

CENSORSHIP & THE ADVENTIST COLLEGE NEWSPAPER

By Stacy Spaulding

First Amendment rights are always a murky issue for private schools. The issue got even cloudier in September 1999 when a United States Court of Appeals decision upheld the censorship and confiscation of two thousand yearbooks at a public university in Kentucky.

Though there is no universal agreement on how much freedom students have at private schools, some worry that the decision may embolden administrators to clamp down on negative stories destined for student publications. Currently, some students at Adventist colleges and universities lack any concern about censorship while covering controversial stories, whereas others face prior review with each issue.

At one point in a particularly volatile debate about Walla Walla College's student newspaper last year the vice president of student administration read each issue before publication and marked passages he did not like. The *Collegian* was then published without those passages, according to 1998-99 editor Ed Schwisow. "They put big black marks over what they didn't like," the twenty-one-year-old senior complains. "I thought that pointed to the climate of distrust we had on campus."

A Case of Censorship

The Kentucky case began in 1994, when administrators at Kentucky State University in Frankfurt confiscated copies of the 1993-94 student yearbook. At the same time, school officials transferred the student newspaper's faculty adviser to a secretarial position after she refused to censor the paper. Administrators complained that the yearbook was of generally poor quality and that its purple cover did not match school colors.

The recent Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals decision upholds a federal district court opinion and is binding in Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The decision represents the first time a federal appeals court has applied the United States Supreme Court's decision in the landmark 1988 case, *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, to public universities and colleges.

In the Kentucky case, a three-judge panel rejected arguments that state officials had violated students' First Amendment rights and said that the yearbook did not constitute public speech. The judges also held that the university had the right to refuse to distribute materials that might harm its public image.

The Student Press Law Center in Arlington, Virginia, disagrees: "When school officials are allowed to use student media as a public relations tool, it ceases to exist as a credible source for teaching students about journalism," asserts center director Mark Goodman.

Two Kentucky students involved in the case have asked the appeals court to reconsider its decision, saying that it ignores over thirty years of legal precedent that provide strong First Amendment protection to college student media.

More than thirty groups have joined the students in requesting a rehearing. Included among the appellants are representatives from every accredited journalism program in the sixth circuit, as well as others from student media, education, professional journalism, and civil liberties associations.

Censorship and Adventist Schools

Though the decision does not apply to private schools, some worry that it may have an intangible effect.

"It might lessen a predisposition to be more open and allow more freedom on a campus," according to Pamela Maize Harris, chair of the journalism and communication department at Southern Adventist University. "It perhaps could be like permission to censor, which I hope doesn't happen. I think our campuses need more openness."

Herbert Coolidge, professor of business administration at the same university advised the *Southern Accent*, Southern's student newspaper, for four years. He sees the tendency to censor strongest when the institution believes itself weakest.

"If the president and his group are doing pretty good, they're more thick skinned," Coolidge claims. "Once you get them to the 'aren't-going-well stage,' then there's almost no issue that can't be some kind of a problem." That's exactly when an institution should be the most open, according to Harris. "It's the time when rumors are flying, and that's when credible information needs to be available."

CORE Complaints at La Sierra University

Mona Karimpour, 1998-99 editor of La Sierra University's student newspaper, the *Criterion*, did her best to cover fairly student and faculty criticism of the university's newly initiated general education curriculum (CORE) program.

Students and some faculty criticized the program last year, saying that the classes' team teaching was awkward, the credits could not be transferred, and that there was a perception that classes often had a nonreligious bias.

The debate even garnered attention from the local newspaper, the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*. Karimpour, now a twenty-one-year-old senior, feels that the *Press-Enterprise's* coverage was inaccurate, however.

To treat the issue objectively, the editor sat in CORE classes for three weeks, assigned another reporter to do an informal survey, and even commissioned articles on the "pro," "con," and administrative viewpoints. "I wanted to hear everyone's side on it even though it was a student newspaper," Karimpour says.

Despite the issue's volatility, Karimpour asserts that no one ever demanded to see the *Criterion* before it went to press. Karimpour, who had no advisor, voluntarily took the paper to a staff member who had experience editing for grammar and style, but the editor retained final control over content at all times.

"I had heard from other students that they felt the paper had been censored," Karimpour said. "But in my own experience with the *Criterion* that is not the case. Being editor myself, I published every story. I wanted stories to be accurate," she continues. "At our school unfortunately a lot of information is spread by students who don't have firsthand knowledge."

