



Strategic Plan

2010 — 2015

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Introduction

In June 2008, the Student Press Law Center's Board of Directors embarked on a strategic planning process. The organization's previous strategic plan, drafted in 1999, resulted in a successful endowment campaign and a complete restructuring of the organization's board, among other accomplishments. Bolstered by these results, and the hiring of the SPLC's first new executive director in two decades, the board set out to chart the organization's course over the coming five years.

The SPLC is implementing this strategic plan at a time of great upheaval within journalism itself. Some have advised that it is dangerous even to plan for a future the shape of which is so uncertain. But some constants will always exist. While communication forms and funding models may change, students will always want to share news and opinions. Society will always need trained, reliable people to gather, analyze and explain information. The government will always require close monitoring by skilled watchdogs; its officials will continue to chafe at scrutiny — and at times, will abuse their authority to conceal scandal and stifle criticism. As long as these conditions remain, there will always be a need for the Student Press Law Center.

This plan takes into account the profound challenges facing the economy, the media industry, public education, and society's overall notions about media and First Amendment rights. Some of these challenges present formidable obstacles to the achievement of the SPLC's ultimate objectives. The "perfect storm" afflicting established media companies — lost revenue as audiences migrate to the Internet, lost advertising as businesses retrench amid a recession — means that all organizations that rely on media-industry funding, the SPLC included, must look elsewhere for support. Meanwhile, federal courts are showing an increasing (and at times excessive) deference to school authority, and placing a low value on student speech, reflecting the broader public unawareness of student journalism's social and educational value and the human costs of unchecked censorship.

Other trends present real opportunities that the SPLC must position itself to leverage. As this plan was being crafted, the United States was undergoing a historic presidential election cycle that saw young people engage in civic life in a way not seen in 40 years. And while readership of print media is declining, young people show a voracious appetite for online content, both as readers and creators, making the need for reliable information about the law of publishing more universal than ever before.

This plan also recognizes that the SPLC, as an organization, faces considerable challenges in keeping itself relevant and vibrant in a new media world. As the concept of 'journalism' broadens and its delivery fragments, the Center must position itself to serve students publishing in new (and yet-to-be-invented) ways. The organization must continually reconcile and balance its twin identities as educator and as advocate — to maintain its integrity as a repository of reliable and objective research about the law of

the student media while also serving as watchdog, guarding student rights, to ensure that truly flagrant violations do not go unpunished. To meet the growing demand for its services, the Center must expand and diversify its funding base by making the case for the importance of uncensored student journalism to new audiences, recognizing that those who most directly benefit from the SPLC's work are in no position to sustain it.

The plan that follows is deliberately ambitious. With its adoption, the SPLC assumes responsibility for producing not only programming, but results — a more hospitable educational environment in which students can safely and freely learn and publish, and their educators can safely teach, free from fear of reprisal. Progress toward these ends will be checked annually by the SPLC board and staff through operational plans, which will act both as barometers of success and as detailed roadmaps for the years ahead.

The problems facing student journalism are enormous. This plan acknowledges that it is the SPLC's job to fix them. We invite those who are ready to stand up for and defend the rights of all student journalists to join us. We encourage those who support our work to hold us accountable for making the world a safer place to learn, teach and practice journalism in all of its forms.

Vision

The Student Press Law Center will improve the climate for student journalism in all forms, by:

- Breaking down barriers that prevent students from gathering, publishing or airing news and commentary,
- Reducing censorship of students' journalistic work,
- Educating students about their responsibilities as journalists, and
- Improving students' access to essential documents and meetings, and teaching them to put the knowledge gained to productive use.

Mission

The Student Press Law Center is an advocate for student First Amendment rights, for freedom of online speech, and for open government on campus. The SPLC provides information, training and legal assistance at no charge to student journalists and the educators who work with them.

Summary of Strategic Priorities

(1) Deliver legal assistance and training reliably, and make it easily accessible to all students and educators who need it: The SPLC will continue to be the recognized authority and provider of information on the law governing student journalism in all its forms.

