



Dr. Maria C. Bennett Rose  
President  
Fairmont State University  
222 Hardway Hall  
Fairmont, WV 26554-2470

June 23, 2015

Dear President Rose,

I am writing on behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists to show our support for Michael Kelley and the staff of *The Columns*, and to urge you to reinstate Mr. Kelley as adviser to the student newspaper.

SPJ is the nation's most broad-based journalism organization, dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. SPJ promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry through the daily work of our approximately 7,500 members nationwide -- 1,800 of whom are student journalists.

We have been following the situation at Fairmont State regarding *The Columns* coverage of potentially harmful mold in campus housing, the university's attempts to censor said coverage, and the failure to renew *The Columns* adviser Michael Kelley's contract.

So far, the university's responses to allegations of censorship, violations of First Amendment rights, and bullying are inadequate and do not reflect a genuine commitment on the part of the university to independently investigate the treatment of journalists and journalism at Fairmont State.

This is not a "contract matter" to be adjudicated through faculty appeal channels. No one at the university has adequately explained why it was necessary to let Mr. Kelley -- a well-credentialed journalism adviser -- go. There was a job opening, Mr. Kelley was able and willing to perform it, and he did so successfully for a year. To not renew his contract because *The Columns* wrote stories that university officials feel put Fairmont State in a negative light is despicable.

Under Mr. Kelley's advisement, Fairmont State students have done excellent journalistic work covering health and safety concerns in the campus dorms. Rather than putting administrative pressure on them, the university should be acknowledging their good work, encouraging them to continue learning and growing as journalists, and congratulating Mr. Kelley on being an innovative teacher who cares about his students and their education.

Just this week, the Columbia Journalism Review ran an article about the removal of faculty advisers sparking concern about the independence of student publications. In so many communities, the student newspaper provides not only the campus community, but the community at-large, an important source of news and a place for up-and-coming journalists to hone their skills.

As the CJR noted, for many college journalism programs, the adviser is the “heart and soul,” serving as coach, recruiter, cheerleader, the institutional memory – and much more. Removing a good adviser who motivates and challenges students can interrupt the publication’s operations at best, and prevent a community from receiving crucial information at worst.

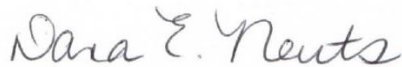
SPJ, the Student Press Law Center and other national journalism organizations across the country are deeply concerned that some universities view student publications more as a public relations tool for the university than as important news organizations with First Amendment rights and protections.

By failing to renew Mr. Kelley’s contract and using intimidation tactics on your own students, Fairmont State is sending the message that student journalists and advisers must now fear punishment for publishing news of which the university does not approve, and that the First Amendment is only looked upon favorably when it benefits the university. No one is benefitting from the situation as it stands.

We would be happy to discuss this matter with you further, if you are interested, either with an informal phone call or a more formal meeting.

Again, we urge you to reinstate Mr. Kelley without penalty to his position as adviser to *The Columns*, and allow him and his students to focus once again on providing news to the Fairmont State community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dana E. Neuts".

Dana E. Neuts  
President, Society of Professional Journalists  
[SPJDana@gmail.com](mailto:SPJDana@gmail.com)