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Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication
Washington, DC
August 2018

Good afternoon. Thanks to Thor Wasbotten, the incoming president of ASJMC, and his colleagues at Kent State University. I’m very fortunate to have a J-school just a few minutes away from my home, and KSU is just one of the schools I’ve had the great pleasure of working with over the years.

My presence here today is also ironic, in two very special ways.

The first irony is if you had the opportunity to see my undergraduate transcript, you would think I would have spent the last 30-plus years running away from anything resembling a journalism education.

Yet it is precisely because of it – more specifically, because of the people who brought me that education – that I’ve spent the better part of three decades working to repay the enormous debt I owe to them. More about that later.

I’ve been blessed with a satisfying and rewarding career, starting as a nightside news reporter in Springfield, Ohio – but in many ways, I believe I’m only just getting started.

The second irony is that the namesake of this award, Gerald Sass, first established the very role I assumed earlier this year for the Gannett company, working with newsrooms across the country to bring talented people into journalism and to advance their careers in the field.

Through the years, I’ve been a reporter, editor and executive at six different news companies: Cox, Knight Ridder, The McClatchy Company, The E.W. Scripps Company, Journal Media Group and, now, Gannett and the USA TODAY Network. I am indebted to Gannett and
all of my previous employers for giving me the opportunity to serve journalism education.

One of the wonderful things about this award is that I’ve had the great privilege of collaborating with, working with and being mentored by several past recipients of this recognition, including Jerry Ceppos, Judy Clabes and last year’s recipient, Keith Woods. Each of them instilled in me the values of quality journalism, diversity and community service.

Indeed, I chose journalism as a career specifically because it presented one of the greatest opportunities I could think of to be a servant of the public and get paid for it.

It was a path blazed by my grandfather, a voracious reader of his hometown newspaper, The Vindicator. (God, I love that name)!

Mizell Stewart, Sr. was a decorated police officer and a community leader in his own right. Years later, I learned that he joined forces with the Vindicator’s publisher to raise money for a youth center that stands today in Youngstown, Ohio.

Marian Wright Edelman, a children’s advocate, once said that ‘service is the rent we pay for being. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time.”

I’ve always believed there is service within the newsroom and there is service to the people and communities who depend on the work journalists do to be informed, to be engaged and even to be entertained.

That journalists focus on serving others and meeting their needs is more important now than ever as people have almost limitless choice in terms of how they receive news and information.

Each of us has an opportunity to build a lasting legacy, not so much for ourselves but for the benefit of the places we live and work.

In 2011, the Carnegie-Knight Initiative for the Future of Journalism Education challenged deans and directors to engage in transformational
approaches to develop the next generation of journalists as the business model that created news empires such as the one founded by the Knight brothers began to crumble.

The report called one of those approaches the “teaching hospital” model of journalism education – one in which journalism students engage in the real work of covering communities, guided by professionals-in-residence and supported by a renewed focus on applied research.

In recent years, programs based on the teaching hospital model have evolved from the pioneering newsrooms associated with the University of Missouri in Columbia to the groundbreaking News21 initiative at Arizona State University to new models, such as 100 Days in Appalachia, a collaboration between the Reed College of Media at West Virginia University, the Daily Yonder and West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

The teaching hospital model is creating amazing opportunities for student journalists, not to mention supporting important work. My USA TODAY Network colleague Brett Murphy uncovered how trucking companies serving the nation’s ports engaged in abusive practices that snared drivers into a form of indentured servitude through onerous leases on truck tractors.

“Rigged” was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize this year. Brett’s reporting began while he was a student in the investigative reporting program at the University of California at Berkeley.

In 2012, my friends Eric Newton and Sue Porter, then directors of journalism at the Knight Foundation and the Scripps Howard Foundation, wrote in an open letter to university presidents that future funding would be threatened if more universities didn’t move faster.

They said, quote, “We believe journalism and communications schools must be willing to recreate themselves if they are to succeed in playing their vital roles as news creators and innovators.”
“Some leading schools are doing this,” they said, “but most are not.” Despite a growing number of high-profile successes, I’m afraid that most still are not, and a renewed spirit of collaboration will be necessary if this great idea is to fulfill the promise of restoring journalism in local communities.

