

# The Reporter



Founded as ΠΔΕ (1909) and ΑΦΓ (1919)

March 2005, Volume 9, Issue 6

*The Nation's Oldest National Honorary Collegiate Journalism Organization*

## Valdosta State Prepares for SCJ 2006

By Frank Barnas  
SCJ Chapter Adviser, Valdosta

When confronted with attending a convention in Valdosta nearly a year from now, two questions inevitably come up. Why Valdosta? And, more to the point, where is it?

Second question first. The easiest directions are to go to Florida, turn around, and drive north for about 15 minutes. We're located in south-central Georgia, so we're not a suburb of Atlanta. We're two hours from Tallahassee or Jacksonville, Florida, and more than three hours from the Atlanta airport. This makes traveling here dicey, but it also makes it a perfect location for a National Media Convention.

Here's why: 100,000 people live here, yet their local newscasts come from Atlanta, Tallahassee, or the city of Albany, Georgia, which is an hour and a half away. Wherever you are right now, you're probably closer to a local TV news operation than we are.

However, VSU's Mass Media Area operates VSU-TV11, which is the only local channel in the county. Our news series, *News 11 In Focus*, enjoys a broad audience as we're the only news source for truly local news. We've shifted our programming time, but when we aired in early fringe, we tied *Jeopardy* in ratings. I'd take those numbers for a college program every time.

In addition, the Journalism Area operates *The Spectator*, the award-winning collegiate newspaper. And as Journalism and Mass Media are in two

entirely different colleges, it's interesting to see how our two disparate yet allied programs work together.

The convention will be Friday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, through Saturday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, and the theme is "*The Value of Journalism*." We will have a reception and welcoming speech on Friday, followed by workshops, sessions, and seminars on Saturday. Also, expect a call for videotapes and print samples of student work, as we'll have an area dedicated to showcasing work from all SCJ chapters.

Logistically, it's an easy drive if you're in the Southeast, as Valdosta is on Interstate 75, which runs from Atlanta to Florida. Driving in from the west? Take Interstate 10 East through Tallahassee. If you're flying, you'll need to connect through

Atlanta on Atlantic Southeast Airlines, a subsidiary of Delta.

The Atlanta to Valdosta leg is sometimes expensive, so the Tallahassee and Jacksonville airports will work if you can fly and rent a car to drive in.

Tallahassee is a bit closer, but Jacksonville is a much easier drive to navigate, and each is about two hours away.

There are plenty of hotels and restaurants in various price ranges. None are within walking distance of VSU, but we'll have shuttle vans to move you around as needed.

The weather will be cool, with daytime highs near 70 and a low around 50. If you're interested in staying until Sunday, we'll have an optional sightseeing event planned.

Hope to see you here in 2006!



Valdosta State University, GA is the site of SCJ's 2006 National Convention. (Photo courtesy of Valdosta State University)

## Open-records laws can be the key to a great scoop, professionals say—if you know where to look

*Citizens' rights to know and journalists' rights to report are threatened everyday, say the organizers of Sunshine Week, who planned the weeklong program to highlight freedom of information issues and emphasize the importance of open government. The Student Press Law Center is celebrating Sunshine Week with a series of reports on efforts by student journalists to access information and report in the sunshine. [This is one such report.]*

Last November, during the height of college football season, something funny was going on in Auburn, Ala.

The Auburn University Tigers were undefeated in the regular season. But each week the Bowl Championship Series rankings—partly determined by the secret votes of 61 football coaches—delivered bad news to Auburn fans: Auburn never cracked the top two.

Jeff D'Alessio and his fellow sportswriters at the **Atlanta Journal-Constitution** wanted to know why.

"There had been some controversy raised over who was and wasn't voting Auburn ... in the top two," D'Alessio said. "There had also been some controversy over [the University of Texas] and [the University of California], which were switched on some polls in the late season ... so we wanted to see who had who where."

The sportswriters knew that just asking the coaches for their ballots would not do the trick. So they put some muscle behind the queries: They submitted state freedom of information act requests for the votes.