Walla Walla College and the April Fools' Edition

Walla Walla College's newspaper, the *Collegian*, covered several controversies in its news and opinion pages before becoming the center of controversy itself.

In the midst of debate last year about a proposal to rename the college a university, the paper published an April Fools' edition that imitated the *National Enquirer* and satirized church art.

"We did several articles that really angered people in the community and also faculty particularly," says editor Schwisow. "The reason we published the story . . . was to say that this paper is totally a farce. To show that these stories aren't true in any shape or form."

Community and board members were outraged. According to Schwisow, in a board meeting some members demanded his dismissal and termination of the faculty advisor. Schwisow continues: "The college president stood up and said 'I know these people. If you're going to kick them out of school and fire them then you'll have to do it when I'm not here.'"

The board instead required a statement published on the front page stating its disapproval. From then on, the vice president for student administration read each issue before publication, marking out selected passages with a black pen. Never before had he been censored so blatantly, maintains Schwisow. "I had a good relationship with my advisor. In some instances maybe she was

acting as a censor but we went back and forth on it. She gave me the right to state my case and I argued with her in front of everybody."

This year, administrators have set up an eight-person advisory board to develop a code of ethics and publishing guidelines for the *Collegian*. Members of the board are expected to take turns meeting with the editor each Monday before deadline, explains Nelson Thomas, vice president for student administration.

"Basically we're there as a resource. We're not going to be censoring. We will be offering suggestions, encouraging students, reminding students that they have more than one readership and that while they should write primarily for the one readership—the students—they should be sensitive to other readerships," says Thomas.

Thomas defends the April Fools' edition, claiming that it is difficult to use humor productively. "I think that it was totally misunderstood. When you listen to people that wrote last year, we misunderstood their intent. There was nothing mean, vengeful, or unkind. They were trying to be fun," claims Thomas. "But humor so many times is used as a form of attack. It's difficult to use humor in a productive, educational way."

Thomas believes that the advisory board will help mentor students and let the advisor concentrate on basic journalistic technique. "Several of the members said 'hey, if we are required to read every word, then we are taking away the responsibility of the students and we will not do this,'" Thomas continues: "We have some fantastic faculty members that are really here to help the students learn. If they make a mistake then there are consequences but most of the time it's a learning experience and that's valuable. We're an educational institution and that's what we're here for."

But Schwisow is skeptical.

"If I was the editor, I would feel stymied. I wouldn't know where to go," he complains. "I'm not going to have the stories until they come in at the last minute. You're going to want to do it five days in advance so everyone can look at it."

Other Adventist Campuses

Newspapers at other schools have experienced minor problems. At Columbia Union College in 1999,

administrators twice asked student reporters not to cover board meetings, in spite of invitations or agreements that granted them access. However, *Columbia Journal* reporters were not asked or forced to leave after the board meetings commenced.

The advisor of Southwestern Adventist University's student newspaper, *Southwesterner*, says his students have a great deal of freedom, but wishes they would be even bolder. "In some situations I want to push them to take on some more controversial subjects," says Glen Robertson, assistant professor of communication. "I've recommended issues that the editors opted not to do. Issues come up that everyone's talked about that never make it into the paper."

Robertson believes that anything is valid if newsworthy and covered objectively. "That's not the opinion of everybody, especially administrators," he warns. "As far as a news story is concerned, if people are going to talk about it in the hallway we should read about it in the newspaper."

But some aren't tolerant of presenting "the other side" in campus newspapers often seen primarily as a vehicle of campus public relations. This trend is evident on Adventist campuses and elsewhere, according to Southern's Harris. "I think our society in general is becoming less tolerant of alternative viewpoints. And I'm concerned about the marketplace of ideas both for our society and within our church organization."

"When there is open expression of viewpoints, it doesn't mean that there is not unity in an organization, it indicates a healthiness," asserts Harris. "People have to make a decision based on information. . . . And if there isn't information available the decision making process is negatively affected."

Harris believes this is true in business, consumerism, and political affairs, as well as religion and education.

But in an era in which some schools are battling rising debts and declining enrollment, an apathetic student press may prevail. "Some people like complacency because it means as long as you're not rocking the boat there's no issues that need to be dealt with," observes Southwestern's Robertson. "On the other hand, from a journalistic standpoint complacency doesn't take you anywhere."

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