Institute update
Recent work helps rural media adapt to change, communities to address issues

Rural research
As rural journalism enters digital era, Institute breaks ground in researching it

Events, trends, issues, ideas and journalism
The Institute’s most visible project, The Rural Blog, offers new story ideas, sources and perspective for rural journalists and rural policymakers almost every day

Keeping government open
Institute stands for openness to support accountability journalism, and not only in the United States

Taking them to school
Journalists should broaden their coverage of education, not just local any more

Classes cover communities
Institute director’s students get real-world experience covering rural communities and issues

Environmental coverage
Institute helps rural journalists overcome obstacles and cover coal and other extractive industries

Journalists and jobs
Rural news outlets should both cover and guide local and state economic-development efforts

Health care and health
The Institute tells rural news outlets: If a news outlet can’t take a stand for good health and better health care, what in the world can it stand for?
from individuals, foundations and the University of Kentucky, which embraced the idea from the start.

The University helped raise key operating grants, created a faculty position for the Institute director, picked up some other costs when grant money ran out, and set aside $1.5 million in a state matching fund for the Institute’s endowment.

That match will expire in April, all too soon because of poor economic conditions in the nation and even worse conditions in the news business, from which we had hoped to gain most of our support.

Perhaps ironically, the financial squeeze on metropolitan newspapers and other changes in the news media have made all the more important the Institute’s vision of helping rural America through journalism, because most major papers and broadcast outlets have abandoned coverage of rural areas.

That has left a vacuum that rural news media must fill, covering issues and setting the public agenda in their communities. That is what we help them do. Many have shown their appreciation, as demonstrated by the testimonials in this report.

However, because journalism should be independent, it is not a favorite beneficiary of those who want their donations to produce specific coverage or commentary. That makes our fund-raising difficult, as does the disinclination of foundations to give to endowments.

We don’t attract much “advocacy money” because we don’t take sides on issues, advocating only for strong reporting and the tools that make it possible, such as freedom-of-information laws.

But we point with pride and gratitude to all the gifts and grants we have received.

The Institute got its start with grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation of the Society of Professional Journalists, and became a reality thanks to operating grants from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and an additional grant from the Ford Foundation.

For the endowment, our most inspiring contribution has come from Daniel Gilbert, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal.

By revealing mismanagement of gas royalties due many landowners in Southwest Virginia, Gilbert won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the Bristol Herald Courier, and several other awards, including a $10,000 prize for Community Journalism in the National Journalism Awards, sponsored by the Scripps Howard Foundation.

Gilbert directed the money to the Institute’s endowment, to create a fund that would enable other rural journalists to attend the workshop that enabled him to do his prize-winning work – a Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp held by Investigative Reporters and Editors.

The earnings from the donation and the state match will fund one rural journalist per year, so the Institute is seeking contributions to expand the Fund for Rural Computer-Assisted Reporting, or R-CAR.

The endowment has two other donor-created funds. They honor the memory of the late Rudy Abramson, who helped conceive and start the Institute after retiring from the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times, and the late Richard Whitt, a University of Kentucky graduate and Pulitzer Prize winner for The Courier-Journal who later worked for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Earnings from those funds are used to support reporting projects in Appalachia, like the one that Harvard economics graduate and Kentucky native J. J. Snidow did in 2009 on the economics and future of Eastern Kentucky. (For details, see Page 8.)

Our biggest endowment givers have been Sara S. “Sally” Brown of Louisville, Brown-Forman Corp., and the James N. Gray Foundation. They and more than 275 other donors, most of them small, have given a total exceeding $600,000 – all matched by the state Research Challenge Trust Fund, known as “Bucks for Brains.”

A pledge to raise the remaining $900,000 allocated for the Institute has allowed us to receive earnings from the unmatched state funds, but any unmatched money will revert to the state, so we face the prospect of a serious budget cut next year unless the endowment gets a substantial boost.

We know that other nonprofit groups, publicly supported entities and businesses also face financial challenges. In our case, we face a crucial crossroads that will determine the future of the Institute.

Will we be able to keep expanding our efforts and build a national community of rural journalists, dedicated to public service? Or will we have to reduce our activities and turn out many of the lights we have lit in the last six and a half years? It’s partly up to you.

If you are interested in giving to our endowment, making the Institute a permanent part of the landscape of rural America and the nation’s journalism, and have questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me at Al.Cross@uky.edu or 859-257-3744.
Institute expands its work to help rural media adapt to change, help rural communities deal with issues

Each year, the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues finds new ways to serve rural journalists and rural people.