On Nov. 30, the **Atlanta Journal-Constitution** submitted open-records requests to 61 coaches who participated in the ESPN/USA Today coaches' poll.

It may sound unusual to those who think sports reporting is little more than recording play-by-play. But, D'Alessio said, these days freedom of information laws have as much to do

with sports reporting as they do with front-page scoops.

Open-records laws are "an untapped tool," D'Alessio said. "It's amazing the kinds of things you can find."

Already in 2005, D'Alessio and his colleagues have run five stories that were proposed and researched using open-records laws, including an investigative piece on recruiting practices at the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech.

"We got everything—from the bill of dinner at a nice restaurant in Atlanta to one of the assistant coach's oil change," he said. "You're entitled to get it all if you ask for it."

Joseph Jesselli knows firsthand the unusual stories that open-records laws can produce. Jesselli is a staff reporter at [thesmokinggun.com](http://thesmokinggun.com), which has built an empire out of publishing the results of open-records requests on its Web site. Infamous mug shot photos of actor Nick Nolte and the transcripts of Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly's lawsuit were acquired because of open-records laws.

Student journalists can reap the benefits of open-records laws too, Jesselli said. All they need to do is know where to look and who to ask, he said.

"It's about knowing what to ask for. That's the key. That's what the journalism is," Jesselli said. "Yeah, the stuff is out there, but you have to know what to ask for and know what's going to be interesting."

Brant Houston, the executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.—an organization based at the University of Missouri journalism school that provides services to investigative journalists—said the possibilities for open records- and open meetings-related stories are



endless. The organization posts stories on its Web site that were reported using freedom of information laws. The site also links to databases created with public records, including one FBI database of campus crime statistics.

As for D'Alessio and his colleagues at the **Atlanta Journal-Constitution**, their open-records request did not crack open the secrets of the BCS voting process. Only six schools complied with the newspaper's open-records requests. Some schools denied that the ballots existed. Others said outright that the coach's vote was not subject to state freedom of information laws.

University of Colorado sports information director Dave Platti said he recorded Head Coach Gary Barnett's vote with a non-university pen on non-university paper and phoned it in to **USA Today** on a non-university phone, to ensure that his vote would be beyond the reach of open-records laws, according to D'Alessio.

"Our legal people felt that it was Gary's vote and not the university's vote," Platti said.

But the story may have served a different purpose, D'Alessio said: In April the NCAA commissioners and BCS officials will vote on whether to discontinue the current voting system, which some critics argue is not subjective and clouded by secrecy.

"We certainly put some pressure on [the coaches] that they weren't used to," D'Alessio said, which is why he said open-records laws should be employed in journalism even more widely than they are. Student journalists are learning the benefit of open records and how freedom of information laws can improve their stories, he said.

"It's not something only big papers should be doing," D'Alessio said. "It's something that makes for really fascinating journalism, frankly."

*This story is reprinted with permission of the Student Press Law Center. For more information about the issues of the student press check online at [www.splc.org](http://www.splc.org). This story was written by Tom Burgess and Campbell Roth.*

# Launch of Online TCJ set for Next Fall

By Mary Beth Earnhardt  
Editor

The editorial board of **The Collegiate Journalist** magazine is currently seeking submissions for the Fall issue.

This issue is unique in that it will now be published as an online magazine. The decision to move to the electronic format was made at the 2000 biennial national convention in New York City. The format change was made to accommodate printing costs.

"I'm glad we've moved to the online environment," said Dr. Arthur Barlow, SCJ National Executive Director. "It not only allows us to cut back on printing and shipping costs but it makes our publication available to the masses."

In addition to increased availability, the magazine will also be searchable as a database. This should make it easier for student's who wish to access past stories. It will also serve as a historical record of SCJ.

At the 2004 National Council meeting in Nashville, TN, SCJ First Vice-President Mary Jennings appointed SCJ National Webmaster Editor of **TCJ**.

"I'm pleased with Mary's decision to pass this task to the Webmaster," said Barlow. "Adam (Earnhardt) has really increased our online resources, and I am sure he will do an excellent job editing the magazine."

