

Selecting an editor in chief of *The Journal*

The Cranky Professor

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A good student newspaper makes a tremendous difference to the quality of life at a university. By reporting campus goings-on and by providing students and professors with rich commentary and considered opinion, a student newspaper can help make a university community vibrant and exciting. Just as important, a student newspaper provides a great opportunity for one to forge one's voice. Writing for the paper should be part of every student's university experience.

A student newspaper needs security and independence. Student journalists and other members of the university community involved with the paper need to know that the paper will be distributed on time and across campus, that they have offices and equipment, and that the bills are paid. That's security. Independence means that decisions about content and presentation are made by the people who write and edit the paper, and only by them.

I hasten to add that though security and independence are necessary to a good student newspaper, they are far from sufficient.

Security and independence are almost always in tension with each other. Security requires money and permission, and money and permission requires pleasing both those who have the money and those who give the permission. But to please funding agencies and authorities, one might have to do their bidding, and that means surrendering one's independence.

The tension between the need for security and the need for independence cannot be eliminated—not in newspapers, universities, or anywhere else. It is possible, though, to manage this tension. The tension between security and independence can best be managed when those who have the money and those who give the permission swear they will keep their distance. Distance, that is, should be written into the charter of our newspaper. Without codes in place that ensure its security while enabling it to maintain its independence, *The Journal* could, at the whim of a politician or administrator, become a mere publicity sheet or an exercise in public relations.

A serious threat to the independence of *The Journal* lies in the present way in which its editor in chief is chosen. The editor is selected and appointed by The Journal Publishing Society, a board in the hands of the Saint Mary's University Students' Association. SMUSA, then, through the Publishing Society, each year makes a decision that has wide consequences for the tone and orientation of the newspaper.

A better arrangement would be for those who participate in the life of *The Journal* to choose their editor themselves. It could go like this: any student who contributes to the paper twice in each term, say, or five times during the year would get a vote in an election for next year's editor. Those

who wish to be editor would make their case to their peers—that is, to the other newspaper people on campus. Under this arrangement, SMUSA and the administration would be at arm's length from *The Journal* in the matter of who edits the paper.

This proposal, or any other that creates distance between, on the one hand, the money and the power and, on the other hand, the newspaper, won't appeal to either the money or the power unless they think that independence is necessary for a student paper to do what it should do. One of the things a student paper should do is regularly to hold the feet of student politicians and university administrators to the fire.