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Regional

Freedom of the press in danger on campuses

Anybody who has attended college is familiar with student-run media. From newspapers to radio to even TV stations, these outlets are oftentimes the main sources of information to the college community.

They vary in quality and content, with some even carrying out investigative reporting of their own institutions and taking critical stances about policies and practices that, while may seem inconsequential to outsiders, are crucial to education.

Although these media are supposed to serve as training grounds for students interested in journalism, recent examples demonstrate how public opinion and college priorities have marginalized them. Despite the supposedly sacrosanct belief in a free press in the American psyche, recent news out of higher education shows serious cause for concern.

It seems that more and more college administrators, which partially or totally support financially these information outlets, are trying to manipulate them. This general concern is now supported by a number of reports, including a report recently issued by the College Media Association (CMA), an organization that provides support to college student media programs and their advisers.

According to their website, the CMA is finding that colleges and universities in every sector of higher education are threatening the independence of their student journalists. They present as recent examples the cases of Mt. Saint Mary's University in Maryland, Northern Michigan University and Wesleyan University in Connecticut. In those cases, student newspapers or their advisers have complained of coming under undue pressure to restrict content.

According to their reports, these are just a few exam-

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

ples in which administrators have tried to curtail or outright control the contents of these media. The fact that a few people are speaking out about these problems is remarkable given that many of them owe their jobs and financial support to their universities.

In a recent report jointly published by the American Association of University Professors, the College Media Association, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the Student Press Law Center, "administrative efforts to subordinate campus journalism to public relations are inconsistent with the mission of higher education to provide a space for intellectual exploration and debate."

Among the report's recommendations are for colleges to create structural barriers to outside interference in student journalists' decisions, while urging other states to follow Maryland's and North Dakota's lead in adopting laws that protect the free speech rights of student journalists and their advisers.

And what it is at stake is not just the concept of freedom of the press but even the safety of students and others in the campus communities.

Take the case of University of Kentucky's campus newspaper that investigated the case of a professor who had been accused of groping students. After an investigation the college permitted him to leave quietly. Now the student newspaper is being sued by the university in a continuing battle over whether records in the case should be disclosed.

The paper, which is partly financed by the University of Kentucky, is a well-respected student newspaper that has won numerous journalism awards. Curiously, the University of Kentucky itself is home to a First Amendment Center.

Yet, when the paper sought the records about the accusations against the professor, the university refused to release the documents. Then the newspaper, following procedure under the Kentucky state law, appealed to the state attorney general. The attorney general first ruled that the university should submit the documents to him for review in private. When it refused, he ruled that the university should release the documents to the newspaper with the names redacted.

However, this legal dispute was in certain ways disrupted when the records in the case were leaked to the newspaper, which published an article based on them. Although the records have already been disclosed, the university sued the paper to prevent the attorney general's order from establishing what it called a "dangerous legal precedent," arguing that such a ruling would open the floodgates for the release of additional documents protected by student privacy provisions, which looks more like a legal maneuver than a solid ethical concern.

Although the University of Kentucky and other institutions of higher education claim that they are trying to protect the privacy of victims, it seems that they are also trying to cover their own tracks when it comes on taking actions on a problem of national dimensions – sexual assaults on campus.

Look at the case of Brandeis University in Massachusetts, where three staff members on "The Justice," the student newspaper, were notified in February that they would

be called to a university meeting – the first step in a disciplinary process – because the newspaper had audio-taped a public rally in 2015 at which students criticized the university's handling of sexual assault cases. No formal charges were filed, the university said, because it concluded that student journalists covering public events were within their right to use recording devices.

Others see this as a way to intimidate reporting on sensitive issues.

Some student newspapers – far from feeling intimidated – are taking a more aggressive stance. "The Daily Tar Heel," an independent publication at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, sued the university on Nov. 21 after officials refused to release details about sexual assault cases there. At Indiana University, the independent "Indiana Daily Student" has been battling since September to obtain a 13-page report on the school's inquiry into sexual assault accusations against a former ballet instructor who was arrested in July and charged with sexual battery of a student. The criminal case is pending.

Although student media are largely designed to serve as training grounds for students in journalistic practices, they are also becoming a training ground for administrators who have yet to learn that when battling the press, they will end up losing. At the end of the day public opinion will support responsible journalists over college administrators trying to use legal technicalities to control student media.

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