

The Alabama Communicator

Newsletter of The Alabama Communication Association

Summer 2026

Auburn U. Hosts ACA Members for 16th Convention

By **George L. Daniels**
ACA Past President

For the first time in its 16-year history, the Alabama Communication Association will hold its annual convention on the campus of Auburn University.

On Saturday, July 25, all convention events will be held in Lowder Hall, which is located at 405 Magnolia Avenue in Auburn. Lowder Hall is also home to the Raymond J. Harbert College of Business.

"We look forward to introducing you to the best that Auburn has to offer during your visit," said Debra Worthington, professor and director of the School of Communication and Journalism.

The convention line-up includes the presentation of 23 research papers during six sessions held in the morning and afternoon. Additionally, faculty will share Great Ideas for Teaching (GIFT)s at two morning panels. The second GIFT session also has two pedagogy-related research papers in it in addition to the two Great Ideas for Teaching.

"We are going to do a book fair," said ACA Vice President Ed

Youngblood, who coordinated this year's event. "So bring your books you want to give away and we'll let people take them."

Convention participants this year represent at least eight Alabama colleges and universities plus institutions from four other states— Georgia, Florida, Virginia and



Lowder Hall is the main location for convention events.

Kentucky.

"It should be a great time for anyone who wants to network, discuss the most compelling aspects of the communication industry and learn what is most important to communicators in the professional world and academia," said Neal Reid, a lecturer in the Auburn University Department of Public Relations, who is a regular at-

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2026 RESEARCH PAPER AWARD WINNERS

Bradley-Bryant Top Undergraduate Paper Award

Grace Miles, Auburn University
Melanie Key Wilson, University of North Alabama

Top Graduate Student Paper Award

Allison Killingsworth, Auburn University

Top Faculty Paper Award

George L. Daniels, The University of Alabama

Student Media Advisers From Alabama Universities Gather For Panel Discussion

By **George L. Daniels**
ACA Past President

Months before hundreds of student journalists from across the South gather in the Birmingham area, student media advisers are meeting at this year's Alabama Communication Association convention in Auburn to discuss the current situation for student media in "The Yellowhammer State."

Will Heath, media adviser and professional development coordinator at Samford University in Homewood, Ala., has organized the panel that will take place immediately following the ACA Luncheon.

In his role at Samford, Heath supports student staffs that produce *The Samford Crimson*, student newspaper and *Entre Nous*, Samford's yearbook.

"I just always wanted to connect with other media advisers across the state, said Heath. "I have good relationships with a couple of them and just like to get everybody together to talk about what's happening on their various campuses."

The student media panel comes less than a year after two student magazines were shuttered at The University of Alabama. *Alice*, a female-oriented publication, and *Nineteen-Fifty-Six*, which showcased issues and concerns of African American students, were discontinued in December 2025 by the university in order to comply with guidance in a memo from then-Attorney General Pam Bondi.



Two University of Alabama student publications were suspended in 2025. Photo: Courtesy Tuscaloosa Thread

Heath, who is an alumnus of the University of Alabama, recalled the discussion about the magazines, but also was concerned about the mental well-being of both students and fellow media advisers.

"It can be a kind of lonely position because nobody totally understands what it is you do," Heath said.

Joining Heath will be his counterparts from student media offices at Auburn University, The University of Alabama at Birmingham and Auburn University-Montgomery.

The panel is a precursor to a major regional gathering of student journalists for the "Best of the South"

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UAH's Gilchrist-Petty elected to SSCA leadership

Alabama To Host Another SSCA Convention in 20275

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear ACA Friends and Colleagues,

We can't wait to see you at our 16th annual conference on July 25th! We're excited to be hosted by Auburn University this year and presenting so much great scholarship on The Plains.

In addition to the usual great line-up of academic and professional scholarship, panels, and student research, we'll also be honoring our 2026 award winners. Our 2026 John H. Saunders Service Award winner is George Daniels of The University of Alabama. I've had the honor of knowing George since my graduate school days at UA, where he is a beloved faculty member and mentor. George has served in ACA leadership and is the driving force behind our newsletter. He's also actively involved in professional service far beyond our state, including with the Broadcast Education Association (BEA) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

Our 2026 ACA Teaching Award winner

is John H. Saunders of The University of Alabama in Huntsville. John, a founder of ACA, received glowing nominations from both students and colleagues for his teaching and mentorship. We've seen the evidence of his teaching effectiveness often at ACA, as many of John's current and former students have presented award-winning research at ACA. Congratulations to both of our award winners!