In the last three years, since its last comprehensive Rural Report, the Institute has expanded its work both geographically and programmatically. Some of that work is highlighted in other articles in this report.

The Institute’s mission is to help rural journalists set the public agenda in their communities, through strong reporting and commentary, especially on broader issues that have a local impact – education, the environment, economic development and health care – but are driven by events, institutions and individuals outside the local community.

It was created primarily to be a public-policy center for rural journalists, rather than a program to teach the craft of journalism, but changes in society and the news media are threatening the ability of news outlets to cover the issues and do the accountability journalism that readers, viewers and listeners deserve.

So, the Institute has become a bit more craft- and business-oriented, to help rural news outlets embrace new technology and the new approaches that go with it.

In October 2009 the Institute presented “Storytelling: Narratives in Print and Pictures,” a workshop with three kinds of storytellers: Stephen G. Bloom, above, author and journalism professor at the University of Iowa and writer for The Oxford Project, a 2008 book of photographs and narratives of the people of a small town in Iowa, 25 years apart; photographer David Stephenson, who helped the Lexington Herald-Leader break new ground in storytelling with audio, video and still photography; and Amy Wilson, feature writer and roving rural reporter for the Herald-Leader and former prize-winning reporter for the Orange County Register in California.

Stephenson then assisted Institute Director Al Cross with “Foothills in Focus,” part of a McCormick Foundation-funded program to help Appalachian newspapers embrace the Internet and multimedia. Four weekly newspapers in Kentucky’s Appalachian foothills participated, as did Cross’s students, who did stories for the newspapers. (See Page 8.)

Many rural newspapers worry that the Postal Service will end Saturday mail delivery, which would not only hurt papers that publish on Friday or Saturday, but inconvenience their readers. On behalf of the National Newspaper Association, which opposes the move, Cross testified before the Postal Regulatory Commission, saying, “The mail is simply a more important part of the public and civic infrastructure in rural America, where those infrastructures are thinner and shakier, than in the rest of the nation.”

The Institute has continued to expand its geographic reach. It now has academic partners at 28 universities in 18 states, and Cross has made two trips to Alaska to speak to the annual meeting of the Alaska Press Club. In 2010 he also spoke to the 100th anniversary convention of the Panhandle Press Association in Texas. He also traveled to Africa and India; for details on those journeys, see Page 6.

The Institute remains actively engaged in issues in its home state. In October 2010 it co-hosted a seminar for Kentucky journalists on crime, sentencing and corrections, held as part of a national series by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice in the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

Earlier in the year, the Institute became involved in an effort to encourage more philanthropy in Kentucky, mainly at the local level, through the creation of community foundations.

Cross testified before a legislative committee in favor of a tax credit for donations to such foundations, which became law, and wrote a story for Kentucky newspapers about a study showing the great potential for such foundations in the next few decades, when billions in wealth will change hands.

“Our policy is not to advocate for anything except news coverage and commentary, and the things that make it possible, but I thought this was a worthy exception to make because no one lobbied against the tax credit and community foundations have such tremendous potential to help the many poor, rural areas of our state,” Cross said.

The Institute often provides advice and comment for metropolitan journalists reporting rural stories. Cross was among the University of Kentucky faculty members that ABC News consulted for its 20/20 documentary, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,” and appeared on the program in a follow-up segment.

The show provoked much criticism in Appalachia. In a column published by several newspapers, Cross found fault with certain elements of the program that appealed to viewers’ emotions, but rejected the most common complaint: that it to failed to show recent progress in the region. The producers made clear from the start that the show was not designed to be a comprehensive report. Cross said the report should encourage Appalachian journalists to take their own looks at such problems in their local communities, and some of them publicly agreed. The East Kentucky Leadership Foundation gave Cross and the Institute its annual Media Award.
As rural journalism adapts to new, digital world, 
Institute breaks new ground in researching it

Though most news outlets in America are community newspapers and broadcast stations, many if not most of them rural, they have been the subject of very little research. The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues is trying to correct that, to guide and fuel its efforts to help rural America through journalism, and to help rural news outlets adapt to the Internet and other technologies.

While the Internet has clearly hurt the print circulation of major newspapers, it has had less effect on community papers. Why? Starting a panel he moderated at the 2010 convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Institute Director Al Cross gave three main reasons for community papers’ relative strength:

They have a strong local news franchise; serving communities that are usually not covered well by other news outlets; their classified-ad revenue is less important than metropolitan papers’ was, and has not been lost to Craigslist and similar services; and many of them (40 percent of weeklies) are independently owned and not subject to the obligations of debt and the profit demands of Wall Street.

