



# KENT STATE STUDENT MEDIA

A MAGAZINE | BLACK SQUIRREL RADIO | THE BURR |  
FUSION THE KENT STATER | FLASH FILM COMMISSION |  
LUNA NEGRA SM ADVERTISING & MARKETING | TV2  
| UHURU

## STRATEGIC PLAN

### PHASE 1:

The Kent Stater/KentWired, TV2, Black Squirrel  
Radio and Flash Film Commission

DRAFT FOR FACULTY ADVISORY COUNCIL  
AND STUDENT MEDIA BOARD REVIEW  
FEBRUARY 2024

#### I. Executive Summary

##### **A. Overview of Kent State Student Media**

Kent State Student Media serves as the umbrella support organization for nearly a dozen branded, student-run media organizations. These groups are established along the lines of legacy media platforms: Newspaper (The Kent Stater); television (TV2); radio (Black Squirrel Radio); a converged website (KentWired.com) and magazines (A Magazine, The Burr, Fusion, Luna Negra, and Uhuru). Flash Film Commission and Student Media Advertising round out the organizational roster, with Student Media Advertising providing

revenue and marketing support to all partner organizations.

In the fall of 2023, the Student Media organization embarked on a “rethink” of its structure and priorities to reflect changing media consumption patterns, anticipated resource challenges and evolving student interests. The near-simultaneous departure of the faculty adviser for The Kent Stater and KentWired and the Director of Student Media underscored the urgency of moving forward with this process.

NOTE: This Strategic Plan is being developed in three phases:

- **Phase 1** (presented in draft form in February 2024) focuses on The Kent Stater, TV2, KentWired, Black Squirrel Radio and Flash Film Commission.
- **Phase 2** (to be presented in draft form in April 2024) will focus on A Magazine, The Burr, Fusion, Luna Negra, Uhuru, and Student Media Advertising.
- **Final** (to be presented in May 2024) will include final recommendations for all brands, budget, goals, and timeline for implementation.

## **B. Mission Statement**

Kent State Student Media empowers students through practical, collaborative, and professional learning opportunities within an independent, student-led, and multi-platform media framework. Our students create valued sources of journalism, information, entertainment, and advertising and develop meaningful connections with our core audiences. We encourage excellence, leadership and accountability as students become innovative, ethical, and skilled media producers within a diverse and global society.

## **C. Initial Objectives**

- Create a more audience-centered and digitally focused Student Media organization reflective of today’s media landscape.
- Realign student roles and compensation for consistency with current professional standards, pay equity and transparency.
- Free up resources for improved student compensation.
- Improve content distribution, both on and off traditional broadcast and print platforms.
- Rebuild a revenue and marketing plan for a post-pandemic and post-print era.

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- Identify desired skills and competencies for Kent State University’s next Director of Student Media.

## **D. Summary of Strategic Initiatives**

### **Refocus**

**Create a new emphasis on digital news, audience engagement, social media, and streaming audio/video distribution** while retaining ties to legacy broadcast and print

platforms.

### **Restructure**

**Create a single cross-platform student organization** incorporating news, entertainment, audience, and production. A Chief Content Officer and senior student leaders in all four disciplines would be vetted and selected by the Student Media Board.

**Enhance staff leadership by prioritizing digital media skills** in a new Director of Student Media and restoring staff support for advertising, marketing, and events.

### **Align advising resources accordingly:**

- **Director** (Chief Content Officer and Audience organizations)
- **Faculty** (three semester hours or adjunct equivalent per functional area) Managing Editor/Digital (3), Managing Editor/Broadcast (3), Audio/Entertainment (3) and Film and Production (3)

### **Rebrand**

### **Reduce the number of distinct Student Media brands while enhancing leadership and collaboration opportunities for students:**

- **Current:** KentWired, The Kent Stater, TV2 and Black Squirrel Radio • **Future:** The Kent Stater (kentstater.com), KSTV, Black Squirrel Entertainment • **Also:** Flash Film Commission would be incorporated into this structure via Audio/Entertainment and Production, repurposing funds to increase student leadership opportunities and compensation in these areas.

## **I. Timeline and process of this Strategic Plan**

Work in the Fall 2023 semester focused on the Student Media partner organizations with the largest potential audiences, and which consume the most staff time and resources: KentWired, TV2, The Kent Stater and Black Squirrel Radio. Since student-produced film productions comprise a significant proportion of video content distributed on TV2, Flash Film Commission was also incorporated into this phase.

