

The Role of Student Publications on Campus

Student journalists and publications play a vital role in informing their fellow students about campus events, serving as a check on their school's administration, and uncovering stories that outside media might miss.

With more and more local news outlets shuttering, many college newspapers are the primary source of information about not only what's happening on campuses but also their surrounding communities.

For example, student newspapers across the country covered Black Lives Matter protests of regional and national significance. From The A&T Register at North Carolina A&T State University to The Collegian at California State University Fresno to The Minnesota Daily (a 121-year old student newspaper) at the University of Minnesota, student publications reported on protests on their campuses and across their surrounding communities, shedding light on alleged institutional racism and civil injustice.

During the pandemic, student publications played a key role in holding administrators and students accountable. For instance, The Michigan Daily exposed a COVID-19 outbreak among the fraternities and sororities at University of Michigan, Arizona State University's student publication reported on students leaving their dorms while they were supposed to be under quarantine, and the student paper at the University of South Carolina alerted the public to the ways in which the administration was withholding information about COVID-19 clusters.

Moving forward, student media will continue to have an important role to play.

Types of Student Publications

Publications can have a variety of formats, including print and digital newspapers, student blogs, journals, and class publications.

Most student newspapers fit into one of two broad categories: classroom publications and editorially independent publications.

Classroom papers, sometimes referred to as lab publications, are primarily teaching tools for publishing stories, and the work is usually directed, assigned, and graded by a professor. In this kind of class, your professor can exercise their academic freedom to maintain much more control over what is published. That being said, they still must approach grading and publishing in a viewpoint neutral way.

With respect to editorially independent papers (which can be funded either through student fees collected by the university or independent sources) students are responsible for content, sometimes with the guidance of a faculty member or an advisor. These advisors act as sounding boards when brainstorming stories, share institutional knowledge, provide advice on ethical issues, and make sure student journalists' rights are being respected. At public schools and at private schools that commit themselves to free speech, administrators and faculty cannot dictate what can and cannot be published.

In regard to funding, student publications have the same rights as any other recognized student organization. Administrators and student governments must be viewpoint-neutral when making funding decisions. For example, a school cannot deny or rescind funding based on reporting that represents the school in a negative light or angers alumni and donors.

Protecting Your Rights as Student Journalists

Student publications are protected by the First Amendment at public universities. At private universities, their treatment should be consistent with university policy—which, at most private schools, clearly expresses a commitment to freedom of speech, if not freedom of the press specifically.

Despite robust protections for student journalists, some colleges have attempted to censor or punish student publications, particularly when student journalists have been critical of the administration or have written about topics the administration finds objectionable.

Among some of the tactics administrators have used to silence journalists are defunding a publication, using the threat of an investigation, insisting on prior review before publication, and putting pressure on journalists and student media advisors to steer coverage.

Having a recorded or written record is key to pushing back against censorship. If anyone does try to silence you, utilize your reporting skills to make sure you maintain a record of communication and alert your advisor.

Other students, university staff members, and sometimes even administrators, have been known to steal or destroy free papers distributed on campus for publishing unpopular opinions or unfavorable coverage. This kind of action is vandalism or theft and should be treated and reported on as such.

The best way to protect against censorship, particularly administrative censorship, is to know your rights and make sure your reporting is ethically sound. Good journalism practices should already avoid the kind of unprotected speech, such as obscenity or defamation, that a school might try to use to justify interfering with student editorial judgment.

Be clear with sources about what is on and off the record, make sure you know your state's laws regarding recording conversations, and always try to clearly identify yourself as an on-duty reporter when attending events you're covering.

Conclusion

Student publications play a vital role in informing students about events and occurrences on campus, exposing wrongdoing, holding leadership accountable, and informing the larger community about relevant events. In order to perform these important services, publications should be autonomous and free from editorial interference or censorship by administrators.

Additional Resources for Students

- [Student Press Censorship — What Does it Look Like?](#)
- [Under Pressure: The Warning Signs of Student Newspaper Censorship](#)
- [A Citizen's Guide to Recording the Police](#)
- [Student Press Law Center's Public Records Letter Generator](#)