

*College Media Advisers letter of concern, as provided to the Student Press Law Center by CMA President Ken Rosenauer.*

The College of Media Advisers Board of Directors disapproves strongly with how Western Oregon University handled the case of newspaper adviser Susan Wickstrom, and it is concerned that the present academic and student affairs environment is not conducive to a healthy journalism and student media program. In spite of these concerns and because Ms. Wickstrom does not want her job back, the CMA Board would like to offer its help to Western Oregon University in creating a healthy environment for student media to flourish.

The Board is concerned about the overall environment for student media at WOU, but CMA's Adviser Advocacy Program limits the focus of its investigation to whether the adviser's contract was not renewed because she was doing her job according to CMA ethical guidelines or whether her contract was not renewed because of other reasons.

The Adviser Advocate has talked to numerous persons, looked at numerous WOU documents, studied the report submitted by the WOU Ad-hoc Committee on Free Press, and discussed that report with committee member Dick Hughes and WOU President John Minahan.

So the Board's particular concerns include:

- University officials searching the student newspaper's newsroom without notifying the students or the adviser. Even though the newsroom is university property, a student newsroom – or any newsroom for that matter – cannot perform its public service function if it is subject to newsroom searches by the people it is covering. The search stifles journalists' credibility with and trust of their sources, and without credibility and trust, newspaper journalists cannot function effectively.
- University officials blaming the newspaper staff and its adviser for exposing the security lapse on its computers. A newspaper staff's job is to inform the public about information the public needs to make educated decisions about community issues. A newspaper staff also guides a discussion about those issues from its editorial pages. It was the newspaper's job to inform the public about the security breach on the university's computers. It was the university's job to fix that security breach and make sure it didn't happen again. Then it was the newspaper's job to inform the public that the security breach problem had been fixed. As the messenger, newspapers are used to being blamed, but that doesn't make it the newspaper's – or the newspaper adviser's – fault.
- University officials' handling of the security investigation and Ms. Wickstrom's case indicates a lack of understanding of the basic philosophy, principles and ethics that guide CMA advisers. The newspaper's job is noted above. That newspaper needs to operate in an open, honest and direct way. The newspaper adviser's job is to teach his or her students' how to operate in that fashion, in addition to teaching them all the skills necessary to do that. These skills include interviewing, observing, researching, writing a lead, organizing a story, working with photo editors and designers and graphics artists to provide a visually pleasing design and

many more skills that a student does not learn in a day, or a week, or a month, or a year. An adviser also teaches students about legal and ethical issues that come up on a daily basis. Then the adviser steps back and allows the students to perform their jobs as a newspaper staff. Then the adviser comes back and critiques their work. This is a time-consuming method of teaching that harkens back to John Dewey's teaching philosophy of learning by doing. But it provides students something that no other method can provide, and that is the advantage of holding them responsible for what they publish. This is very important to understand when it comes to journalism education methods. There is much more to be said about this teaching philosophy, but the point is that Ms. Wickstrom had very little chance, if any, to teach them how to do such a difficult story in such a short time, and the decision to publish or not should be in the students' hands, not the advisers'.

- University officials' handling of the security investigation and Ms. Wickstrom's case indicates a lack of understanding of basic journalism principles and ethics, especially in a student newspaper. First and foremost, a student newspaper – like any professional newspaper – serves the public, which is the community of WOU students, faculty, staff and administrators. Serving the public comes before serving university guidelines, and those two interests sometimes conflict. Good student newspapers will always choose to serve the public interest first. This can be a problem when administrators don't understand why public service is more important than university guidelines. It also can become a problem when administrators don't understand that the university's attorney, who serves the university's interests, is not the first attorney someone would turn to who is serving the public's interest when those interests might be in conflict with the university's interests.
- The committee did not interview Ms. Wickstrom or her former supervisor. We're concerned about this because the committee would have come away with some different perspectives, but we understand that it was Ms. Wickstrom and her former supervisor's choice not to be interviewed.

So the CMA Board concludes:

- 1) It already has been a year since the chain of events began that led to WOU's refusal to renew Susan Wickstrom's contract.
- 2) Ms. Wickstrom does not want her job back.
- 3) Ms. Wickstrom wants a healthy environment for student media at WOU so the next adviser can flourish.
- 4) WOU President John Minahan wants CMA's help in creating a healthy environment for student media to flourish.
- 5) If it is not possible to help the adviser, the least CMA can do is help create healthy environments for student media programs.

For these reasons, the CMA Board issues this strong statement of concern for the health of student media at Western Oregon University, and it offers to work with WOU leadership to help create a healthy environment for WOU's student media program.