The Institute helps set the pace for research in this field. It conducted the first survey of training backgrounds and needs at the 4,000 rural U.S. newspapers, as part of its initial grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The survey found that almost half of the papers offered no training opportunities to their employees in 2006, and the most common form of specific training mentioned was not in journalism, but in layout and design, as papers struggled to embrace digital technology and spread design work around.

However, the survey also found that most rural papers are willing to support journalism training, and are more likely to do so if it deals with issues of concern in their coverage areas. Only seven of the 137 papers in the survey reported training for coverage of specific issues or subjects.

The survey also found that more than two-thirds of reporters at the papers had at least a bachelor’s degree. Generally, the larger a paper’s circulation, the more likely its reporters and editors were to have degrees. About 16 percent of the reporters had only a high school diploma or GED.

The survey’s findings guided the Institute in its training efforts, and provided a useful resource for further work. The survey was the first of its kind, so it required the Institute to develop a first-ever database of newspapers in the rural U.S.

The full report can be read on the Institute’s website at www.uky.edu/CommInfoStudies/IRJCI/Survey2007.doc. It was presented in 2007 at the Institute’s National Summit on Journalism in Rural America and the annual Newspapers and Community Building Symposium, conducted by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University for the National Newspaper Association.

Because the Institute is based in Kentucky, a major Appalachian state, much of its work has focused on the mountainous, coal-bearing region, and it has presented research at annual conferences of the Appalachian Studies Association.

“Coverage of Public-Policy Issues at Newspapers in Central Appalachia” reported that Eastern Kentucky newspapers generally had weak editorial pages and provided poor coverage of county budgets, the basic policy document of the main local government.

Following up on the editorial-page study, Cross worked with students in his Community Journalism classes to take a closer look at Kentucky papers’ editorial pages. One did a detailed study of the pages’ content, and another surveyed daily papers about political endorsements.

The students’ work formed the basis for “Keeping Quiet or Taking the Lead?,” a paper that Cross and Dr. Elizabeth Hansen, right, of Eastern Kentucky University, presented at the National Newspaper Association’s 2008 symposium. Hansen chairs the Institute steering committee, comprising its 28 academic partners in 18 states.

Their research found that about a fourth of the state’s weekly newspapers had no editorial pages at all, and only half published material that was clearly the voice of the newspaper (editorials presented as the opinion of the paper or columns by the publisher or editor). There was no such material in over a third of papers that had editorial pages. Just under half of weeklies had an editorial page in every edition.

While all of Kentucky’s daily newspapers have editorial pages, less than half made endorsements in elections for any particular race in the election cycle studied, and they were more likely to endorse in major statewide races than in legislative or other major local races, in large measure because they wanted to avoid ruffling local feathers.

Cross and Hansen did a paper for the 2010 NNA symposium, “Discerning a train coming down the track: Three rural weekly newspapers and the Internet.” This paper detailed the Institute’s effort, funded by the McCormick Foundation, to help rural weeklies adopt and embrace the Internet and multimedia. It said that for weeklies, the prospect of adapting to the digital, 24/7 world “is like looking down a railroad track at a train gaining momentum.”

Hansen, who has conducted research for and about community newspapers for 20 years, and her Community Journalism students conducted polls in the two counties (two papers are in the same county) on residents’ newspaper readership, their use of the Internet and what they would like to see from their newspapers online. The paper said the responses showed that “Weekly newspapers need to establish a Web presence if they wish to remain the primary source of news for their communities.”
The Rural Blog: events, trends, issues and ideas

The most visible project of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues is The Rural Blog, a digest of events, trends, issues, ideas and journalism from and about rural America that is updated almost every day.

The Web log reaches thousands of rural journalists and others interested in rural issues, and its audience is steadily growing. In November 2010, it had 6,803 absolute unique visitors and 12,153 page views, a record.

The blog is designed primarily to give story ideas, sources and perspective to rural journalists, but it is read regularly by journalists at The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and other big and small newspapers, and by hundreds of people whose jobs deal with rural policy at the national, state and local levels.

“Thick and nutritious as a bowl of chili,” wrote Daniel Rubin, a columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer.

“I’ve gotten some good stories out of the blog,” wrote Michael Davis of the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

“It is a fantastic forum of ideas,” wrote Rick Greene, managing editor of the Portsmouth (Ohio) Daily Times.