(2) Affirm the value of a free student press across all media platforms, and promote the use of open-government laws to strengthen student journalism: The SPLC will generate and reward substantive journalistic work that uses legal research tools and skills, and will widely publicize excellent student journalism so judges, policymakers, school officials and the general public appreciate the value of a robust and independent student press.

(3) Tell the story to the public: The SPLC will gather and bring widespread public attention to violations of student journalists' legal rights, emphasizing the negative impact not merely on students' rights and academic careers, but also on school accountability and on civic engagement. It will also bring greater attention to the growing challenges to students' and educators' ability to use the Internet to gather and publish information.

(4) Pro-actively seek to improve the legal landscape: The SPLC, in addition to providing responsive service when called upon, will actively seek to create a healthier legal environment for student journalism.

(5) Build a stronger SPLC: The SPLC will secure the financial support to satisfy the increasing needs for its services; the organization will protect and strengthen its endowment fund and will build a diverse donor base of individuals and members of the business and legal communities to augment its traditional base of support from the scholastic journalism community.

Implementing the Strategic Priorities

(1) Deliver legal assistance and training reliably, and make it easily accessible to all students and educators who need it: The SPLC will continue to be the recognized authority and provider of information on the law governing student journalism in all of its forms.

Expected Outcomes

- Instances of censorship or of obstruction of student journalists' access will be successfully resolved.
- The SPLC Web site will employ the latest technological tools, be more user-friendly and, as a result, will see increased use.
- The attorney referral network will receive more assignments and will grow accordingly.

Phase One

- Keep the attorney hotline fully staffed with trained, qualified lawyers, and market its availability beyond traditional student journalism circles, so no student fails to receive service because he or she is unaware that the SPLC exists.
- Reinvigorate and make more regular use of the attorney referral network.
- Modernize, update and promote the SPLC's library of legal reference materials to support more fully the work of volunteer counsel.
- Use the latest technological advancements more effectively to educate students of all ethnic, geographic and economic backgrounds, working in all mediums, as to the legal responsibilities that accompany their press freedoms.
- Continually keep abreast of, adapt to and embrace new technology-assisted ways of delivering information and services.

(2) Affirm the value of a free student press across all media platforms, and promote the use of open-government laws to strengthen student journalism: The SPLC will generate and reward substantive journalistic work that uses legal research tools and skills, and will widely publicize excellent student journalism so judges, policymakers, school officials and the general public appreciate the value of a robust and independent student press.

Expected Outcomes

- SPLC publications will be redesigned to meet the needs of constituents.
- The SPLC Web site will be a destination for those looking for path-breaking examples of investigative student journalism.
- Student journalists who are unaffiliated with traditional student media programs will be aware of and use the SPLC's resources.

Phase One

- Broaden and aesthetically improve the SPLC's online publications library to more effectively teach students how to use open-records and open-meetings laws to strengthen their reporting.
- Showcase on the SPLC Web site exemplary works by student journalists who use the SPLC's legal resources.
- Forge partnerships with scholars to research and document the pedagogic value of a free and independent student press.

Phase Two

- Develop educational programming that specifically caters to small, entrepreneurial student journalism start-ups, freelancers and bloggers, emphasizing issues that differentially have an impact on them.
- Partner with college journalists at the local level to create and distribute original editorial content that uses open records laws and legal research skills.
- Build a library of in-depth editorial projects from which students can learn.

(3) Tell the story to the public: The SPLC will gather and bring widespread public attention to violations of student journalists' legal rights, emphasizing the negative impact not merely on students' free speech and academic careers, but also on school accountability and civic engagement. It will also bring greater attention to the growing challenges to students' and educators' ability to use the Internet to gather and publish information.

Expected Outcomes

- The SPLC will be a clearinghouse for information pertaining to violations of students' First Amendment rights.
- The frequency and nature of violations of students' First Amendment rights will be better documented and better understood.
- The SPLC will be considered a primary source for professional journalists covering violations of students' First Amendment rights, and will be frequently and widely cited in the professional media as the go-to expert in the field.
- The SPLC will have published a book and/or documentary revealing the life-altering consequences of censorship.

