

December 2, 2025

Kendall Parrish
General Counsel
Office of the President
University of Central Oklahoma
100 North University Drive
Edmond, Oklahoma 73034

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (kparrish5@uco.edu)

Dear Mr. Parrish:

FIRE appreciates your November 10 response to our October 27 letter regarding the university's treatment of student newspaper *The Vista*. However, the response does nothing to address our substantive concerns, and instead merely dismisses the First Amendment infirmities with UCO's behavior. UCO's actions belie any claims of offering "unwavering support of *The Vista*," and we find UCO's continued misunderstanding of basic First Amendment law alarming.¹ UCO *must* refrain from censoring both *The Vista* and *The Independent View*, the former *Vista* editors' new, unaffiliated outlet. Meddling with content and distribution methods of a student newspaper is not just textbook censorship—it is unlawful. We again call on UCO to uphold its First Amendment obligations and to publicly announce it will no longer interfere with student media's protected editorial decisions.

First, we would like to set the factual record straight. In responding to attorney Leslie Briggs's letter, you suggest there is no content animus from the university, instead accusing her of mischaracterizing President Todd Lamb's remark that the paper focused too much on "broken eggs."² Yet UCO offers no alternative explanation of his comment, and conveniently ignores that the student to whom Lamb made the remark interpreted it as an effort to sway the paper's coverage. This, coupled with the efforts to reappropriate *The Vista*'s funding for a new

¹ Emma Murphy, *Free speech advocacy group condemns UCO for 'controlling' student newspaper*, OKLA. VOICE (Oct. 27, 2025, 3:04 PM) <https://oklahomavoice.com/briefs/free-speech-advocacy-group-condemns-uco-for-controlling-student-newspaper/>.

² Letter from Kendall Parrish, General Counsel, to Leslie Briggs, Attorney (Oct. 20, 2025) (on file with author).

promotional magazine,³ suggests Lamb meant exactly what they thought he meant with his “broken eggs” comment: Student journalists should not report; they should promote UCO.

Further, you present Ella Spurlock’s resignation as evidence that there was no retaliation against individual staff members because she resigned from her position voluntarily rather than assume more responsibilities. But Spurlock resigned because UCO retaliated against her. After assuming the role of acting editor-in-chief,⁴ faculty informed her that UCO would strip her of her managing editor responsibilities.⁵ UCO effectively silenced Spurlock by taking these duties away from her, and it appears to have done so in retaliation for her speech opposing the print ban. While her eventual resignation from *The Vista* may have been “voluntary” in the strictest sense of the word, it was clearly a response to UCO’s campaign against her.

You then insist the print ban itself was not retaliation, summarizing UCO’s decision to restrict *The Vista* to digital distribution as stemming from “(1) academic freedom and pedagogical reasons; (2) availability of resources; and (3) enhanced opportunities for distribution.”⁶ Even if all of these reasons were responsive to some reality—according to the students involved, they are not—it would not matter, as those decisions are not administrators’ to make.

Again, the problem stems from UCO’s fundamental misunderstanding of the university’s role regarding editorially independent student publications. The argument that the university has discretion to determine what is best for *The Vista* might have some validity were the newspaper produced for a class. Not only is that not the case for *The Vista*, but the paper has a 120-year history of editorial independence. Not even a professor, imbued with academic freedom in the classroom, may claim an academic freedom right to censor a student newspaper operating with editorial independence.⁷ And for the *university* to claim an academic freedom right to alter the distribution of a newspaper defies decades of precedent that make clear students, not the government, are entitled to make editorial decisions for independent student newspapers.⁸ Regardless of the university’s motivations, the decision to print a newspaper on paper is not up to university administrators, even if the outlet has a faculty advisor or the university disagrees with the direction students wish to take the paper.⁹

³ Email from Elizabeth Maier, College of Liberal Arts Dean, to Joe Hight, professor, (Jul. 22, 2025, 4:18 PM) (on file with author).

⁴ Email from Hight to Erika Williams, Advisor (Aug. 29, 2025, 9:23 AM) (on file with author). You cite Victor Lopez’s resignation to prove UCO never sanctioned a *Vista* staff member, but neither FIRE nor Briggs referenced this case as an example of retaliation. We *did* reference several other cases you did not address.

⁵ Letter from Briggs to Todd Lamb, President, (Oct. 7, 2025), *available at* <https://www.rcfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025-10-07-RCFP-letter-to-University-of-Central-Oklahoma.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *State Bd. for Comm. Colls. & Occ. Educ. v. Olson*, 687 P.2d 429, 439 (Colo. 1984) (citing *Reineke v. Cobb Cnty. Sch. Dist.*, 484 F.Supp. 1252 (N.D. Ga. 1980)).

⁸ *Husain v. Springer*, 494 F.3d 108, 121 (2d. Cir. 2007); *Bazaar v. Fortune*, 476 F.2d 570 (5th Cir. 1973).

⁹ *See, e.g., Coppola v. Larson*, 2006 WL 2129471 at *8 (D.N.J. 2006) (holding of an outlet with an advisor: “The State may exclude speech only if the restrictions are meant to preserve the forum’s purpose and are reasonably in relation to that forum’s purpose. ... Impermissible editorial control over student-run

Similarly, while the university might put forth content-neutral reasons to cut funding for the print product due to a resource shortage, it cannot use the advisor's lack of expertise with print journalism to justify killing that product. Not only is the university's claim that there was no other advisor available factually incorrect, as Hight volunteered to take over the role in August,¹⁰ but its feelings about the advisor's expertise can only influence its choice of advisor, not control the student's choice to print.¹¹

A public university may not regulate a student newspaper's editorial choices, and it may not retaliate against a newspaper for its content. That was true when UCO impermissibly restricted *The Vista*, and it remains true now that the students have struck out on their own in creating *The Independent View*. That UCO cannot—or will not—recognize these realities is deeply concerning; if it would be helpful, we are more than happy to meet to help UCO administrators understand their First Amendment obligations vis a vis student media, free of charge. We ask for a commitment that UCO will not interfere with the editorial decisions of either *The Vista* or *The Independent View*—including how the papers distribute their product. We request a substantive response to this letter no later than December 19, 2025, confirming UCO understands its First Amendment obligations and will respect the rights of its student journalists going forward.

Sincerely,



Dominic Coletti
Program Officer, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Todd Lamb, President

publications may also include actions by school administrators that have an indirect but adverse impact on a publication's ability to publish.”).

¹⁰ Email from Hight to Williams (Aug. 29, 2025, 1:10 PM) (on file with author).

¹¹ See *Husain*, 494 F.3d at 121 (2d. Cir. 2007); *Bazaar*, 476 F.2d at 560 (5th Cir. 1973); *Coppola*, 2006 WL 2129471 at *8 (D.N.J. 2006).