

spig news

2025 No. 1: *The official newsletter of the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group*



Drake students and instructors pose with CNN's Wolf Blitzer in the lobby of the cable network's Washington D.C. bureau in mid-January.

Drake students earn warm D.C. memories

By Amy McCoy
Drake

“They took out the trash,” two senior leaders at CNN’s Washington D.C. bureau told a group of Drake University students in mid-January when explaining how one intern earned a spot in the newsroom.

They said the student was a talented journalist, but also contributed in unexpected ways including emptying an overflowing trash bin at an election event as the news desk was churning out coverage. That landed the intern the coveted job: talent plus teamwork. This message of teamwork and doing the unexpected, the undesirable, of being

Find more student stories and photos at the Drake in DC blog:
<https://drakeindc.org/>

scrappy and cultivating curiosity, resonated throughout a two-week trip to Washington with 25 students.

From attending Supreme Court arguments to observing a protest march and viewing a Cabinet confirmation from media box seats, students gleaned many takeaways about the nation’s capital and democratic processes.

Many of the most memorable moments came from advice shared during visits with about a dozen Drake alumni who gave insights into

*Please see **DRAKE** on page 3*



Masudul Biswas

head notes

We’ve been busy getting ready for great time in SF

When this newsletter is published, we will be almost three months away from the AEJMC’s 108th Annual Meeting in San Francisco. SPIG leadership has been busy planning a program for this conference. Our vice head, Ecaterina Stepaniuc, has helped us create a program for this year’s annual meeting featuring several timely issues that we journalism and communication professors encounter in our programs.

SPIG-sponsored panels will cover topics such as “navigating mental health” in classrooms, teaching journalism to students who may not trust news media, and preparing students for communication careers. A panel will share insights and strategies on how to find time for research.

In addition to the Great Ideas for Teaching (GIFT) session, two other SPIG pre-conference sessions on August 6 will dwell on study abroad programs and teaching tips from

*Please see **CELEBRATE** on page 2*

head notes

Celebrate 30 years of SPIG with us

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Teacher of the Year Award winners.

30th anniversary

We have planned for a special session on August 9 from 4:45 to 6 p.m. at the AEJMC Convention to celebrate SPIG's 30th anniversary. In this celebratory session, we also will honor top research-paper authors and this year's award winners.

As part of this anniversary celebration, SPIG's leadership has decided to recognize "outstanding" members, current and former, for their impactful contributions to the group. Look for this series in special newsletters from February through July. The SPIG executive committee identified nine members based on one of the following criteria:

1. SPIG member who did not win an award before but actively participates in the group's discussion and/or initiatives, including sharing useful teaching insights in the SPIG email Listserv.
2. A long-serving SPIG member (15 or more years), who made an impact on SPIG in at least two of three ways:
 - a) creating or spearheading a new

initiative for SPIG,

- b) contributing to or participating in the group's conference programs, and

- c) offering services to the initiatives, such as journal, research paper and award competition.

3. A past member and/or deceased member who made great contributions to SPIG.

4. A fairly new SPIG member, who has been active with the group's programming and initiatives.

Since February, we have featured three such members – late Pam Parry, Brian Steffen and Doug Mendenhall. From May through July, we will feature six more members.

These eNewsletters are also curated in our website's newsletter section. In the post-convention newsletter in August/September, we plan to include articles/interviews of our nine outstanding members.

AI in the classroom panel

Finally, I would like to thank our teaching chair, Christina Smith of Georgia College and State University, for organizing an insightful and timely Zoom panel on "AI in the Classroom" on April 17. Smith

and panelists Sonya DiPalma, UNC Asheville; Kay Colley, Texas Wesleyan; and Amy McCoy, Drake, shared strategies to navigate AI in the classroom including class activities and grading rubrics.

While we are saddened by the passing of our beloved colleague Pam Parry this year, we have remained focused on the topics and issues that matter to the group's members. We look forward to connecting with each other in August at the AEJMC annual meeting in San Francisco.



Former SPIG Head Pam Parry

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beyond the classroom

Drake students persevere in D.C.

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their success in Washington, which often came down to cultivating connections and leaning into whatever work was needed in the moment.

