

## Thesis shows direct relationship between students making decisions and quality of student media

A 2007 study of high school newspapers and yearbooks found direct relationships between student decision-making and control of content and overall quality of publications as seen in awards won from the National Scholastic Press Association.

Kent State University master's student, Jill Strainic, also found:

- Papers with no prior review policy were three times more likely to earn an All American than publications with prior review policies. Papers with no prior review practice were four times as likely to win All American status
- The less a school restricted students' journalistic freedom, the more likely it was to earn a higher award
- Where principals or school officials either altered or removed content or where they either stated or implied the adviser should censor, quality was lower; same with adviser censorship
- Even student editor action of discouraging coverage of a topic or changing content because of fear of censorship had a negative impact on quality (in yearbook and newspaper).
- "It is not surprising, perhaps," Strainic wrote in the study, "that actual practices have shown to be a clear, statistically significant relationship with quality while policy has little or no clear positive or negative impact. Regardless of what a school's publication policy mandates, this study shows that it is the actions of advisers and principals that have the great effect on a publication's quality."

Strainic surveyed 239 newspaper and yearbook advisers in 40 states, one school in England and one Defense Department school in Korea. The advisers represented 159 newspapers/newsmagazines and 162 yearbooks.

Other findings showed:

- Both policy and practice questions about prior review proved to have a statistically significant relationship with publication quality. Publications without prior review more often won the top award, "All American" than publications with prior review.
- No significant relationship was found for prior review policy and yearbook quality; a significant association was found between yearbook awards and prior review practice
- Administrative interference with publications showed significant relations; adviser interference proved less significant
- State laws providing student protection also had a statistically significant relationship to quality for newspaper and yearbook; publications from states with such laws were about twice as likely to earn an All-American rating.
- Newspapers where credit was offered and where production took place both during class and after school tended to earn top awards more than other schools not offering credit.

## Think First

Materials were produced for this Web site by the Journalism Education Association (<http://jeapressrights.org>) and the Center for Scholastic Journalism <http://jmc.kent.edu/csjs>.

# Free expression through responsible journalism

“Actions speak louder than words,” Strainic wrote in her study. “What a school’s policy says has little effect on quality compared with the actual practices of a school – in particular whether school officials interfere with the publication’s content.” The study did not include grammar and mechanics as content.

The word “censor” had a variety of meanings to respondents, and many “commented on their own struggles to define the word in the comment box at the end of the survey,” Strainic wrote.

“A simple definition would have clarified the intended meaning of this phrase to exclude mere grammatical corrections,” she indicated, “which, although a form of censorship, is not the primary concern of this study.”

The survey did not attempt to measure the general attitudes of school officials, the school community or even the respondent about review.

Continuing with censorship, newspapers with no prior review policy were three times more likely to earn an All American than publications with prior review policies. Papers with no prior review practice were four times as likely to win All American status

Overall, the less a school restricted students’ journalistic freedom, the more likely it was to earn a higher award

Where principals or school officials either altered or removed content or where they either stated or implied the adviser should censor, quality was lower; the same was true with adviser censorship.

One adviser indicated in a comments section of the survey that prior review left a chilling effect with students, leading newspaper students to being less interested in publication and yearbook student angered and hurt. Another wrote, “strict prior review causes students to shy away from ‘real’ story knowing it won’t get published.”

Even student editor action of discouraging coverage of a topic or changing content because of fear of censorship had a negative impact on quality in yearbook and newspaper.