

Western Washington University alumni create \$42,000 student investigative journalism endowment using funds from public records lawsuit against university

After settling a [lawsuit](#) against Western Washington University last year, three alumni have used the funds to establish a permanent endowment for student investigative journalism at the university.

The donation of \$42,000 last week by Erasmus Baxter, Asia Fields and Julia Furukawa will mean the fund will begin by providing around \$1,600 a year to support students pursuing investigative journalism projects or training.

“We know it can feel like an uphill battle to hold institutions accountable,” the alumni said in the gift agreement. “We also believe that student journalists are doing some of the most important accountability journalism about their campuses and communities. We want to help equip them with the resources needed to do this work.”

Additional donations will increase the amount available to students each year. **Anyone who is interested in supporting student investigative journalism at Western can [make their own gift](#) to The Foundation for WWU & Alumni. Please specify that the gift is for the “Student Investigative Journalism Fund.”**

The lawsuit began in 2019, when Baxter and Furukawa were still students, and alleged that the university had violated Washington state’s Public Records Act by withholding the names of students found responsible for sexual misconduct or violent offenses.

A Whatcom County judge agreed. After a state appeals court struck down an effort by some of the students to prevent their names from being released, the judge [penalized Western \\$111,780](#). A settlement followed last fall.

As students, the three reported on sexual misconduct at Western, including how the university [readmitted students following sexual assault findings](#) or [convictions](#). They sought the names of students found responsible for misconduct as a way to understand how widespread this practice was and if sanctions were being applied equally.

In his ruling, Judge David Freeman recognized the importance of student journalism on this topic to the campus community.

“It goes to the heart of free press and the importance of journalism on very important topics,” [he said](#).

The donation to Western represents the full amount that the alumni retained after attorney’s fees and taxes, except for \$2,000 used for an emergency expense.

“This lawsuit was never about the money,” Baxter said. “It was about forcing Western to follow the law. We hope this settlement and endowment will provide an example and resources for future students so that they can hold powerful institutions accountable — even if the institution is their own university.”

The alumni were grateful to have the support of the [Student Press Law Center](#), the [Washington Coalition for Open Government](#), faculty members and their attorney, Bill Crittenden. They were also inspired by students at [The Daily Tar Heel](#) in North Carolina who took their university to court for similar records.