As members of a college community, we can sometimes become siloed within our own tasks and interests. A significant focus of this trip was encouraging students, from across disciplines – including political science, international relations, journalism, psychology and pharmacy – to pull together to navigate a bustling city that was preparing for a presidential inauguration, as well as to work together to create an engaging Drake in DC 2025 blog.

Students worked as teams to experience events, try new foods and explore museums between their coursework and class visits.

Their photos, videos and blog posts reflect these experiences and what it meant personally, as well as what they learned from this class, billed as an opportunity to “investigate the causes and consequences of legislative gridlock, the agenda-setting role of national politicians and news media outlets, the potential for new collaborative policy outcomes, and the meaning of bipartisanship in a polarized political environment.”

Alumni visits and meetings with officials underscored networking



Drake students outside the Supreme Court.

and communication skills and the ability to sit face-to-face for a conversation in which you actively listen and patiently explain your position.

Connection, persistence, patience and empathy were regular themes in managing a polarized environment, and for students entering politics and journalism, embracing a “we’re in this together” mentality was at the center of those discussions.

One student compared waiting several times, for many hours, in the frigid cold to view Supreme Court arguments with the patience needed to rise the ranks in D.C.

The student wrote: “These experiences may have been an inconvenience at the time but overall taught us strong lessons of persistence and patience, and how it can be applied to future careers. As the saying goes, patience is a virtue. You need to have patience when working on ‘the Hill’ and in D.C. in general. D.C. is a fast-paced competitive city with

lots of areas to grow and develop if you’re willing to put in the work. Something we took away from our conversations with legislative staffers ... is that this city is very much ‘head down, chin up’. Starting as an entry-level staffer is difficult but with grinding hard and patience, you will see yourself climb up the ranks and see everything pay off. In parallel to the Supreme Court, we saw our success later as we consistently tried to enter the court, persisting until we experienced victory.”

Another student emphasized connection and perspective following a visit to the floor of the U.S. House chamber. “Here there are fierce debates about the good for the country, but there are also personal and light-hearted conversations between representatives of differing parties about life and family.

Seeing this room in person put it in perspective compared to the screens that I am used to seeing it on. It is a small room where elected officials, no matter the political affiliation, are working for the American people.”

For me, observing students as they heard from leaders and other political and journalism experts the importance of networking, embracing challenges and gratitude for the “grunt work,” was a true highlight.

While we can discuss this in the classroom and tell our own industry stories, by hearing from others, students further understand the importance of these qualities, especially persistence, patience and willingness to pitch in for the greater good.

Recognizing the depth of this opportunity, I hope the Drake students remember these lessons as they continue in their studies and their careers, and on occasion, be the person who “takes out the trash.”

Course note

This two-week experience in Washington, D.C. is offered through Drake University’s Political Science Department and led by Dr. Rachel Paine Caufield, co-chair of the department, and Kristin Economos, senior director of the Donald V. Adams Leadership Institute, with support from the Olson Institute for Public Democracy. Co-instructors were state Rep. David Young, a practitioner in residence at the Olson Institute; Scott Raecker, director of the Robert D. and Billie Ray Center; and Amy McCoy, assistant professor of strategic political communication and public relations at Drake since 2022.

aejmc 2025 preview

Conference in San Francisco includes many SPIG offerings

Pre-Conference panels

WEDNESDAY

Aug. 6, 1 to 2 p.m.

Adventures Abroad: Navigating the Ups and Downs of Study Abroad Programs. Study abroad enriches students but brings challenges. This panel explores its benefits – global reporting skills, cultural awareness – and pitfalls such as misunderstandings and ethics.

Aug. 6, 2:15 to 3:20 p.m.

Teaching Tips from Teachers of the Year. In the 30th anniversary of SPIG, this panel of past Teacher of the Year recipients will provide insights and teaching tips, sharing pedagogy and course management ideas.

Aug. 6, 3:40 to 5 p.m.

Great Ideas for Teaching for Small Programs. GIFTs for Small Programs provides a dynamic opportunity for faculty members and/or graduate students to share classroom-tested “great ideas” with other educators in an engaging and fast-moving presentation style.

Conference panels

THURSDAY

Aug. 7, 8:30 to 9:45 a.m.

