



Into the Breach: Should Student Journalists Save Local Political Reporting?

For much of the decade to 2009, coverage of local news declined as newspapers—typically the lifeblood of local coverage—folded or contracted in the throes of an historic industry realignment. As media attention to legislatures and statehouses across the country waned, experts worried in particular about the watchdog function of journalism. Who would hold politicians to account? How would citizens monitor their lawmakers? One proposed solution: let university journalism programs take up the slack and assign students to cover local events, including politics. The idea had been tested at a few top-ranked journalism schools, which touted the joint educational and civic benefits. But no one knew whether a standard journalism school—with fewer financial and institutional resources—was capable of establishing a political news service.

Beth Barnes, director of the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky (UK), had long harbored hopes of doing just that. But she had been stymied. While Kentucky had suffered an alarming decline in the number of journalists assigned to cover the state capital, Frankfort, early efforts to assign students to substantive stories had proven overly ambitious. The learning curve for students was simply too steep, UK lay geographically too far from Frankfort, and the investment of faculty time to bring student work up to publication quality was staggering.

But in early 2009, Barnes thought she might have hit on a winning solution. A small, historically black school in Frankfort, Kentucky State University (KSU), wanted to create an accredited journalism program. KSU Provost James Chapman had approached Barnes to advise on this effort, and the consultant Chapman hired to design the program was enthusiastic about making a student-run news bureau a centerpiece of the new department. The consultant hoped UK might work with KSU to make such a project a reality. KSU had space for a bureau, some impressive reporting equipment, and a desire to make its mark on the journalism landscape; UK had the journalistic expertise and respect of the media community to make it work.

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Barnes was thrilled, and for much of 2009 she watched hopefully as KSU came to terms with the realities of creating a journalism school. In the summer, Chapman asked her to head a steering committee to advise KSU on its proposed program—and on the hypothetical news bureau. The committee's first meeting was scheduled for November 17, 2009.

But as the meeting approached, Barnes was beset by doubts about the proposed partnership. First, KSU was many months, likely years, from having an accredited journalism school. How could it head, or even partner in, a credible news bureau? How would it be financed? Who would direct it? When students went home for the summer, who would maintain the service? Would Kentucky newspapers even consider running copy from a student organization?

Then, on the morning of the committee meeting, the Associated Press (AP) announced that it had cut its Frankfort bureau from two reporters to one. The AP provided the bulk of political coverage to dozens of small, rural publications across Kentucky. The cutback reminded Barnes how urgent it was for someone to fill the reporting gap. If university journalism programs didn't step forward, who would? But at the same time, were universities capable of serving as primary providers of statewide political news coverage?

Civic Service or Educational Enterprise?

Barnes had first heard about the possibility of a student-run news bureau from her predecessor at UK, Richard Wilson.¹ Shortly after she was hired in 2003, Wilson, the longtime chief education reporter for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, discussed with Barnes whether UK could simultaneously train students in political journalism and feed Kentucky news organizations additional political coverage. Barnes liked the idea and, in the spring of 2004, sent Wilson on a fact-finding mission to Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and the University of Maryland in College Park (UMD), schools that had launched capital news services.

Maryland's program was the more ambitious of the two. UMD had set up four independent newsgathering operations, each directed by an experienced journalist. The print side consisted of bureaus in Annapolis and Washington, DC, which supplied daily newsfeeds to newspapers, wire services, radio, television, and online news outlets across the state and country. Students served semester-long tours in the bureaus, wrote 25 to 30 stories in that period and received academic credit for their work. Meanwhile, the school's broadcast division produced a nightly newscast that reached 400,000 DC households. Finally, the school produced an online news magazine—*Maryland Newsline*—that ran original feature stories and showcased the work from the print and broadcast operations.

