



# **The Cougar SFAC Program Questionnaire FY 27**

**STUDENT FEES ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SFAC)**  
**FY2027 PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE**

*Please answer the questions below. The totality of your responses should give the members of the Committee a comprehensive understanding of the role and function of your unit(s).*

**Questionnaire completed by (please include name, title, email, and phone number):** Cindy Rivas Alfaro, Editor in chief of The Cougar, [editor@thedailycougar.com](mailto:editor@thedailycougar.com), 713-743-5362

1. Please provide 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 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 1<sup>st</sup> place Pinnacle Award for Best Investigative Story and in 2024, we won an Apple Award Honorable Mention for Best News Website, and 3<sup>rd</sup> place Apple Award for Best Editorial and Best Opinion Column.

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 freshmen 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 your success in achieving the DSA strategic initiatives as well as action steps in contributing to the retention of students. 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 John Lomax and the editor of the Houston Press Margaret Downing. Recently, The Cougar hosted the Houston Chronicle's editorial board so students could learn about letter writing and opinion writing. 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 a 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 and 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 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 professionals 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 10 stories across all sections every week.**

- a. In 2025, we saw an increase of around 15% to our total viewership. March, April, July and August were our higher performing months. August 2025 was the most views we have received in that month since we started collecting data, at 132,000 views. Our goal is to continue establishing methodologies to increase our viewership.

Total views ⓘ

Months and years Average per day

|      | Jan    | Feb    | Mar    | Apr    | May   | Jun   | Jul   | Aug   | Sep    | Oct    | Nov    | Dec   | Totals    |
|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-----------|
| 2010 |        |        |        |        | 8K    | 23.3K | 29.2K | 25.9K | 53.5K  | 55.8K  | 56.6K  | 25.4K | 277,695   |
| 2011 | 46.7K  | 72.4K  | 68.9K  | 52.5K  | 27.2K | 18.8K | 14.7K | 35.8K | 72.1K  | 102K   | 96.2K  | 51.3K | 658,641   |
| 2012 | 58K    | 83.8K  | 107.4K | 90.5K  | 38.8K | 42.1K | 44.4K | 51.3K | 80.9K  | 75.2K  | 65.4K  | 40.9K | 778,788   |
| 2013 | 52.2K  | 56.3K  | 56K    | 69.3K  | 37.1K | 62.8K | 61.3K | 55.8K | 116.3K | 135K   | 100.4K | 63.7K | 866,171   |
| 2014 | 84.8K  | 96.2K  | 90.2K  | 105.3K | 54K   | 74.7K | 54.9K | 73.7K | 119.5K | 120.7K | 154.3K | 54.6K | 1,082,681 |
| 2015 | 74.8K  | 114.6K | 112.6K | 139.2K | 70.3K | 75K   | 64.4K | 75K   | 106.4K | 129K   | 107.7K | 66.5K | 1,135,599 |
| 2016 | 55.5K  | 82.2K  | 66.7K  | 87.3K  | 73.6K | 57K   | 60.8K | 88.6K | 94.2K  | 77.7K  | 79.4K  | 42.4K | 865,401   |
| 2017 | 64K    | 77.1K  | 89.9K  | 69.1K  | 36.8K | 21.9K | 19.4K | 49.8K | 121K   | 64.5K  | 41.1K  | 24.7K | 679,387   |
| 2018 | 32.2K  | 45.3K  | 49.6K  | 41.4K  | 33.6K | 26.7K | 26.2K | 35K   | 45.8K  | 63.3K  | 42K    | 25.5K | 466,621   |
| 2019 | 33.5K  | 37.4K  | 44.6K  | 41.1K  | 29.2K | 39.9K | 30.7K | 50.4K | 52.5K  | 55K    | 87.2K  | 32.2K | 533,602   |
| 2020 | 48.3K  | 81.9K  | 53K    | 38.9K  | 35.7K | 73.6K | 39.7K | 40K   | 53.1K  | 59.5K  | 62.8K  | 79.1K | 665,676   |
| 2021 | 139.1K | 71.5K  | 102K   | 77.6K  | 72.1K | 56.8K | 53.3K | 93.9K | 85.6K  | 98.8K  | 123.3K | 71.3K | 1,045,249 |
| 2022 | 67.7K  | 65.7K  | 102.7K | 65.8K  | 64.3K | 50K   | 50.7K | 61.1K | 72.7K  | 64.3K  | 55.1K  | 61.1K | 781,184   |
| 2023 | 47.6K  | 69.8K  | 79.7K  | 50.7K  | 35.8K | 30.7K | 27K   | 29K   | 47.1K  | 67.2K  | 59.2K  | 35K   | 578,683   |
| 2024 | 47.6K  | 86.6K  | 67.3K  | 53K    | 27.4K | 29.8K | 35K   | 59.6K | 43.5K  | 38.9K  | 42.4K  | 25.4K | 556,389   |
| 2025 | 35.6K  | 58K    | 87.5K  | 123.6K | 26.9K | 28.2K | 72.2K | 132K  | 60.7K  | 18K    |        |       | 642,625   |

Fewer Views More Views

## b. Digital-first newsroom: Increasing newsletter subscriptions and social media engagement.

- Constant Contact:** As of October 2025, The Cougar has a little over 24,000 students subscribed to its newsletter which is a 22% increase from last year due to our partnership with Media Mate. This year we had an 86% open rate which is above the national average of 15-25%. We also have a 2% click rate which is on the normal end of the national average of 1-5%. 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.
- Instagram:** As of October 2025:
  - There has been a 30.2% increase in followers in the past 90 days.
  - We reached a milestone of over 7,000 followers earlier this semester with our current following standing at 7,962.
  - Our Instagram has surpassed 2 million views in the past 90 days, due to our fast coverage and consistent posting.
  - We have received 38,186 interactions in the past 90 days: 21,015 likes, 261 comments, 823 saves, 7,090 shares, and 1,141 reposts.
  - 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.

## Collaboration

- 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.

3. Please discuss any budget or organizational changes experienced since your last (FY2026) 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.
  - a. Since the last 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. However, many of these positions are unpaid due to budgetary constraints. We are hoping SFAC can aid in assuring student leaders can be paid for their work.
  - b. 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.
  - c. 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.
4. Please use the following file naming conventions when submitting your pdf files to the Dean of Students:

|                           |                                                                                        |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| FY27Q_DepartmentName      | Questionnaire                                                                          |
| FY27AOT25a_DepartmentName | Add'l One time request - change "a" to "b", "c", etc. for additional one-time requests |
| FY27WS_DepartmentName     | Excel worksheet                                                                        |
| FY27OTa_DepartmentName    | One time request - change "a" to "b", "c", etc. for multiple one-time requests         |
| FY27PRES_DepartmentName   | Presentation                                                                           |