The Wobbly Three-Legged Stool – Finding Time for Research (SPIG and HIST). Research Panel. New faculty members are informed from the start of their careers that success in academia stands on three legs—teaching, service and research. Yet as teaching loads and service demands increase, faculty at smaller institutions struggle to find time



for research. Unlike the R1s, faculty at small colleges do not have a cadre of graduate students to help compile data and many struggle to make connections with collaborators at other institutions. This panel will provide strategies for devising research agendas that can be accomplished by one person as well as provide tips on finding collaborators at other institutions.

Aug. 7, 1:45 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Refereed Research. (SPIG).

Aug. 7, 3:30 to 4:45 p.m.

They're Not OK: Navigating Mental Health in Your Media Classroom or Lab (SPIG with ICIIG). Teaching Panel. Students in our post-pandemic classrooms and media labs are carrying baggage many thought would be gone in 2023. It's not. And research on twenty-somethings shows they are more prone to clinical depression, anxiety and misgivings about all things structural, including your curricu-

lum. How do you fire them up for what you teach? How do you navigate the absences and tardies and struggles with assignments? This panel will help you with best practices driven by psychology, sociology and the wisdom of flexible pedagogy.

FRIDAY

Aug. 8, 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

Put This Another Way: How to Teach Journalism to Students Who Don't Trust Journalism (SPIG and CTAM). Teaching Panel. Journalism is not the academic discipline it was 20 years ago. That's especially true at smaller colleges and universities whose shrinking budgets have caused consolidation of what used to be entire journalism or media programs. This panel will explore how faculty trained (or career experienced) in journalism and media have found ways to bring practical journalism training into a liberal arts model, an English or Business curriculum, or other places in the university milieu. Bring your insights and concerns.

Aug. 8, 11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m.

From Momentous Change to Leadership: Preparing our Students for Communication Careers (ICIIG with SPIG). Teaching Panel. This panel will address how communication professionals do not consider Generation Z to be “work ready.” While Gen Z has expertise in several areas, their problem-solving abilities, ethics knowledge, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and understanding of office politics may leave them behind – especially as many are working in the momentous workplace changes – remote

aejmc 2025 preview



The 2025 AEJMC conference in San Francisco will be headquartered at the Marriott Marquis on Mission Street, overlooking downtown and within walking distance of many of the city's top attractions and sights.

Photo courtesy of Marriott

Final evening to toast SPIG's 30th

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and hybrid environments, or, conversely, returning from remote and hybrid learning models to working in person. Of particular focus for the panelists will be how professors can deliver post-pandemic classes, extracurricular experiences, experiential learning through classes, and internships, that will help ensure our students are better prepared for entry level work and leadership.

SATURDAY

Aug. 9, 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

How Do I put This? Journalism and Media in a Post-Journalism Era (SPIG with ICIG). Teaching Panel. Journalism and practical media instruction have fallen into disrepute and have lost funding in the post-pandemic, “fake news” era of American higher education. Many small programs (and even big ones) have been either swept en-

tirely or folded into other academic disciplines. This panel will bring the insights, advice and futurist projections of seasoned educators who have seen their programs grow, wane and dissolve in an era when all higher education is asking hard questions about what an educated person should be.

Aug. 9, 3 to 4:15 p.m.

Helping Podcasting and Broadcasting Students Become Confident Communicators. (BAMJ with SPIG). Teaching Panel. Students in podcasting and broadcasting courses often are uncertain about how to write in their own voice and are uncomfortable speaking when it's time to record. Many hear vague feedback about how to “write like you talk” and “sound conversational.” This panel brings together veteran journalism educators to share tips on how to give students more specific, helpful advice on audio writing, voicing and editing. Panelists

will share exercises they have used in class to help students become more confident communicators. Topics include writing engaging, informative scripts; overcoming anxiety and learning to sound your best; and getting comfortable editing your own voice. This session covers not only how to teach students about the technical aspects of voicing and writing, but also how to craft a message that resonates with listeners. These topics are timely as podcasting has become an increasingly popular course offering and are significant as a growing number of journalism and communication jobs (even those considered to be in “print”) require speaking to an audience on a variety of platforms.

Aug. 9, 4:45 to 6 p.m.

