

unhappy, and their collective indignation was likely to reverberate during the university's annual fund drive.

The cause of their disaffection was located in Chandler Hall, the home of the Office of University Relations and the *Central State Gazette*, the university's award-winning alumni magazine. In many respects, the *Gazette*, which was supported by a combination of university and alumni funding, was the prototypical alumni publication, with its methodical but informative accounts of campus life, faculty and student profiles, a survey of the activities of notable alumni, and obituaries. The magazine was distributed both to alumni and other patrons of the university. But despite its affiliation with Central State's public relations enterprise, the *Gazette's* editor and writers approached their mission with the mentality of journalists, producing several candid and uninhibited accounts of campus life that challenged some alumni's nostalgic recollections of their own college experiences. For example, one article documented the incidences of campus "date rape," including complaints that university officials were slow to respond to such charges. Another featured the winner of a "wet T-shirt" contest sponsored by a local fraternity during Homecoming weekend. The article was accompanied by a revealing photo of the smiling coed as she accepted her award. On another occasion, the *Gazette* revealed that the Central State Medical Center, which was located ten miles from the main campus, was under investigation for improperly disposing of medical wastes. This was followed in the next issue by an impressive article on the NCAA's investigation of the university's recruiting practices, a story that had appeared frequently in the commercial media but that some alumni viewed as an unpardonable sacrilege. All of the articles were balanced and provided ample opportunity for comments from university officials.

The *Gazette's* unflinching coverage had earned it the prestigious Robert Sibley Award, an annual competition sponsored by *Newsweek* magazine through the Council for Advancement and Support of Education to recognize excellence in alumni magazines. The day the award was announced Daniel Humphries expected a congratulatory phone call from the university's president. Instead, he received

CASE 8-4

The Alumni Magazine: Journalism or Public Relations?⁸⁷

This had not been an enjoyable year for university president Alexander Davidson. Some of his largest contributors to the Central State University (CSU) Foundation and the Alumni Association were

an urgent summons to meet with President Davidson. Humphries was Central State's director of university relations and frequently met with the president to apprise his superior of his department's public relations strategy on various issues. When Humphries arrived, Davidson was more agitated than usual.

"I'm catching a lot of heat from some influential alumni and the head of the CSU Foundation concerning our magazine's coverage," he began. "They're complaining that we're not projecting a positive image for the university. One alumnus was really incensed that we would publish a picture like the one of the wet T-shirt contest winner; he thinks things are out of control here." Davidson also said that the university's director of alumni relations, an office that provided a steady flow of material for the *Gazette*, had received similar comments.

"As you know," Davidson continued, "I've always been a supporter of the public relations efforts of your office. In general, as a taxpayer-supported institution, I feel we should be upfront with the public concerning the activities at Central State. But the alumni audience is different. With state support dwindling, we rely more and more on our alumni to support the CSU Foundation. And it's crucial that we stay on good terms with the alumni."

In recounting the conversation later, Humphries could not recall the litany of complaints cited by Davidson, but the president's message was clear: He was impressed with the *Gazette's* journalistic enterprise in winning the Sibley Award, but he was concerned that the magazine's candor and what some alumni perceived as negative coverage of the CSU campus threatened the university's fundraising efforts. He asked Humphries to meet with his staff and develop a recommendation on what role the alumni magazine should play in the university's public relations arsenal. "Whatever your recommendation," Davidson promised, "I'll give it careful consideration."

As he returned to his office to confer with the two staffers who were most directly involved in university-sponsored publications—the *Gazette's* editor and the editor of *Central State Perspectives*, the university's on-campus faculty and staff publication—he silently reviewed the historical role of the alumni magazine.

The *Gazette* had originally been established under the auspices of the Office of Alumni Relations as little more than an expanded newsletter, but fifteen years ago it had been moved to University Relations as part of CSU's consolidation of its public relations efforts. Its original charter had been rather modest: "To promote the accomplishments of Central State University alumni and to serve as a source of information for alumni concerning campus life and the University's activities, programs, policies, and achievements." Such a mandate was subject to interpretation, in Humphries's view, but for most of its history the *Gazette* had been fairly conventional and non-controversial in its coverage.

But with the arrival three years ago of LeToya Michaels as editor, the magazine had taken on a more aggressive approach in covering campus events. She understood the *Gazette's* role as a public relations organ but believed that the best public relations is to provide a candid assessment of the university's activities, both its sins and its virtues. With seven years' experience as a reporter on a small-town daily, Michaels rejected the notion of the *Gazette's* role as nothing more than a cheerleader for the university. She had not dispensed with the sections celebrating the alumni's achievements and the more mundane aspects of campus life but believed that the magazine's investigative pieces added balance to an otherwise unimaginative publication. In Michaels's first year as editor, the *Gazette* had received accolades from the alumni faithful because of its innovative design and enterprising writing style. But in the past several issues she had apparently "pushed the envelope" on content, and the wolves were beginning to howl.

