureau director Eric Townsend for help placing their op-eds.

Inspired by Duke University's national op-ed service model and recognizing the inefficiency of reaching out to one paper at a time, Townsend, who came to the North Carolina institution from a regional newspaper, contacted local editors to see if their publications would run Elon's op-eds on a nonexclusive basis. The answer was a resounding yes.

"In this Internet age, where the idea of exclusivity isn't applied quite as much, I think editors realize this service can be of value to them," says Townsend.

Since Townsend launched the Elon University Writers Syndicate ([www.elon.edu/writers](http://www.elon.edu/writers)) in May 2012, editors at more than 30 newspapers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Maryland have agreed to the arrangement. The service is free, and there are no obligations to publish a certain number of op-eds.

To continue building the university's op-ed service, Townsend meets with as many editors as possible. These in-person conversations help him identify the topics that most interest the editors and their readers, such as education, jobs and job creation, and social justice. This information proves useful when Townsend asks faculty members to write on a certain topic. Within the program's first 15 months, Townsend says about two dozen faculty members wrote at least one op-ed, and they all seem pleased with the results.

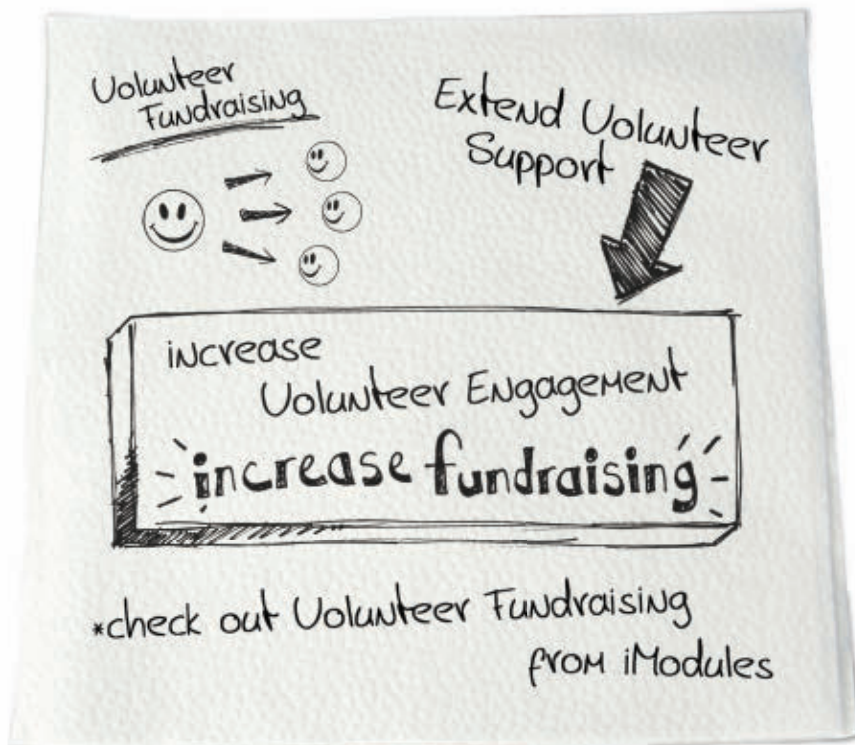
To extend the reach of the pieces, Townsend also displays the op-eds prominently on Elon's website, promotes them on social media, and shares them in the weekly email newsletter distributed to 30,000 members of the university community.

"I want to make sure that if a professor spends time writing an op-ed, there is going to be an audience for it, even if the audience is our own," Townsend says.

Yes, running the writers syndicate adds to his responsibilities, but it's worth it.

"Our columns are appearing more and more often," he says. "It's quite a wonderful experience to see the program grow."—KL





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efforts aren't worth their time. They often express appreciation for our candor.

