

Image conscious colleges reassign advisers (Part 1)

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Part II can be found on page 7

There appears to be an ongoing trend in the United States of censorship of college and University newspapers. Some incidents involve the direct removal of advisers. Others go much further. Delta State University in Mississippi, for example, was bold enough to dismantle the entire journalism department. It seems college newspaper advisers who follow the tenets of sound journalism, who teach students how to assertively operate as a newspaper have been retaliated against for



Cheryl Reed

doing their job.

This year Northern Michigan University professor Cheryl Reed, James Compton of Muscatine Community College (MCC) in Iowa, and Patricia Roberts of Delta State University in Mississippi have all been removed from their campus newspaper advising positions. Both Compton and Reed were removed as newspaper advisers, but their schools allowed them to continue teaching in their English departments. Roberts was outright fired and the journalism program was terminated.

Frank LoMonte is an attorney who has worked in journalism and newspapers in Florida and Georgia. He has been the director of the Student Press Law Center (SPLC) since January 2008. At the SPLC, "We get several hundred phone calls a year reporting some degree of infringement of First Amendment rights and those vary in their level of seriousness, but certainly dozens and dozens of times a year students, at the college and high school level, are



Frank LoMonte

censored either directly or indirectly," LoMonte said. LoMonte understands how censorship of college newspapers operates. "At the college level the censorship is usually indirect by way of applying pressure. And pressure can come in the form of withholding funding or removing an adviser or threatening disciplinary action... At the college level it is usually the indirect form of coercion to intimidate people from expressing themselves."

This is happening right now to

journalism advisers all over the country. Reed was removed in April as the campus newspaper adviser. She was a full-time faculty member with a 10-year positive track record. Reed encouraged her students to use their student press rights.

Reed said, "They didn't like how I had advised the students. They didn't like how I had defended the students. They didn't like that the students were FOIAing and they felt like if they removed me that would stop."

Compton is scheduled to be replaced with an adjunct adviser, and his explanation why is similar to Reed's. "The school admin was uncomfortable with what they saw as "bad press," and whether the story was as minor as broken bathroom faucets or as major as conflict of interest in student government, their reaction was the same - that they were being harassed by a student

journalism that is within the traditions of the profession."

Administrations that dislike when newspapers report on stories that are not flattering often have demonstrated they are willing to take critical action against a student run news organization that appears to be doing its job. Instead of acknowledging legitimate concerns that students have reported on, colleges are instead removing full-time advisers who care about their job as a way to get the stories to stop.

LoMonte believes "advisers get targeted because schools realize that that is an effective way of muzzling the publication...The authority of a school to punish a student for speech is pretty limited, but the authority over an employee is much greater. So I think the adviser is the weakest link, the person with the fewest legally protected rights who is the most vulnerable to retaliation."

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paper whose goal was to embarrass them. They couldn't tell the difference between campus relevant news, which is what the students were producing, and personal attack, which did not happen."

The stories that have led to adviser removals are often surprisingly uncontroversial. Reed's began with a story on Starbucks Coffee. Compton's began with a story about a student award worth a certificate and a \$20 gift card to a local grocery store.

LoMonte has been directly involved in helping advisers and student reporters understand and navigate these reoccurring incidents. "I have yet to see in any of these controversies involving the removal of an adviser that the students went over the line of law or ethics. All of the journalism that has led to this wave of this retaliation against advisers was very standard, routine

Palatine, Illinois, after he fought Harper administration's attempt to contractually obligate the newspaper staff to "work closely with the Student Activities staff ... using their experience and advice" to guide the content and journalistic quality of the student newspaper.

According to Gire, "The job of a newspaper is not to be served as a public relations forum for business goods or services for people. It is to provide essential understanding and information to the students about how the world and how their government and how their school's operating...for what's going on so that you not only provide for a knowledgeable student body, but you plant the seeds for a knowledgeable society."

College newspapers that are willing to report relevant news that may be uncomfortable for some on campus to read appear to be far less common than campus newspapers acting, intentionally or unintentionally, as public relations vehicles.

According to LoMonte, "Most newspapers on campus are filled with positive news about people winning awards and traveling overseas and getting scholarships. Most college newspapers like most community newspapers are filled with happy, upbeat news. It's not that it is a newspaper's job to solely be the voice of criticism, but like any community newspaper the newspaper's job is to pursue the truth wherever the truth leads and if the truth turns out to be unfavorable to the institution that's still newsworthy."

In light of what appears to be a rising number of journalism programs under assault, LoMonte said,

"I think colleges are much more aggressive about censoring now than they might have been 15 years ago, because of the power of Google. A story can have a much longer life online and it can haunt your reputation for years to come and because of that colleges are much more motivated to try to shut down anything unflattering before it hits the paper."



Dann Gire



Jim Compton

tion."

There have been instances where advisers who are removed have been replaced with advisers with public relations backgrounds. Lillian Martell, for example, who is scheduled to replace Compton at MCC, formerly taught journalism at Friends University, a private university in Wichita, Kansas. Her teaching responsibility is listed in the Friends University archived catalog as "Journalism/Public Relations Emphasis."

A public relations person's job is to relate to the public with happy, upbeat news about the college. A move like this could be seen as another "indirect" attempt of colleges to censor student newspapers.

In 2006, Dann Gire had been fired from his position as the adviser of the Harbinger, the student newspaper of Harper College in