I'd also like to offer my personal thanks on behalf of ACA to Auburn University for hosting our conference, and especially ACA Vice President and conference planner, Ed Youngblood. Ed has been working hard all year preparing our program and conference site. Without his work and the support of AU, this year's conference wouldn't be possible.

See you soon!

Lindsey A. Sherrill
2025-2026 ACA President



Dr. Lindsey Sherrill

Student Media Advisers Meet in Auburn



Heath

STUDENT MEDIA (from p. 1)

Student Journalism Awards that are handed out as part of the Southeast Journalism Conference (SEJC) which will be hosted by Samford University February 4-6, 2027.

"Birmingham is very centrally located in terms of the Southeast. It's very driveable," Heath said. "So, we're anticipating a big crowd."

Along with the student awards, college journalists from as far away as

Kentucky will also participate in on-site competitions in sportswriting, feature writing, and photography.

Heath says this year the conference will also have some sessions focused on job readiness skills.

The 2027 gathering will be a bit of a homecoming for the SEJC, which held its first conference at The University of Alabama at Birmingham 40 years ago.



The Southeast Journalism Conference will be hosted in Birmingham in February 4-6, 2027.



Alabama Communication Association 2025-2026 Executive Board

President - Lindsey Sherrill, University of North Alabama
Vice President - Ed Youngblood, Auburn University
Vice President-Elect - Joseph Honeycutt, The University of Alabama
Secretary - Caroline Parsons, The University of Alabama
Immediate Past President - Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo
Executive Director - Jeff Walker, University of Montevallo
Executive Director-Elect - Tiffany R. Wang, University of Montevallo

CONGRATULATIONS 2026 ACA AWARD WINNERS!

Saunders Chosen For 2026 Outstanding Teacher Award

This year's ACA Outstanding Commitment To Teaching Award Winner is John Saunders, senior lecturer in communication arts at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. Having just completed his 25th year of teaching college, Saunders was interviewed by Former ACA President George L. Daniels.

Daniels: What prompted you to enter academia?

Saunders: I didn't really make a conscious decision to enter academia at a crossroads between that or a different path. I just made the decision not to leave college. I took one semester off between MA and PhD, but once I started teaching as a GTA at Penn State, I felt I was where I needed to be, and where I felt like I fit.

Daniels: Where did you do your graduate training?

Saunders: At Penn State. My first semester teaching was Fall 2001 (Dealing with 9-11 during my first semester teaching is quite a different story), and I was taking a pedagogy class while teaching two sections of Public Speaking, and observing an Oral Interpretation class.

Daniels: What types of courses do you teach at UAH?

Saunders: At this point, I have taught 41 different courses, but at UAH my regular courses are Rhetorical Criticism, Contemporary Rhetorical Theory, Public Speaking, Legal Arguments, Mass Media in America, the Rhetoric of Public Memory, Persuasion, Business & Professional Communication, and several others.

Daniels: Over the years, you have had many graduate students attend ACA. What is the key to inspiring them to continue their education beyond the bachelor's degree?

Saunders: I don't ask what they want to do with their life. That's too big of a question. I ask them how do they want to spend their days. If they want to be in a classroom, there is a path for that. If



John Saunders

Like he has done so many times before, John Saunders brought multiple students with him to the Southern States Communication Convention, which held in Birmingham in April 2026. This is one of the photos taken at the recent conference where he and his students presented.

they want to be in a cubicle, or in a gym, or doing non-profit work, there are paths for all of that. To me, the key is helping them answer this one question, and then looking at the path options to get them there.

Daniels: Has Artificial Intelligence had an impact on your teaching? If so, what's your advice for how to respond with the technology?

Saunders: AI has had a minor impact so far, but I assume that will grow as time marches on. I see my role with AI as letting students now that they are just tools. They don't do magic, and they won't write a coherent 20-25 page paper on the rhetoric of Taylor Swift. They are tools, and very useful ones to those who know how to use them. To those who don't know what they are doing, they can be very dangerous tools that can end an academic career by relying on them to do the work of a student.

Daniels: Excited To Be Among A "Community of Communication Servants"

Just a few days ago as I was going into the first of two meetings, I received a message from ACA President Lindsey Sherrill with the word "CONGRATULATIONS!"

I wondered "Me, for what? What did I do?" Then, I saw it was for the ACA's Service Award. How ironic that this message would arrive in my e-mail box as I was actually **doing** service, attending two different summer meetings of communication committees or boards on which I serve.

Instead of focusing on preparing for fall classes or working on research, I have found this month of July I have to pause frequently to attend a Zoom or Microsoft Teams meeting for this or that. Most of those meetings are associated with a professional group or organization.