We've gained a few other insights into managing expectations and maintaining quality, such as:

**Embrace your backyard.** It's OK if an op-ed runs only in your local newspaper. In fact, it's often your best chance for success. With all the methods institutions have to quickly share news with their audiences, posting a link once the published article appears on the newspaper's website is easy. And if we can't get pieces placed—and let's be honest, we can't get them all published—we can still post them on the Duke Today opinion page, which averages about 1,800 unique page views a month.

**Keep editors wanting more.** Don't submit more than one op-ed per week. Editors will run only so many pieces from one institution. Give them a chance to digest one before serving up another.

**Watch for new markets and marketplaces.** If you have prolific faculty authors, you'll need to find alternative outlets for their op-eds. In our experience, The Huffington Post, with its approximately 39 million unique monthly visitors, is a good option. Its editors usually respond and post pieces quickly, and our faculty members enjoy seeing their work published there because they often hear from colleagues at Duke and peers elsewhere. Other possible online landing spots include Bloomberg News, Al-Jazeera, CNN, and Slate.

#### GROW YOUR OWN WRITERS

Recruiting op-ed writers takes time, as does editing and placing these pieces with media outlets. Before you begin a project like this, carefully consider whether the costs, in terms of staff time and effort, and the benefits align with your office's communications priorities.

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If they do, here are some techniques we've used to attract writers:

**Host educational op-ed workshops.**

We hold them once or twice a year, limiting each to 30–40 people so we can offer individual feedback. In addition to reviewing how to structure an op-ed, we ask attendees to write the opening and closing paragraphs for a potential piece and then leave enough time for the group to critique some examples.

**Be inclusive.** Rather than limiting workshops to faculty members, we

*Duke-oped*) to offer direction to aspiring writers—and to make our case for their participation.

**Go where the writers are.** Visit departmental faculty meetings at the start of each semester to outline the resources your office can provide, including help with op-eds.

**Know your faculty's areas of expertise.** When news breaks, send faculty experts a note asking if they would be interested in quickly writing an op-ed on the topic.

in North Carolina, is one example of an institution that has adopted a similar model, targeting publications in states that align with the university's student-recruitment efforts.

At Duke, we believe our op-ed service not only showcases our faculty's expertise to a wider audience but also advances Duke's mission of "knowledge in service to society" by informing the debate on important public issues. By plugging your faculty members into the op-ed market, you can help them extend their

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who have been otherwise reluctant to deal with the media.




invite administrators, university staff members, and graduate students to participate. Some of our best op-eds have come from the director of Duke's career center, who authored a piece on job prospects in a down economy; the head of counseling and psychological services, who discussed binge drinking; and a doctoral candidate who writes frequently on behavioral psychology—related issues opining about Americans' love of underdogs and why we should care about future *Star Wars* sequels. Demystifying the op-ed process and empowering other members of the Duke community to start thinking in this way not only benefits our university but may also be a future boon for the institutions where some of these writers might one day end up as faculty or staff members.

**Provide guidance.** We share our op-ed guidelines on our website ([bit.ly/](http://bit.ly/)

**Promote success internally.** When a newspaper runs a faculty member's op-ed, make sure the author and her colleagues know. Ask the department chair to post the article on a bulletin board, include it in the department's newsletter, and share a link on the department's website and Twitter account. One person's success often inspires others to get in the game. The op-ed service has helped us work with faculty members who have been otherwise reluctant to deal with the media. Writing an opinion piece allows the authors to maintain some control over the final product.

While running an op-ed service takes a fair amount of time and skill, most institutional news offices, which are often staffed by former journalists, are up to the task. (If you're short-handed, consider hiring a freelance editor devoted solely to working on op-eds.) Elon University, also

voices beyond your campus and raise their profiles—and your institution's—at the same time.

So the next time a professor calls you at 5 p.m. on a Friday with an op-ed that must run in the next day's *Times*, don't bang your head on your desk. Take a deep breath and calmly say, "Why don't we consider some other options?" 

Keith Lawrence is the director of media relations at Duke University in North Carolina.