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ECU defends firing of newspaper adviser

BY JANE STANCILL - jstancill@newsobserver.com

GREENVILLE – As criticism mounts over East Carolina University's firing of the adviser to its student newspaper, a university official on Tuesday defended the dismissal, saying it was related to an undisclosed personnel matter separate from any First Amendment issues.

"We ask all advocacy groups and the public to trust our internal process, which has been deliberate, correct and legal, as we move forward to address these two separate issues," said a prepared statement by Virginia Hardy, vice chancellor for student affairs.

ECU officials have been the target of anger after the firing last week of Paul Isom, the director of student media since 2008 and adviser to The East Carolinian newspaper.

Two months ago, the newspaper published nude photos of a streaker who was arrested after he ran across the football field during a game. The photos stirred controversy, and university officials said the paper's decision was "in very poor taste."

Isom has said that his evaluations at ECU had been positive but that his relationship with administrators rapidly deteriorated after the streaker photos appeared in the newspaper. Isom has said it was not his role, nor would it have been legal, to prevent the student editors from publishing the photos.

So far, university leaders have not disclosed the reason for the firing, prompting widespread speculation that it was related to the streaker photo brouhaha.

Hardy said the university is concerned that the decision to change leadership had been connected to a First Amendment issue "without full knowledge of the facts at hand. It is important to distinguish between any personnel matter and the First Amendment."

Letters call for reinstatement

Two national groups focused on free press and students' rights have sent stern letters to ECU, demanding that Isom be reinstated.
In a Jan. 9 letter, the Virginia-based Student Press Law Center called on ECU's board of trustees to commission an independent investigation into the circumstances of Isom's firing.

"It is neither legally supportable nor educationally sound to punish a college media adviser for the lawful editorial judgments of the students he advises," wrote Frank LoMonte, executive director of the center.

In a Jan. 6 letter to ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard, the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education details legal precedents that protect student journalists and staff media advisers, including a 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals case involving ECU in the 1970s.

"ECU has both a legal and a moral obligation to respect the freedom of expression rights enjoyed by its students," writes FIRE's Will Creeley, director of legal and public advocacy. "Please spare East Carolina University the embarrassment of fighting against the Bill of Rights. ... We are prepared to use the full range of our resources to secure a just result in this case."

Hardy's statement reiterated support for the student journalists.

"The First Amendment demands public universities provide student journalists the opportunity to make their own news decisions and learn from them without interference," the statement said. "ECU puts that principle first. It has upheld it, especially in this instance."

Stancill: 919-829-4559
University: Newspaper adviser fired over 'personnel issue,' not streaker photos

By James Eng, msnbc.com

East Carolina University says its decision to fire the adviser to the student newspaper was based on a “personnel matter” and not a First Amendment issue related to the paper's publication of photographs of a streaker at a football game.

Paul Isom, adviser to the The East Carolinian, was terminated last Wednesday, two months after the newspaper published pictures of a nude streaker at a Nov. 5 football game against Southern Miss.

At the time, the university said student newspaper’s decision to publish the photos, which showed full frontal nudity, was “in very poor taste.”

“They told me they wanted to go in a different direction,” Isom told The Daily Reflector last week about his termination. “They were very cautious not to give me a real reason.”

The firing drew the ire of free-speech groups. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a national advocacy organization, sent a letter to the university’s chancellor, Steve Ballard, calling the firing unwarranted and asking that Isom be reinstated immediately.

“Given The East Carolinian's unequivocal independence, ECU may not punish The East Carolinian for its exercise of expression protected by the First Amendment,” the letter said.

Virginia Hardy, vice chancellor for student affairs, released a statement Tuesday explaining the university’s actions. The university declined further comment.

"We're going to let the statement speak for itself," Mary Schulken, university director of public affairs, told msnbc.com.

Here is Hardy’s statement in full:

East Carolina University is concerned that a decision to change leadership in its director of student media role has been connected to a First Amendment
issue without full knowledge of the facts at hand. It is important to
distinguish between any personnel matter and the First Amendment.

We ask all advocacy groups and the public to trust our internal process,
which has been deliberate, correct and legal, as we move forward to address
these two separate issues.

The First Amendment demands public universities provide student
journalists the opportunity to make their own news decisions and learn from
them without interference. ECU puts that principle first. It has upheld it,
especially in this instance.

We support The East Carolinian fully. Students have been the central focus
of what we have done and the decisions that have been made. We have
involved them openly when it was constructive and useful for their
education, including holding open, informational discussions with the
editorial staff to talk about the impact of news decisions.

Regarding editorial decisions in student media, we have respectfully allowed
the student journalists to take their own course. We have and will continue
to support their right to make decisions in publishing a newspaper for their
fellow students.
Paul Isom teaches students during his Comm 1002: Basic Reporting class at the Communication Building on Campus. Isom was fired as advisor of the East Carolinian after students published uncovered nudity on the front page. Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2012. (Aileen Devlin/The Daily Reflector)

**ECU: Firing is ‘correct and legal’**

By Jackie Drake

East Carolina University on Tuesday said the termination of its student newspaper adviser was “correct and legal” after First Amendment groups criticized the move.

Officials released a statement in response to increasing calls from national free speech organizations to reinstate Paul Isom, who was fired on Jan. 4 from his position as student media adviser, two months after The East Carolinian printed photos of a streaker at a Nov. 5 football game.

“East Carolina University is concerned that a decision to change leadership in its director of student media role has been connected to a First Amendment issue without full knowledge of the facts at hand,” Virginia Hardy, vice chancellor for student affairs, said in the statement.

