Griffiths Innovators

Cox Institute for Journalism Innovation, Management & Leadership
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

End-of-Year Report for 2025-2026

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The Griffiths Innovators, funded by Richard T. Griffiths, is a program within the Journalism Innovation Lab of the Cox Institute for Journalism Innovation, Management & Leadership. Its purpose, now in its second year, is to engage UGA journalism majors in innovation projects with news organizations — providing a rich learning experience for *both* members of the partnership for the benefit of local news.

Since our start in 2021 as Digital Natives, also supported by Richard and Debbie Griffiths, this program has **partnered with 61 different newsrooms** — including local newspapers, radio and TV stations, nonprofits and digital news organizations — and **more than 80 journalism majors have been innovators**. What an amazing impact!

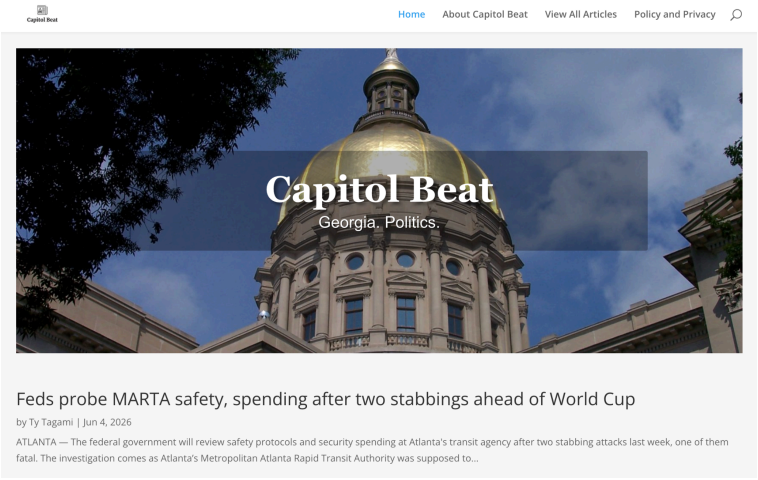
Our yearlong placements are now complete for our 10 Griffiths Innovators for 2025-2026, and here is what they've accomplished and learned.

Capitol Beat (Georgia Press Association) — Rachel Sandstrom

Accomplishments

I talked with the editors and/or publishers of about 10 Capitol Beat member newsrooms. Through these conversations, I was able to identify common story topics among papers, gauge their level of interest in implementing a tool to increase interaction among themselves and Capitol Beat, and found out if/how they measure readership metrics. These conversations also allowed me to build relationships with Capitol Beat's member newsrooms, which will aid Capitol Beat's larger goal, which is to increase engagement.

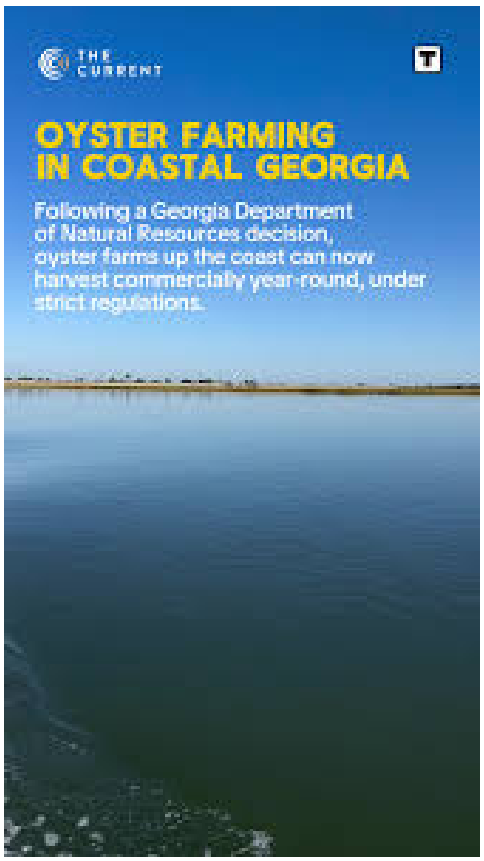
We implemented a digital tool, Discord, to create two-way communication between Capitol Beat and its member newsrooms. I am excited to see how Capitol Beat evolves after further opening up this two-way communication. This semester I also got the opportunity to do a bit of reporting, and I am so grateful to Ty Tagami for this opportunity. I got the chance to be in the Statehouse and interview lawmakers. Through this opportunity, my article was not only published in Capitol Beat, but it got picked up by other newsrooms, such as WABE.



