

# Having Press Problems?

## SG can't hold a paper's funding hostage

By Lauren Russell

Student editors have been locked out of their offices and fired from their positions. Copies of student newspapers have been stolen by the thousands. And most commonly, student newspaper's funding—the core of its survival—has been cut or eliminated. These tactics are just some ways Student Government attempts to bring the student press to its knees when they disagree with its coverage.

SG slashed \$75,000—one-third of the paper's budget—just like that at the **University of Northern Colorado** when officers disagreed with the coverage in *The Mirror*, says former Editor in Chief Dave Stefenson. Now, Stefenson says *The Mirror* is waiting for the rest of its money to run out.

Ron Johnson, director of **Kansas State University's** Student Publications, Inc. and news advisor to the *Kansas State Collegian*, warns SGs to avoid the temptation to try and control editorial content. "First, it's a violation of the First Amendment rights of the students who produce the newspaper," he says. "Second, it's unethical to use a student newspaper as a political propaganda tool. Third, it poisons academic freedom, a foundation of American higher education."

Johnson knows firsthand how strained the relationship between SG and the student press can become. At one point, Johnson was fired as an advisor when a dispute arose between SG and the student press. After protest from colleagues and friends, however, Johnson was back on the job 10 days later.

Instead of just accepting the budget cut, Stefenson says *The Mirror* responded correctly by contacting the Student Press Law Center in Virginia. SPLC, which is an advocate of free-press rights for student publications, served as *The Mirror's* legal team and convinced SG to change its mind about cutting funding. Stefenson is still waiting to hear how much money the paper will receive next year. "It'll be some money but not enough to survive," he says.

Very few papers have the resources to operate independent of the school. Because funding is the lifeblood of a newspaper, typically it's the first asset a SG attempts to manipulate. Jenny Tenpenny Crouch, president of College Media Advisors and student publications director at **Middle Tennessee State University**, recommends that student newspapers receive a direct allocation of money from the university, giving the newspaper "department" status on campus. SPLC Executive Director Mark

Goodman says the university administration should take responsibility for distributing funds because it has more experience. Goodman also recommends that an automatic system of payment similar to a subscription fee be implemented. After determining how many students are registered for classes, a portion of the money from student activity fees would be paid out from the university in bulk sum to the newspaper.

Goodman says the root of the conflict often is mired in the ignorance of some SG leaders. He recommends that an experienced advisor or lawyer be

similar situations once out of college.

Daniel Carson, former editor in chief of *The Famuan* at **Florida A&M University**, says this is a common problem. As a result of butting heads with the newspaper over coverage two years ago, the Student Government Association withheld *The Famuan's* funding until after the semester's end. Carson says he now has a fairly good relationship with the SGA president and vice president because he's aggressive and follows through when it comes to communicating with and informing SGA. "A lot of it's incumbent on student papers to pressure and educate SGA," Carson says.

One solution Johnson suggested is that student journalists at war with their SG use the commercial media as an outlet to spread coverage of the battle. "I've been amazed how the 'light' of news coverage has improved some nasty situations for student journalists," Johnson says.



appointed to educate SG leaders about the importance of the First Amendment.

Some SG officials may not realize that attempting to control the student press by yanking its funding is counterproductive. Goodman says members of SG aspiring to ultimately serve in real-world government positions should start their careers out right by following the law now. They must understand that by law, a public university that relinquishes editorial control to its students isn't ever permitted from then on to censor its newspaper. "Nothing looks worse for them than to ignore one of the most fundamental principles of democracy," Goodman says.

Furthermore, problems result because newly-appointed SG officials often aren't ready for the criticism that accompanies political life. When faced with criticism on the opinion pages of a student newspaper, unprepared SG officers often retaliate. How students deal with campus issues in the face of public criticism will shape how they address

There are no surefire solutions when dealing with the opposing forces of a student newspaper and SG. "It takes a SG willing to challenge the student press but ultimately reject any attempts to control the newspaper's content," Johnson says. "And it takes a student press that editorializes with fairness and reports with objectivity."

It's unlawful for a university that's created a publication with student editors to confiscate publication materials, require prior review, remove objectionable material, limit circulation, suspend editors, and/or withdraw or reduce funding. Although it may control the purse strings, SG needs to resist the impulse to zero-fund a newspaper. It's illegal, unethical, and destructive for the SG and the newspaper. **SL**

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