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In the context of those organizations, Student Media advising, administration, staffing, revenues, and expenses were all examined, as well as content and distribution of the high frequency brands. This report will outline recommendations in each area to date.

Conversations were held with student leaders, Student Media staff and faculty members throughout the School of Media and Journalism.

Two student-driven initiatives focused on content were also launched: Kent Stater team

members embarked on a survey of content topics as a tool for realigning staff responsibilities and beats. In addition, students in Luke Armour's PR Case Studies class examined the reach of individual Student Media partner brands and offered recommendations for improving their audience and impact.

In the Spring 2024 semester, attention will turn to building a new revenue, audience, and marketing plan for the high-frequency brands, supported by the efforts of a student team in Adam Stephens' Spring 2024 Interdisciplinary Projects class. That will take place concurrently with a rethink of the next tier of Student Media brands: A Magazine, The Burr, Fusion, Luna Negra, and Uhuru.

Finally, should the Student Media office staff recommendations outlined in this report be adopted, recruiting for those positions should begin immediately with the goal of having the new team in place by the beginning of FY 2024-2025 on July 1.

## **II. Guiding Philosophy**

Student Media's progress in adapting to the current news, information and entertainment landscape has been driven by – and at times hindered by – the strong and appropriate desire to preserve the independence of student decision-making and expression. Kent State University, under the direction of the Student Media Board, takes the concept of independent student media quite seriously and has enshrined that value into official institutional policy.

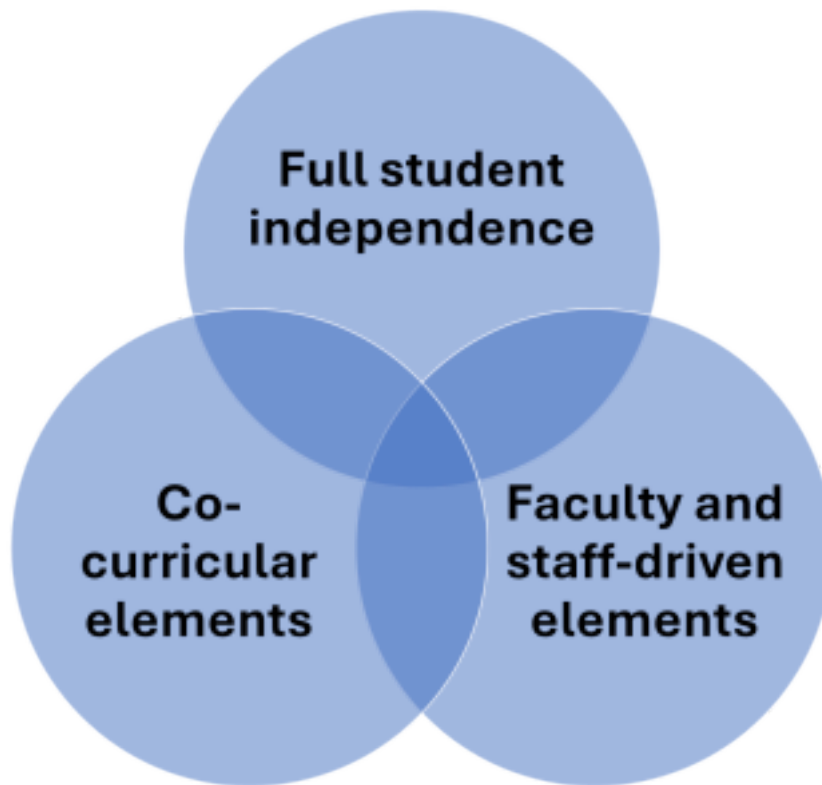
That said, the forces buffeting professional media are strong, and Student Media is subject to them all. The audience shift away from appointment television and print newspapers in favor of content consumption on mobile, streaming, and social platforms has upended both revenue and distribution models.

Navigating this transition is a challenge for the most storied professional news organizations and content-centered businesses; the New York Times took years to navigate the transition away from print to its current reliance on digital distribution and digital subscriber revenue. Blockbuster Video is out of business, supplanted by Netflix, which itself morphed from a video rental business to a subscription-based video streaming platform.

Kent State has made important strides in supporting Student Media through a dedicated allocation of student fee revenue, yet transformation of the student media enterprise has proceeded slowly. One reason for that is the independent nature of student media leaves many major decisions up to student leaders.

