

# THE RECORDER'S CODE OF ETHICS

The Code of Ethics was created to keep a level of defined standards for a college newspaper that is constantly changing due to the graduation of staff, the transformation of media and inherent nature of journalism. Similar to the newspaper, this code is designed to be flexible to changes in media practices and guide the paper's continuous efforts at improvement. This is a working document and should be examined on an annual basis by the editors and other voting members of the staff.

Much of what was put into this code of ethics was based on experiences at the newspaper in 2007. Other facets of the code draw from The New York Time's ethics handbook, *Groping for Ethics in Journalism* by Ron F. Smith and *The Student Newspaper Survival Guide* by Rachele Kanigel. These works, as well as other similar works, should be referenced if the current code of ethics is missing a specific section of interest.

Future editors will find challenges and bumps along the way during their time at The Recorder. At times, they might find that this first edition does not address their immediate concerns. It will then be up to these future editors to make the appropriate adjustments so that these past challenges are reflected in an updated code of ethics.

This code is a reflection of growth and is a significant step in the right direction. It has been a rewarding journey to complete the first edition of this code of ethics and I hope future editors find it just as rewarding and helpful to use and transform this document.

**Mark Rowan**  
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## **I. FIT TO PRINT**

The debate over what is fit to print happens often in a college newsroom. This section will help clarify and guide student editors of The Recorder when deciding what is appropriate and what is not appropriate for publication.

### **A. OBJECTIONABLE MATERIAL**

Any material, article or art, questioned by the staff should be reviewed by the Editorial Board. The Recorder's editorial policy states that if an article goes through the section editor, copy editor and Executive Editors with even the slightest amount of questioning along the way, the article should be brought to the available members of the Editorial Board, discussed and, if need be, voted on. Objectionable material can include wording of a sentence or the entire subject matter of an article; a photograph, comic or illustration.

#### **1. PROFANITY**

Vulgar language in print should not be treated lightly. While The Recorder believes its audience is mature enough to read profane language in print, such language should serve a purpose to the piece. If there is language in question, the Executive Editors should discuss with the author of the piece what the reader would lose if the profanity was not present. If the Editors find that a significant point will be missed then they should decide to keep the language. However, when in doubt, it is best to just edit out such language.

#### **2. GRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY**

Graphic photography can mean a number of things. If a photo is sexually explicit or gruesome, the Editorial Board should have a healthy discussion if any questions come to rise during the approval process. When dealing with sexually explicit images, the argument of taste must be discussed. As they should with profanity, editors should ask themselves, as well as each others, if they believe the image is essential to the article it accompanies. Gruesome photos, such as those taken at crime scenes, should typically be avoided. However, the same questions must be asked. Does a bloody photo tell the readers something written text cannot? More often than not, editors will find that such a photo does much more harm than good. There is a vast difference between informing readers and making them queasy.

## **B. DIVERSITY**

This section on diversity addresses the need for an array of stories that appeal to an array of people. The Recorder, of course, cannot force certain groups of students on campus to participate in the editorial process, but the newspaper should keep themselves aware of the surrounding community.

With coverage in diversity also comes the need for sensitivity in language. The Associated Press Stylebook should be consulted when questions arise on what is appropriate when referring to a group of people. Sexist, racist and otherwise offensive or harmful language must be avoided and the Stylebook will assist in preventing such errors.

## **C. HONESTY**

Being honest with our audience is vital to the relationship between THE newspaper and the reader. Losing the trust of our readership hinders the newspaper's ability to distribute important information. Honesty does not only apply to the relationship with the paper's

audience, but also to its sources. Sources should not be misinformed about a reporter's identity or what he/she is trying to accomplish. Actions like hiding tape recorders and going undercover compromise the need for honesty in reporting. Hiding recording devices will not be tolerated and any information obtained through such actions will be disregarded. If a reporter feels he/she needs to go undercover for a story, the reporter must meet with Executive Editors before doing so.

## **D. CORRECTIONS**

With all the above stated, there will still be times when The Recorder needs to print corrections. Corrections do not need to lambaste the author of the article, but should let the readers know what was incorrect or misleading about it. There is no need to print the name of the author of the article, but the article and the date it was published should be stated.

## **II. PUBLIC CONDUCT**

The following section will discuss what is and is not appropriate public conduct for a member of The Recorder. It is not meant to impede or comprise journalists' basic rights as students or citizens, but to serve as a guideline for proper community behavior in an ever transparent world.