Top Paper Research Award and SPIG's 30th Anniversary Celebration

Aug. 9, 6:30 to 7:30 p.m.

SPIG Members' Meeting

tales from teachers

Protest in Lithuania stands up for communication program

By Michael Ray Smith

LCC International University

Loss of accreditation. Protest. Resolution.

It's not a U.S. university reeling from controversy in the Middle East; it's a mild protest in Europe.

A routine self-study of a communication program in Lithuania led the Ministry of Education this year to not renew the Department of Contemporary Communication program at LCC International University, Klaipeda, Lithuania. Originally the

state gave the university until December to have students complete the major – a decision without precedent and draconian by any measure.

Nonetheless, administrators, students and faculty banded together to combat the decision and it appears that the resistance may be working.

The unified efforts of students, faculty and others may have moved the ministry to allow LCC's communication program to have a couple of years for the students in the pipeline to finish their studies, but the offi-

cial outcome won't be known until weeks from now, after the deadline for this SPIG newsletter.

One administrator noted May 1 that the ministry acknowledged LCC tried to obtain an extension on what the university is calling a two-year teach-out opportunity; however, the ministry has not responded.

"I think we will be moving on," an exasperated LCC administrator said.

Students from the old communi-

Please see **DISRUPTED** on page 8



Photo by Michael Ray Smith

Students at LCC University, a faith-based school in Klaipeda, Lithuania, protest a ruling by the Ministry of Education against the Department of Contemporary Communication.

tales from teachers

I've been riding the Substack trend for fun and no profit

By Jeff Inman
Drake University

At this moment, there's probably a Substack newsletter in your inbox. In the last several months, the platform has seen a surge of activity.

Blame it on whatever you want.

The influx of TikTok creators looking for a more stable home. The surge of prominent journalists abandoning legacy media for the freedom of autonomy. The development of Substack subcultures such as Foodstack and Bookstack. Or the tsunami of anxious readers desperately seeking content that helps them make sense of President Trump's latest pronouncements.

They've all helped Substack grow exponentially in the last few months.

Need proof? Just after the election, company founder Hamish McKenzie announced that Substack had reached 4 million paid subscribers, a massive milestone that took seven years to reach. By March of this year, the start-up notched 5 million paid subscribers and over 50 million total subscriptions.

I can claim about 500 of those.

I've been writing a Substack newsletter since the beginning of 2023. When I launched the Journalism Monday Memo, it was a way to keep students – particularly my students, since I'd imported all their email addresses into the platform – updated about industry news and opportunities. It was informal. It was full of inside jokes. It was a Drake University email dressed up as a Substack newsletter.

But slowly I began to understand the power of the platform – and it changed everything.

Substack has always branded itself as a home for creators, one



Jeff Inman

where writers can connect with an audience that values their work outside of the algorithms that have come to dominate our lives.

For some, that model means they can quickly turn their writing into a livelihood, their name and cache instantly building a substantive subscription base. They catapult up the leaderboards. They get shoutouts in the press.

But that kind of success is reserved for the big names such as former CNN anchor Jim Acosta, who recently joined Substack and already has 300,000 followers.

For folks like me, Substack is more a platform of slow gains. Over two years, my audience has grown by 280 percent, which sounds impressive – and I'm not going to diminish my hard-won success, as small as it is. But it's been a lot of work.

I spent a year sorting out JMM's point of view. I used my ardent support of journalism as a starting point, and my hope to help journalism students, professors, and even professionals in the industry, keep up with the rapid change impacting everything we do.

So, I started tracking state-house bills across the country that touched on censorship. I wrote about non-profits boosting support for local coverage. I talked with former columnists about the need to rethink political journalism.

I spent time trying to understand AI and its impact on what we do. I analyzed industry trends and the business decisions behind them. I took a skeptic's approach to Big Tech and social media. I covered layoffs and closures. I cheered on big breakthroughs and deals. I eventually settled into an identity, one focused on the increasingly overlapping space between journalism and technology and the forces that impact both.

All of it leaked into the classroom.

That focus also helped my audience change and grow. At first, I had to grind through the heavy attrition of students who graduated and moved on.

To replace them, I started posting new content to Notes, Substack's Twitter-like newsfeed that's a mix of the creators you follow and the random newbie who breaks through. I leaned into Substack's karma economy, recommending other likeminded newsletters, and in turn many of them started to recommend me.