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Informed by conversations with student leaders and student affairs professionals, here is an alternative view that has guided our process thus far:



***What aspects of Student Media should be fully independent? (Defined as free of prior restraint from faculty, staff, or administrators)***

- Decisions on what to present and what not to present (news and feature stories, audio and video programs, entertainment)
- Decisions on what to distribute and not to distribute
- Writing, shooting, editing and presentation

***What aspects of Student Media should be co-curricular? (Defined as influenced by, defined by, or overseen by faculty, staff, or administrators)***

- Aligning student expectations, responsibilities, and position descriptions to industry standards
- Setting standards of journalistic ethics, workflow, and interpersonal behavior • Routine post-program and post-publication feedback
- Day-to-day advising; in-the-moment content coaching
- Help in resolving disputes that cannot be handled among student leaders and staff members

- Collaborating to make completed coursework available to Student Media partner

organizations

- Fulfilling administrative and contractual obligations for revenue-producing or expense-incurring services

***What aspects of Student Media should no longer be the exclusive province of student leaders? (Where do staff, faculty and administrators need to exercise a stronger hand?)***

- Platform and content strategy
- Paid staff compensation and onboarding
- Setting of expectations and responsibilities for paid positions
- Regular post-program and post-publication feedback
- Workflow documentation and training on all platforms

### **III. Situation Analysis**

#### **A. SWOT Analysis**

In every measure, awareness of the high-frequency Student Media brands across the Kent State University community is low when compared to the significant resources devoted to them. This is due to shifting trends in media consumption habits and distribution challenges that persist following the 2020 pandemic shutdown.

##### **1. Strengths**

- History of excellence, measured by awards and external recognition.
- Strong alumni and friends support, measured by size of endowment funds.
- High level of student engagement and participation – anywhere from 400 to 700 students are engaged in Student Media each semester.
- Outstanding support, both financial and in-kind, from the College of Communication and Information and the School of Media and Journalism.
- Consistent financial support through Student General Fee allocation.

##### **2. Weaknesses**

- Multiple surveys show awareness of Student Media brands across the Kent State University community is below par, due in part to distribution challenges that persist following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Multiple brands create cohesive student organizations but divides among the primary news brands are confusing to the target audience.
- Multiple brands and associated leadership structures also inhibit collaboration and resource sharing across platforms and organizational boundaries.
- Continued emphasis on legacy broadcast and narrative text platforms reflects immediate career opportunities for students. It does not reflect the rapid evolution

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of the broader media industry and the way Student Media's target audience consumes news, information, and entertainment.

- Lack of external distribution on legacy platforms – cable (TV2) and print (The Kent Stater) has reduced visibility and compounded the revenue challenge by reducing earned advertising revenue.
- Lack of internal advertising sales expertise leaves Student Media reliant on student staff for about 50 percent of earned revenue, limiting sales pressure and potential upside.
- Strong cultural focus on news and journalism has limited leadership opportunities for students from other disciplines within the School of Media and Journalism and the College of Communication and Information as well as opportunities for a wide range of students with relevant skills outside of the College.

### 3. Opportunities

- Putting increased energy behind fewer distinct brands can increase both visibility and impact in the news and entertainment space.
- The development of post-broadcast audio and video distribution platforms such as podcasts, streaming audio and streaming video can provide opportunities to increase distribution and reach of student-produced content. (YouTube, TuneIn, Roku, etc.)
- Integrating audience development, analytics, marketing, and public relations into a complementary student organization can lay the groundwork for a more audience centered, 'civic media' approach to content creation and production.
- More frequent (and targeted) print distribution can drive needed revenue while maintaining digital as the primary content platform.

### 4. Threats

- Declining Student Fee revenue as the so-called "enrollment cliff" takes effect in the coming years.
- Continued shift of audience attention away from print and broadcast to social and mobile platforms.
- Cultural divides between platforms, topics and functions inhibit collaboration. • Evolving student interests risk a decline in available talent if suitable creative outlets are not created, maintained, and enhanced.
- Declining trust in institutions / interest in traditional journalism requires innovative approaches to maintain relevance and audience attention.

## B. Industry Analysis

### 1. Competitive Landscape

The challenges facing Kent State Student Media are not unique; student media

organizations around the country are rebuilding after being shut down during the

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COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a loss of distribution frequency and local advertiser relationships. [Kelly Furnas](#), who leads [student media at Elon University](#), was among several contacted at other institutions who cited COVID-19 as the cause of a significant loss in recruitment to student staff roles, institutional memory, and day to-day content production. Furnas said Elon is only now beginning to recover from that period, and that is also true at KSU Student Media. Our director and newsroom advisor vacancies have only exacerbated those issues. Meanwhile, competition for students' time and attention continues to shift in favor of platforms and social media, as outlined in the Consumer Behavior section. That said, Student Media and the Division of University Communications and Marketing are, together, the only true sources for news, entertainment and information focused on Kent State University and the extended university community.

