



Society of Professional Journalists

Bluegrass Professional Chapter

Elizabeth Hansen, president spjliz@gmail.com

John A. Nelson, vice president john.nelson24@gmail.com

National office: 3909 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis IN 46208-4045

317/927-8000 Fax 317/920-4789 **Web site:** www.spj.org

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Statement on UK vs. Kentucky Kernel

Journalism at the University of Kentucky is alive and well. That may be the only good thing about the current battle between President Eli Capilouto and the independent student newspaper, the Kentucky Kernel, but it's a really good thing. If the controversy were between the newspaper and anyone else, Capilouto would be proud of the courage and determination shown by the student reporters and editors, and of the professors who obviously have trained them well.

Instead, the president has vilified them for printing "salacious" material just to grow readership, material he sought to bury because it reveals the university's irresponsible disposition of sexual assault complaints against a former professor who was secretly dismissed with pay and was free to take his propensities elsewhere. We know this much because the newspaper has other sources. But there is more to learn, and the fight has resulted in the school suing its own student newspaper and refusing to comply with state law by allowing the state attorney general to review the documents confidentially, so that the office can execute its responsibility under the Kentucky Open Records Act.

The Society of Professional Journalists, Bluegrass Pro Chapter, joins a chorus of institutions and individuals expressing strong support for the Kentucky Kernel. The school should immediately drop its lawsuit, comply with the attorney general's order and allow the state's 40-year-old open records law to work as it has for decades.

Capilouto suggests only he can protect the privacy of students who are victims of predators, and that it can only be done by withholding records. That's a false claim. The newspaper has practiced professional ethics in its restraint. Even though it has those names and even though the university inadvertently released one name, they have not been published. The president is protecting only the administration and its policies.

At a recent Board of Trustees meeting, Capilouto was confronted by several members who said his handling of this matter was troubling, that it appears the university has something to hide, and that perhaps the documents should be handed over and the lawsuit dropped. Capilouto was steadfast. There was no vote for fear the president would resign amid the dissension.

Maybe resigning is not such a bad idea. A leader of a public university who has such disdain for transparency, the law and students who demand answers may find pastures greener at a private institution, where secrets are more easily kept, where bad acts are more easily swept under the rug, and where there is more control over student publications.

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