“Education is a crucial beat and the blog brings to reporters’ and editors’ computer screens tremendous resources, articles and reports significantly identifying education trends across rural America.”

The blog is a window on rural America for rural journalists, helping overcome isolation and lack of resources.

“I’m always amazed by some of the things I read on your blog,” wrote Michelle Phillips, editor of the Anamosa (Iowa) Journal-Eureka.

“I have advised everyone in our newsroom to check your site daily,” wrote Neil Middleton, news director at WYMT-TV in Hazard, Ky. “It is a great source for stories impacting our viewers.”

“My professional day is always richer because of y’all,” wrote Brad Martin, editor of the Hickman County Times in Centerville, Tenn.

The Times and other rural weekly papers reprint blog items, leavening their usually all-local news pages with stories that resonate with their local readers.

The Licking Valley Courier of West Liberty, Ky., ran on its front page a blog item based on stories by The Associated Press and The Farmer’s Pride, a statewide agricultural newspaper, about cigarette companies cutting tobacco farmers’ contracts.

The Courier turned one item, about TV journalist Tom Brokaw’s call for merging rural counties, into an editorial by adding an introduction. It even printed the two online comments on the story, adding additional perspective.

“We don't try to be provocative, so we don't generate as many comments as most blogs with the level of traffic we have,” the blog tells its readers. “This blog generally follows traditional journalistic standards. It's not about opinions, though you may read one here occasionally.”

Institute Director Al Cross sometimes uses the blog to call on rural journalists to cover particular topics or practice accountability journalism. A former political writer for The (Louisville) Courier-Journal, he concluded that fall 2010 saw the most misleading collection of political campaigns ever, he wrote an item (above) urging rural news outlets to use the PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org websites to reveal distortions, misleading claims and outright falsehoods in political ads, which in federal races used many of the same issues from state to state.

The blog also tries to highlight examples of good rural journalism, such as reporting by The Times Tribune of Corbin, Ky., which led to the indictment of the local sheriff.

The blog was the brainchild of Bill Bishop, a Texas journalist and native Kentuckian who has long been a member of the national advisory board of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. He suggested it soon after Cross came to the Institute in August 2004, and Cross immediately saw the need and filled the niche, with the assistants’ help. (The blog moved from the Institute website, RuralJournalism.org, to http://irjci.blogspot.com, in 2007.)

Bishop and his wife, Julie Ardery, are now co-editors of the Daily Yonder, an online journal published by the Center for Rural Strategies. It specializes in original journalism about rural issues, and The Rural Blog often refers to it.

Other news aggregators use Rural Blog items. Steve Taylor, then agriculture commissioner in New Hampshire, wrote, “We practice a little creative theft and run one or another of your items from time to time in our Bulletin and watch it carom around media outlets hungry for story ideas.”
Institute stands for open government to support accountability journalism, and not only in the U.S.

Institute Director Al Cross spoke to Zambian journalists and students at the Zambia Institute of Mass Communication in the capital of Lusaka.

Sometimes the biggest issue in a community, a state or even a nation is the efficiency and integrity of its government, so the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues is a strong supporter of open government and freedom-of-information laws that help journalists hold officials, governments and institutions accountable.

Such laws and their interpretations are constantly changed by legislatures, courts and other state officials. So, the Institute works with the Scripps Howard First Amendment Center, also based in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky, to keep journalists up to date and share the best strategies for opening records, meetings and courts.

The Kentucky Open Government Blog, at http://kentuckyopengovernmentblog.blogspot.com, is a service of the Institute and the Center, as are a continuing series of Sunshine Seminars in all parts of the state, co-sponsored by the Kentucky Press Association and recently also by the Kentucky Broadcasters Association.

Jeff Noble, editor of The Times-Voice in Jackson, said he enjoyed “learning what tools were available at my fingertips when looking into open records and open meetings. I was able to glean insight . . . They say ‘knowledge is power.’ The seminar was proof of that.”

The KOG Blog has been written largely by Terry Anderson, right, former chief Middle East correspondent for The Associated Press, who is wrapping up a two-year stint of work with the School, the Center and the Institute. He and Institute Director Al Cross have done original reporting for Kentucky news outlets on open-government issues, including secrecy in courts, and started an annual Kentucky Open Government Report.

On a national level, the Institute uses The Rural Blog to keep journalists current on open-government issues, with more than 100 posts on the topic since the blog took its present form three and a half years ago.