¹ Information from author's interviews with Beth Barnes in Lexington, KY, on January 20, 21, and 22, 2010, and telephone interviews on January 9, February 24, and 25, 2010. All further information about and quotes from Barnes, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

Virginia Commonwealth's Capital News Service was much smaller in scale. The bureau was based on VCU's campus in Richmond, the state capital, and directed by Jeff South, a former editor at the Austin (TX) *American Statesman*. He anchored the program around a spring political news course, designed to give students the opportunity to cover the Virginia General Assembly and provide complimentary political coverage to the state's small weekly, biweekly, and thrice weekly newspapers. VCU's service scaled back in the summer and fall, when it was primarily used to help students freelance and distribute stories they wrote in other classes.

Wilson returned to UK inspired by both programs and wrote a memo to Barnes that outlined a long-range plan for UK to set up its own capital news service. The first step would be to hire an experienced capital reporter to serve as director. This person, he wrote, would act as bureau chief and seek out partnerships with the state's media outlets. Students, he envisioned, would then work as temporary employees of participating newspapers. Once the print side was up and running, UK would hire a broadcast director to run television, radio, and online operations. Perhaps, he suggested, the bureau could even be developed in partnership with surrounding schools in the region.

At the same time, Wilson was aware of the prohibitive costs of launching a full-fledged bureau.² To reproduce even VCU's more modest program would require UK to find funding to hire the director, secure dedicated classroom space in Frankfort, and build computer labs—money Wilson knew Barnes did not have. UK did, however, have one advantage: the Kentucky legislative session happened to mirror the university's spring term, which solved the problem of matching the academic calendar with the political calendar. So, as a compromise solution, Wilson proposed that he come out of retirement as an adjunct professor and teach a small, spring-semester, capital reporting seminar. Students in the class would report to Wilson, who would edit the work and seek outlets for their best stories. The seminar was intended more to expose students to civic service than ask them to perform a civic service. As he wrote Barnes in April 2004:

Rather than thinking grandiosely, or attempting to propose a "Cadillac" of state capitol journalism programs, I have tried to narrow the scope of this proposal to make it doable in the near, rather than distant future, and perhaps offering [*sic*] the course for the first time during the Spring 2005 semester.³

Barnes approved the course and redirected part of a modest Scripps-Howard grant to fund it. Meanwhile, Wilson convinced his friend Carl West, editor of the *State Journal* in Frankfort, to host the class in the paper's conference room and to run the students' best stories. Wilson taught the first section in the spring of 2005, and over the next three years it served for Barnes as an object

² Author's telephone interview with Richard Wilson, on January 11, 2010. All further quotes from Wilson, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³ Richard Wilson, memo to Beth Barnes, March 30, 2004.

lesson in how a typical journalism school could launch a modest student-run political news service.

From the start, Wilson ran into several teaching and logistical challenges that highlighted the difficulty of simultaneously teaching journalism to undergraduates while asking them to produce publishable work. He initially intended for each student to publish three pieces in the paper per semester. He learned, though, that this was an unreasonable goal. His students took weeks to acculturate to the statehouse and to develop sound enough news judgment to distinguish a story from a term paper. Moreover, he had to instruct them on the inner workings of the legislative process. Finally, the UK campus in Lexington was a 45-minute drive from the statehouse in Frankfort. The workload proved crushing for Wilson and his students, and over the years enrollment dwindled from a high of eight to four. By the spring of 2008, it was too low for Barnes to continue to list the course.

Yet the experiment, in Barnes's view, was more success than failure. Wilson's students had managed to publish several front-page stories in the paper. Barnes was so encouraged by these results that she came to believe that the course could succeed—and even blossom into a full-fledged news service—if she could secure greater institutional support and resolve the logistical problems that made administering it so difficult. As she mulled the options, Kentucky State came knocking at her door.

The Schools

In the summer of 2008, KSU Provost Chapman came to consult with Barnes. His school, he told her, wanted to start a journalism program. Would she be willing to advise him and his colleagues on what was required? Barnes agreed, although she was uncertain about what exactly that would involve.