### **A. STUDENT GOVERNMENT / POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Objectivity in print and in other forms of public display is of the utmost importance for The Recorder. The newspaper does not have an official political stance, so political bias should be kept within the appropriate pages dedicated to commentary.

Editors of The Recorder shall not participate in any form of student, local or national government and should be free of any ties to any political organization, campus-based or otherwise. Participation in government or political organizations may give off a false sense of favoritism that would harm the credibility of the newspaper.

Staff members must relinquish all government and political organization positions before they can be considered for the position of editor. While a staff member who is also involved with government or political organizations can participate, that person is not allowed to cover news on subjects pertaining to his/her position or group.

All members of the newspaper have the right to vote in local, state and national elections as American citizens; they are also entitled to vote in campus elections. But staff members must never publicly display their political bias as a member of The Recorder. Members of the newspaper should note that while they may not be representing The Recorder, the public may be under the impression that they are. Public displays of political bias that must be avoided include campaigning, endorsing and protesting.

If a member of The Recorder is unsure of whether or not political activity is deemed inappropriate by the Code of Ethics, he/she can consult the Editor(s)-in-Chief and/or Managing Editor(s). The standards described in the government and political organizations section of the Code of Ethics is specifically tailored to prevent situations where doubt is cast on the newspaper's objectivity and independence.

## **1. FAVORITISM**

Similar to the aforementioned political bias, favoritism in any form should not be practiced or publicly displayed. For example, It is not appropriate for a staff member of the newspaper to be seen celebrating a sports team victory, collegiate or professional, while they are covering such an event and representing The Recorder. Displaying favoritism as a representative of the newspaper obstructs our integrity and devalues our coverage. This does not apply strictly to sports coverage, but to all coverage.

## **B. LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Letters written to the Editor are an important facet to any newspaper, as the section allows for dialogue between the newspaper and its audience. Letters should generally be kept to a maximum of 200 words. If a letter exceeds 200 words, it is up to the Executive Editors' judgment to edit the letter. If possible, request the reader to edit his or her letter; but deadlines and the need to keep letters topical this may not be feasible. Some readers will specify that their letters are not to be published; such a request should be respected.

Fact-checking is an essential part of Letters to the Editor. If someone portrays themselves as a student, the Executive Editors should use available resources to confirm such a claim. The Recorder is responsible for printing inaccuracies even if they are contained in the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper. Falsehoods should either be challenged and clarified in a response, or omitted from print.

The Recorder reserves complete editorial control over what letters get published. Therefore, if a person, organization or party continuously submits letters for publication, the newspaper should consider limiting the number of letters published. The same can be said about multiple letters that discuss the same subject with a similar opinion. Editorial space is valuable and should be treated as such.

Replying to letters to the editor is not necessary. If an Executive Editor believes that a misconception needs to be clarified then he/she can publish a concise reply following the letter. Other members of the staff should not reply to letters in the newspaper; and those members of the staff that receive letters to their personal e-mail address should notify the Executive Editors before replying. Again, such replies reflect upon the entire publication and need to be treated with thoughtful consideration.

### **1. CHANCE TO COMMENT**

A figure at the center of an editorial, opinion piece, or news article must be allowed to comment. The Recorder, however, does reserve the right to edit letters due to space concerns; such responses should not go over the length of a typical letter, which is 200-300 words. Exceptions can be made based on the Executive Editors' discretion. The newspaper should allow for readership to get the "last word," and the paper should not become a place for a drawn-out debate.

## **C. ONLINE COMMUNITIES & BLOGS**

Online communities, such as Facebook and MySpace, have become an integral part of college students' lives in the last few years. However, online communities and blogs should not be. These elements of the Internet allow for readers to interact directly and more freely with The Recorder's staff, and should be taken seriously.

Members of The Recorder who participate in online communities should keep in mind who will come across their personal information and discussions. Such information is easily accessible and could damage the reputation of the newspaper. These communities are also monitored by future employers, so it is also in a member's best interest to not carelessly use such websites.

No member of The Recorder, editors included, should post on blogs or online communities as a spokesperson for the newspaper. The newspaper will comment on questions or criticisms through the publication, in person, or through the newspaper's official e-mail address. If a member of The Recorder strongly believes in addressing an issue on behalf of the newspaper, that member should request that the Executive Editors take action.