#### 2. Market Trends and Consumer Behavior

[The most recent research conducted on behalf of Kent State Student Media was conducted in 2022.](#) That survey examined media consumption habits among the student population. In that survey, 62 percent of those surveyed did not use the campus website to get news about Kent State University and the surrounding community. Nearly 68 percent of those surveyed went somewhere other than the campus newspaper and nearly 78 percent said the same about campus television. The survey indicated that students spend far more time with social media than with any other media platform. Competition for advertising dollars continues to shift away from traditional print and broadcast platforms toward digital; indeed, most Student Media revenue now comes from digital sources: To date in the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Student Media has realized \$39k in digital revenue compared to \$8k in print. Pick-up rates for the Kent Stater print edition remain high, however, so we see additional revenue opportunities in the short term through increased frequency.

### **IV. Goal Setting**

**Long-term Goals:** Though this plan summarizes the most high-profile recommendations under the moniker of “Refocus, Restructure, Rebrand,” we present here a more specific list set of goals (and corresponding strategic initiatives) to drive Kent State Student Media forward over the next two to three calendar years: **1.**

**Enhance Audience Engagement**

**2. Strengthen Financial Sustainability**

**3. Expand Content Platforms and Channels**

**4. Foster Collaboration, Adaptability, and Innovation**

**5. Enhance Skill Development for Student Team Members**



## V. Strategic Initiatives

### 1. Enhance Audience Engagement

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- **Audience organization:** One of the most significant recommendations in this strategic plan is the creation of an Audience team as an equal-status student-led organization. Today, audience teams are a fixture in local and national news organizations; the [New York Times created its audience team in 2014](#). In the first two months, the Times saw a 20 percent increase in online audience. The audience team will focus on four areas: **Engagement** (in both online and offline forums), **social media**, **analytics**, and **search engine optimization**.
- **Integrated marketing, fundraising and membership support:** Recommendations for staffing the KSU Student Media office include dedicated staff resources for revenue and marketing, combined with the development of additional revenue streams: A more integrated approach to fundraising, centralizing that work for all Student Media organizations, and the development of a [membership strategy](#) to secure alumni and friends support for KSU Student Media are also envisioned.
- **Consolidate brands to improve visibility and effectiveness:** The most significant public-facing recommendation is to rebuild the high-frequency student media brands under two long-standing brands: The Kent Stater/KSTV and Black Squirrel Entertainment. This consolidation tracks with the [findings of a student group](#) charged with assessing KentWired, The Kent Stater and TV2 and providing recommendations for improvement. This proposal differs from their recommendation, which is to consolidate under the KentWired brand. We find the history of The Kent Stater brand to be compelling. In addition, digital technology has evolved beyond strictly wired connections, making the KentWired brand a bit out of date.

### 2. Strengthen Financial Sustainability

- **Consistent distribution of audio, video and print brands:** This report recommends a strong focus on driving consistent distribution of our audio, video, and text content, including a biweekly print edition schedule in the fall and spring semesters.
- **Diversify revenue streams to include fundraising, events and memberships for alumni and friends:** As noted above under integrated marketing, fundraising and membership support, we would deploy additional resources toward developing multiple sources of earned revenue. Event ideas include a hosted or co-sponsored Housing Fair, combined with a printed Housing Guide.
- **Optimize printing and related costs:** Exploring more compact formats for print content, smaller editions and more frequent distribution will create enhanced opportunities for earned advertising revenue. Student Media has sought and received additional price quotes for printing that will accomplish this task.

### 3. Expand Content Platforms and Channels

- **On- and-off-campus distribution of video and audio content:** On and off campus distribution of TV2 stopped during the pandemic when the university

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ceased on-campus cable television distribution and Spectrum cable launched its own local news channel. We would create a student leadership structure to support the distribution of streaming audio and video on platforms such as [iHeart Radio](#), [TuneIn](#) and [Roku](#). This would also facilitate distribution of the KSTV television and BSE audio streams on campus.

