We left Elon at around 4:30 on Thursday afternoon and arrived at Atlanta around 11:30 p.m. that night. We were tired from the bus trip but excited to be there. After we got settled in, some of us explored the hotel.

I woke up at 7 a.m. on Friday morning to prepare for the day of adventure. An hour and a half later, the broadcast/film Fellows group met Dr. Landesberg and professor Gibson who were taking us to CNN, the Weather Channel and the WSB/TV-Radio.

The first stop on our eventful trip was the CNN's worldwide headquarters. We met Lisa Guthrie, who led us to the floor of the CNN newsroom where we divided into groups of six. Half of us went to the floor of the newsroom first and half went to the control room, before both groups switched.

I was in the group that went to the control room first, where we saw the technical director, associate producer and graphics specialists at work. There was an entire wall in the control room filled with monitors showing camera views from the newsroom and airing news from other networks such ABC, because CNN likes to keep tabs on the competition and see what they are doing. (Pretty good idea, if you ask me.)

Then, we left the control room and walked out into the newsroom. Professor Gibson pointed up at a glass panel above the newsroom where forlorn faces were staring down at us. “That’s where we would be if we were on the public tour,” he said. I looked up and realized how far away that was. The people observing from the glass seemed jealous of us who were actually right there in the action. It was then that I realized how fortunate we were that we had this wonderful opportunity of being on the floor and seeing how everything was run close-up.

We next spoke to Tim Lister, one of six executives at CNN who work on what is called “The Row.” It is The Row’s job to make sure all the news aired on CNN is as accurate as possible. Above all else, it is essential that CNN keeps its news accurate to keep its credibility as “The Most Trusted Name in News.” They even have a team of lawyers who make sure the newsgathering is conducted ethically.

Next, we all went to a boardroom and met with four people who spoke to us about working at CNN. Dr. Landesberg told them that I was interested in long form journalism and so I was especially interested in hearing what Mr. Brian Larch, the long form journalist expert at CNN, had to say. He said that you must know how to structure a story through writing, and you must do all the research you possibly can on your story.
ATTITUDE, ATTITUDE, ATTITUDE. I couldn’t believe how much everyone we spoke to stressed this. They all said that in the workplace, you are remembered for your attitude. You have to suck up your pride and deal with it when people don’t treat you the way you wish they would. You have to work hard and prove to your co-workers you are a valuable part of the company. You also have to have an assertive personality to succeed in the business: Be willing to go beyond what is required and be vocal about your ideas and passions.

Another thing that was continually stressed was the necessity of writing skills. Basically, the people who spoke to us said that if you can’t write, you might as well find another major because you won’t find a job in the communication field. On top of this, today’s journalists need to be able to do more than write. They must have extensive computer competency and be able to shoot and edit their own material. I was a little surprised to hear the CNN professionals say that they edit using Final Cut Pro. That is what we use to edit material here at Elon and for some reason, I thought CNN would have used software that was fancier and harder to use. It is encouraging to know that once I’ve mastered Final Cut Pro, I will be able to edit video footage for CNN, should I get the opportunity to work there after graduation.

After we left CNN, we met up with the rest of the Fellows who were in the strategic communications/journalism group.
We all got back on the bus and headed off to the Weather Channel. The people at the Weather Channel were kind and friendly. The atmosphere here was a lot more laid-back then at CNN, where everything had seemed so intensive and slightly intimidating. The Weather Channel actually provided us with lunch and gave us a whole stash of free things. The speakers that we listened to spoke about the dynamics of the Weather Channel: How meteorologists work with reporters and journalists to create a rich information source of weather around the nation. A few people who talked to us told us about the importance of networking and thinking about compelling ways to tell stories about the weather. One of the senior talent acquisition consultants gave us priceless advice on how to secure internships. (Be prepared, show initiative, ask questions and be flexible) We were also taken on a tour of the Weather Channel’s new HD studio. It was exciting to think that all the cutting-edge technology being put into place now are the tools my peers and I will be using in just a few years’ time.

After the Weather Channel, we boarded the bus and headed for WSB-TV/Radio. At this point, we were all starting to feel drained and tired, but we did our best to be attentive. The manager of the station came to talk to us and show us around the station. He talked more about the marketing aspect of the station, rather than the news and TV production. He talked about how important it was for the station to continue to remain financially viable.