Reflection

These past two semesters with Capitol Beat have taught me valuable lessons that I will carry with me as I step into the journalism field. I have learned that measuring engagement in journalism needs to reach beyond simply tracking clicks. We need to be thinking of new ways to do this as the journalism field continues to evolve. If we don't, we will get left behind. I have also learned the art of picking up the phone and calling. This is something my generation is scared to do. I have even seen fellow journalism students struggle with this. Thanks to the role I took on last semester, I know calling someone, aside from showing up in person, is one of the quickest ways to get a question answered. Throughout these phone calls, I learned how to build relationships. I believe this is one of the most valuable journalism skills, and I can confidently say I have grown my ability to do so at Capitol Beat.

The Current — Katherine Davis



Accomplishments

- Generated ideas for individual videos and general direction of TikTok
    - Researched other investigative journalism outlets for inspiration
- Tested various vertical video ideas for Instagram and TikTok that best showcase investigative journalism
    - Wrote vertical video scripts
    - Edited and produced vertical videos
    - Edited weekly story roundup videos
- Drafted template designs for Instagram
- Drafted designs for YouTube video thumbnails
- Provided feedback and critiques on social media scripts, content and design from the perspective of Gen Z
- Some specific videos I helped work on:
    - Weekly News Updates (January-March)
    - Oyster Farming
    - Races to Watch
    - Luiz Valdez Interview
    - Healthy Savannah

Reflection

Over the course of this project, I learned a lot about generating ideas and adapting investigative journalism for digital and social media platforms. I gained experience in developing content strategies for TikTok and Instagram, translating complex reporting into concise, easily digestible content, both as a script writer and an editor, and testing and analyzing different video styles. Investigative journalism was much more challenging to adapt than I anticipated, but I'm glad to have been a part of the process and even though not every idea worked, we can learn from and build off of them.

I’m very grateful for everything I learned (I learned a lot of things I didn't know about coastal Georgia!) and the opportunity to contribute to your outlet.

The Envoy — Jasmine Milbourne



Accomplishments

Substack is an online platform where writers can create websites, newsletters or general content based on subscriptions. For The Envoy, I researched the top food creators, travel content, SEO/GEO strategy and did extensive research on fonio. I've also created the first six installments of a new newsletter product.

In my research, I've found that The Envoy is special. It takes a new angle on food by diving into the cultural, economic and worldly factors, which not a lot of culinary shows do. Right now, food content creation is heavily saturated with easy-to-cook meals or restaurant-quality food at home (a.k.a. recipes), especially on Substack. It's somewhere between a lifestyle blog and travel blog, but surrounding food and its historical significance..

Every installment of The Envoy Substack is a deep dive into a portion mentioned in the TV show. Fonio is, obviously, the main focal point, but we explored women-owned businesses, Anthony Bourdaine's connection and even researched the health benefits. I also used a plethora of AI tools and SEO/GEO factors to determine how well the newsletter will perform. Although this is always evolving, keeping a unique voice, expanding reach and being aware of differing trends should serve us well in the future. We came up with a content schedule, first posting every two weeks then more frequently as the episodes are made. After this is set up, a multiweekly post would be best for engagement.

Reflection

This opportunity has given me great experience and truly honed my writing skills in a way I haven't explored before. Not only was delving into Substack fun, but it gave me ideas for future projects. I've learned a lot about fonio (and hopefully that will serve me well in trivia one day). I love the idea of The Envoy and cannot wait to see it reach an even bigger audience than it has now.

WMAZ (Macon) — Nicholas Eriksen



Accomplishments

- Researched what made other newsrooms successful in their work with verticals.
- Watched previous vertical videos and critiqued them on what we could do differently.
- Researched how the structure of a vertical can make an impact on the product.
- Created Verticals - What Works?
- Collaborated to figure out how to increase audience engagement
- Created Vertical Tip Sheet
- Reviewed other TEGNA apps to see what works and what doesn't. We checked things such as the algorithms, structure and quality of verticals.
- Reviewed the WMAZ app following its launch, making sure everything worked.