I created a branded Instagram account that's yielded a few new eyeballs. I grabbed more readers with regular posts on Bluesky and Threads. I even started repurposing content as articles on LinkedIn, which helped build awareness and increased traffic.

It's all paid off. I've quadrupled my followers on Notes. I've tripled my newsletter subscribers. I've doubled my number of weekly reads. I've kept my newsletter open rate steady at 40 percent regardless of my subscriber base.

Please see **SUBSTACK** on page 8

Last month I crossed 25,000 page views. It only took 83 posts, he says with exhaustion.

tales from teachers

Former SPIG head sees LCC major disrupted

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cation major will work throughout the summer to finish for the fall 2025 semester, which includes defending original thesis research.

Earlier in the year, Lithuania's Ministry of Education found the com program lacking in professors with terminal degrees in communication and a general lack of research presentations and publications. Of the five, full-time comm faculty, only one possessed an earned doctorate in communication and was engaged in research, the ministry reported.

In early April, representatives of the ministry responded to a petition signed by nearly 70 students who reminded the ministry that over the years, more than 100 programs in Lithuania were allowed to "teach out" when accreditation was lost.

Now the push is on for more than 20 juniors to graduate in December or sooner. They are working on their mandatory thesis and will take classes this summer to meet the end-of-year deadline. Another 31 students filled paperwork to switch majors; most changed to Global Business and Public Engagement. A few may transfer to other Lithuanian universities that teach communication.

The protest was considered mild by standards in the U.S., where this year some students protested international politics by vandalizing abuilding, chaining themselves to a fence and confronting campus officials with incendiary remarks.

At LCC, the men and women who protested stood in the lobby of the main classroom building, looking grim, and talked in hushed tones. Administrators had met with students to listen to their concerns, but the protest gave students a shared expe-



Michael Ray Smith

rience.

One campus leader who asked that he not be identified said that the university worked behind the scenes, hired a lawyer to intercede and made personal

visits to the capital, Vilnius, 85 miles from LCC, to reverse the decision that has left students questioning what can be expected from this novel university and the nation.

"As for the protest signs, everyone wrote their own," said Xeniya Cherednik, a communication major from Kazakhstan and the incoming president of student government. "They were bright, honest and reflected the strong emotions of those involved," she said.

Of nearly 600 students at LCC, 25% are from Ukraine, and others are from 60 countries including Lithuania. Ukrainian Vasyl Chovnitskyi is a communication student scheduled to graduate in May. "The protests did not seem to make any difference but it was definitely cool to see the unity of our students," he said.

Founded in 1991 to help students from former Soviet-bloc countries and elsewhere learn about freedom, LCC is the only faith-based university in Europe that uses a North American style of instruction for the liberal arts.

Michael Ray Smith is scheduled to be the incoming chair of Global Business and Public Engagement, the major that will replace the outgoing communication program. Smith once served as head of SPIG.

Substack is putting joy back into my writing

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And last month I crossed 25,000 page views. It only took 83 posts to do it, he says with exhaustion.

The last part is real. Building even a relatively small audience like mine required more time and effort than I ever thought. It's like signing up for a part-time job. Since I don't charge for subscriptions, JMM is a part-time job I don't even get paid for.

It was a conscious decision. I wanted to keep it free for students – mine, yours, whoever's. But it means I'm deliberately missing out on one of Substack's true innovations, which is its ability to generate revenue for those who can't help but write.

In the end, though, Substack has reconnected me with my keyboard. I spent 20 years as a working journalist. But academic life has a way of sucking up all your time and energy. I went from being a creative to a full-time critic, editing and judging student work seemingly around the clock.

But the Journalism Monday Memo has given me space to reconnect with writing. I get to play with words again. I get to challenge myself. I get to have a voice. And I get to be a part of this growing revolution that, whether it's a new paradigm or just a fad, will have a lasting impact on the journalism industry.

Because it's proven that people will pay to have writing they love magically appear right in their inbox.

Jeff Inman is an associate professor at Drake University, where he is advisor to the Times-Delphic newspaper, and Drake Mag, the school's national award-winning magazine.