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College and University General Interest Magazines



The Robert Sibley Magazine of the Year

Grand Gold Medal

Dartmouth College, (*Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*)

In candidly covering alumni governance and Native American identity on campus—two lingering controversies that erupted this year—*Dartmouth Alumni Magazine (DAM)* proved its mettle as a trustworthy source of information. *DAM* seeks to speak as “the voice of reason,” as the editor puts it, and the staff often assigns stories to alumni who are experienced journalists. Clearly acknowledging that the rumors of a “hostile takeover” of the board of trustees, plus a lawsuit brought by alumni, had polarized the trustee elections, the magazine brought in one of its alums, a *Washington Post* reporter, to investigate. Readers definitely responded to *DAM*’s thought-provoking approach: “Anyone who’s an editor would be thrilled” to publish that many letters, one judge noted.

The judges commended the magazine’s deft touch in balancing thoroughly reported pieces with lighter, lively content, including cartoons for reunion-goers and a package on the “guts and glory” of 125 years of football. A “homeland security” feature interviewed alumni who had dropped out of the workforce when their “bambinos” arrived. To draw readers through its type-intensive features, *DAM* makes good use of dramatic opening spreads and enticing headlines/callouts. Instead of yet another news piece on the commencement speaker, *DAM* had a handwriting expert analyze his signature (a clever way of pointing out that as secretary of the U.S. Treasury, the alum’s John Hancock will appear on all U.S. paper currency).

Each of the six other contenders for the Sibley Award had won a Gold Medal in either College and University General Interest Magazines or Special Constituency Magazines. Among the appealing elements that drew the judges’ attention were:

- *Stanford Medicine*’s consumer-friendly theme issues (one focused on “why we don’t do what’s good for us”); and
- *Tufts Magazine*’s “Your Brain on Books” package of essays, fiction, and striking black-and-white photos, along with its well-paced news sections.

While each of the contenders had much to like, the judges mentioned several approaches that detracted from overall quality:

- having too leisurely a pace (for example, 10 type-free pages of fall scenes);
- lacking in intellectual content;
- relying on an outdated design or one that falls down in organizing the content; and
- going overboard on white space that becomes too repetitive, or packing the text in too densely.

Magazines with Circulations of 30,000 and Under

53 entries

There were many, many bright spots in the magazines submitted, indicating how hard magazine staff members are working to produce a quality magazine with a limited budget, staff constraints, and administration/development priorities. We enjoyed reviewing them and encourage all who submitted to ask the award winners for copies.

There were several magazines, Taylor, Marietta, and Pomona, whose design was noteworthy. We liked the use of good photos, strong opening spreads, and in the case of Marietta, a strong unifying theme throughout. Pomona's use of dramatic opening gatefolds was impressive and the design was striking and well put together. But in all three (and in many of the other entries), the writing felt flat and PR-ish. With stronger writing that tells real stories, these magazines could have been award winners. Taylor's article "Brother in Arms," for example, about soldiers in Iraq who are devout Christians, was a missed opportunity – it could have been a fascinating soul-searching article.

A number of panelists argued on behalf of *Portland*, the University of Portland's magazine, for its very strong writing (it was the one magazine that made us want to brew a copy of tea and curl up with it.) "Not afraid of anything," wrote one judge. "In a class by itself," wrote another. But the graphic artists on the panel felt that the design was consistently weak. The covers were strong, but the features seemed to come from a single template: a full-page photo and the head pushed to the top of the page, followed by solid text. It reminded one panelist of the *New York Review of Books*, where content is king.

Gold Medals

Carleton College, (*Carleton College Voice*)

- This magazine publishes articles that are so interesting that even people who are not alumni can find themselves engrossed in the magazine. It has an eye-catching youthful design and great photos – together, it's an unbeatable combination. The design represents a "credible reflection," wrote one judge, "of its vitality and intellectual life." Judges liked the mix of numerous short articles and one or two longer features. The magazine isn't afraid to have fun, and doesn't take itself too seriously. A caption in Class Notes points out that two alums "recently put their expensive liberal arts educations to work" by starring in a commercial dressed a bottles of Buffalo wings sauce. Feature story ideas are creative and all over the map. Departments are reliably entertaining.
Picky, picky: The magazine outsources its design, which is reflected in the high cost per unit (\$1.96). The back of the book "Carl Quiz" seems to be a take-off of the American Express print ads. Its fun but hard to read. Launch of campaign stories are difficult, granted, but the Voice's campaign feature seemed bland and predictable. The treatment of some headlines made them unreadable. A letter to the editor: "You managed to print an article that pissed off some readers... You should do more of this." Not just on behalf of Carleton's Voice but for all alumni magazines, including our own, we agree.