The cause has gone international. In May 2010, Cross answered a call to help journalists in the southern African nations of Botswana and Zambia, where press freedoms have come under threat recently. In Zambia, cadres of the ruling party have physically attacked journalists. In both nations journalists are calling for a Freedom of Information Act like the one in the U.S.

Cross spoke out strongly for freedom of the press and open government, and in Botswana addressed and moderated a meeting that included journalists, academics and leaders of the ruling party and prompted what one observer said was a rare, “truly open exchange of ideas and opinions.” In Zambia, his speech won front-page coverage in the nation’s only privately owned daily newspaper.

In Botswana, Cross visited most of the privately owned newspapers, discussed how they practice journalism, offered some points about American practice, and endorsed self-regulation of the news media as long as the only punishment is embarrassment.

Cross brought to bear his many years of covering politics, legislation and government for The (Louisville) Courier-Journal and smaller newspapers, and his 2001-02 presidency of the Society of Professional Journalists, a group focused on journalism ethics and freedom of information.

“In both countries I told journalists in various venues that they needed to emphasize facts over opinion, to argue that a Freedom of Information Act would help them do that, and to make their arguments to the public at large,” Cross reported.

(Continued on next page)
Institute brings rural issues to Iowa, builds national presence

A volunteer in the Botswana office of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, which sponsored Cross’s visit, wrote in an open letter, “I have had the opportunity to sit in on a number of events, conferences and presentations. This, however, was the most compelling and dynamic of events I’ve attended in the three years I’ve lived in Botswana . . . It was decided that events similar to this should continue, and be held on a regular basis in order to improve the understanding of media freedom, freedom of information, and freedom of expression.”

The Zambia visit was sponsored by the Zambian Institute of Mass Communications, two staff members of which attended the 2010 conference of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, which the Institute hosted with Eastern Kentucky University.

The Institute’s other international foray has been to India and its very rural state of Orissa, which Cross and Anderson visited in January 2010 at the invitation of the Orissa State Volunteers and Social Workers Association. The group, the Institute and Berhampur University are developing a proposal for a project to train rural Indians in the basics of journalism so they can report on local issues and get them on public agenda beyond the village and district level.

Cross and Anderson also traveled to Lucknow to meet with the Indian Rural News Agency and to Manipal to meet with officials and journalism faculty at Manipal University, the largest private school in India. The university already has a cooperative relationship with UK’s College of Medicine, and has indicated a wish to have a similar agreement with the Institute and the School of Journalism and Telecommunications, part of the College of Communications and Information Studies.

Further work in India will depend on outside funding. Such “project funding” is separate from the funding of the Institute’s endowment, which is its near-term priority.

Education: A core community issue that’s now more complicated

The biggest issue for most rural news media is education – always the local schools, and sometimes local institutions of higher education. The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues helps rural journalists take their school coverage “Beyond the Board Meeting,” the title of a workshop it held for Kentucky education reporters and editors.

Rural education issues are still mainly local, but increasingly national. Education policy was once determined almost exclusively at the state and local level, but passage of the No Child Left Behind Act made the federal government a stronger player, and imposed some requirements that many rural schools have found difficult to meet – such as tutoring for students in underperforming schools and staffing every classroom with a teacher fully qualified to teach the subject.

Those issues come on top of what rural schools see as unfairness in the main federal aid program for schools, Title I, which allocates money not just on the percentage of children from poor households, but on the total number of poor children. That means rural areas get shortchanged, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, which provides much information and analysis that appears in The Rural Blog. The blog also passes along the latest developments as reported by Education Week, the leading periodical on elementary and secondary education, and other national sources. (See story on The Rural Blog, Page 5.)

The increasing federal impact on local schools was the topic for Alan Richard, left, director of communications for the Southern Regional Education Board, at the November 2006 workshop. His remarks helped local reporters translate Washington-speak for their readers. Other speakers included the former chair of the state school board, who had been a local board member and was later state secretary of education; officials of the state Department of Education; specialists in finding, organizing, analyzing and presenting such data as school test scores; a veteran journalist who now works for the state school boards’ association; and a coach for school councils, the fundamental governing body for Kentucky schools, who talked about who calls what shots in running the schools.

