Student Newspaper Funding Issues on Public University Campuses in Ohio: Higher Education Administrators Vs. Student Journalists

Terry L. Hapney, Jr.
STUDENT NEWSPAPER FUNDING ISSUES ON PUBLIC UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES IN OHIO: HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS VS. STUDENT JOURNALISTS

By Terry L. Hapney Jr., Marshall University

Cases of college and university administrators using funding for student publications as a mechanism to attempt to exercise control over student media arise on a fairly steady basis (Hapney & Russo, 2013). Occasionally, this comes in the form of student government associations that defund student newspapers in retaliation for reportage. Usually, funding provided by administrators and student government associations is not a license to control student newspapers on public university campuses, in particular (2013). Struggles and conflict between university administrators and student journalists over who controls student newspapers in Ohio is evident—including the issue of funding (Hapney & Lucas, 2014a).

This article begins with a review of the relevant literature associated with student newspaper budget cuts carried out by college and university administrators, including an examination of the important federal and Supreme Court cases associated with this scenario. It also outlines the method used in examining budgetary issues on four public university campuses in the state of Ohio. The views of university administrators, faculty members, and student journalists at these universities are outlined. It concludes with ideology in relation to a continual issue with which administrators, faculty members, and student journalists contend.

Review of the Literature

A couple of U.S. Supreme Court cases deal directly with the issue of funding student newspapers.

The plaintiffs in Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Southworth (2000) argued that university mandates for students to pay fees funding student media that students found in conflict with their ideologies violated their First Amendment rights. The Supreme Court disagreed, holding that the fees had the singular purpose of facilitating freedom of ideas exchanged on the campus. This, the Court maintained, is a central part of a public university’s mission, so long as the fees are available to all student groups with all beliefs. The justices, in a unanimous judgment, decided that the fee system was acceptable because the university does not award funding to student groups based on the groups’ views (Wood & Schilling, 2000). An optional or refund system is not required, according to the Court, leaving public universities with the choice of refusing to fund all student organizations or funding all of them no matter the views members champion (Wood & Schilling, 2000). Had this not been the Court’s opinion, student newspapers may have been forced to shut down for lack of funding.

In Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia (1995), a student organization that gained Contracted Independent Organization status began publishing a newspaper to promote its activities. The students sued a committee of the university’s student council after it denied payment to a printer to cover printing costs for the publication. The Supreme Court found that the council discriminated against the students “on the basis of religious editorial viewpoints, not religion itself” (p. 819). The Court also decided that the students were seeking funding as a student publication supported by the student activity fund in other cases. The funding was to cover printing costs that contain materials that are covered by the First Amendment.

Thanks to Rosenberger, administrators at public universities must treat religious student organizations in the same manner as other student organizations (Mawdsley & Russo, 1995). When universities provide students a pub-
lic forum for free speech, they cannot deny such expression based on religion without encountering free-speech problems, according to Mawdsley and Russo.

**Method**

The research included in this article is part of a larger study on student newspaper governance on Ohio’s public university campuses (Hapney, 2012). Specifically, this paper addresses issues related to the funding of student newspapers at public universities in Ohio. It provides a look into the thoughts of administrators, faculty members, and students on this important issue.

The data included in this article came from a mixed-methods research study that was, primarily, qualitative (Ridenour & Newman, 2008). The researcher’s quantitative survey questionnaire examined administrative, faculty, and student attitudes regarding student newspapers on public university campuses in Ohio. Once data collection concluded, the researcher visited all campuses on which litigation had occurred between university administrators and student journalists. He conducted interviews and focus groups on those campuses to dig deeply into the issues and struggles among higher education administrators, faculty members, and student journalists.

This study focused on 11 of Ohio’s public universities: University of Akron, Bowling Green State University, University of Cincinnati, Ohio University, The Ohio State University, University of Toledo, Kent State University, Miami University, Cleveland State University, Wright State University, and Youngstown State University. Three other state institutions were removed from the study for several reasons affecting rigor. Of the 11 universities in the study, four had experienced lawsuits related to the operation of the student newspapers on their campuses. The researcher conducted interviews and focus groups to collect data in the informants’ natural workplaces and classroom environments.

The principal investigator visited the four higher education locations to conduct interviews and hold focus groups with a Business Affairs Representative (BAR), Journalism Faculty Members (JFM), administrative Legal Team Members (LTM), Student Affairs Administrators (SAA), Student Journalists (SJ), and Student Newspaper Advisory Board Members (SNABM). This article gives insight into issues of funding that face student newspapers on select Ohio public university campuses.

**Funding**

This section provides guidelines related to funding that administrators should use when dealing with student newspapers on college and university campuses throughout the United States, based on how the courts are trending.

