

Journalism Advisory Committee Meeting
February 28, 2024, 3:30 pm

Present on Zoom: Eric Bonds, Kimberley Kinsley (chair), Juliette Landphair (*ex officio*), Marie McAllister (secretary), Farhang Rouhani, Sushma Subramanian (*ex officio*), with guests Amy Jessee (Executive Director of University Communications), and Norah Walsh (Editor in Chief, *The Weekly Ringer*)

I. Call to Order

II. Minutes

Minutes from 1/10/24 were previously approved via email and posted for the UCF.

III. New Business

None.

IV. Old Business

A) FOIA, OSCAR, and FERPA

The committee sought to clarify FOIA policies and procedures in cases where student journalists are investigating the outcome of cases handled by the Office of Student Conduct and Responsibility, particularly in regard to violent crimes that students have chosen not to report to the police. Kim briefly reviewed the case from last year in which FERPA was applied to disciplinary records as well as to academic records. Sushma noted several legal rulings to the contrary from other states. The issue has not come before the Virginia Supreme Court. Sushma noted that there may be a similar FOIA request about OSCAR outcomes in the making this year, so the issue remains topical.

Amy Jessee explained the FOIA process in detail (see <https://www.umw.edu/news/freedom-of-information-act-2/>). In brief, requests come through the Office of University Communication, go through UMW's legal counsel or the Attorney General, then are directed to the appropriate department unless they fall under a statutory exemption that keeps records from being released.

One goal of this meeting was to allow Norah Walsh to ask questions of Amy Jessee and allow Amy to ask questions of Norah. This was productively accomplished. Among other things, Amy suggested that student journalists can send questions to University Communication, where most can be answered without a FOIA request. Amy also noted that even if UMW is legally advised that some particulars under OSCAR are covered by FERPA, student journalists can follow up with OSCAR to learn more about the OSCAR process and with Campus Police for information about reported violent crimes. Juliette noted again that the rights and responsibilities of complainants and respondents were clarified last year in a revision to the OSCAR process (now under the direction of Hunter Rauscher).

In discussing what is at stake in such cases, and what can be done, Kim noted that if the outcome of OSCAR cases is shielded, complainants may regret trusting OSCAR to produce fair results instead of pressing charges. Kim also noted that violence on campus is a legitimate topic for research. Sushma asked whether, even if legal counsel advises that aspects of OSCAR are shielded by FERPA, students journalists could ask for general information about cases of violence handled through the OSCAR process, and Marie asked specifically about OSCAR cases that do or do not include police charges. Amy will look into these questions as part of preparing for any future FOIA requests about OSCAR proceedings.

In other topics, Norah asked whether UMW has a formal policy that controls student interviews with staff and faculty members. Amy noted that staff and faculty are asked to route media contacts (including interview requests from *The Weekly Ringer*) to University Communications so they can be answered by the best source. Amy asked about situations in which University Communications gets multiple questions on the same topic, and about how *The Weekly Ringer* handles corrections in print and online, which Norah explained. Finally, Sushma mentioned that the accuracy of quotes in student newspapers has improved thanks to OtterAI transcripts of interviews.

B) Local journalism

At our previous meeting, Eric suggested that there might be considerable interest on campus and from the community for a panel discussion on the death of traditional local journalism and the implications for democracy, or on the new shape of local journalism in Fredericksburg. CMDS is interested in sponsoring something, and Sushma and Kim will try to make this happen next year, possibly with involvement from PSCI, ENLI, or other departments.

V. Next meeting: Wed., 3/27/24, 3:30 pm, on Zoom

Meeting adjourned at 4:29 m.

Respectfully,
Marie McAllister, JAC Secretary