“The information she delivered was so valuable!” one journalist wrote in an anonymous evaluation. “I’ll be able to use it pretty much on a daily basis.” Another journalist wrote, “What was most helpful for a rural news/education reporter like myself was getting valuable information about test scores, how to understand those scores and then how to relate those scores to your community. The burden of understanding . . . has been lightened.” The Institute created a list-serve for journalists at the workshop, to keep them and others who joined later up to date on education issues.
Director’s students cover communities and issues

Students are gaining valuable experience covering real-world issues and communities in courses taught at the University of Kentucky by Al Cross, the director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

As an Extension Title faculty member, most of Cross’s work is directed away from the campus, but he teaches courses as an assistant professor in UK’s School of Journalism and Telecommunications.

In the fall, he teaches Community Journalism, which he says is more difficult to practice well than metropolitan journalism, because journalists’ professional careers more often come into conflict with their personal lives. He drives that point home by making students’ first outside assignment a story about a community of which they are a member.

Sometimes those stories gain an audience beyond the classroom. In fall 2009, horsewoman Jennifer Whittle produced a story about Kentucky programs to help non-racing breeds and some problems that had arisen, such as abuse of walking horses. Her article became the lead story in the Farmer’s Pride, the independent, statewide newspaper for Kentucky agriculture.

The major, final assignment for students in the course is a research project on a community media outlet, company, market or phenomenon. That usually culminates in an article that could be published in a Kentucky Journalism Review, a publication that Cross would like to see started one day.

In fall 2005, student Laura Clemmons, right, profiled Paducah-based Paxton Media LLC, the largest media company based in Kentucky, and her story was reprinted in the Kentucky League of Cities’ City magazine in 2007 as a sidebar to Cross’s article about the ownership, audience and other key features of Kentucky’s news media.

Three students from Charles Sturt University in Australia have taken the course and conducted research that led to nationally presented papers by the Institute, including a detailed examination of Kentucky papers’ editorial pages.

Students in the Community Journalism course also help cover the town of Midway, halfway between Lexington and Frankfort, to maintain a project that Cross started in the spring semester of 2008, around an advanced-reporting course, Online Community News Site.

Midway has fewer than 2,000 people, but it is fertile ground for student journalists because it is surrounded by some of the world’s best Thoroughbred horse farms; has a vibrant, tourism-oriented business community; and is the scene of much concern about land use, development, zoning and economic development.

Students in the course write all kinds of stories for the Midway Messenger, a website and blog, including coverage of local government, especially the Midway City Council. In spring 2009, Messenger stories questioned how the proposed city budget was drafted. In spring 2010, when the mayor referred at a council committee meeting to a proposed budget he had given the council, student Heather Rous asked for copy of the budget and was denied. Through the Kentucky Press Association, the Messenger appealed the denial to the state attorney general, whose opinions in open-records matters have the force of law. Overruling the mayor and two previous decisions of his office, Attorney General Jack Conway ruled that the proposed budget was an open record because the mayor had given it to the council.


The spring 2010 class also gave students the opportunity to work with weekly newspapers in Appalachia, thanks to a grant the McCormick Foundation made to spur use of the Internet and multimedia by rural weeklies.

Before the Midway project began, Cross taught two spring courses on the 2007 Kentucky governor’s race and 2006 judicial elections. Several newspapers published stories by students in each course.

In 2005, the spring course was “The Future of Tobacco and Tobacco-Dependent Communities,” prompted by the 2004 repeal of the Depression-era federal program of tobacco quotas and price supports, a major key to maintaining a culture of small farms, especially where burley tobacco is grown. Kentucky is the leading burley state.

The work has included collaboration with students at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, comparing how the nation’s top two tobacco states spent money earmarked for agriculture from states’ settlement with cigarette manufacturers.

Students examined Kentucky spending and found evidence that the money was being spent too loosely. The state tightened its oversight of the program.
Institute informs, provides environmental coverage

Many if not most environmental stories have their roots in rural places. Those are the places where extractive industries do almost all their extracting, where America ultimately puts much of its solid waste, where farm fields get the fertilizers that create dead zones in the sea.

They are also places where journalists struggle to cover these and other environmental topics. Their obstacles include isolation; lack of resources and support systems; outside interference in the newsroom, and lack of skills and knowledge to tackle issues that can be complex, with few good sources close at hand.

Perhaps the most challenging and controversial player in rural environmental coverage is the coal industry, which tends to dominate regions such as Central Appalachia. But the region had never seen a conference for journalists to learn from industry leaders, opponents of mountaintop-removal mining, mine-safety advocates, state and federal regulators and other experts until 2005, when the Institute sponsored “Covering Coal” at the Marshall University Graduate Center in South Charleston, W.Va.

The conference led directly to another first-ever event, the Coal-Media Roundtable in Pikeville, Ky., at which journalists and industry representatives found some common ground as they sorted out their often-contentious relationship.