Public college and university administrators may choose to fund student newspapers with student fees. Such decisions do not violate the First Amendment rights of off-campus newspaper publishers and students who object to such use of fees because university student newspapers fulfill universities’ educational goals by providing journalism experiences to students and for public discussions (Haye County Guardian v. Supple, 1992).

University student senates may not refuse funding for gay and lesbian student groups if they approve funding for other student groups, because public universities that fund speech or expression must do so fairly with no discrimination based on religion (Gay and Lesbian Students Association v. Gohn, 1988).

Even when students disagree with the content of campus papers, they must continue to pay student fees (Kania v. Fordham, 1983). Public university supervisory boards may not reduce funding of student newspapers when board members and administrators object to editorial content (Stanley v. Magrath, 1985).

Universities that require students to pay fees to fund newspapers do not abridge the First Amendment by requiring individuals to pay such fees. Student journalists may edit material submitted to student newspapers, but public university administrators may not censor student newspapers if they were created as a forum for expressing student opinions, not as publications designed to further governmental programs regulated by university administrators (Arrington v. Taylor, 1974).

Public university administrators cannot penalize student newspapers financially for deciding what type of advertising they will accept, their editorial content, and who is hired to their staffs (Joyner v. Whiting, 1973). Requiring mandatory student fees to fund student newspapers is constitutional, and students cannot refuse to pay such fees because institutional officials have the freedom to
present the broadest range of ideas in various formats to their students (Veed v. Schwartzkopf, 1973).

Views on Student-Newspaper Funding at Select Ohio Public Universities

**Funding at Hillcrest University**

Administrator: The student media board makes financial decisions for all student media at HU. “They determine who gets what from the budgets,” the SAA commented. “So, it includes a variety of magazines, student radio, student television, all of that.” There have been conversations taking place between the journalism program and student affairs division about finding enough money to create a position that would be a business manager for all student media at HU. “Then, hopefully, transition that person off institutional dollars so part of the revenue they would bring in would pay for that person and the person would oversee the business function but also have some editorial advising,” the SAA explained. “It’s not administering. It’s not managing. But, advising . . . How you define that role of advising, I think, is very important.”

Student. There is one thing that “keeps me up at night,” according to the SJ:

It’s not the $30,000 we get from (the student media board) that scares me. But the fact that so many of our advertisements are from the university or organs of the university. The way I see the $30,000, although (the student media board) may not see it this way, they see it as funding to a student organization, but I see it as payment for delivering 8,000 papers to campus each week. So, students . . . each student is paying $2, basically, for 50 issues of the paper a year. I think that’s a pretty good deal. So, the funding here always annoys me. I feel more like we should just be able to charge them. ‘Hey, you want the paper?’

The SJ indicated that the editors would have to create a complicated subscription formula if it lost the university funding. “Most universities do support their paper in some way,” the JFM maintained. The SJ noted that if the university ever cut the paper’s direct support the paper would survive. It might have to move to a once-a-week basis for a while, he offered. “I’d probably have to talk most of the staff into taking a giant pay cut,” the SJ pointed out. “Or just giving up our pay altogether. I mean, we would be doing it anyhow. But if we lost that and all the advertising, then there would be a problem.”

Faculty. The JFM stated that the students sell advertisements that run in the student newspaper. The JFM oversees all of the students. The week prior to this interview, a lot of the students who sell advertisements had final exams, so there were not many ads in the paper. The student media board approves the newspaper’s budget. One time the JFM was told her job was going to be eliminated. This was when the current SAA first arrived at HU:

She had no idea she had no power to get rid of (my position) . . . She wanted the money. But it was set under student fees, or somewhere it had to be spent on (student newspaper) advisers, so it didn’t change. (Student media board members) got involved by writing letters. They’re more like an advocacy group . . . If I have something going on and . . . I feel like they need to be aware . . . they’re almost . . . like my backbone. I feel like I’m in a great situation here. Obviously, you never know what might happen tomorrow.

The JFM and the student editors create the budget that then goes to the student media board for approval. Then it makes its way to student activities. “We request a certain amount from them and they tell us if we get it,” the JFM remarked. “This year we got $50,000 from them.” The student newspaper has had budgets as strong as $200,000. For the past few years, according to the JFM, the budget has been in the $140,000-$150,000 range, due to the economy. The $50,000 student fees allocation is just a small part of the overall budget. The rest is the result of advertising sales. “We get a lot of national advertising,” the JFM declared.

Two or three years ago there were state budget cuts. Every unit on campus took a 10% cut to its budget. “We got $27,000,” the JFM acknowledged. “Actually, it was the students’ idea to ask for 10% less. It was budget cuts and the students said, ‘Well, if everybody’s cutting, we’ll cut 10%.’ But then we went back up when the budget went back. The next year we asked for the full amount again.”