After the long day of going to all the different media outlets, we returned to the hotel to reflect on all we had learned that day. When we got back to the hotel, we had a couple of hours to refresh and get ready for dinner at the Hard Rock Café.
Ian, me and Alex J at the Hard Rock Café. All the waitresses there were dressed up in creepy Halloween costumes with blood dripping down their faces! Too bad we didn’t get pictures of them.

We woke up early again on Saturday morning and went to Turner Field. I was really excited to go to Turner Field because I knew my brother, who is a huge Atlanta Braves fan, would be insanely jealous. Jonathon Hillyard, the production specialist who met us there, was young -- he had just graduated from college and was already on the way to a successful career. It was inspiring to see how quickly he had managed to secure a great job after graduation. He had a degree in broadcast journalism and was the head editor of Braves Vision. He showed us around the control room, where we were able to see how the cameras were operated from computers to display certain views on the screen. It was all interesting and highly technical, but I learned a great deal. My favorite part of our visit to Turner Field was probably our visit to the Braves’ dugout where we could act like cool baseball players.

Our intense baseball player poses

Soon thereafter, it was time for us to head back to Elon. On the bus ride back to school, we made a quick stop at Lennox Mall. It was probably close to 8 p.m. when we finally got back to our dorm rooms on Saturday night. We were all very tired but amazingly thankful for the experience!

I felt like everything I learned on this Fellows trip reiterated things that the professors here at Elon have been trying to tell me. Time and time again, I heard successful professionals in the “real world” saying the same things that professors here at Elon have said to me. I can’t count how many times Professor J. McMerty has
told me how important attitude and hard work is. Dr. Landesberg and Dr. Gaither have always emphasized the significance of writing and while I never doubted them for a moment, I realize now just how right they were. It also built on all the things I have already learned during the short time I have been in student media organizations. I noticed that the people at CNN and the Weather Channel threw out terms such as “B-roll” and “VO/SOT,” expecting that we already knew what such terms meant. I know that if I hadn’t gotten involved in Phoenix14 News and freshTV right away, I would have been at a loss to make sense of what they were discussing.

All the media outlets we visited spoke about the challenges of the media industry to keep a hold on their audiences. The professionals at the Weather Channel, for instance, spoke about how they had recently incorporated interactive games on their website to attract a younger demographic. In addition to local weather news, WC also features stories/documentaries on storms to make their channel more interesting and diverse. At WSB, The radio station was secondary to TV, especially since so much music has migrated toward the iPod. Consequently, creativity is essential in the communications field in this day and age. Media companies must always be thinking of new ways to keep their target audiences engaged. It was sad to see just how fiercely competitive and cut-throat the media industry is but I’m glad I got exposure to it now so that I can learn how to adapt and be ready for it in the future when I leave college and pursue my career.

I am incredibly grateful that I had the privilege of going on this trip. There was a lot I was able to take away from it. I came to realize that it really isn’t going to be an easy ride to becoming a distinguished long-form broadcast journalist; there is a lot of hard work and dedication I will have to put into it. There are so many different aspects of communications and skills I will have to develop before I graduate, which I find a little daunting. However, I was motivated by this trip to learn as much as I possibly can about the different media skills I can learn here at Elon. There are so many positions within the student media organizations that can help me develop the skills I need to be an excellent journalist. I sometimes get discouraged because I feel like I am terrible at everything and that I have no natural talent whatsoever. I often think I stink at all the studio positions I have dabbled in thus far, such as VTR, technical director, and jib operator.

After Atlanta, however, I realized that instead of thinking with the mindset of “Oh, I suck at everything, and I’ll never be good at any of this,” I need to start thinking positively. “Well, I definitely need to get more practice with fast thinking and hand-eye coordination to get better at technical directing,” is a much better approach to deal with the challenges of learning these new skills. I need to start believing in myself first of all, and then realize that I am here at Elon to learn how to do these things. I was never expected to be good at everything right off the bat. Even though I may not have a natural talent for everything I will eventually have to master in communications, if I work hard, practice as much as possible and am always willing to listen and learn from my professors, I feel like I will have just as much a chance of landing a dream job with CNN as anyone else.
In addition to getting great glimpses into the real life work force in the field of communications while on this trip, I was also able to form closer bonds of friendship with my fellow Fellows. We laughed, had crazy adventures walking around downtown Atlanta and learned more about each other and our opinions on various issues. I also had time to talk to some of the faculty who came with us and become more familiar and comfortable with each of them. Overall, I had a fabulous time and have no complaints or regrets whatsoever of the trip to Atlanta. I loved every minute of it and only wish I could go again next year!