University of Kentucky. Both UK and KSU were land grant universities, which meant that the agricultural arms of each school received federal funding earmarked for the state's agricultural sector, with an emphasis on economic, educational, and social problems. However, the similarities stopped there. The UK campus in Lexington was the state's premier university and in the midst of trying to satisfy a state mandate to become a national Top 20 public research institution. The campus was home to over 2,000 faculty and 27,000 students. It consisted of 16 colleges, 66 doctoral programs, and 93 undergraduate programs. The School of Journalism and Telecommunications was part of a larger College of Communications and Information Studies within the university. The journalism program, which had gone through numerous permutations, dated its founding to 1914 and was one of only 114 fully accredited journalism schools in the country and abroad. Some 10 fulltime faculty taught 250 journalism students in print or broadcast reporting and on subjects ranging from media law to ethics. Students could gain practical experience at a handful of student publications and broadcast outlets.

Kentucky State. Kentucky State University, on the other hand, was a far smaller school with three colleges, 2,800 students, and 155 fulltime faculty—and a more focused social mission. It was first chartered in 1886 to serve Kentucky's black community and shortly afterwards was designated a land grant university. The school still proudly distinguished itself by these two animating missions. In the fall of 2009, 57 percent of the student body was African American, and 20 percent of the school's budget was directed to the land grant arm of the school. The school offered only a couple of journalism courses through its English department.

Barnes and Chapman were as different as their schools. Barnes, a communications scholar who specialized in advertising, had devoted her career to journalism school administration and education. She had worked for several years as a department chair and dean at Syracuse's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication before UK hired her to direct their journalism school. She had accepted the Kentucky job because it gave her significant ability to shape the journalism school's mission and outreach in addition to working nationally as a journalism accreditation consultant. Her favorite part of administration was finding ways to implement ambitious new ideas, which translated to an informal and digressive conversational style that drew in faculty and students alike. However, she had limited power to enact large-scale projects like the proposed bureau because she had no university-wide budgetary discretion.

Chapman, on the other hand, with his clipped white hair, suit, and carefully appointed office, had a more formal bearing. He was a career administrator with a doctorate in higher education and two master's degrees, one in Classics and the other in Student Personnel. He had worked for 27 years at UK, where he had risen to assistant chancellor. Then he had gone on to guide the University of Alaska at Anchorage, Eastern Kentucky University, and KSU through university-wide accreditation processes. As KSU's provost, he oversaw the school's academic budget.

Chapman seemed serious about launching a journalism program and, shortly after his initial approach to Barnes, he hired Billy Reed, a prominent Kentucky sports journalist and former writer for *Sports Illustrated*, to draft a strategic blueprint for doing so. Reed set up an office at KSU's Cooperative Extension Facility, the building which housed the university's land grant programs, and arranged interviews with Barnes and several other administrators and faculty from the region's top journalism schools about how to build a program.

Collaboration possible?

Barnes drove to Frankfort on February 24, 2009, to advise Reed on accreditation. As she pulled into the parking lot, her eye was drawn to an 18-foot, state-of-the-art satellite news truck that took up four spaces in front of the massive red brick building. She had heard about the truck and knew that it was owned by the land grant arm of the university and that it had never been used for journalistic purposes. This mobile studio, she thought longingly, could easily send live

video feeds to every newsroom in the state. As if to announce its latent journalistic potential, the phrase “Enter to Learn, Go out to Serve” was emblazoned on its side across a photo illustration of a farm overlooking a panoramic view of downtown Louisville.

As Reed led Barnes on a tour of the building, he went over his plans for the new KSU journalism program. He believed that it must be directed by a seasoned journalist, such as himself, who would invest it with a strong journalistic culture.⁴ The student newspaper, the *Thoroughbred News*, which had been overseen by the university, should be turned into an independent student publication. He wanted the program to train students to work across print, broadcast, and online platforms. He also felt the faculty and curriculum should reflect the university’s core missions of diversity and agricultural development. To that end, he was interested in housing the program in the agricultural arm of the university, where it would be eligible for federal land grant monies, have access to the television truck, and use classroom space in the Cooperative Extension Facility.

