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Out of the briar patch

By G.D. GEARINO, Staff Writer

Sex isn't Scott Ralls' problem anymore.

It's been a problem for the previous four months. Ralls is president of Craven Community College in New Bern, where in March a column offering tips on how to "jolt tired sex lives" was published in the campus newspaper, to the dismay of some readers. But Ralls expects the sex problem to end this week -- whereupon he can tend to more typical campus needs, such as making sure there's not enough parking or seeing that political correctness is rigidly enforced.

Note to Ralls: I'm teasing, Scott. I tease because I love.

Actually, I ooze with sympathy for Ralls. He wandered into that briar patch of First Amendment law that says, essentially, that administrators at public colleges don't get to decide what goes in their campus papers. They just get to live with the consequences.

College sex columns are at a high tide these days. Spend just a few minutes with Google and you'll find references to at least a dozen college papers that feature a sex columnist. Even the mainstream media has climbed on -- sorry, couldn't resist -- by reporting on the phenomenon with varying degrees of approval: Fox News (scoldingly) and the Philadelphia Inquirer (benignly), just to name two. So it was just a matter of time before somebody at The Campus Communicator, the student paper at Craven Community College, decided to join the trend.

The one and only installment of "Between the Sheets" was relatively tame, by Cosmo-in-the-checkout-line standards. "Break out the heels, ladies!" the column exhorted at one point. At another, it encouraged lovers to "try a change of atmosphere and environment, like a car, pool, cooler or desk." (Car? Got it. Pool? Got it. Desk? Got it. Cooler? Don't get it.)

Other items were racier -- most notably a short discussion of adult toys -- and they are what caused the problem.

"It created a huge outcry in the community and among the students here," Ralls says, a characterization shared by Communicator editor Corey Friedman. There had never been "clear operating policies" for the newspaper, Ralls said, but it seemed apparent that some were in order. That was when Ralls found himself in the briar patch: He proposed that future issues of the paper be reviewed by administrators prior to publication.

Suddenly, this issue wasn't about sex anymore. It was about censorship.

Ralls got a graduate-level education in the pitfalls of stepping on the First Amendment. Two organizations that zealously protect free speech, the Student Press Law Center and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, weighed in with letters that explained the law and decried the proposal. Ralls also received e-mail messages from all over the country, some of which portrayed his proposal as "the worst censorship that's ever occurred," he says.

A graceful retreat was in order. A newly proposed set of guidelines for the paper -- which will be presented to the college's board of trustees this week -- calls for "an editorially independent newspaper," Ralls says. Any complaints will be the

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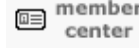


editor's problem from now on.

Friedman confirms that he, not Ralls, will henceforth decide what gets published. One decision he's already made is to kill the sex column permanently. "I think it was a bad fit for our readership," Friedman says. Besides, that love-in-the-cooler thing had him puzzled, too.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the difference between censorship and editing.

Columnist G.D. Gearino can be reached at 829-4802 or dang@newsobserver.com.



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