

Analyzing prior review

The activity:

School officials argue prior review is important because school media represent the image of the school to the community. Analyze this argument and make two sets of recommendations: one supporting prior review, the other arguing against it. Develop criteria and arguments for each position.

An activity you might try with students involves anticipating prior review arguments and having answers for them ahead of time.

It could work like this:

- Divide your group into two parts: one that comes up with positive arguments for prior review and one that comes up with negative ones.
- Each group should come up with 5-10 arguments. Brainstorm your arguments and look for articles or sources to support or add value to them.
- Once each group has done so, share each team's points with the other side to see if they can identify weaknesses or suggestion alternatives. They might even come up with points that strengthen the arguments.

For example, here are some points an online Social Role and Responsibility class at Kent State University developed last year:

For review:

--Journalism is a class and therefore part of the curriculum. Therefore, the instructor's lesson plans are subject to approval and oversight by school administrators. All content produced in conjunction with the class should follow suit. School administrators must ensure that journalism students have met the assessments/outcomes set forth by the instructor's lessons.

--Student-produced content must be reviewed to ensure that it contains no factual or grammatical errors, and that it follows journalistic style.

--School administrators must be vigilant about student-produced content that is libelous, obscene, invades the privacy of others, socially inappropriate, at odds with the rules and ethics of journalism and/or materially disruptive to the educational process. This extends to editorials, guest columns, letters to the

editor, website comments and posts on social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter.

--School administrators must ensure that school print and digital publications reflect and represent the school community in a positive light.

Against review:

--The journalism class is designed to teach students real-life media practices and tenets. Students learn journalism ethics and law as well as interviewing, reporting, writing and production techniques. They learn that accuracy, verification and transparency are integral to the journalistic process.

--The hierarchy of the editorial system provides a checks-and-balances system that allows students to make content decisions not in isolation, but as a team, with careful and deliberate consideration of ethics, legal ramifications, factual evidence and responsibilities to all who might be affected by publication.

--Prior review by authority figures is not a real-world media practice. As part of the learning process, journalism students must be allowed to produce content in an environment that encourages them to make responsible, mature coverage decisions and accept responsibility for them.

--The real-world media also report on a wide range of issues and events – both positive and negative – affecting their communities. It is not real-world media's job to promote communities or to spread propaganda about them. Journalism students must be allowed to explore the wide spectrum of stories in their school community; they must not be expected to serve as public relations officers for the school.

Questions for follow-up discussion:

- What is the importance of a forum for student expression? What does it help teach students and how can it help with a school system's commitment to excellence?
- What are the plusses and minuses of a school establishing an open forum for student expression? What are educationally valid ways to prevent the minuses?
- What are the plusses and minuses – educational and legal – for establishing a closed forum? How does it affect student learning, community knowledge and support for education?

- What are the plusses and minuses – educational and legal – for establishing a limited forum? How does it affect student learning, community knowledge and support for education?
- Educators feel the designated public forum is the best choice for many reasons. What are negative factual anecdotes, stories, that can balance this view?
- Why do schools emphasize critical thinking and civic engagement in their mission statements? How do each of the three forum examples interact with school mission statements? What arguments can be made against scholastic journalism that interfere with or prevent student accomplishment of those missions? How can those negatives be best overcome?
- What legitimate educational mission does prior review accomplish? How can the “fact” that prior review inherently leads to censorship be prevented? How can a community be best convinced that prior review does not interfere with or preclude the free flow of accurate information?
- What are the most effective ways for a school system to show its students and its communities the working, real value of the First Amendment through its handling of student media?