#### **D. BEFORE PUBLICATION**

Occasionally sources ask to see an article before it is printed. This is not a practice of most publications and is not the practice of The Recorder. A reporter or editor can read back a question to source to check accuracy, but staff members should not make the entirety of the available. Authors should also avoid making their stories public before publication, as often times authors do not have the final edits and should not scoop their own publication. The Recorder asks all authors who plan on further publicizing their stories through blogs or other online communities to do so after the newspaper prints.

### **III. PLAGIARISM**

The following section will define different kinds of plagiarism and what should be done in cases where plagiarism is committed. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, to plagiarize is "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own" and "to use (another's production) without crediting the source." Plagiarism encompasses not only the act of directly stealing words, but also ideas, quotes, photographs or any other artwork without attribution.

#### **A. WORDS**

The most blatant and obvious act of plagiarism may be the plagiarism of sentences or even whole paragraphs. Occasionally this can be done subconsciously, after reading an article on the same or similar subject, but steps should be taken to avoid plagiarism at all costs.

Editors who come across articles that spark suspicions of plagiarism should consult an Executive Editor, as well as do their own research. A quick Google search using key sentences of an article should bring up a piece with the same sentences. The sentence must be put in quotes in the search engine. It should be noted that this is not an absolute solution but one method of identifying plagiarism.

There are certain red flags that editors should look for:

- a. Editors should know how writers "sound." If the vocabulary or tone seems to be uncharacteristic of the writer this should set off a red flag.
- b. Is a writer taking on a subject that he or she may not be completely familiar with or that lacks original research? The lack of research can cause writers to pull words from other sources in order to make deadline.

c. Sourcing (see section on Quotes).

## **B. QUOTES**

The plagiarizing of quotes is done far too often with new and inexperienced writers. It is the editors' job to look out for such acts of plagiarism and to educate their writers about correct practices. This act often occurs when a student journalist is covering or doing commentary on a national event. However, the lifting of quotes and not attributing the quote to the appropriate publication can easily happen with lazy reporting with local stories as well.

The reader is under the impression that if a quote is left unattributed to another publication then the reporter communicated with the subject. Leaving quotes from other publications unattributed is not only unethical and unfair to that publication, but it also misleads the reader. Occasionally, bigger, 'real-world' publications will look to college media on local or campus issues that they may not have picked up on. During these cases such media outlets usually accredit the campus newspaper when borrowing information or quotes. That same practice must be followed when college media is borrowing from other media outlets. All quotes taken from anything other than direct communication—press releases included—should be attributed to the appropriate source.

### **Fabrications of all kinds must be avoided.**

Writers should not report events as if they witnessed them if they did not. Articles must be transparent. If you are interviewing people after an event but did not attend it, let the reader know that. If you interviewed people before an event but did not attend the event, do not assume that the event proceeded as anticipated. You need to check with participants.

Writers and editors caught fabricating material will be dismissed from the staff immediately.

## **C. PHOTOGRAPHS AND ARTWORK**

Using photographs and artwork without attributing the original source is also a form of plagiarism and could also be a violation of copyright. Much like words, ideas or quotes, someone originally worked to create a photograph or another form of artwork. These visual aspects of media must also be appropriately attributed. The temptation to simply Google search a photo and pull it off the Internet is far too common and should be avoided. The Recorder has been and should be subscribed to various photo wire and stock image websites in order to combat this bad habit. These photos, however, should still be credited if the source deems it appropriate. If you are unsure whether or not a photo needs to be sourced, it is in the best interest of the newspaper to credit it when in doubt.

## **D. DISCIPLINARY ACTION**

The guidance of the Editorial Board and the decisions made by the Executive Editors will be the only form of punishment warranted against a student journalist who plagiarizes. The Recorder is aware of the Academic Integrity workshop available on campus, but is also aware that a journalistic understanding of plagiarism and attribution formats is different than an academic one. If the Board and Executive Editors are unsure of a course of action, it is in the best interest of the newspaper to consult the paper's advisor.

The advisor will be able to offer advice for action in such a situation, as well as assist in educating a student who commits plagiarism.

Above all, it must be noted that if the act of plagiarism is committed without ill intent (for example, the writer is new, inexperienced, or plagiarized without truly realizing it), that staff person should not be harshly punished. However, an education process should still occur so the same mistake is not repeatedly made.

If a form of plagiarism does occur, the Executive Editors must make sure a form of education takes place before that person is allowed to be published again. If plagiarism is committed with ill intent, the Editorial Board can rule on a punishment that ranges from suspension to expulsion after an investigation from the Executive Editors and the current faculty advisor.