Reflection

It was truly insightful to work alongside a professional news outlet such as WMAZ. I have learned through my time with the program how important proper communication and how feedback can help better shape a product. Having met with Lars multiple times throughout the year, it was cool to see how our critiquing and ideas helped change the newsroom's vertical video structure. It was also vital for me to be able to get such a great experience while still a student, understanding the ins and outs of how to be a professional in the industry.

The Monticello News & WRBL (Columbus) — Maya McKenzie

The Monticello News Accomplishments

I developed a comprehensive content calendar tailored to your newsroom's goals and ideas, I helped research the best ways for consistent engagement on social media, and analyzed your current stories and posts to help identify opportunities for strategic scheduling. Moving forward, the use of the content calendar will help you maintain consistency and clarity across platforms.



I also created a new Instagram account. Since you can cross post between Facebook and Instagram, I recommend utilizing that as much as you can. Even if you don't post every day, follow businesses in your area and teams that you cover. It's a great way to bring more people to your page.

WRBL Accomplishments

During my time with your newsroom, I created an Instagram workshop and helped develop new ideas and goals for your social media strategy. I also researched best practices for maintaining consistent engagement across platforms and analyzed your current stories and posts to identify opportunities for more strategic scheduling. A specific project I think your newsroom could benefit from is the weekly "Three Stories" recap video. Having Jazmine provide voiceovers for newsroom clips and editing them together using CapCut or even filming herself on camera discussing the top articles of the week could help bring more personality and consistency to your social media content. It would also give your audience a quick, engaging way to stay updated on your newsroom's biggest stories while making your content feel more approachable and shareable.



Reflection

Thank you again for allowing me to collaborate with your teams and contribute to your newsrooms. I learned a lot from seeing how your newsrooms approach storytelling. I also encourage you to consider applying for a future Griffiths Innovator. Someone could easily build on the foundation we've started and help create even more momentum.

WSB-TV and RJI Student Innovation Competition — Shad McMillan, Makenna Reavis and Maura Potvin



Accomplishments

- Created the “Bridge” program: designed to introduce influencers to the world of journalism through a series of video-instructed modules.
- Created a platform that gives influencers the opportunity to partner with accredited newsrooms and allows them to make content under the same guiding principles as journalists, but not turn them into journalists.
- Tested the “Bridge” program by introducing WSB-TV to influencers around the state for review and allowing influencers and professionals to offer feedback.
- Experimented with the ability of WSB-TV to partner with influencers to create a mutually beneficial relationship.
- Won third place and fan favourite in the national RJI Student Innovation Competition.
- The program accomplished its goal by properly experimenting with the idea of partnering newsrooms with influencers in order to increase overall viewership between both parties.

Reflection

After a year of working together, we’ve learned a lot about the way that both newsrooms and social media influencers operate in a professional setting. The more we learn about each side, the more we can better understand how they can work together and create a news media atmosphere that is cohesive and ethical. We can both say that we’ve developed a better understanding of web design and how to properly communicate the journalistic principles and ethics with the public. This knowledge and newfound understanding is invaluable and for that we say, again, thank you.

WCGA — Maura Potvin (one semester only)

Accomplishments



This semester, I spent my time researching and learning a lot about e-mail newsletters. I looked at many different examples and compared their purpose, audience and message in order to determine what would be most helpful in a design for your station. I learned how to create in Mailchimp and went through a few different iterations, with feedback from Dr. Bright, before settling on the version you see above, which is a new template for you to use. I also listened to the station to get a sense of your content and priorities you may have in what you share with your audience.

Reflection

I am so grateful for this opportunity to expand my skills and knowledge base by working with your station. I have gained real world experience in aspects of the industry that I had not previously been exposed to. Thank you for being a part of the Griffiths Innovators program.

WJUL/WJRB & The Jesup Press-Sentinel — Riley Baugh

WJUL/WJRB Accomplishments

This fall I built a website wireframe that gives the stations a cleaner layout and a more modern feel. I also put together a social media plan with ideas for expanding to new platforms and boosting engagement.