Reed was also a convert to the idea of a student-run political reporting service. He had interviewed Wilson about his capital reporting seminar and had learned about Wilson’s loftier, but unrealized, ambition to create a student news bureau. Perhaps, he told Barnes, KSU could pick up where Wilson had left off and make a news service the centerpiece of a journalism program. He hoped Barnes could advise him on whether such a news bureau would impress the regional accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Barnes was intrigued and agreed that a capital news service could distinguish KSU’s journalism program. As she toured the facilities, she could also see why Reed hoped to house it in the land grant arm of the school. In addition to the satellite truck, the Cooperative Extension Facility housed 1,000 square feet of broadcast studio space, a professional control room, audio equipment, new computer labs, conference rooms, and offices—all of which Reed felt was being underutilized by the agriculture faculty for community outreach.

Indeed, Barnes thought, a KSU/UK partnership might provide the financial and logistical solution she been searching for to launch a bureau. Done right, the two schools—and others that wanted to participate—might be able to lend enough journalistic and academic resources to staff a bureau that could simultaneously serve the educational mission of the university and help satisfy the journalistic needs of the state. UK faculty, she told Reed, had always imagined a news bureau as a program that would be open to journalism students across the state. Maybe they could explore that possibility? Yes, Reed responded. He had actually thought about inviting students from the surrounding journalism schools—including UK—to spend a semester in the bureau and take courses at KSU.

⁴ Author’s email exchange with Billy Reed, on January 20, 2010. All further quotes from Reed, unless otherwise attributed, are from this exchange.

In return, Barnes suggested that UK might open its Media Law course to KSU journalism students—saving KSU the need to hire a faculty member expert in that area. Barnes left the meeting optimistic about the educational promise of a collaboration. She recalls:

I was personally very happy. I knew there was no way that we could do more than we had been doing. I didn't have money to hire someone like [Reed]. And, given that we were geographically close to them, we were the most likely [of the regional schools] to benefit.⁵

Over the next two months, Reed continued to build on the idea of a student news bureau and, in April 2009, he prominently featured the bureau in a strategic proposal he submitted to Chapman:

Almost everyone I interviewed thought it would be a wonderful idea to establish a State Student News Bureau that would be based at KSU. Under this program, JMC [journalism and mass communications] students from around the state would spend a semester in Frankfort covering state government for their college media outlets or any commercial enterprise that needs print, video, or photos on something happening in state government.⁶

Reed, however, had also learned in the course of his research that he would not be heading the new department. That spring, SACS had informed KSU that at least a quarter of its journalism courses had to be taught by faculty with a terminal degree in order for the program to meet the organization's accreditation guidelines. This meant that any candidates for hire—including a new director—would likely need a PhD to be considered. Shortly after he submitted his report to Chapman, Reed sent out a message on the listserv for the Kentucky Press Association (KPA) inviting properly credentialed journalists to submit their names for consideration. No one responded. The doctoral requirement had effectively ruled out every senior journalist in the state.

Barnes was not surprised by SACS's recommendation. Nor did she think it necessarily ruled out the possibility of a bureau. She could certainly imagine a scenario in which KSU hired a program director with the proper academic pedigree and then a journalist to direct the bureau. However, she also knew that a journalism program's vision and culture derived from its administrative leadership. In that light, SACS's requirement threw KSU's journalistic inexperience into sharp relief and raised the question of whether it was capable of launching and administering a topnotch training ground for political journalism students, let alone a full-fledged news service.

⁵ Author's telephone interview with Beth Barnes, on February 24, 2010.

⁶ Billy Reed, *Review and Recommendations for Journalism/Mass Communications Program*, April 10, 2009.

