

# SEJC

Southeast Journalism Conference

April 14, 2015

Dear Dr. Borsig and Trustees:

On behalf of the Southeast Journalism Conference's 40 member schools, among them Delta State University, we appeal to you to reconsider what we regard as a counterproductive, unfair and detrimental proposal to eliminate the journalism program at DSU and to cut funding for the print edition of The Delta Statement.

You were sent a copy of our letter to Mr. LaForge, in which we itemized solid reasons why the program should not be eliminated. He also sent you a copy of his response to us, in which he accused us of "yellow journalism," said our letter was "filled with innuendo and red herrings," and that we did not present "facts." He chose to rely on what he regarded as "facts," while ignoring the "facts" we presented that clearly disputed the course of action he was determined to follow. For example, he said he was "proud" of the SEJC award received by the online edition of the Statement, arguing that it somehow "reaffirms for us what students told us in our program review process—that they prefer to read their news online. That is a fact."

Is it? Which students, and how many of them, indicated they no longer desire a print edition? To our knowledge, no scientific survey supports that conclusion. He ignored the "fact" that the print edition also won an award; why does not that then "reaffirm" that students also want a print edition? Since those letters were exchanged, the print edition won 16 Mississippi Press Association awards, which speaks volumes of the worth of DSU's journalism program.

We feel duty-bound to rebut Mr. LaForge's other specious "facts." For example, he wrote that "an open forum was held on Sept. 30, 2014, where the process and details about program and non-program cuts (such as the Delta Statement reduction) were discussed. Students, faculty and staff had ample opportunity to weigh-in (sic) with their perspectives throughout the process. There was barely a mention of concern."

This is blatantly untrue. We have reviewed the *eight-page* program review response, dated Sept. 30, 2014, and addressed to the DSU administration outlining the arguments for continuing the program. Eight pages is considerably more than a "mention." He simply ignored it. We enclosed a copy for your review

Mr. LaForge also wrote in response to our argument that student journalists need faculty training and guidance to ensure a professional journalistic product: "While the journalistic training a student receives certainly can, and often does, dovetail nicely with newspaper work, it is not necessary. Many student newspapers are run and staffed by non-journalism students. In fact, that was my experience at Delta State."

First, Mr. LaForge is not expressing a “fact,” but an outdated opinion. He refers to a time when journalism was regarded as a trade, not a profession, a notion that has long since been discredited in favor of liberal arts programs in journalism.

Second, it is simply not a “fact” that “many student newspapers are run and staffed by non-journalism students.” Maybe in his undergraduate days, but no more. Even the Southern universities like Vanderbilt, Tulane and Emory that lack a mass communication program still have faculty advisers with journalistic training to guide those student-run newspapers. The “fact” is that at virtually all of our schools in the SEJC, there are independently run student newspapers, with *both* print and online editions, which are staffed largely by journalism majors or minors and advised by faculty members. The staff members’ classroom instruction does far more than “dovetail nicely with newspaper work.” Professional journalism, so essential in our free society, is not obtained by trial and error, which is what Mr. LaForge proposes. It requires rigorous training in English usage, writing and editing, adherence to established style, graphics, identifying sources and interviewing, fact-checking, and adherence to legal and ethical standards. Would you want the Mississippi higher education system sued for libel because amateur student journalists were not properly schooled in communication law?

Let us turn to another “fact” that Mr. LaForge conveniently ignored, which is that the print edition of the Delta Statement generates approximately \$8,000 in advertising revenue, which has been largely siphoned off into the university’s general fund. In other words, killing the print edition will actually exacerbate the budget deficit he cites as justification for killing an 83-year-old newspaper. It is also a “fact” in the newspaper industry that 75-90 percent of advertising revenue still comes from the *print* editions. At the Delta Statement, 100 percent comes from the print edition. Mr. LaForge assumes that all the revenue from the print edition will magically dovetail, to use his word, to the online edition. This will not happen. If you decapitate the goose that lays the golden egg, there will be no revenue stream for either a print or online edition. The deficit will worsen. That is an economic “fact.”

Another economic “fact” we raised and that he ignored is that if you force the 20 journalism majors to other schools because they do not want change their majors, it will represent a loss of more than \$120,000 in tuition and fees, double the salary line for the journalism adviser.

Finally, a “fact” that has been brought to our attention since we sent that letter is that the journalism program was established, and its facilities built, under a \$350,000 endowment. So, far from being a financial drain to DSU, the journalism program, and the print edition of the Statement, have brought and continue to bring in revenue. If the journalism program is killed off, what happens to those facilities? Will they be raided by Mr. LaForge and diverted to other purposes in defiance of the donors’ wishes? Will the donors’ estates sue? That could prove far more costly than the \$10,000 budget for the print edition.

Ladies and gentlemen, completely apart from the sound, dispassionate economic reasons we have presented, we urge you also to consider what is in the best interest of those Delta State students who wish to become professional journalists. The university and the entire surrounding region, which has produced such legendary journalists as Ida B. Wells and Hodding Carter, are so fortunate to

have been the beneficiaries of that endowment. It would be wrong to throw it away in the misguided belief that it is saving a few dollars. We also urge you to consider the interest of the students who *read* the Delta Statement. They are entitled to an independent, but professionally produced, publication, both print and online.

Professional journalism is vital for informing the citizens of a free society, and to serve as a watchdog for their interests and against government abuses. In addition, one fundamental purpose of any student newspaper is to be one of, if not the only, written historical archive of information and events for a college campus. So many of our institutions' historical records are deeply rooted in the student newspaper and its coverage. It is simply not enough to assume a website will hold the same value or worth 10, 20 or 50 years from now.

You have an award-winning journalism program at DSU of which you should be proud, which is preparing future journalists and archiving the history of Delta State. We implore you to cherish it, not scuttle it.

Respectfully,

Robert Buckman, Ph.D.  
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SEJC President, 2013-14

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