**Funding at University of Tomorrow**

Administrator: The SAA offered that the funding for the paper, prior to the newspaper becoming independent,
came from student general fees. “Before, it’s my understanding that it was pretty traditional (support for) the paper.”

**Student.** The student newspaper is fiscally independent of UOT, according to the SJ. She does not have input in the budget. “That’s, sort of, a business thing. And the editorial and the business side are totally separate entities. So, I usually don’t deal with anything that has to do with budget, other than the payroll budget for, like, the editorial staff.” Payroll is structured as a set amount the students use to operate every position. Students are paid per issue. “It can either be more or less depending on how (the editor feels) their performance has been or if we have extra money in the budget,” she pointed out.

**Faculty.** The JFM remarked that student fees funded the paper prior to its independent status. Advertising funds it now. The SNABM said funding for the paper comes, solely, through advertising. He said when the split occurred, the university no longer had to support a $100,000-plus budget for the paper or the roughly 1,000-square feet of office space. “So they were content . . . as content as university administration ever is with any student newspaper, because student newspapers make bonehead mistakes,” the SNABM stated. “Student newspapers . . . take on the administration. Sometimes rightly and sometimes maybe not with all the facts. So . . . that aside . . . the university was pretty content to let it, you know, be independent.”

The SNABM declared that the paper struggled, financially, for a while. One of the things the student newspaper advisory board realized was it was paying a lot of money for rent. “The location was at the south side of the campus and in a not . . . very safe area.” He approached the university’s Board of Trustees to ask the board for permission to rent office space on campus. He had ties to the university, as an alumnus. “I thought I’d get a fair hearing,” he reported. “I’ve never been so stonewalled in all my life. I was really surprised at the lack of responsiveness from the university to our requests . . . So, we decided . . . we’ll just make the best of it and go it alone.”

The SNABM acknowledged they put together a business plan and retired the $150,000 debt in three years. Now the paper has $150,000 in the bank.

The SNABM recognized the paper is doing “pretty well” financially. He said he attributes that to university newspapers being “somewhat immune” to what is happening in print media. Such papers are a niche market, but they are starting to feel the effects now. “Print revenue is way . . . down (now),” he said. “We probably (have to) reinvent ourselves again. We had a board meeting last night and talked about . . . what we can do to turn it around.”

**Funding at Taylor White University**

**Administrator.** There is a Board of Trustees policy at TWU that addresses funding for the independent student newspaper, the SAA reported. Student publications get money from student fees to produce and publish the student newspaper, including paying the students who serve in leadership roles. The policy states that the independent student newspaper’s staff members will retain the paper’s carry-forward money. Any unspent money at the end of the academic year goes back to the student newspaper. “The other student organizations don’t (get carry-forward funds),” the SAA acknowledged. Other student organizations’ carry-forward funds go to the SAA who works with the student activities board to reallocate the money. Student media included in the receiving of carry-forward funds are the campus radio station, the independent student newspaper, and other media operations.

The independent student newspaper receives a student fee allocation of just over $70,000. The SAA recognized that the paper is also budgeted to make $40,000 in advertising sales. “They haven’t done that in a while,” he said.

There have been no budget cuts made to the student newspaper. In fact, the administration has given them more money because the costs associated with publishing the independent student newspaper have risen. Students make the decisions regarding student-fee allocations at TWU. The SAA chairs that committee. There are also administrators on the committee, but the students make up the majority of members.

The SAA added that he thinks the lab newspaper also gets some student-fee funding, but it does not go through his office: “I think the College of (name) gets money directly from the administration without student input, and I think they may give some of that to the (lab newspaper).”

The LTM commented that she is unsure from where the funding comes for the independent student newspaper. She explained that she thinks the lab paper is recognized as a student organization that taps into a pool of fees that the student government allocates. “They have an allocation body,” she indicated. “Now, I’m sure they do get some . . . advertisements, too. But there has to be some, you know, basic, operational funding.”
Student. The student journalist did not mention funding during the course of the interview.

Faculty. The JFM with the lab paper confirmed that funding for the paper comes from the university, specifically, the dean’s office, but in the case of the independent newspaper funding comes from student fees because it is a club activity. Over time, according to the JFM, it increases. He noted there have been no cuts to the lab paper’s budget since he has been at TWU. “Though, we always foresee it in the future the way things are going,” he offered.

Funding at Buckeye State University

Student media at BSU is converged in a major way. The student newspaper, student radio station, student television station, and student online medium work closely together.

