



To: Kenneth Kitts, Ph.D., president, University of North Alabama
Ross C. Alexander, Ph.D., provost, University of North Alabama

CC: Butler Cain, communications department head
Jim Purcell, Ed.D., executive director, Alabama Commission on Higher Education
Mr. Charles Ball, chairman, Alabama Commission on Higher Education
Mr. Martin Abroms, UNA Board of Trustees
Ms. Libby S. Jordan, UNA Board of Trustees
Mr. Marcus A. Maples, UNA Board of Trustees
Mr. Todd C. Oulette, UNA Board of Trustees
Mr. Steven F. Pierce, UNA Board of Trustees
Mr. William A. Trapp, UNA Board of Trustees
Ms. Felicia Mason, executive director, Alabama Press Association

From: Southeast Journalism Conference
Date: November 29, 2018
Re: Student media adviser position

The Southeast Journalism Conference, of which the University of North Alabama is a member, wishes to join the College Media Association and Foundation for Individual Rights in Education in condemning what we regard as an unjust, unnecessary and seemingly punitive action in forcing media adviser Scott Morris from his position. We are also troubled by your new faculty protocols that mandate that any requests for media interviews with faculty must be screened through the administration. This not only infringes on students' First Amendment rights but undermines the principle of academic freedom as well.

The SEJC's concerns go beyond those outlined by the CMA. In his response to the CMA report that Dr. Alexander sent to faculty and staff, he insists that discussions to upgrade the media adviser's position to that of a tenure-track, full-time faculty with a Ph.D. date to "late 2014." That seems strange, as that is the same semester Mr. Morris was hired. Even if it were true that the decision had been under discussion for four long years, we agree with the CMA that the timing of the announcement, just days after the controversial Flor-Ala article that distressed the administration, seems suspiciously coincidental.

Not only that, but Dr. Greg Pitts, who was communications department head at UNA from 2009-2015, when Mr. Morris was hired and when these discussions allegedly began, disputes your contention. He emailed us:

"I NEVER initiated a request to convert the line to a tenure-track position. I don't believe anyone can produce evidence of such a request at a level above me.

"There was no money for a faculty line in journalism and little opportunity to move the UNA program ahead. The chance to align the student newspaper with the Department of Communication, after having received an initial approval for ACEJMC accreditation, made sense. But there was no talk of converting the position to a faculty line. A Ph.D. faculty member also would not likely have the experience to serve as an adviser.

"If UNA asserts that discussion started in 2014 to change the position to a tenure-track line, I must add that it did NOT begin with me. If anyone asserts that I made this request, I would describe their claim as FALSE. At best, a wrong conclusion and at worst, a distortion attributed to me because I am no longer at the university and part of the discussions."

Please understand that we regard this as more than a simple personnel matter, or our rallying to the defense of a colleague. This involves the students' First Amendment rights. If the media adviser were to be replaced every time an article in the student paper displeases the administration, you'd need a revolving door on the Flor-Ala office. The only other alternative is to stifle your student newspaper through prior censorship and/or to place it under the control of the university's PR office to ensure milquetoast news content. That would not be the way to train student journalists for the real world of journalism.

Dr. Alexander cites the ACEJMC accreditation report, in which the ACEJMC regards it as positive that UNA has nine out of 12 faculty members with a terminal degree. We agree. That still leaves three others without a terminal degree, but the ACEJMC seemed satisfied that the glass was three-fourths full. Dr. Alexander ignored the next paragraph of the ACEJMC report, which states:

"Many faculty members have worked in their fields of expertise, from newspaper, television and radio reporting and producing to documentary producing and consulting. While it is sometimes a challenge to find qualified communications adjuncts in smaller communities, the department has been fortunate to hire local professionals who bring years of experience as reporters, broadcasters, videographers and PR professionals into the classroom."

It is not unusual, indeed it is quite common, for a university to have someone with a bachelor's degree and several decades of professional experience in lieu of an advanced degree to serve as student media adviser and even full-time or adjunct faculty. Several of our schools have such advisers. It is the same principle as having a writer-in-residence, or journalist-in-residence, as Alabama-Tuscaloosa has with Rick Bragg.

UNA has indeed been fortunate to have a media adviser with 30 years of professional experience, something you won't have with a newly minted Ph.D. The Flor-Ala has won numerous accolades on Scott Morris' watch, more than the average, we would estimate, for a school your size. We have examined his students' record of achievement. These are some of the garlands the Flor-Ala and its staff have achieved in just the past year:

- *Outstanding College Newspaper, American Scholastic Press Association, 2018*
- *First place with special merit, American Scholastic Press Association, 2018*
- *Outstanding front page, American Scholastic Press Association, 2018*
- *Outstanding investigative reporting, Ciera Golliver, American Scholastic Press Association, 2018 (for calendar year 2017)*
- *2nd place, best news graphic designer, David San Miguel, SEJC Best of the South, 2018 (for calendar year 2017)*
- *2nd place, best opinion-editorial writer, Monday Sanderson, SEJC Best of the South, 2018 (for calendar year 2017)*
- *Finalist, general news reporting, Harley Duncan, Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Award, 2018*
- *Finalist, feature writing, Tyler Hargett, SPJ Mark of Excellence Award, 2018*
- *Finalist, breaking news, Hillary Taylor, SPJ Mark of Excellence Award, 2018*
- *Finalist, sportswriting, Jacob Cole, SPJ Mark of Excellence Award, 2018*

SEJC's Best of the South competition has roughly 30 schools from seven states competing in most categories, including flagship schools. In the best college newspaper category, against that kind of stiff competition, the Flor-Ala placed fifth for calendar year 2015, fourth for 2016 and eighth for 2017. That is truly remarkable for a school the size of UNA.

In the SPJ Mark of Excellence competition, UNA is competing against schools in Region 3, which encompasses Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each category has one winner and two finalists.

Moreover, the Flor-Ala finished the 2018 fiscal year with the largest net profit of the past 10 years. That is a remarkable accomplishment in a time of dwindling newspaper advertising revenue nationwide. As professors and advisers, we continually hear stories from our colleagues about their difficulties stemming from losses in sales. The profit and resulting financial stability that the Flor-Ala currently enjoys could not have happened without experienced and dedicated leadership. Thus, your decision is not only ethically irresponsible, it is financially unwise.

We urge you to rethink that decision. To use the old axiom, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The Flor-Ala ain't broke. Don't tinker with proven success, not if you care about the kind of journalism education you say you want for your students.

Something else for you to consider is that UNA was suggested at our last convention as the site for the 2021 SEJC convention. Our conventions average 290-320 students and faculty from seven states. Hosting a SEJC convention brings prestige for accreditation purposes, as well as being an economic boost to the community. That would prove impossible with a brand-new hire who is unfamiliar with the organization.

The SEJC is an organization dedicated to the furtherance of excellence in journalism education and student press freedom. It is composed of almost 40 college and university journalism programs, in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee.

Yours most respectfully,

Leon Alligood, Ph.D.
Middle Tennessee State University
SEJC president

Robert Buckman, Ph.D.
University of Louisiana at Lafayette (retired)
SEJC past president

Bryce McNeil, Ph.D.
Georgia State University
SEJC Treasurer, past president

Tomi McCutchen, M.A.
University of Tennessee at Martin
SEJC past president
(former colleague of Mr. Morris at the Decatur Daily)