One of the biggest prices we pay when we serve is our **TIME**. Yes, sometimes we grumble and complain. But, in the end, we realize without us giving of our time, talent and sometimes even our finances, key things won't get done. These are the things that truly make a difference in our profession and in the larger society.

No one had mentioned to me that I was being nominated for this award. So Lindsey's big news was a total surprise.

The award is named for ACA founder John H. Saunders. It is such a thrill to be the fifth person to receive this award, which was first presented in 2022.

WHY SERVE IN THE ALABAMA COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

When John Saunders, Sherry Ford, Jason Black and others helped start this organization, they did not do it because it was going to add to their research programs or extend their teaching. It was in the spirit of service across our state that they made the Alabama Communication Association a reality.

I believe it's up to all of us to keep it going in whatever way we can, whether it's in reviewing papers or chairing a session or setting up tables on the day before the convention. There's a place for each of us to lend a hand.

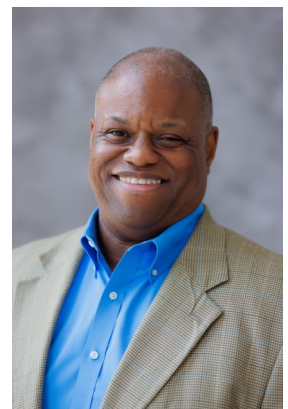
In doing so, we grow what I like to call a com-

munity of communication servants whose willingness to give of themselves is reflected even outside of ACA and the state of Alabama.

MY SERVICE ROLE MODELS

Sally Hardig, last year's Saunders Award recipient, served faithfully as our president for two years during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The three other previous recipients of this award have been role models for me in giving of self in the interest of helping their students and communication colleagues.

Elsewhere in this newsletter, we salute Jeff Walker, the 2024 Saunders Award recipient, for his great years as our executive director. He followed in the footsteps of Ray Ozley, the 2023 Saunders Award recipient, who served faithfully for many years. And,



George L. Daniels

then there's Brad Bailey, the 2022 Saunders Award winner, who comes to us from Mississippi each year. **George L. Daniels, an associate professor of journalism and creative media at The University of Alabama, is the 2026 John H. Saunders Award recipient.**

Auburn University Welcomes ACA Members on the Plains

CONVENTION (from p. 1)

tendee at ACA conventions.

The morning line-up includes a panel on "Surviving and Thriving in the Academy as Communication Faculty Members."



Youngblood

"Hosting the ACA annual conference is a great honor for Auburn and a chance to spotlight our campus and the talented communication professionals we have on the Plains, Reid said. "The ACA Conference is a wonderful mix of academic researchers and practicing communication professionals, and I know visitors will enjoy their time in Auburn."

The day kicks off with the ACA Business Meeting at 8

a.m. and concludes with the Top Paper session ending at 5 p.m.

"Auburn University is celebrated for its traditions, school spirit, and "Auburn Family" culture, and the city of Auburn is ranked as one of the most welcoming college towns in the country," Worthington said.



Samford Hall is an icon of Auburn University. In Fall 2025, 35,172 students were enrolled.

16TH ANNUAL CONVENTION SCHEDULE

7:30 a.m. — 11:00 a.m.	Registration
8:00 a.m. — 8:40 a.m.	Session B ACA Business Meeting
8:50 a.m. — 9:40 a.m.	Session C1 "Great Ideas in Teaching (GIFT)"
8:50 a.m. — 9:40 a.m.	Session C2 PANEL: "Streaming Media in a Divergent Global Ecosystem"
8:50 a.m. — 9:40 a.m.	Session C3 PANEL "The Primordial Polymath"
9:50 a.m. — 10:40 a.m.	Session D1 "Great Ideas in Teaching (GIFT) and Teaching Research"
9:50 a.m. — 10:40 a.m.	Session D2 "Surviving and Thriving in the Academy as Communication Faculty Members"
10:50 a.m. — 12 noon	Session E1 "Graduate Student Papers"
10:50 a.m. — 12 noon	Session E2 "Faculty Papers"
12 noon — 1:15 p.m.	Session F Lunch and ACA Awards Presentations
1:20 p.m. — 2:10 p.m.	Session G1 PANEL: "The State of Student Media in Alabama"
1:20 p.m. — 2:10 p.m.	Session G2 PANEL: "The New Legal Landscape of AL: Addressing New AL Bills"
2:20 p.m. — 3:35 p.m.	Session H1 "Graduate Student Papers"
2:20 p.m. — 3:35 p.m.	Session H2 "Graduate Student Papers"
3:35 p.m. — 3:45 p.m.	Session I Cookie Break
3:45 p.m. — 5:00 p.m.	Session J "Top Papers"

Walker Completes Term As ACA's Executive Director

While the home base for the day-to-day operation of the Alabama Communication Association won't be changing, the person in charge will be.

