

## The Blue Banner's View

# Butler University foolishly stifles freedom of speech

Recently, Butler University filed a lawsuit against one of its students for making allegedly libelous and defamatory statements about administrators on a blog.

Jess Zimmerman, a junior and editor of the campus newspaper, maintains he accurately described conditions on his campus and said the opinions he expressed on his blog are protected by the First Amendment.

Wisely, the university dropped the lawsuit, but significant damage had already been done.

Not only did the litigation fail to quiet Zimmerman's criticism, as was intended, but it also created a national public relations nightmare for the university when mainstream media outlets picked up the story.

Zimmerman's case raises several interesting points.

First, it highlights that the best way for administrators to deal with dissident students and faculty is, as the old adage goes, to "keep your friends close, and your

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enemies closer."

Blackballing or cracking down on critics creates a tension that never goes away and exacerbates an already bad situation.

Take UNC Asheville for instance. Here at *The Blue Banner*, we are sometimes critical of administrators, not because we have a personal vendetta to fulfill, but because we think they are not living up to the expectations of this unique, diverse campus.

UNCA's administration, to their credit, has not interfered in any way and continues to support an unfettered student press, unlike Butler.

Some administrators undoubtedly would say criticism of university leadership, whether at Butler or UNCA, harms the uni-

versity. It is similar to the argument the Bush administration used to silence critics following 9/11. What those who raise such complaints fail to see is that it is possible to love an institution but disagree with its leadership.

If students like Zimmerman cannot challenge authority when they see something wrong on campus, then how can anything improve?

Butler administrators attempted to kill the messenger rather than solve the problems he pointed out, and it backfired on them.

Even though Butler dropped the lawsuit, the university is still pursuing other disciplinary action, according to an e-mail from Zimmerman.

*The Blue Banner* stands with

Zimmerman and is proud he is actively taking on Butler.

Wishing for things to work out instead of working them out is irresponsible, and Zimmerman demonstrated courage by speaking out on what, undoubtedly, countless other Butler students and employees already knew.

Zimmerman's case highlights the sad fact that, at universities across the country, the student press is often alone in publicly highlighting failures of school leadership.

As we have shown this semester, too many cases exist on this campus of faculty anonymously complaining about serious problems rather than publicly airing them so that creative and productive solutions can be found.

Sadly, some of the same faculty who encourage student expression and political involvement are themselves silent. But for those who truly cannot speak out for fear of losing their jobs, we will be your voice.

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### Have a tip?

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*The Blue Banner* is UNC Asheville's student newspaper. We publish each Wednesday except during summer sessions, finals week and holiday breaks. Our office is located in Karpen Hall 019.

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