

DT Controversy: An Open Letter

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USC vice president for Student Affairs covers the issues raised by recent events at the Daily Trojan.

An Open Letter to the USC Community

Dec. 6, 2006

Dear Trojan Family,

Within the last two weeks, our campus community has been engaged in a debate regarding the transition in editorial leadership at the Daily Trojan, the organization of the newspaper and issues of editorial freedom. As the administrator who works on behalf of President Steven B. Sample and the USC Board of Trustees to oversee the student newspaper, I write to share recent days' events, stress our institutional values and lay out our future plans.

Editorial Leadership

My decision to withdraw the candidacy of the spring 2007 semester editor in chief nominee was based solely on the fact that the candidate's application was inconsistent with the responsibilities outlined in the job description. The editor in chief is responsible for oversight of editorial content and managing the daily production of the newspaper.

The initial nominee made it clear that he wanted a fundamentally different role – one involving publishing responsibilities for the newspaper, which included creating new senior editor positions that were not funded in the current budget. Zach Fox was not fired from his position as the fall 2006 semester editor in chief. He submitted his resignation voluntarily on Tuesday, Nov. 28. This result was one I neither wanted nor requested.

On Friday, Dec. 1, the Daily Trojan staff nominated Jeremy Beecher for the editor in chief position for the spring 2007 semester. On Monday, Dec. 4, the Media Board approved Jeremy's nomination after a thoughtful discussion with him about his vision for the newspaper and his desire to move forward with a number of the proposals submitted last semester by the DT editors. We all look forward to working with Jeremy in the months ahead.

Newspaper Operations

Many have misconstrued the decision to reject the initial applicant's candidacy as an attempt to silence the previous editor in chief for proposing a series of changes to the Daily Trojan management and organization – a proposal with which they assumed I would disagree.

In fact, I deeply appreciate that several members of the DT senior editing staff submitted a thoughtful proposal for consideration. As evidence of this, in October I convened a Student Newspaper Task Force to discuss the editors' proposal more broadly and to develop a set of recommendations that reflect campus-wide consideration of the issues.

The task force includes members of student government and the undergraduate student body at-large, current and former DT editorial staff, journalism faculty from the Annenberg School, Student Affairs staff and others. The report of this task force will be available to the public. Furthermore, I may ask for the task force to reconvene next semester to offer additional counsel and consider other issues that have arisen in recent days.

Editorial Freedom

Since publication of the Daily Trojan began in 1912, the university has maintained a distinguished record of supporting the editorial freedom of the newspaper. We believe the Daily Trojan provides an important voice for USC students and the Trojan Family. In addition, as a university that hosts one of the nation's leading journalism programs, we see it as our obligation to help foster an environment that supports quality journalism in the university context.

The Daily Trojan is a great paper due to this long history and the successful collaboration between professionals and students who work together in mutual respect. As the years pass, it is important for organizations to periodically stop to reflect on their growth and development – and consider big, bold plans for the future. But I have learned in my 25 years in higher education that the best results come when this process is not rushed. As a Trojan Family, I encourage us to consider change through a reflective, inclusive campus discussion.

Michael L. Jackson
USC Vice President for Student Affairs