



# College Media Advisers

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Office of the President

Jan. 12, 2009

Dr. John Minahan, President  
Western Oregon University  
345 N. Monmouth Ave.  
Monmouth, OR 97361

Dear Dr. Minahan,

The College Media Advisers board of directors has voted to censure Western Oregon University for its handling of the case of former newspaper adviser Susan Wickstrom.

As you know, the university chose not to rehire Ms. Wickstrom after student staff of the *Western Oregon Journal* in spring 2007 discovered Social Security numbers and other confidential information about former students in files on the university's public computer server. The students downloaded the information to a disk and, after consulting with Wickstrom, notified university administrators of the security breach. Subsequently, university personnel searched the newspaper's offices, and the copy editor involved was nearly expelled.

In my letter of concern to you, dated June 22, 2008, I addressed CMA's concerns about this case and offered the assistance of CMA adviser advocate Mark Witherspoon, a former CMA president, to work with you in helping the university to establish a healthy environment for its student media and any media adviser who replaced Ms. Wickstrom.

Initially, you seemed receptive to our offer; however, I have learned that you have refused any reasonable attempts by Mr. Witherspoon to assist and, in fact, hung up on him during his last phone call to you.

CMA guidelines for its adviser advocacy program read, in part, as follows:

"If the Investigator determines upon the exhaustion of all reasonable attempts to resolve the dispute that the problematic administrative action stands and is in significant conflict

with CMA's established standards and practices for advising and the student press, then a report stating so will be provided to both the Committee Chair and CMA President. If each agrees with the Investigator's conclusions, the Committee Chair will bring to the CMA Board of Directors a proposal to censure the college or university involved. For the purposes of this document, censure is a formal resolution by the CMA national association that officially reprimands and condemns an institution as oppressive of students' rights to free expression and hostile toward those professionals it employs to advise the student press. Censure requires CMA Board approval."

Therefore, the appropriate course of action has been for the CMA board to vote censure. Please understand that censure is an action that we take with great care and reasonable patience. Censure also carries with it a variety of additional actions, based on CMA policy, which reads as follows:

"The president or chancellor of institutions officially censured will receive a formal letter under CMA letterhead from the CMA President declaring the censure along with the reasoning for the action. The CMA President will notify the CMA membership of the censure, and call for members to write letters of concern to administrators, board members, and other individuals of influence at the censored institution. The CMA President will also notify the student press at the institution; the local commercial press in the institution's city; the state press agencies in the institution's state; the department of higher education or regulating agency in the institution's state; the Chronicle of Higher Education; and other media outlets relevant to higher education."

We hope that this censure might be short lived. Again, I cite CMA policy in regard to removing censure:

"CMA institutional censure continues until officially removed by action of the Board of Directors. The request for censure removal must come in writing from either a ranking administrator at the institution or from a CMA adviser at the institution and be directed to the CMA President. The request must either include, or be followed by, documentation supporting a resolution of concerns that led to the censure. Upon receipt of documentation, the CMA President will direct the Adviser Advocate Committee Chair to investigate the veracity of resolution claims. The Chair may elect to conduct this investigation or appoint a Committee member to do so. Upon completion of this follow-up investigation, a report will be submitted to the CMA President with a recommendation either for or against censure removal. The CMA Board will then take action on the recommendation. If Board action removes the censure, then the President will send letters declaring such to the institution's president or chancellor, and to as many agencies and media outlets originally notified of the censure as is reasonably possible."

Students' rights — especially those of student journalists — seem to have become increasingly important among current college students. We had hoped that Western Oregon would be among those schools that model how best to respect those rights. Sadly, that seems not to be the case.

As noted in my June 22 letter, the Board's particular concerns continue to be the following:

- University officials searching the student newspaper's newsroom without notifying the students or the adviser. Even though the newsroom is university property, a student newsroom – or any newsroom for that matter – cannot perform its public service function if it is subject to newsroom searches by the people it is covering. The search stifles journalists' credibility with and trust of their audiences, and without credibility and trust, newspaper journalists cannot function effectively.
- University officials blaming the newspaper staff and its adviser for exposing the security lapse on its computers. A newspaper staff's job is to inform the public about information the public needs to make educated decisions about community issues. A newspaper staff also guides a discussion about those issues from its editorial pages. It was the newspaper's job to inform the public about the security breach on the university's computers. It was the university's job to fix that security breach and make sure it didn't happen again. Then it was the newspaper's job to inform the public that the security breach problem had been fixed. As the messenger, newspapers are used to being blamed, but that doesn't make it the newspaper's – or the newspaper adviser's – fault.
- University officials' handling of the security investigation. The newspaper needs to operate in an open, honest, and direct way. The newspaper adviser's job is to teach his or her students how to operate in that fashion, in addition to teaching them all the skills necessary to do that. These skills include interviewing, observing, researching, writing a lead, organizing a story, working with photo editors and designers and graphics artists to provide a visually pleasing design and many more skills that a student does not learn in a day, or a week, or a month, or a year. An adviser also teaches students about legal and ethical issues that come up on a daily basis. Then the adviser steps back and allows the students to perform their jobs as a newspaper staff. After publication, the adviser comes back and critiques their work.
- University officials' handling of Ms. Wickstrom's case. Both this and the handling of the security investigation indicate a lack of understanding of basic journalism principles and ethics, especially in a student newspaper. First and foremost, a student newspaper – like any professional newspaper – serves the public, which is the community of WOU students, faculty, staff and administrators. Serving the public comes before serving university guidelines, and those two interests sometimes conflict. Good student newspapers will always choose to serve the public interest first. This can be a problem when administrators don't understand why public service is more important than university guidelines. It also can become a problem when administrators don't understand that the university's attorney, who serves the university's interests, is not the first attorney someone would turn to who is serving the public's interest when those interests might be in conflict with the university's interests.

For your information I have attached a news release being distributed to major news and journalism organizations around the country and across the Northwest.

Once Western Oregon University has taken the appropriate steps to alleviate these concerns, I would be happy to work with you, following our guidelines, to remove censure.

Sincerely,

Kenneth L. Rosenauer, President  
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