Kenyon College, (*Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin*)

- This magazine is a big handsome hunk of a magazine. Plus, as one judge wrote, "I wanted to read it." Another: "Really good at emphasizing school culture, past and present," the design is bold and not afraid to devote the first two pages of a spread to a great photo, a head and not much else. Heads, and decks are, happily, bait and not synopsis. Features about the college seem to outnumber features about alumni but the former are so entertaining and varied ("The Haunted Kenyon Tour," for example) that the magazine doesn't feel administratively heavy handed. The photo essay in Winter 2008 was drop-dead gorgeous. The section "Office Hours" makes it easy to browse the academic life. "The Hot Sheet" is a fun quick read. The switch to recycled matte-finish paper as of Fall 2007 was a good move.
Picky, picky: Why, when there's the alternative of dogs or W. Hodding Carter, would you put a boring photo of a piano on the cover? Particularly when the cover story is three paragraphs long? (The fall and winter covers more than make up for it, though.) The essay on the last page could use a clever deck to draw readers in.

Bronze Medal

McDaniel College, (*The Hill*)

- The design of The Hill, particularly the Summer 2007 issues, is confident and good looking. The writing is engaging. Departments like "Ask the Expert" are clever and fun to read. (Insider travel tips from professors, Summer 2007, was a brilliant idea and the illustrations were class.) The two pages of haiku winners featured a simple yet elegant design. The Trivia Challenge is fun and interactive. The covers are simple and strong. Overall, The Hill is a smart, nicely balanced magazine.
Picky, picky: With 28 pages of Class Notes in a 56-page magazine, the feature well seems like it could use another eight pages. The panel noticed with some amusement

that after the first three pages, the font size in Class Notes drops substantially. (Some panelists thought that from the readers' point of view it would be depressing to open a new issue and discover you have moved into the big-font section. Others felt it was a clever solution to the perennial font-size complaints.) The sans-serif font, particularly in bold, is hard to read. Between the two issues submitted there was a noticeable unevenness in design.

Honorable Mentions

Gonville & Caius College Cambridge: "Collage-y and quirky."
 Hillviews, (Texas State University): "Great photographs."
 Swarthmore: "Interesting content." "A nice balance of fun and serious stuff."
 The Experience, (Warner Pacific College): "Good job on a small budget"
 Bowdoin: "Nicely designed front."
 Grinnell: "Fun Winter 2007 cover."
 Cornell: "Handsome, though ad-heavy." "Interesting articles, particularly March/April 2007."

Magazines with Circulations of 75,000 or more

51 entries

Three members of the judging panel met in advance of the full panel and whittled the list down to 35. This left time for a more thorough reading of the strongest magazines. In both the preliminary screening and the final screening, the judges used an anonymous numerical ranking system to determine the top magazines. It was surprising how strong the consensus was on most of the entries.

The panel included a veteran newspaper reporter, two writers and editors from a large state institution, and an editor and a designer from a small liberal arts college. From the stack of 35 magazines, the judges came up with 13 semi-finalists. After a brief discussion, there were eight magazines vying for five medals. All of them were worthy contenders and a fine line separated the eight magazines. Our judges spent ample time reading copy and abstracts before making a decision.

One editor inquired in his abstract if the CASE judges actually read the entry forms. The answer is yes. Our judges looked at objectives, budgets, and results to help determine the winners. The eight finalists included Brown, Duke, North Dakota State University, Penn State, Stanford, Tufts, Yale, and the University of Notre Dame.

All of the winning entries mixed the institutional with the global and the weighty with the light, with accessible design that include multiple points of entry. "I wanted to be able to open the magazine at the end or the middle and immediately get into it," remarked one judge.

If there was a global weakness of the magazines that did not make the top cut, it was in the design arena. There were a surprising number of busy, cluttered covers. Many magazines printed full-page photos that were enlarged beyond an acceptable range or were not deserving of so much space. Designers used so many fonts, screens, and shadows they seemed to be pushing readers away.

Many, many institutions ran stories about green initiatives. The judges were interested in how various institutions tackled this hot topic. Many magazines excelled, but several institutions made the mistake of touting their initiatives as unique when they were not.

Gold Medals

Penn State Alumni Association, *The Penn Stater*
 Tufts University, *Tufts Magazine*

- Each of the magazines exhibited engaging cover stories, clean design, and a sense of place about their respective institutions. While each of them tackled stories of interest to those not associated with their institution, the stories seemed rooted in relationship to the mission of the magazine. Our judges were puzzled by the stories that appeared in some of the top magazines and even those that didn't make the final cut. "I'm not saying stories should be provincial, but they should offer some sense of where they came from," remarked one judge.
 The quality of story selection and writing was high among all of the top magazines. *The Penn Stater* distinguished itself with clever headlines, outstanding captions, and reader-friendly design. "You feel like you have to read this magazine," commented one judge.

Silve Medals

Stanford Alumni Association, *Stanford Magazine*
 Yale University, *Yale Alumni Magazine*

- Both frequent winners in this category. The judges had high praise for the cover choices made by Yale. They ranged from such weighty topics as a deadly form of TB to the more creative theme of Yale alumni who have appeared on stamps.

Bronze Medal

North Dakota State Magazine, *North Dakota State Magazine*

- The judges felt it was in a category of its own. “Its mission was to reflect the entire state, and it did so very well,” said one judge. “It was simultaneously quiet and bold, understated in design but not too much so, with an eclectic assortment of articles.”