A Question of Leadership

KSU Provost Chapman, however, was undeterred. In June 2009, he invited Barnes to Frankfort and, over lunch, asked her to help him assemble and chair a steering committee to advise KSU on how to proceed with both the program and the news bureau. She agreed and recommended that he hire Erin Gilles, a young academic who had just earned her doctorate in communications from UK, into a tenure track journalism position. Chapman brought Gilles on in August, a hire that deepened the relationship between the two schools and solved KSU's credentialing problem. Gilles, though, had little journalism background; her only experience was a year-and-a-half as an assistant photo editor on her college newspaper.

This put the pressure on Barnes to use her pulpit as chair of the advisory committee to craft the news bureau's shape and mission. "The bureau had to be done right or it was obviously not going to work," Barnes says. "Part of the role of the advisory board was to make sure KSU understood that." This was delicate because Barnes had no formal say on several decisions she considered key to the success of both the bureau's educational and civic mission.

First, Barnes believed that the bureau needed editorial independence from the university in order to have credibility with the news organizations she hoped would publish the students' work. Then there were the financial questions. Barnes hoped that KSU land grant money could subsidize the bureau's operational costs. However, that funding was available only to the agricultural arm of the university, which was both physically and bureaucratically separate from the department of Literature, Language and Philosophy, where KSU's few journalism courses were listed. This meant either moving the journalism program out of the humanities or, more likely, running the news bureau separately from the department, as an independent arm of the agriculture program. Moreover, she was not aware of any precedent for a university directing land grant money to fund a journalism program. This meant KSU would have to make the case that the bureau served the school's agricultural mission. Then there were finer grained questions of what institutional support—academic, housing, and administrative—KSU was prepared to lend students from surrounding journalism schools while they served tours in the bureau.

But these questions assumed a KSU-sponsored bureau. Barnes was well aware that a strong faction at her own university—with whom she had discussed the proposed student news bureau at length—believed that UK should run it. Al Cross, the member of her print faculty with the most journalism experience, led that group. Cross was himself something of a political and journalistic institution in Kentucky. He had worked for most of his career at the *Courier-Journal*, where he rose to chief political reporter in 1989; in 2004, he became the director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues (IRJ) at UK. He still lived in Frankfort, a few blocks from the statehouse, where he remained on a first-name basis with several senior Kentucky journalists and lawmakers. He tended to focus even casual conversation on the future of Kentucky journalism

and the intricacies of state politics. Cross believed that a student-staffed capital news bureau was more than a timely idea with educational and journalistic virtues: it was a civic necessity.

Shrinking Coverage

Cross had been tracking the gradual decline of Kentucky political journalism for 30 years. For much his reportorial tenure in Frankfort the *Courier-Journal* assigned five reporters to the statehouse. At any given time during that period, there were often 15 fulltime journalists covering the statehouse and as many as 30 during the legislative session. “Our mission was to keep the bastards from stealing the dome off the capitol,” says Cross. He adds, “I put that in the past tense, because they are incapable of fulfilling that mission now.”⁷

By the fall of 2009, just seven fulltime journalists covered state politics in Kentucky. The *Courier-Journal* assigned only two reporters to the statehouse. As a consequence, Kentucky’s leading papers had come to practice what Cross called “hit and run” journalism: they rotated statewide political issues—the budget, taxes, courts, and so forth—in and out of the paper as high profile stories surfaced.

Civic price. Evidence was emerging that these cutbacks had measurable political consequences. In spring 2009, Sam Schulhofer-Wohl, a Princeton economist and former journalist, published a working paper that examined the political ramifications of the 2007 closing of the *Cincinnati Post* on the city’s Kentucky suburbs. Schulhofer-Wohl found that the following year fewer candidates ran for office, voters turned out in lower numbers, and incumbents were more likely to win re-election. “Although our findings are statistically imprecise,” Schulhofer-Wohl wrote, “they demonstrate that newspapers, even underdogs such as the *Post*, which had a circulation of just 27,000 when it closed, can have a substantial and measurable impact on public life.”⁸