- **Biweekly print distribution of Kent Stater in fall and spring semesters (noted under Financial Sustainability)**
- **Mobile, social media, SMS, and newsletters:** The new Audience organization would be charged with strengthening our distribution across mobile and social platforms and launching experiments with SMS, otherwise known as text messaging. [Subtext](#) is a platform used by news organizations to connect people with journalists across the country.

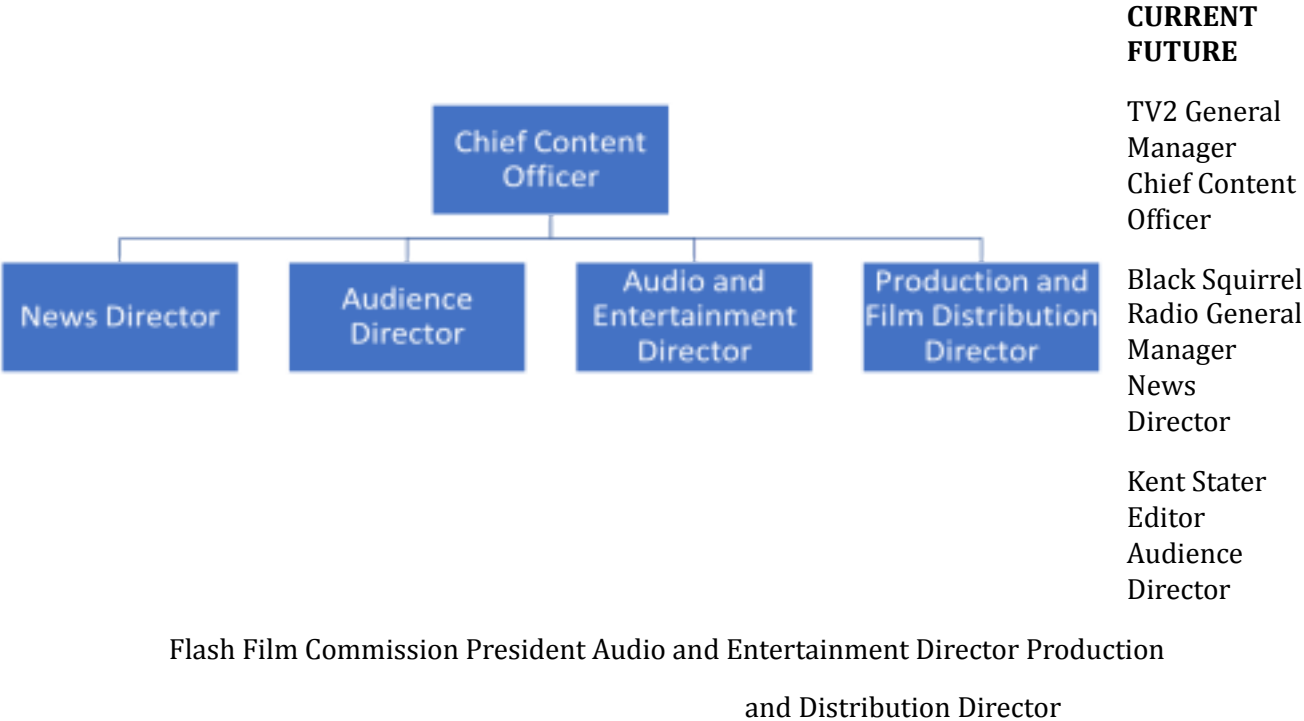


#### 4. Foster Collaboration, Adaptability, and Innovation

- **Establish a true cross-platform student organization:** To support the content and distribution strategy outlined above, we would create a single cross platform student organization incorporating news, entertainment, audience, and

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production. In practice, this would bring together KentWired/The Kent Stater, TV2, Black Squirrel Radio and Flash Film Commission. A Chief Content Officer and senior student leaders in each discipline would be selected by the Student Media Board. The result would increase the number of senior student leaders chosen by the board from four to five.



[Complete org charts for the cross-platform student org are linked here.](#)

**5. Enhance Skill Development for Student Team Members**

- **Adjust selection timing and terms for student leaders:** We would move the selection process for student leaders forward by two to three weeks. This would enable a longer period of overlap between outgoing leaders and incoming ones and permit the scheduling of formal leadership training for this population before the end of the semester in which they are selected.