Phase One

- Enhance the SPLC's data-gathering and analysis capabilities to help establish a baseline for measuring instances of censorship and other violations of student journalists' legal rights.
- Create an annual media event designed to heighten public awareness of the myriad threats facing the student press.
- Use media appearances, and publishing and speaking opportunities to heighten public awareness of the SPLC's expertise in high-profile issues of online speech; seek opportunities to engage with niche and specialty media in the education, technology and civil-liberties fields.

Phase Two

- Work with funders and major research institutions to develop a reliable database of information concerning the legal challenges facing student journalists, with an eye toward dispelling persistent myths and misunderstandings that lead to bad policy.
- Compile print and video interviews with victims of censorship who have suffered life-altering consequences – e.g., those fired from jobs, or suspended from school – and disseminate their stories to the public.

(4) Proactively seek to improve the legal landscape: The SPLC, in addition to providing responsive service when called upon, will actively seek to create a healthier legal environment for all student journalists.

Expected Outcomes

- Flagrant incidents of censorship will have swift and visible consequences.
- More states and municipalities will pass laws and ordinances that support the First Amendment rights of students and those who advise them.
- Curriculum at colleges of education will accurately address the First Amendment rights of students.
- The SPLC will offer full support services to litigators taking on cases that defend the First Amendment rights of students and those who advise them.
- The SPLC will bolster its in-house capacity for litigation.
- SPLC-affiliated attorneys will pro-actively identify and litigate more test cases that reinforce the First Amendment rights of students.

Phase One

- Mobilize, train and share information among those who care about student journalism to seek positive changes in federal, state and local law.
- Use all available tools – e.g., litigation, publicity, reports to accrediting and regulatory agencies – to make sure that flagrant cases of censorship or denials of access are met with consequences.
- Strengthen relationships with the legal, media and civil-rights communities so student journalists' interests receive due consideration from policymakers.
- Develop the infrastructure to support fully the work of volunteer outside counsel by collecting sample briefs and motions, compiling legal research on standard topics, and assisting with other information gathering needs.

Phase Two

- Find opportunities to train administrators, board members and school attorneys about media law and the educational and social values of a robust student press.
- Expand rapid-response capability by building additional litigator capacity, either by identifying funding for in-house staff attorney positions or partnering with a law school clinical program.
- Identify and litigate the strongest test cases to build up a body of legal precedent that will discourage future violations of student journalists' rights.

(5) Build a stronger SPLC: The SPLC will secure the financial support to satisfy the increasing needs for its services; the organization will protect and strengthen its endowment fund and will build a diverse donor base of individuals and members of the business and legal communities to augment its traditional base of support from the scholastic journalism community.

Expected Outcomes

- The SPLC will expand its audience and donor base beyond its core constituency.
- The SPLC will more effectively use volunteer services toward promoting the cause of student free-press rights.
- The SPLC will establish a continually growing e-mail list and member base.
- A greater percentage of the SPLC's annual revenues will come from individual donors.
- Additional staff will be hired to meet the SPLC's growing responsibilities.

Phase One

- Maintain strong relationships with the "backbone" scholastic journalism organizations while also entering into new partnerships that can put the SPLC's message and services in front of audiences beyond its core constituency.
- Raise the SPLC's visibility and multiply its impact by creating meaningful and engaging volunteer opportunities for people from the legal, journalism and educational communities, to build a network of active foot soldiers in support of students' First Amendment rights.
- Streamline and modernize the individual and group membership processes, and in doing so developing a thorough e-mail contact list.
- Cultivate individual donors at all levels, with a special focus on donors who have interests beyond scholastic journalism, by showing the impact of the SPLC's work on concerns of importance to them.
- Create a board committee to address fundraising and development.

Phase Two

- Through Web-enhanced marketing, more effective use of existing organizational structures and increased member incentives, launch an intensive membership drive aimed at boosting financial support from the core audience that should

universally agree with the SPLC's work, including media lawyers and college journalism professors.

- Launch new endowment or human capital campaigns to help the SPLC grow to meet and respond to the challenges faced by its growing constituency.