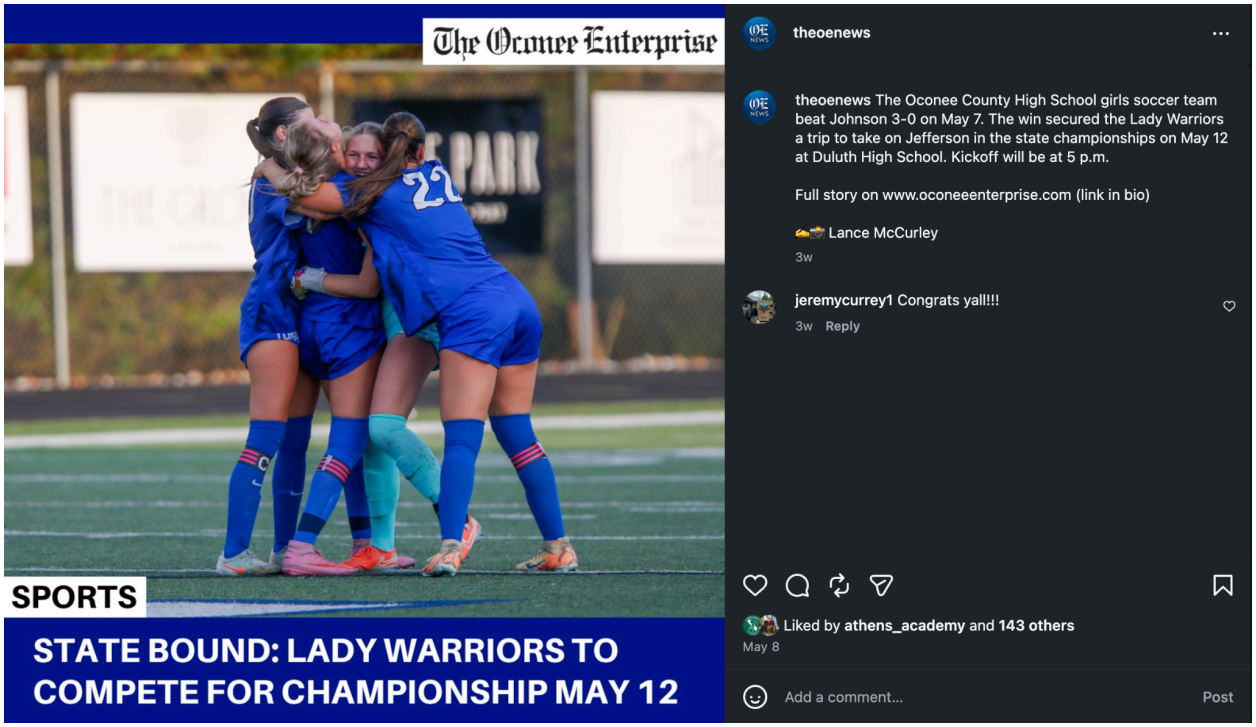
The Press-Sentinel Accomplishments

For my work with The Press-Sentinel, my main task was to get their Instagram up and running to capture younger audiences. Mainly the focus of my work was on social media and how to expand their presence across multiple platforms, not just Facebook.

Reflection

I really appreciate both the radio station and newspaper taking the time to work with me this semester. It was great getting a closer look at how the stations and newspapers operate and thinking through ways to support your digital presence. Thank you again for the conversations and for trusting me with the projects.

The Oconee Enterprise — Derek Oliveros



Accomplishments

Working as your Griffiths Innovator, I was able to do many things that I was not totally familiar with: creating a pitch presentation with three different types of videos that could be created for The Oconee Enterprise social media pages. To do this, I looked at what I was working on for Grady Newsource and what other newsrooms were doing for their digital video content for inspiration. I then used what I found in combination with the goals that you laid out earlier in the semester to create video types that would work for the Oconee Enterprise. I have also worked on short intro and outro videos to put at the beginning and end of the short-form videos.

Reflection

As we come to the end of the year, I wanted to thank you for allowing me to work with The Oconee Enterprise. This semester has been such a great learning experience for me, and I hope that my ideas were able to help the newsroom take their first steps into video.