In 2007 the Institute hosted an intern from the Knight Community Journalism Fellows program at the University of Alabama, who earned her master’s degree partly by writing the first-ever story comparing the regulatory and lobbying situations in the four states with mountaintop-removal coal mining: West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee.

The reporting of Mary Jo Shafer, later an assistant city editor at The Anniston Star, was published in Appalachian papers and correctly predicted that the mountaintop-removal battle would shift from the states to the federal level.

The Institute’s Rural Blog has continued to follow the issue closely, as the Obama administration has tightened regulation of the practice. It also closely follows the news on climate change and other coal-related issues, including electric utilities’ increasing use of natural gas, which poses a threat to the coal industry.

In 2008 the Institute and the Society of Environmental Journalists co-sponsored “Covering Climate Change and Our Energy Future in Rural America,” a one-day seminar that began the annual SEJ Conference in Roanoke. Institute Director Al Cross wrote an advance article for the society’s magazine about the difficulties rural journalists face covering environmental issues. The Institute helped plan the program and sponsored attendance of journalists from the coalfields, to promote more coverage of the coal industry.

Also at the conference, Cross moderated a reporters’ discussion on covering the environmental and health issues in agriculture, and moderated a similar discussion at the 2009 SEJ meeting in Madison, Wis.

In 2009 Cross was a major player in “Coal in Kentucky,” a conference followed by an hour-long documentary of the same name that premiered in 2010. He moderated and presented at a day-long forum, served on the documentary’s advisory board and finally was a consultant who appeared on camera several times as a neutral observer who framed the issues. He received good reviews from the industry and environmentalists. The film was produced by the Center for Visualization and Virtual Environments in the University of Kentucky’s College of Engineering.

Also in 2009, Cross gained national attention with his story revealing that Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack disagreed with the Environmental Protection Agency’s approach to estimating the carbon footprint of ethanol, and that his Department of Agriculture should oversee the allocation of carbon credits under the climate-change bill then nearing passage in the U.S. House.
Rural media must cover and guide development, Institute says, and it provides examples

Many rural news outlets have played a role in bringing jobs to their communities, both with stories and editorials and with civic leadership. That role is more important than ever, because rural communities face new challenges: economic globalization, which has made it difficult for American communities to attract and retain jobs; technological obstacles, such as the lack of affordable broadband, or high-speed Internet service.

How rural communities can overcome those challenges, and where rural journalists fit into that work, has been a major focus of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

Starting with a 2006 conference and in many presentations since, the Institute’s theme has been “Covering and Guiding Economic Development.” That title reflects its belief that rural news outlets must do both things: Cover development as an issue but also guide it, both through editorial leadership and careful civic activity.

News outlets that are involved in local economic-development activities need to ensure that those activities are covered in a way that holds local leaders accountable and ensures that the community is making decisions that are in its economic, social and environmental interests, Institute Director Cross argues.

The dangers of getting in bed with local boosters was brought home at the 2006 conference by Paul Monsour, right, former editor of the Union County Advocate in Morganfield, Ky., who went to head the county economic development foundation.

Monsour recalled how he let local boosters mislead him, as editor, into not reporting on what they called a "high-tech industry" coming to Morganfield. It turned out to be nothing more than a call center. "I think some officials feel the city gave too much," he said.

Beyond such cautionary tales, the Institute informs journalists and their communities about key strategies for rural economic development. Perhaps surprisingly, there is general agreement among economic development experts on three key strategies for rural areas – think regionally, encourage entrepreneurship, and build on the assets you already have.

Rural communities need to understand the effects of globalization, but also need to know that it presents opportunities, such as small-scale, high-tech manufacturing and niche markets for farm products.

The Institute has taken these messages to journalists in other states, and to local economic-development groups in Kentucky. It has also produced original journalism on the subject for one of the nation’s most economically depressed areas, Appalachian Kentucky.

A series of in-depth news stories about the future of the region’s economy were written by Ashland native J.J. Snidow, a 2009 economics graduate of Harvard College. He came to the Institute’s attention because of his prize-winning senior paper, which used regression analysis to conclude that coal has been a “natural resource curse” for Eastern Kentucky.

Snidow, right, started with a story about two Kentucky Appalachians with sharply competing visions for the economic future of the region: Former Gov. Paul Patton, a coal operator who sees little future beyond coal, and UK history professor Ron Eller, who had just published a history of modern Appalachia and called for a ban on strip mining in the region and a turn to tourism.