Upon his return to Chandler Hall, Humphries briefed Michaels and Manuel Montiel, the editor of *Central State Perspectives*. Montiel also served as a contributing editor of the *Gazette*, with primary responsibilities for the faculty and staff profiles and other personnel achievements. Montiel had joined the University Relations staff upon his graduation from Central State fifteen years ago with a master's degree in mass communication and a concentration in public relations. Humphries anticipated that his views would differ from those of the *Gazette's* editor. He was not disappointed!

"I think we should stay the course," said Michaels confidently following her superior's summary of his meeting with President Davidson. "I appreciate the alumni's concerns, but our job is to give them an honest accounting of what's going on on campus, warts and all. The essence of good public relations is honesty."

"But you're forgetting what the purpose of an alumni magazine should be," responded Montiel. "Our job is to provide information to various publics. If the media asked us to comment on the NCAA investigation or the problems at the medical center, for example, then we should be as forthcoming as possible. But the *Gazette* targets the alumni and other patrons of the university. They're interested in the positive aspects of their alma mater—a relentless barrage of negative stories makes it sound as though things are out of control. And that could affect fund-raising."

"If that's the case," replied Michaels, "then the *Gazette* becomes an exercise in spin control. We should give our readers—the Central State graduates—a realistic view of campus life and events at the university. I'm not insensitive to the impact on fund-raising. But if we just report the positive side of campus life, then we lose credibility as a university publication."

"Credibility with whom?" Montiel asked defiantly. "The alumni—or at least some of the more influential ones—don't view the *Gazette* as a journalistic publication. They're not interested in investigative pieces. Credibility is related to expectations, and most alumni don't expect a university publication that thrives on the unattractive side of campus life. After all, alumni donate because they have a special affection for the university."

But Michaels was undeterred by what she perceived as her colleague's willingness to pander to the university's philanthropic interests. "Our coverage has been balanced," she remarked. "University spokespersons have been included in every article. This has provided them with an opportunity to tell the alumni what the university is doing. We might lose some donors in the short term, but over time the alumni will come to appreciate the *Gazette's* candid assessment of university life. Writing honestly about our campus is not only good journalism—it's also good public relations.

The *Gazette* has received national recognition as the recipient of the Sibley Award, which has brought prestige to the university and the Office of University Relations. We shouldn't allow some disaffected donors to dictate the content of our magazine."

"But with the reduction in state appropriations, the university is depending more and more on the support of alumni. Just remember who signs our paychecks. The *Gazette* is not like a news magazine. It's a public relations tool—not a journalistic organ."

Humphries listened to the points and counterpoints offered by his two staff members. As the director of University Relations, he was the moral agent who would either respond to the alumni's complaints or convince the university president to support the magazine despite pressure from Central State's benefactors. If the second option were not chosen—or if President Davidson elected not to accept it—then LeToya Michaels might resign as the *Gazette's* editor, and the magazine would retreat to safer but perhaps less prestigious terrain.

THE CASE STUDY

What should be the role of a state university alumni magazine? Should it be essentially a public relations organ, or can such a publication legitimately define itself as a campus news medium and embrace the journalistic virtues? Are these two philosophies incompatible?

This question has erupted on a number of campuses. Several alumni magazine editors have resigned rather than succumb to pressure from alumni and fund-raisers.⁸⁸ And yet, those who provide financial support to universities are major stakeholders who feel that, as the target audience for alumni magazines, they should be allowed to influence the editorial direction of these publications.

In this case, the editor of the *Gazette*, LeToya Michaels, apparently believes that good journalism and public relations are not mutually exclusive. This philosophy is captured in this observation in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Many editors acknowledge that they have a duty to pave the way for fund raisers by making connections with alumni. But they insist that they can best do so by having the editorial freedom to write honestly,

fairly, and openly about the institution, its students, and its alumni. The closer their magazines are to development, they argue, the harder it is to divorce themselves from the office's goals.⁸⁹

On the other hand, Manuel Montiel argues for a much more restricted editorial philosophy for the university's alumni magazine. In his view, good public relations consists of putting the university in the best light, where possible, and targeting its messages to its various constituencies, which in this case are the CSU alumni and other donors. Economic reality appears to be a major motivation here, although Montiel also apparently feels that the *Gazette* has no mandate to cover issues or events that reflect unfavorably on the university and perhaps should avoid them altogether.

For the purpose of recommending an operating philosophy for the university's alumni magazine, assume the role of the director of university relations, Daniel Humphries, and render a judgment in this case.