- **Adjust timing of staff selection and training:** Selecting student leaders earlier in the semester will also enable the selection of student leaders below those selected by the Student Media Board before the end of the term. Initial training can be conducted in advance, helping the teams get off to a faster start each semester.
- **Consolidate training activities where appropriate:** Holding adviser-led workshops early in the fall and spring semesters would target students who are new to student media and who have not had exposure to the core curriculum. Sessions would be recorded and archived for later playback for students who are unable to attend or who need extra reinforcement. Here is a glimpse of possible

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workshop topics on tracks optimized for journalism, creative/production, digital products, and leadership intended to be delivered over a two-day period:

<b>Journalism / reporting track</b>	<b>Creative / production track</b>	<b>Audience / digital track</b>	<b>Leadership track</b>
Developing story ideas and planning your work	Collaboration and developing creative ideas	Editing text, audio content and visuals	What it takes to lead and manage your peers
Conducting background research and effective interviewing	Research, program, and production planning	Writing effective headlines and search engine optimization	Understanding and growing your audience
Reporting across platforms	Audio, visuals, and graphics	Conceiving, writing, and editing e-mail newsletters	Ethics, decision making and news judgment
Organizing your story and preparing to write	Program execution; working together as a team	Introduction to digital and social analytics	The unbelievable power of planning
Writing, self-editing and reviewing your own work	Sweating the details; professionalism and public performance	Audience-centered decision-making on digital platforms	Communication, resolving conflict and building a team
Ethical, safety and legal issues	Ethical, safety and legal issues	Ethical, safety and legal issues	How and when to ask for help

- **Adjust advising expectations to focus on advance workshops and regular feedback:** The transition in Student Media leadership and advising presents an opportunity to rethink how students are prepared and trained to practice the skills they are learning in the classroom in a supportive, co-curricular and professional setting.

During the fall semester 2023, the focus of advising shifted from having a faculty adviser in the KentWired newsroom to having multiple advisers serve as coaches and guides.

While this presented some challenges, students rose to that challenge with energy, pushing the boundaries of what is possible, gaining important learning experiences when it comes to leadership, communication and managing scarce resources.

This model would shift our advising emphasis to focus on **advance preparation and regular critique**. This would enhance student agency for decision-making and be **supported by more consistent, day-to-day coaching**. The proposed model restores a day-to-day newsroom presence in the form of a new Director of Student Media.

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Involvement of full-time and adjunct faculty members as advisers would be focused and enhanced to preserve the connection between classroom and practice.

Whether they are full-time faculty, adjuncts or staff members, the responsibilities of advisers assigned to Student Media should include a regular, formal critique. These can be delivered verbally in staff meetings, for example, or in written form that students can peruse during the day. The format and approach should be appropriately tailored to the brand and be the province of the adviser, with review by the Director of Student Media.

**How this combination of advance preparation and critique works in practice:** [Keith L. Alexander, Howard University's newsroom adviser](#), is a veteran Washington Post reporter and Howard alum. He plans and hosts training seminars and workshops for the staff by engaging DC-area journalists and delivers a weekly critique to the student staff. He said prior advisers left training up to students and did not critique student work at all. This resulted in repeated mistakes and unbalanced reporting, an inferior student experience and a loss of credibility on campus.

- **Expand advising to include Production and Distribution:** TV2 is an important

co-curricular resource, but the current advising scheme does not incorporate Production or Creative activities (now labeled Tech and Entertainment). Meanwhile, the leaders of TV2, BSR and The Kent Stater do not work together in an organized way to truly program KentWired for an increasingly digital audience. Overall resources devoted to advising would be as follows:

- **Digital content (CCO), Audience Team:** Director of Student Media -
- Student Media Advertising & Marketing:** Student Media staff member -
- Daily video newscast:** Faculty load of 3 semester hours or adjunct equivalent
- **Daily text news:** Faculty load of 3 semester hours or adjunct equivalent -
- Audio and video entertainment: (What is now Black Squirrel Radio and TV2 Entertainment)** Faculty load of 3 semester hours or adjunct equivalent
- **Production and Distribution:** Faculty load of 3 semester hours or adjunct equivalent

**V. Next Steps in the Development of the Student Media Strategic Plan:** As the development of this plan continues, Phase III will include the following recommendations:

- A. Student Media Magazine Portfolio
- B. Budget and Resource Allocation

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- C. Staffing and Talent Acquisition
- D. Innovation Fund Investment
- E. Student Staff Transition Plan
- F. Implementation Timeline
- G. Metrics and Key Performance Indicators
- H. Evaluation and Measurement

I look forward to discussing the plan further with the many committed stakeholders of Kent State Student Media.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mizell Stewart III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "M".

Mizell Stewart III  
Professional-in-Residence  
Interim Director of Student Media  
Kent State University School of Media and Journalism