

SEJC

Southeast Journalism Conference

March 9, 2015

Mr. William LaForge, J.D.
Office of the President
Delta State University
Cleveland, Mississippi 38733

Dear President LaForge:

The faculty delegates of the Southeast Journalism Conference, meeting at the annual convention in Atlanta, Georgia, on Feb. 27, directed us, the current and two immediate past presidents of the SEJC, to convey to you our profound concern over your decision to eliminate the print budget for The Delta Statement, which has been the voice of the student body since 1931, and to eliminate the journalism major and minor from the curriculum.

Apart from the troubling First Amendment issues your actions raise, we have examined your budget, and see that the savings from eliminating the printing expenses of The Statement amount to a trifling \$6,291, a minuscule amount out of a total deficit of roughly \$1 million you hope to close in a \$45-million budget.

When we asked if the newspaper's advertising revenue didn't defray the operating expenses, we were told that, unlike the customary business model at most of our 40 member schools, the advertising revenue goes directly into the university's general fund. In other words, you are cutting off a revenue stream, thus exacerbating the very budget deficit you are using as justification for killing the print edition. Our research indicates net advertising revenue in 2014 was approximately \$6,000, virtually enough to offset the \$6,291 budget cut. We strongly feel that money should be earmarked for the newspaper, as it is at other schools.

Provost McAdams said in November he wants The Statement to begin a "digital transition." The other newspapers at SEJC member schools are also facing lean budgetary times, but they nonetheless maintain both print and online editions. Even so, if you eliminate the journalism major and minor, where are The Statement's staffers supposed to learn the skills to effect this "digital transition?" Moreover, even a digital newspaper is expected to adhere to certain journalistic principles and standards. Where are the staffers supposed to learn these? From the University of Phoenix?

We are also concerned that your decision to eliminate the \$65,000 salary line for Delta State's sole journalism professor suspiciously coincides with the request for an interview with you by a Statement reporter regarding Dr. William Hays' wrongful termination suit against the university. This forces us to question if this is now outright censorship, a violation of the students' First Amendment rights. We also find it eerily suspicious that journalism was the only minor eliminated in the division of languages and literature.

Moreover, Phase I of your academic program review for low-enrolled (less than 20) and low-producing programs lists only 15 journalism majors, but that number was taken during the summer after six majors had graduated. Our understanding is that seven new journalism majors have since matriculated, so the number is now greater than 20.

You have required your newer journalism majors to choose another major. So, if they wish to pursue a career in journalism, you leave them no option but to leave Delta State, which they may not be able to afford to do. Do you really want to drive students, who are the reason for a university's existence, *away* to competing institutions all to save a few dollars? In fact, you would *lose* dollars. If 20 journalism majors, who now pay \$6,187 per year in tuition and fees, were forced to transfer to other schools, that would represent a loss of \$123,740 to DSU.

On top of all this, you received a \$12,000 salary increase, more than the cost of printing The Statement for a year. This irony is not lost on us and others.

Mr. LaForge, a university newspaper, operated by students and for students, is one of the most hallowed elements in American higher education. You yourself are a graduate of Delta State and the University of Mississippi School of Law. Do you really want to be remembered as the president who killed the print edition of The Statement, the award-winning paper of your own alma mater, as part of a specious budget-cutting maneuver? Would you want to see The Daily Mississippian killed off to save some money? An independent student newspaper provides information of interest to the student body, and it serves as a vital training ground for the next generation of journalists. It is emblematic of school spirit and pride.

A university's newspaper is an institution to be valued and protected, and yes, subsidized with student fees if necessary, not regarded as a budgetary nuisance or luxury. Certainly, it should not face undue and unjust targeting for doing what its staff has been taught, in your very own classrooms, to do. To borrow from a speaker at our most recent conference, "You don't get the positive stories for the sake of the truth."

You cannot rationalize that DSU's 84-year-old newspaper will still exist as an online edition if you eliminate the means by which those student journalists can learn how to operate a newspaper, whatever the platform. Nor can you justify cutting this and other programs while taking a \$12,000 raise for yourself. That is unconscionable.

We are proud to have Delta State as a member of the SEJC, which has almost 40 member schools in seven states, and you *should* be proud of the awards your newspaper has won. We therefore call upon you in the strongest possible terms to reverse this unwise, draconian, disproportionate, inconsistent, harmful and possibly unconstitutional decision.

Yours respectfully,

Robert Buckman, Ph.D.
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
SEJC President, 2013-14

Bryce McNeil, Ph.D.
Georgia State University
SEJC President, 2014-15

Jacob Lowary, M.A.
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