“Great journalism has numerous similarities to a great university. Both need inspired and mature leadership, a staff with many talents and an insatiable curiosity about the world and its people. They must learn to listen constantly, to evaluate, to experiment – and then by various means to tell others what they have learned.”

– Nelson Poynter, August 25, 1965

Early Years

Nelson Poynter, the owner and editor of the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) and founder of the Poynter Institute, was born in Sullivan, Indiana on December 15, 1903.

He earned his undergraduate degree from Indiana University and worked as a reporter and editor for the school’s newspaper, the Indiana Daily Student. While still enrolled at IU, Poynter worked during the summer of 1923 as a reporter for the Washington (DC) Daily News.

After serving briefly as the news editor of the Japan Times, he returned to the U.S. to earn a master’s degree in economics from Yale. Beginning in 1927 Poynter served as an assistant general manager at the St. Petersburg Times.

In 1929 Poynter bought the Indiana newspaper, the Kokomo Dispatch, but sold it within a year. He went on to hold various positions at a number of different newspapers, including serving as business manager of the Minneapolis Star. Poynter returned to the St. Petersburg Times in 1938 as general manager and became the newspaper’s editor in 1939.
During World War II, Poynter held a number of government positions. One of his last assignments was for the Office of War Information’s Bureau of Motion Pictures in Hollywood, California.

In 1945, Poynter and his wife, Henrietta, founded Congressional Quarterly to provide nonpartisan and accurate congressional news to subscribers in newsrooms, government offices, libraries and various research centers.

Building an Award-Winning Newspaper

Poynter became the majority owner of the Times and the Times Publishing Company when he purchased most of the company’s stock from his father in 1947. Under his leadership, the St. Petersburg Times became one of the best locally owned, independent dailies in the country. The newspaper gained a national reputation for its award-winning reporting and its pioneering use of graphics and design.

The first of many Pulitzer Prizes was awarded to the Times in May 1964 for coverage of financial abuses at the Florida Turnpike Authority. The newspaper’s investigation led to the reorganization of state auditing and bonding practices.

The Poynter Institute

Poynter believed one of the best ways to improve journalism was through education. In 1975, he founded a school for journalists called the Modern Media Institute (later called the Poynter Institute). In 1977 Poynter willed ownership of the Times Publishing Company to the Institute so that after his death the school would become the owner of the Times.

USF St. Petersburg Benefactor

On June 11, 1978, USF President John Lott Brown conferred an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters degree on Poynter during the university’s Spring Commencement.

Brown said: “Publishers, editors, and reporters in this country and throughout the free world have been inspired by your dedicated and unwavering support of constitutional democracy in the United States ...Your gifts to Yale University and to Indiana University...are well known. Less well known, perhaps, but more important to us, has been your support of the University of South Florida, including major fund-raising for the library at USF’s Bayboro Campus, and your extremely generous personal contribution toward land for the campus itself.”

Poynter died four days later on June 15, 1978 at the age of 74. He became ill in his office just a few hours after helping break ground for the new USF St. Petersburg campus and its new library. The next day’s newspaper included a story about Poynter’s death, but it also featured a story about his Bayboro Harbor groundbreaking titled, “Dream realized as USF expansion begins.”

A great deal has changed since 1978, but Nelson Poynter’s commitment to his community lives on in his newspaper, the Poynter Institute and the library that bares his name at USF St. Petersburg.

Our society is changing so much from year to year that any medium, whether printed or electronic, must keep up with these changing interests of the people in communicating with each other, or that medium will die.”

– Nelson Poynter