Today, I’d like to issue a new call, specifically to colleges and universities outside the so-called ‘top tier,’ to elevate the role of community service and professional practice in their own programs.

I speak to this not only as a news executive reaching for new ways to serve local communities but as a hiring manager seeking to employ that next generation of journalism graduates.

Even today, far too many students are emerging from journalism school with limited exposure to a professional newsroom. This issue is particularly acute among students of color and who are part of other under-represented groups. News companies need to do their part by eliminating unpaid internships and being pro-active in establishing relationships with journalism schools in their regions.

It’s why I’ve worked throughout my career to establish and sustain partnerships between newsrooms and local universities in places like Evansville, Indiana and Tallahassee, Florida.

Opportunities for formal and informal relationships abound – and I challenge my professional colleagues to allocate more of their precious time to nurture those relationships.

I’d also like to challenge my friends in the journalism funding community to broaden their own approaches. One with potential is to seed smaller grants among a wider spectrum of programs, such as the Knight Challenge Fund for Journalism Education, a partnership between the Knight Foundation and the Online News Association.
Other ideas for schools and funders include serving as an incubator for local journalism startups, training citizen journalists and potential freelancers in local communities, even raising funds in your community to place interns in local newsrooms.

I can’t say that any of these ideas are truly original, and all take time, focus and effort. I also understand that service initiatives don’t always accelerate the progress of my friends in academia along the tenure track.

This is where affirmatively linking models such as the “teaching hospital” method of journalism education to the growing emphasis on engaged scholarship can help. More and more, engaged scholarship models leverage the considerable resources of place-based academic institutions to pursue teaching and action in the surrounding community.

Many of the colleges and universities represented here today are part of the Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,000 institutions of higher education dedicated to the practice of engaged scholarship.

Here is how Campus Compact describes the organization’s purpose:

Campus Compact advances the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility. Campus Compact envisions colleges and universities as vital agents and architects of a diverse democracy, committed to educating students for responsible citizenship in ways that both deepen their education and improve the quality of community life. We challenge all of higher education to make civic and community engagement an institutional priority.

I don’t know about you, but if I replaced the phrase “colleges and universities” with “newsrooms” and the word “students” with “citizens,” that statement reflects exactly what I believe about the role of a local news organization in the community it serves.
A critical emphasis within engaged scholarship models is the creation of systems and practices that address social and economic inequality within local communities.

This provides a significant opportunity in local journalism, where academic programs and partnerships have the potential to directly address the growing concern about ‘news deserts’ – communities and regions where no independent voice is looking out for the public welfare.

The economic challenges facing local journalism truly constitute a threat to democracy, and I remain committed to finding solutions that provide every citizen with the local news and information they deserve.

Let me close by saying that service brings its own reward, and it is for this reason I return to my own years as a journalism student.

Before we move to the Q&A session, I’d like to recognize three more people: Ray Laakaniemi, Emil Dansker and Robert Bortel, my mentors at Bowling Green State University and my friends today.

Ray and Emil – more correctly, Dr. Laakaniemi and Dr. Dansker – combined service and teaching in ways that would be crazy to try and pull off today.

Both worked part-time at local media outlets to bring real-world experience back to their students in real time. Dr. Dansker at one point purchased a weekly newspaper in nearby Pemberville, Ohio, hiring students as reporters, copy editors and photographers.

It was through Drs. Laakaniemi and Dansker that I was first exposed to the American Society of News Editors, an association that also continues to this day.

As Bowling Green’s Director of Student Media, Bob Bortel has mentored hundreds of students, leading the transformation of the campus newsroom into the digital era.
The students Bob, Emil and Ray taught and mentored went on to senior leadership roles in newsrooms in Ohio and beyond, brought home three Pulitzer Prizes and continue to ply the trade on air and online today.

Personally, it would be an understatement for me to say that I was not a model student. But all three of them looked past my dismal academic record and saw in me the potential to have a successful career in journalism. Their encouragement, then and now, is what drives me to pay it forward to journalism education.

I dedicate this award to them. Thank you.