6 August 2012

Dear President Raines,

My name is John Ensslin. I am president of the Society of Professional Journalists, the nation’s oldest, largest and broadest-based journalism advocacy organization with 8,000 members across the country, including Memphis.

I am writing to express our profound dismay and concern over reports of a substantial funding cut to the operating budget of your campus newspaper as well as some of the controversy that preceded those cuts.

Here’s our gripe: in The Helmsman you have a student newspaper that had been an excellent training ground for young journalists. And yet this funding cut sends a chilling, mixed message to the journalism students and faculty.

In my role as SPJ president, I read a fair amount of student newspapers from around the country. I can tell you that The Helmsman stands out as a paper that produces a consistently high level of journalism, especially when it comes to enterprise and watchdog reporting that seeks to hold institutions and elected officials accountable.

In particular, the paper’s coverage of an alleged sex assault earlier this year involving a registered sex offender was outstanding. The paper also raised difficult but legitimate questions as to whether notice of this incident should have been provided to the campus community in a more timely manner.

I also was impressed by the paper’s reporting on a story in 2010 in which it described how student activity fees were being used to pay tuition costs for members of the student government association and student activities council.

That set of stories won two national awards as well as a regional SPJ award.

I’m sure there are instances when staff at The Helmsman have made mistakes in judgment in their reporting and writing. However, they are student journalists learning their craft which sometimes means learning from their mistakes.

Overall though, I am struck by the high caliber of work these young journalists are doing. In particular, I’m impressed with the work of The Helmsman’s editor Chelsea Boozer.

In Chelsea, I see a promising young journalist whom your university will someday be proud to call a graduate. I can see what prompted Frank LoMonte, executive director of the Student Press Law Center to remark:

“She may well be the best reporter working in college media today. She is Mike Wallace with molasses syrup, disarming, but deadly, and she is going to be a Mike Wallace-sized star.”

We journalists are a skeptical lot. We question authority. We ask seemingly impertinent questions. We hold public figures accountable. We fight for the public’s right to know so that people can make the kind of informed decisions that are vital in a democracy.

Chelsea displays all these traits and then some. Here’s an example of the kind of journalist she is and promises to become: On Labor Day weekend, while many of her peers will be at the beach or some such place enjoying the end of the summer, Chelsea has made plans to be one of the number of student journalists who will be traveling to Fort Lauderdale.

There they plan to produce a newspaper for residents of a homeless shelter through a program that the local SPJ chapter has organized for the last four years.

This is the kind of student you should be proud of. Her work reflects well upon the education she has received at the University of Memphis.

That is why it is so disheartening and disappointing to read the coverage of the controversy surrounding these funding cuts.

I understand that we live in a world where resources are not infinite and where funds for higher education have been cut significantly in recent years.

But I’m also mindful of the fact that while other organizations that received less than the funding than requested, The Helmsman is one of just two groups to have their funds slashed by a third.

I’m also greatly disturbed by a statement attributed to your Dean of Student Stephen Petersen in a story that appeared in the Commercial-Appeal which quotes him as saying:

“I can't begin to tell you the examples that came up in that conversation about things that the paper did print that seem to have very little relevance or that seemed to touch very, very few students on the campus,” Petersen said, according to a transcript of that meeting. “Probably the one that sticks out most in my mind is the Marxist student group, which is like four people or something.”

Petersen, who chairs the allocation committee, also added that, “There were some members of that committee that voted zero funding for the Helmsman this year. Zero.”

Zero. That certainly sounds to me like a sentiment based more upon the content of the paper than a budget-driven austerity move. If that is the case, such a decision could be viewed as a First Amendment violation.

So I was glad to read last week that you have asked for an investigation into whether those cuts are the result of an unwelcome and possibly unlawful attempt to exert undue influence over the paper’s editorial content.

I also would ask you in your capacity as University President to restore these funds so that The Helmsman does not have to resort to the drastic remedy of curtailing the number of days on which it is published.

That would go a long way toward clearing up any mixed messages. Your campus is well served by having a robust student newspaper that not only informs the community but serves as a training ground for future professional journalists.

Yours truly,
John Ensslin
President
Society of Professional Journalists