Jeff Walker, associate professor of communication studies & director of the Honors Program at University of Montevallo, will be stepping down as executive director, a position he has held since 2022.

Since she was elected last year at the ACA Convention in Huntsville, Tiffany R. Wang, professor of communication studies at Montevallo, has been shadowing Walker as executive director-elect.

Wang will be the third executive director from the faculty at University of Montevallo. Walker's predecessor as executive director, Ray Ozley, is now chairman of the communication department.

Walker stayed on in the position an extra year.

Since the association does not elect a treasurer, the major responsibility of the executive director is receiving and disbursing funds as well as preparing reports of the organization's financial condition.

"The most rewarding part of the

position was spearheading these efforts with my friends and colleagues on the executive committee," Walker said.

Working with the ACA officers, the executive director plays a large role in connecting with the various colleges and universities hosting the convention each year.

"I'm glad that we've kept membership and registration fees affordable, in spite of growing costs around the conference, Walker said. "We've also gone to different corners of the state, including three first-time hosts (Samford, UNA, and Auburn) during my tenure."

Walker was asked if he had any recommendations for the

woman who will succeed him in the position.

"We're in good hands with

Dr. Wang, who has experience as the Central States Communication Association's Executive Director—so I



Jefferson Walker will complete his term as ACA Executive Director at the conclusion of the 16th Annual ACA Convention in Auburn. Tiffany R. Wang, a former executive director of Central States Communication Association, will take over day-to-day duties of running ACA..



"The most rewarding part of the position was spearheading these efforts with my friends and colleagues on the executive committee."

-Jefferson Walker

Outgoing ACA Executive Director

don't think she needs much advice from me!"

In addition to serving as executive director-elect, Wang was also ACA's immediate past president for 2025-2026.

The first winner of the ACA Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Award, Wang serves as program coordinator for communication studies at University of Montevallo.

Alabama Hosts SSCA Convention for Second Year In A Row

Regional Gathering Moves To Mobile After 2026 Event in Birmingham



Above, Brigitta Brunner, professor in the Auburn University School of Communication and Journalism, received the John I. Sisco Excellence in Teaching Award at SSCA in Birmingham. Below, Eletra Gilchrist-Petty (far right) from The University of Alabama in Huntsville was elected second vice-president of SSCA. She paused for a photo with other SSCA leaders for 2026-2027 at the convention in Birmingham.



The Alabama Communication Association is one of more than a dozen partner organizations with the Southern States Communication Association (SSCA), which held its annual convention in Birmingham in April.

Faculty and students from institutions across the Southeast were in attendance at the conference that will be returning here to the Yellowhammer State once again in 2027.

The Call for Papers and Conference proposals will open soon for the 97th SSCA Annual Convention that will take place at the Renaissance Riverview Hotel in Mobile April 7-11, 2027.

Submissions for SSCA are typically due around September 15th each year.

Participants come from as far away as Texas, Virginia and

Kentucky, which all have state communication associations that like ACA are SSCA partner organizations.

Even as authors prepare submissions for next year's SSCA conference, the recent gathering in Birmingham was a special time for several faculty from our state.

ACA congratulates Brigitta Brunner, professor in the Auburn University School of Communication and Journalism, who received the 2026 John I. Sisco Excellence in Teaching Award at the 2026 Southern State Communication Association convention.

"Winning this award is a nice way to celebrate what happens in my classroom and how I prepare students with theories and concepts and then give them room to apply that knowledge to real-world practice," Brunner

said.

Also, Eletra Gilchrist-Petty, chairperson of the University of Alabama-Huntsville Department of

"Winning this award is a nice way to celebrate what happens in my classroom and how I prepare students with theories and concepts"

Brigitta Brunner
Auburn University

Communication Arts, was elected 2nd vice president of SSCA. She will move up the leadership ladder to lead the organization in two years.

"This is a 4-year term, where I will plan the Undergraduate Honors Conference in Mobile as 2nd Vice President, then plan the entire convention as 1st Vice President the following year in Memphis," said Gilchrist-Petty.

She will become president of SSCA at the end of Convention in Memphis in 2028.



**SOUTHERN STATES
COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION**



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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SAVE THE DATE

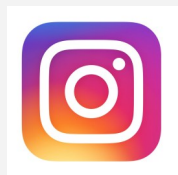
Mark your calendars for **July 31, 2027** when the 17th Annual ACA Convention will be hosted by The University of Alabama. Stay tuned for the Call for Papers and Panels from Incoming ACA Vice President Joseph Honeycutt who will serve as the convention planner for 2027.

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