

UI public relations on dangerous spin

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When government and state officials hinder or stop the free flow of information, bad things happen.

We need look no further than the University Place fiasco a few years ago at the University of Idaho for a case in point - \$25 million worth of bad judgment, done beyond public scrutiny. The strain of that debacle left the university strapped for cash it surely could use in these trying financial times.

It appears orders from on high have created a policy that sets a dangerous precedent for the free flow of information at UI again.

The latest idea is to hinder, or at least spin, news flow by using public relations people to run interference and shield university decision-makers from answering questions of inquiring reporters without a watchdog.

President Steven Daley-Laursen and his administrators have done a passable job of keeping the university community informed of the program priority process, which will result in program cuts and consolidations. Keeping the public informed about the tough financial decisions they will have to make in the upcoming months should be a priority.

The student newspaper has done a solid job reporting on the crisis. But reporters and editors have said they are now being forced to work through UI's communications people. Deans they have interviewed recently have indicated they would not be interviewed without UI communications people sitting in on interviews.

Hold on a minute: public relations people sitting in on interviews? Why?

Rarely do public relations people make those kinds of decisions on their own. We can deduce their marching orders have come from their bosses - the administrators at UI.

The public is intelligent enough to understand the importance of having public relations people inform us of happenings at the university. We might not even mind a little spin; after all, it's their job to portray the university in a good light and inform us of all the valuable things the university does for the state and its citizens. Their jobs are all about facilitating flow of information and informing the public.

It should never be the purview of public relations people to sit in on interviews done by journalists, students or not. This is a public institution, and we the public pay the salaries - big ones - to administrators hired to run our institutions of higher learning.

This policy is just wrong, and it needs to stop. Bad things happen when the public's business starts happening without scrutiny, and when the free flow of information is hampered by throwing up barriers to access. We still rely upon journalists to bring us news from a different perspective than those whose job it is to put a good light on the university's business.

Let journalists do their jobs. Unimpeded. It is a dangerous precedent to have public relations people sitting in on interviews, no matter the situation. And in these times of economic downturn, it sniffs of arrogance at the least, and worse if we are inclined to study the examples of recent history at UI. (I would welcome a direct response from UI's director of communications defending such a policy - no spin, please.)

If officials have nothing to hide, there seems no reason to have hired guns sitting in on interviews done by reporters whose interest is providing us information.

The usual reason given by administrators is they don't want miscommunication. More typically they don't want information leaked or the entire truth released as tough decisions are made. Defensive responses such as these are silly.

Institutions are better served by offering transparency to the publics they serve, and UI should use that as a guiding principle.

This is bad policy in the best of times. But in these times of economic crisis the taxpayers deserve to know all of the decisions made by those we employ. Hindering reporters in interviews is simply wrong.

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