Eller and Patton agreed on at least one thing, that education was the key to the future, so Snidow’s next story was on schools, especially on those in Johnson County, which rank high in academic achievement. He also did stories on Eastern Kentucky tourism and state economic-development policy. The stories were published on the Institute website and by several Eastern Kentucky newspapers, several of which expressed their appreciation and wrote editorials in reaction.

The Institute had to cancel an economic-development conference in Alabama at the deepest point of the recession, but it used the grant money it had remaining from the Delta Regional Authority to publish an economic-development guide for all the newspapers in the authority’s region: Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee.

The Institute has presented “Covering and Guiding Economic Development” to these groups in person or through publications:

National Newspaper Association
International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors
Kentucky Press Association
Mississippi Press Association
Tennessee Press Association
West Kentucky Press Association
Albany-Clinton County Chamber of Commerce
Columbia-Adair County Chamber of Commerce
Rockcastle County Chamber of Commerce
Newspapers in counties of the Delta Regional Authority (Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee)
Health coverage is major mission for Institute

Most rural areas face challenges in the accessibility and affordability of health care, and many have poor health status. However, rural news outlets often lack the knowledge or motivation to help their readers, listeners and viewers live healthier lives and make better health-care decisions.

Some shy away from looking like crusaders, but the Institute argues, “If a news outlet can’t take a stand for good health and better health care, what can it stand for?”

Health topics have been a major focus of the Institute from the start, and are increasingly so.

Its first conference for journalists, “Covering Health and Health Care in Central Appalachia,” led to an Institute presentation, “How Rural Journalism Can Help Rural Health,” at national and state rural-health conventions, and a project that provided a template for rural health coverage.

The Institute obtained funding from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky to produce locally oriented stories for special sections on health in weekly newspapers in Appalachian Kentucky. Papers financed the sections by selling advertising, mainly to health-care providers.

At the Institute’s urging, one paper mailed copies to nonsubscribers, who probably need health information more than subscribers. A survey found they would be more likely to subscribe if they knew the paper would have regular features on health. That provided a good argument for papers to do health sections on their own, and several have.

At least one, the Todd County Standard, not only mailed to all homes, but designed its section around a packet of information the Institute sent to every Kentucky paper – the pertinent pages from a county-by-county compilation of health data, including strategies for addressing the main health problems in each county.

The Institute used the report’s data on diabetes to recruit rural journalists to attend the Kentucky Diabetes Solutions Summit in 2008. Journalists came from three of the five counties with the highest diabetes rates, two others in the top 20, and two other counties. All wrote articles about the subject, and one did a four-part series. This suggested that when told their community has a major, specific health problem, rural journalists and their employers will respond.

The Kentucky Institute of Medicine was less successful when it tried to use the county data to get news of certain health problems in print, but it pointed the rural-journalism institute in a direction that may result in more coverage.

An intern for KIOM prepared articles for 16 Kentucky papers about health problems in their regions, but only two published the articles. A rural-journalism institute researcher found that the plurality of articles on health-related behavior in the papers were “advertorials” promoting a health product, service or provider, and that relatively few articles were written by health professionals or newspaper staffers. Results of the study were presented at a national conference.

Under a contract with the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, the Institute is conducting research to determine why Kentucky papers run certain health-related articles and not others. Some rural editors have told the Institute that they would like to do more health coverage, but are reluctant to make special efforts for fear of being seen as crusaders.

The findings of the research will guide the Institute as it generates health stories and distributes them to news outlets.

The Institute makes a point to avoid advocating for anything but coverage, commentary and things that facilitate them, in order to maintain its credibility with its clientele, which ranges from very liberal to very conservative. But it partnered with advocates of smoking bans on “Sorting Through the Smoke: Covering Tobacco and Health in Your Community,” a series of seminars and a soon-to-be-developed website, because heavy use of tobacco in Kentucky has such a major impact on the state’s health. The Institute made sure that a leading opponent of smoking bans had time to espouse his libertarian and free-market views and answer journalists’ questions in a give-and-take session with the leading advocate of smoking bans in the state.

The Institute’s health work extends to the national level, with presentations at national conferences and hundreds of items on The Rural Blog. The Institute also helped a talented rural journalist, Tara Kaprowy of The Sentinel-Echo in London, Ky., gain a national Health Coverage Fellowship funded by the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky. Her reporting since her week in Boston has included a series on obesity, with some follow-up stories. “They were well received and created a lot of positive conversation in the community,” Publisher Willie Sawyers said.