Earnhardt hopes to select an Editorial Board in the next few weeks. "I will be asking Na-

tional Council Members to serve," said Earnhardt. "I believe there is a lot of great content for the upcoming issue and this service should be rewarding to those who choose to help."

Anyone interested in serving as a member on the Editorial Board should contact the National Office.

Most of the work for this issue will take place in the summer in order to accommodate busy schedules during the academic year. Because of online communication, the editorial process will take place electronically over email.

"I'm excited to extend my service to SCJ by taking on this new challenge," said Earnhardt. "I believe my web and writing skills will be helpful in re-building this glorious publication."

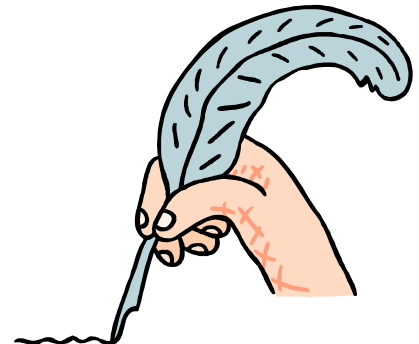
## CALL FOR ARTICLES THE COLLEGIATE JOURNALIST ONLINE MAGAZINE

*The Collegiate Journalist (TCJ)* is an online magazine published by the Society for Collegiate Journalists (SCJ) and housed on the SCJ web site at [www.scj.us/tcj](http://www.scj.us/tcj).

The first issue of *TCJ* is slated for online publication in late-September 2005. Please consider submitting an article or editorial addressing the theme of this first issue: "Information Access and the Plight of the College Journalist." Articles/editorials using this theme will address topics including, but not limited to:

- First Amendment protections for college journalists
- The Sunshine Act and on-campus meeting access
- Private schools and information access
- "How to" get access to information on college campuses
- Preparing future journalists
- Case studies of current legal battles

See enclosure for more details.



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# Notes from the Executive Director



Congratulations to all the winners in the SCJ 2005 National Contest. I have included the current listing of the contest winners with this newsletter; if we receive any other notices from the judges I will update the list, but it is time to make the initial announcement.

Vivian Wagner of Muskingum College, OH will be processing and mailing the Awards to individual chapters soon. It is gratifying to see so many new names in the Winner's Circle as well as traditionally

strong SCJ Chapters. The contest is one of the major perks to being an active SCJ chapter. It is the only national student journalism contest judged by professional journalists.

I extended the deadline for the major Awards, and I am awaiting Past President Sheridan Barker at Carson-Newman College, TN to make the decisions – so the best is yet to come. In the April/May newsletter we plan to highlight the winners of these major awards, so look for more information shortly.

Remember a \$500 scholarship, made possible by the National Dean's List, is presented to the winner of the prestigious National Student Journalist of the Year Award.

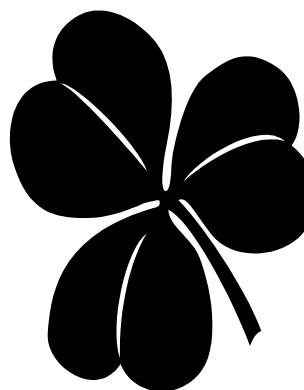
Spring is springing, even here in Western Pennsylvania, and that is a natural reminder that April is the best month to rejuvenate your SCJ Chapter with a Spring induction ceremony – go forth.

Have a happy holiday.

## SCJ Chapter Notes and News

**Congratulations to our new members at:**

**Tennessee Tech, TN—  
5 new members;**  
**Slippery Rock University, PA—  
3 new members;**  
**Shenandoah University, VA—  
8 new members;**  
**Elizabethtown College, PA—  
8 new members;**  
**Wartburg College, IA—  
16 new members;**  
**Virginia Wesleyan College, VA—  
6 new members**



**And a special nod to the Medal and Certificate of Merit winners at Virginia Wesleyan College and Valdosta State University.**

### The SCJ Reporter

The SCJ newsletter is published once a month during the fall and spring semesters in accordance with the Clarion University of Pennsylvania academic calendar. It is created on an Optique computer using Microsoft Publisher 2000.

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