Methodology

Amid a historic economic slowdown and rapidly changing media paradigms, a planning committee of the board and its consultants used a variety of methods to take the pulse of the SPLC constituency and investigate trends affecting the student press. Those methods included:

- More than 16 hours of interviews, conducted via telephone, with 23 individuals, including members of the SPLC advisory board, former SPLC board members, former SPLC executive directors, and heads of prominent national journalism organizations.
- Randomized nationwide surveys of more than 130 students and advisers at both the scholastic and collegiate levels.
- Multiple surveys of board and staff member sentiments.
- Examination of internal data, procedures and Web traffic figures.
- Analysis of professional media trends and their relation to student media.
- Analysis of competing and other similar nonprofit organizations.

The findings derived from these lines of research were many. However, the data yielded a few overarching trends, chiefly pertaining to public perceptions of the SPLC as it currently exists and to means of improving the SPLC's services.

Of the current state of the SPLC, internal data and interviews with constituents revealed that, while the Center's educational materials and services are highly valued, many are unaware of the full array of those services. Moreover, the SPLC is generally seen as reactive — it is known for providing reliable emergency response services when a controversy occurs, and not widely known as an advocate that prevents controversy from arising.

Stakeholders in the organization's success called for a more pro-active approach to fighting for students' rights — ranging from increased outreach to school administrators and the public to more aggressive litigation tactics. They also called for a more effective use of the latest technological developments to engage students directly and increase the organization's local and regional presence. Most of all, they called on the SPLC to better raise awareness of its services and of the plight of student journalists.

At a meeting in February 2009, the full Board of Directors digested the information gathered; it continued honing prospective strategic directions at its subsequent meeting in June 2009. The resulting plan is designed not only to strengthen the SPLC's core

services, but also to make the organization more pro-active in its defense of First Amendment rights for student journalists of all ages and mediums, and those who advise them.

Student media are at a crossroads. This strategic plan gives the SPLC the strength and flexibility required to defend the rights of student journalists into the future — to ensure their voices continue to be heard.

SPLC Board of Directors

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Rosalind Stark, Executive Director (retired), Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, Reston, Va. (ex officio)

Frank D. LoMonte, Esq., Executive Director, Student Press Law Center, Arlington, Va. (ex officio)

Acknowledgments

This plan is the product of many months of fact-gathering and discussion to which every member of the board and staff of the Student Press Law Center, as well as numerous outside supporters and stakeholders, made a substantive contribution. The SPLC wishes to single out for special thanks those experts from law, journalism, education and philanthropy who agreed to be interviewed about the role of the SPLC in the changing media universe: Candice Perkins Bowen, John Bowen, Tom Eveslage, Barbara Hines, Kathleen Kirby, Jane Kirtley, Logan Aimone, Andrew O'Dell, Linda Puntney, Vanessa Shelton, Helen Smith, Ron Spielberger, Edmund Sullivan, Marc Abrams, Mark Goodman, Jim Ellenberger, Malcolm Gibson, Monica Hill, Michael Koretzky, Adam Maksl, Mark Newton, Cathy Stablein, Sue Hale and Steve Anderson. We especially appreciate and value the input we received from the late Terry Harper of the Society of Professional Journalists, and we join the entire journalism community in lamenting his passing.

Two members of the SPLC board, Rosalind Stark and A.J. Bauer, deserve special recognition for assuming responsibility for taking this plan from concept to reality. Roz Stark brought a depth of perspective and insight that informed every aspect of our deliberations, and her dedication to our work is so great that she agreed – even after her tenure as a voting member of the board elapsed – to stay on to see the plan through to completion. A.J. Bauer shouldered the workload in identifying and interviewing stakeholders, in distilling hours of interview materials into useful input for the board's consideration, and in capturing the results of our brainstorming sessions in a concise and cohesive document. He framed the guiding principle that the SPLC must use advanced communication technology to convey to a wider audience the urgency of preserving what is good about student journalism, and he inspired us to accept ownership of this difficult mission.

We reserve our deepest thanks for Kathleen Criner, a longtime friend and supporter of the SPLC, who generously donated countless hours of her time and talent to guide the board and staff in every phase of the planning process, from the design of the fact-gathering phase through the last edits to this document. This plan could not have been a success without her patience, her wisdom, and her persistence in pressing for deeper and more insightful thinking. We are indebted to Kathleen for her invaluable service to securing a bright future for the SPLC.