Equally troubling to Cross, the *Courier-Journal* and its chief competitor, the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, no longer made it their goal to serve as statewide papers. Their coverage focused increasingly on the urban cores of Louisville and Lexington. Yet 43 percent of Kentucky’s population was rural. Cross, who grew up in rural Kentucky, was particularly worried about how these people would get political news. As it stood, most of them depended on Kentucky’s quilt of county dailies and weeklies. Several of these papers were owned by small chains, but only one—

⁷ Author’s interview with Al Cross in Lexington, Kentucky, on January 21, 2010. All further quotes from Cross, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁸ Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido, “Do Newspapers Matter? Evidence from the Closure of *The Cincinnati Post*,” Discussion Paper #236, Discussion Papers in Economics, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, March 2009, pg. 2, http://www.princeton.edu/~sschulho/files/Schulhofer-Wohl_Garrido_newspapers.pdf.

Community Newspaper Holdings, Inc.—stationed a reporter in the capital. The rest relied on the AP for legislative reporting.

But the AP had also cut back. For much of the '80s and '90s, the AP staffed its main Kentucky bureau in Louisville with a bureau chief, news editor, day and night desk supervisors, a chief of communications, several technicians, and three reporters who traveled the state. The AP also fielded a two-reporter team in Frankfort, which grew to three during the legislative session. In addition, it had single-reporter bureaus in Lexington and Pikeville. By 2009, the Louisville bureau had been pared down to one reporter, the Pikeville station had been closed, and AP no longer brought in a third reporter to help out in Frankfort.

Cross knew that Kentucky's 125 rural weeklies did not have the manpower to provide capital coverage. The state's 24 rural dailies, on the other hand, were capable of picking up some slack. But he wasn't hopeful. Most, in Cross's view, tended to take a hyperlocal—even parochial—approach to political reporting by at once heavily favoring county-based stories and then failing to place them in the context of statewide politics. Cross had founded the Institute for Rural Journalism to address this problem, primarily through a website for reporters interested in linking rural issues to national stories. For all its ambition, though, the IRJ was essentially a one-man operation.

Competing Vision

Cross believed that a student-run news bureau had the potential to offer small, rural papers what he alone could not: a robust reporting presence in Frankfort. But Cross did not think a Kentucky State-run bureau could succeed in replacing the dwindling capital news coverage. The school's leadership and faculty were, in his view, too journalistically inexperienced to run a full-fledged news service. Moreover, Cross feared the school's widely recognized racial and social mission would undermine its credibility as a neutral provider of political news with legislators, journalists, and the public alike. Rather, he held that the University of Kentucky—with its reputation as one of the top journalism programs in the region—must lead.

The vision. In Cross' vision, UK would administer the bureau and KSU host it. This meant UK would hire an experienced political journalist to run it. This director would be supported by a team of retired journalists, each volunteering between 10 and 15 hours a week on a rotating basis to advise students and edit their work. The reporting staff would be drawn from a statewide pool of upper division students, who would live and study in Frankfort during the spring semester, when the legislature was in session. To solve the problem of year-round reportorial continuity, he proposed that UK develop a master's program; the graduate students would staff the offices in the summer and fall.

Distribution, Cross figured, was straightforward. Reporters could post stories on a bureau website. The Kentucky Press Association had recently established a story sharing service, which he imagined the bureau could join. Meanwhile he, Barnes, Wilson, and their colleagues on the UK faculty could leverage their relationships with major journalism figures in the state to enlist formal commitments from newspapers, radio, and television stations to run the students' work. In some respects, Cross's vision was even more ambitious than the VCU and UMD programs Wilson had visited in 2004. Where those schools made it their mission to provide complementary political coverage to their states' papers, Cross was envisioning a bureau that could eventually serve as a primary political news source for much of the state.

