# **Editorial: Support needed for students’ rights**

***Directions:*** *Read the following editorial (published in The Omega, a student newspaper in Downers Grove, IL). Textmark for the following:* ***problem****,* ***plan*** *and* ***addressing counter argument****. After you’re done, discuss the editorial with your group members and answer the following questions.*

March 24, 2016

Just as an entrepreneurship class teaches students the ins and outs of the business world and an art class equips artists with techniques that will help them create a career out of their talent, a high school journalism program educates students by teaching them the skills that are practiced by professionals. The fundamental principles of journalism aren’t just meant to be taught, they’re meant to be practiced, and practiced without the fear of interference from outside bodies.

This being said, *The Omega* will never be able to properly inform the school community, give a voice to students, or practice sound journalism with the increasing burden of prior review and censorship that has occurred in recent months.

The Supreme Court case that limits the rights of student press, Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier, is confusing to say the least. The language of the decision leaves a lot of things open to interpretation and has been the heart of The Omega’s recent problems. This confusion over what rights administrators have is what has most likely led to the dramatic increase of journalistic restraint from administrators across the nation.

Recently proposed Illinois House bill 5902, also known as the Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act, would improve this situation. Not only does this bill protect students’ rights to exercise freedom of speech and press, it also secures for students the right to determine what is the content of the publication.

All that we have to say about this bill is this: it’s about time.

Even under the Hazelwood standard, some administrators show more regard for students’ expression rights than others. Just because administrators have the right to invoke prior review, doesn’t mean they necessarily should.

Excessive administrative involvement in the editorial process creates both an adversarial relationship between the student press and administration and self-censorship by the student journalists. Our coverage of school policies and events this year, such as the proposed Master Facility Plan, the different aspects of Red Ribbon Week and more recently the gender-neutral spaces, has received an unprecedented amount of prior review and censorship.

Between the fall of 1999 and spring of 2011, The Omega received a total of three requests for prior review from administration. Last year, six articles were subject to prior review. So far this year, eight articles have been reviewed by administration before being published.

When administrators make changes to school policy articles before they are published, it is a conflict of interest. In the majority of cases, it is against professional journalistic ethics to allow a person or group to preview an article about themselves before it is published. If we aren’t going to allow a sports team or any other person to make changes on an article about themselves, administrators should expect the same.

We have a responsibility to readers to practice sound journalism by writing truthfully about topics that are important to our audience: the student body.

Earlier this month, one of our editors-in-chief emailed a two-question survey asking about the student body’s views regarding proposed gender-neutral spaces. Finding two minor errors in the survey (slightly misleading wording of one of the questions and a problem with how the survey was set up that allowed users to send multiple responses and skew results), the editor planned on re-sending an updated version but was told by administrators to refrain from doing so because of a pending investigation into whether or not the survey violated board policy 7.15.

Due to the fact that we did not receive an explanation for the restraint or a final decision on the investigation until more than a week later, (requiring us to push our publication back more than a week as well) the Omega considered this an act of unlawful censorship. According to administration, the survey was not considered appropriate for all students. However, the two questions on the survey only included information that was given to The Omega by the administration.

In December, during the review of an article regarding the proposed Master Facility Plan renovations, administrators requested for the reporter to change quotes said by a faculty member to ones that diluted the meaning of the original. The Omega contacted outside counsel and fought to publish the original quotes.

The best way for administration to confront problems they might have with a school publication’s content is through letters to the editor and asking for corrections to be published in a later issue. This allows students to still report freely without administrative involvement but still gives the school the ability to voice any legitimate concerns they may have.

Despite all our criticism of administrative involvement, we get where they are coming from. There is an understable anxiety that comes with the possibility of a student newspaper embarrassing a school or administrator, but ultimately, there has got to be a little faith that student journalists will follow their own high ethical standards.

Having a relationship with administration where there is a constant fear of unnecessary involvement leads student journalists to self-censor themselves, unconsciously taking away some of their own freedom of speech because of the fear of administrative backlash. But if the student press doesn’t say it, who else will?

According to a survey conducted by the Brookings Institute, a mere 1.4 percent of news media coverage is devoted to education. If student journalists do not cover decisions and policy changes throughout the district, these important topics risk going unreported, also risking the possibility that the sole information about said topics is uneducated online gossip.

There is a need in every school for a well-educated student press to set the record straight and be able to do legitimate reporting, have a reasoned opinion, and promote a more informed community. We have a crucial role in the marketplace of ideas and censoring does nobody any favors.

In light of this, the Omega has decided that it is our obligation as journalists to inform our readers when these acts of prior review occur. As of this issue, all articles that have gone through the prior review process will be printed with an editor’s note, noting this fact.

The Speech Rights of Student Journalists Act isn’t just something that we want, it is something that we need. In order for our rights to be secured and to do the best reporting possible, censorship cannot be a thing. As high school students negatively affected by acts of prior review and censorship, we know that our rights have been compromised.

We need them back.

**Questions:**

1. What is the problem described in this editorial?
2. Why is this problem urgent? (Why does it need to be addressed now?)
3. What plan is offered?
4. Who will be implementing this plan?
5. What is the purpose of publishing this editorial? Who is/are the expected audiences of this story and why would they need to know?
6. What is the strongest point made in this story?
7. What is the weakest point made? Explain. Or, are there holes in this argument? Explain.