Administrator. The SAA stated that there have been a couple of funding differences of opinion in terms of how funding for student media should be used. “But we’ve usually been able to work those through,” the SAA pointed out. The SAA also remarked that the BSU student newspaper considers itself independent because the majority of its funding comes from advertising revenue. “But those dollars are getting a little scarce right now,” the SAA stated. She said the rest of the funding comes through student fees: “The amount of fee that goes there is a board-established fee. Over the years, (the student newspaper advisory board) has come through with requests to increase that per student dollar amount.”

The SAA declared that the funding level has stayed pretty steady over the years.

Student. The SJs reported that “a good bit” of student media funding comes from student activity fees. “We get a lot from advertising when we cover local football games and broadcast those,” a broadcast journalism student who works for the television station acknowledged. “And we also get a lot of revenue from our production company. We do in-house commercial production, different shoots for different people. We get a lot of revenue that way.” The journalists who work for the television station also have a deal with a teleproductions organization in which they have use of a media truck to do live broadcasts. The student newspaper is “an advertiser’s wish,” according to the SJs. They make money from student housing advertisements, advertising revenue from Amazon, in addition to local businesses. “We are considered a student organization on campus, so we do get funding from the university as well,” a student newspaper journalist recognized. The website and campus television station are also considered student organizations and receive funding from the university in the form of student fees.

Student journalists from all media indicated that the amount in student fees has been cut in recent years:

That’s why we’ve upped our revenues on our side. That’s why we go out and do the football games . . . because it’s a bear to do those games. It takes a lot of time, a lot of effort, manpower that we almost don’t have. But we do it because when we get cut, and we do get cut. We all took salary cuts.

Other student journalists said the budget has been “slashed” for the past two semesters. “Our salaries have gone down . . . we try to make up for it,” an SJ added. “Same here. I don’t think it’s like, uh, necessarily like a vendetta kinda thing,” another SJ commented. “It’s not like the university is trying to censor us.”

Faculty. The SNABM explained there is a student advertising staff for the student newspaper. A professional staff supervises them. They “actually do a great job,” the SNABM indicated. The SNABM maintained that the university determines the level of student fees funding for the newspaper. There is a “referendum process where it can be adjusted without university direct approval, but just last year, for example, the BAR submitted a letter asking for an increase in funding because of the added expense of all the computer equipment that goes along with this and the university approved it,” the SNABM noted. Since the SNABM has been at BSU, the student newspaper budget has not been cut or gone down. “It’s stayed the same for a considerable period of time and then just went up.”

The JFM offered that funding for the student newspaper is a 50/50 mix of student fee monies and ad revenue. “It used to be that (the student newspaper) took nothing from student fee money, but we obviously can’t keep student hours in here at a decent amount.” The JFM pointed out that the overall budget for the student newspaper, television station, a magazine, and the radio station is nearly $1 million per year. It covers all co-curricular media. There are other non-curricular media, including several magazines that are not covered
by this budget. Funding for the student media was flat from spring semester to fall during this study. “But in essence we have cut budgets almost every semester I’ve been here,” the JFM remarked. “We got an increase in student fee money. Without that we would have had to severely cut budgets.”

Conclusion

The only confirmed lawsuits among these four universities centered on open records requests that had been denied by university administrators (Hapney & Lucas, 2014b). There were no confirmed cases of legal action with regard to funding issues.

Overall, the public universities examined for this article seem typical. One uses a student media board to make funding decisions based on, in large part, advertising sales with a small percentage of funding coming from student fees. This institution’s student newspaper has experienced budget cuts, but they were the same as those all across the campus. Another university’s student newspaper is completely independent from the institution, but was funded completely by student fees before the independent status. Its current operating budget is from advertising sales and the paper is financially sound. A third university has an independent student newspaper that is funded by advertising and student fees. A lab paper tied to the curriculum in the form of two classes relies on student fees that are funneled through academic affairs and distributed by the dean of the college under which the newspaper falls. There have been no budget cuts to these papers. The final university examined in this study features an independent student newspaper whose funding comes mainly from advertising sales. It was mixed in terms of perception of budget cuts. Students said they had endured cuts, but that the cuts were not a “vendetta” or “censorship.” The business affairs representative said there had only been increases. The faculty member said there had been cuts.

Compared to the literature on student newspapers’ enduring struggles over control throughout the rest of the nation (Keierleber, 2014; Kruth, 2015; LeBoeuf, 2015; Santus, 2014; Vicent, 2013; Viera, 2015; Zweifler, 2012), these four public university student newspaper scenarios seem pretty stable as they relate to funding. As Student Press Law Center attorney Adam Goldstein said, a “University’s funding shouldn’t be used as leverage to regulate (a) paper’s speech” (Vicent, 2013, para. 26). It appears as though administrators on these campuses take that quote to heart.

Dr. Terry L. Hapney, Jr. is an associate professor in the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Marshall University.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

1. Informants in this study selected pseudonyms for their universities.