At the same time, Cross recognized that his more ambitious civic vision for the bureau raised numerous questions. Would the university oversee content? Would client papers have editorial input? Who was liable in the event of libel or other offenses? Then there were revenue questions. Should the news bureau charge fees? Should it be a partnership with the Kentucky Press Association? Would the students be paid for their work? For that matter, would working in the bureau come at a cost to their overall academic experience? Finally, did subsidizing private media companies by offering free content conflict with the university's educational and civic mission?

Barnes understood the conceptual appeal of Cross's plan, but she did not see how it could work. No one at UK had the time to run a Frankfort news bureau. Cross was overcommitted. So were Barnes and the rest of her faculty. Barnes had no money to hire a senior journalist to direct the bureau. Nor could she present mandates to Chapman so long as KSU was financing the bureau as the centerpiece of its proposed journalism program. The choice, it seemed to her, was to continue to serve in an advisory capacity to a KSU-led bureau or pull back and wait, perhaps several more years, to secure funding to launch a UK-run news service.

Steering Committee

Over the fall, Barnes helped Chapman assemble a six-person committee to discuss and settle on the parameters of a journalism school for KSU—and the news bureau that would be its star attraction. Together they enlisted Dick Wilson, Barnes' predecessor at UK; Bill Wilson, the former director of Kentucky Educational Television (KET), former KSU Board chair, and currently in KSU development; Sam Oleka, April Fallon, Erin Gilles, and David Shabazz—respectively the dean, chair, and faculty members associated with the journalism and mass communications program; Brack Marquette, a public relations executive; and Marilyn Clark, a former broadcast journalist. But by far the most important figure, in Barnes's estimation, was Chapman, because as provost he controlled where the bureau would be located in the university and ultimately how much money would be earmarked to fund it.

Barnes scheduled the committee's first meeting for November 17, 2009. That morning, as Barnes prepared to leave for Frankfort to convene the committee, she received an email Al Cross

had sent the previous night to journalism educators across the state alerting them to an industry news item that sharply changed the calculus for the need, scope, and timeframe for the proposed bureau: the Associated Press announced that it was cutting its Kentucky capital news bureau from two fulltime staffers to one. Describing the contraction as “a journalistic disaster of unprecedented proportions,” Cross wrote:

Almost 20 daily papers in Kentucky depend almost entirely on AP for Frankfort news. Among the remainder, the CNHI [Community Newspaper Holdings Inc] papers depend primarily on AP, and The C-J [Courier Journal] and Herald-Leader depend on it more than ever because of their shrunken bureaus. KPA once had a Frankfort reporter but he had little impact; now there's a KPA news-sharing service but several key papers have declined to sign up and it rarely has anything on the state-government beat. The question of who will pay for accountability journalism has now hit Kentucky smack in the face.⁹

Moments after Barnes read the email, Cross stuck his head in the door of Barnes's office and asked if she had seen it. Barnes looked up over the piles of student work and reports cluttering every corner of her desk, and told him that she was just that moment preparing for a meeting later that afternoon with Kentucky State. “If there was ever a time to launch a student bureau,” she said, “it's now.” Upping the ante, Cross responded: “Is there any chance that we can do this by ourselves?”

Barnes was as shaken by news of the AP contraction as Cross. This made the steering committee's task more urgent than ever. She was pretty sure a KSU-run project remained the only way forward in the immediate term. Far from taking over the project, she probably needed to use this inaugural meeting of the advisory committee to convince Chapman and his colleagues at KSU to take even greater ownership of the bureau. But as she headed west to Frankfort, she found herself less sure. To whom was she ultimately responsible—to students, or citizens? Was Cross right that the University of Kentucky had a civic obligation to lead this effort and do it right? Had she been thinking too narrowly in terms of financial resources at a moment when statewide political reporting was in retreat, if not outright collapse? Might the state or a private foundation step in if UK took over the project? Or should she trust her instincts that they must seize on this opportunity—as journalistically and educationally imperfect as it was—because it might prove their best chance to step into the journalistic breach?

⁹ Al Cross, email message to Kentucky journalists, November 16, 2009.