“It is important to distinguish between any personnel matter and the First Amendment. We ask all advocacy groups and the public to trust our internal process, which has been deliberate, correct and legal, as we move forward to address these two separate issues.”
Officials would not answer further questions about the statement. The university has not publicly stated the reason for Isom’s termination, citing personnel confidentiality.

ECU received letters on Isom’s behalf from the Foundation for Independent Rights in Education and the Student Press Law Center.

“It doesn’t really tell me anything,” Isom said of Tuesday’s statement. “It didn’t deny there was a cause-and-effect connection between my firing and the photos. I don’t think their understanding of the First Amendment is where it needs to be. And we’re all supposed to trust their internal process? That’s not all that convincing.”

Isom said he obtained a copy of his personnel file Tuesday, “and as I already knew, there was nothing negative in it.”

The decision to print the photos was made by student editors, who have not commented on the situation, but Isom said he stands by their decision.

ECU supports the right of student media outlets to make independent editorial decisions, Hardy said in the statement.

“We have and will continue to support their right to make decisions in publishing a newspaper for their fellow students,” she said.

Contact Jackie Drake at jdrake@reflector.com or 252-329-9565.

**ECU Statement**

Virginia Hardy, vice chancellor for student affairs, issued the following statement on “East Carolina University’s record and responsibilities in regard to the First Amendment and its student-run newspaper, the East Carolinian.”

East Carolina University is concerned that a decision to change leadership in its director of student media role has been connected to a First Amendment issue without full knowledge of the facts at hand. It is important to distinguish between any personnel matter and the First Amendment.

We ask all advocacy groups and the public to trust our internal process, which has been deliberate, correct and legal, as we move forward to address these two separate issues.

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from them without interference. ECU puts that principle first. It has upheld it, especially in this instance.

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Regarding editorial decisions in student media, we have respectfully allowed the student journalists to take their own course. We have and will continue to support their right to make decisions in publishing a newspaper for their fellow students.
Some former UNC system board members are joining forces against proposed tuition increases at university campuses.

About two dozen former UNC Board of Governors members have signed a statement calling for the current board to reject the increases proposed at many campuses for the fall. The hikes, according to the document, "will make these institutions inaccessible to many qualified young men and women and breach the moral and constitutional duties of our state to all of our citizens."

The UNC system's board will take up tuition proposals at a meeting Thursday. A vote is expected in February.

The petition was organized by William Johnson, a Lillington attorney, chairman of the board in the late 1970s. In an interview Tuesday, Johnson said it's important to get tuition under control.

"Tuition has been creeping up - drastically, I think - in recent years," he said.

At this week's meeting, campus leaders will make their case for tuition and fee increases that go well above the board's current annual cap of 6.5 percent.

UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, wants to charge students an extra $2,800 during the next five years. Its proposal would raise undergraduate tuition for North Carolina residents next year by $800, or 15.6 percent, bringing annual tuition and fees to $7,795 in 2012-13. That does not include costs for room, food or books.

N.C. State University also wants multi-year tuition hikes.

Campus leaders have argued that quality is slipping in the face of double-digit percentage state budget cuts. They say an increase is needed to help restore courses and academic offerings lost in budget reductions.

But there is a sense of unease among some current board members about the tuition proposals. "I think the in-state increases requested by the campuses are too high, and I sincerely hope and believe they will be scaled back," said Brent Barringer, a member from Cary. Conversely, Barringer said, out-of-state tuition should rise substantially.
UNC board meets this week

This week's debate is likely to be heated, as the board considers the proposals and students show up to protest. With former board members now sounding off, too, there is added pressure on the board to keep costs low in a difficult economy.

"We cannot responsibly shift an increasing burden in the form of ever-rising tuition and fee charges on to the students and their parents," the former members' statement said.

The effort is also meant to push the legislature, and calls on citizens to contact their elected representatives. The petition cites North Carolina's constitutional provision that requires free higher education for the people, "as far as practicable."

The former board members also ask university leaders to reduce costs, to defer launching new programs and to keep increases modest.

Outside groups also are weighing in. A Jan. 9 letter from the Washington-based American Council of Trustees and Alumni called on the UNC board to set an example for the rest of American higher education at a time when tuition is rising much faster than inflation.

The letter suggested rewarding those campuses that freeze or lower tuition and close or consolidate programs to save money.

"The public and taxpayers rightly have reached the boiling point when it comes to ever-increasing costs," wrote Anne Neal, president of the organization. "They are tired of policymakers who are saddling our next generation with unsustainable debt, rather than making the tough decisions that these times demand."

Stancill: 919-829-4559
An artist’s rendering shows the 7,700-square-foot dental clinic East Carolina University plans to build on the former Vicki Villa Restaurant site on U.S. Highway 17 North in Elizabeth City.

**Dental clinic work set to start soon**

By Peter Williams  
The Daily Advance

Construction is expected to begin within the next two weeks on East Carolina University’s $3 million dental clinic in Elizabeth City.

A.R. Chesson Construction Inc., will build the 7,700-square-foot clinic on the site of the former Vicki Villa motel and restaurant on U.S. Highway 17 North across from Albemarle Hospital.

According to Chesson, construction of the clinic should be complete by September.

The clinic will be one of 10 ECU plans to build in eastern North Carolina to train dentistry students and meet the dental needs of indigent and low-income residents.

The plan is for four to five ECU senior dental students to work at the clinic to learn and provide care for the community. ECU won’t have its first crop
of seniors until 2014, so in the meantime, residents and other staff members will man the clinic.

Students will be taught by dental school faculty members based in the centers, along with advanced dental residents. Students would come for nine-week periods and then rotate to another area.

“When we’re fully operational we’ll have a full-time staff there in excess of 10 people,” said Dr. Greg Chadwick, interim dean of the dental school. That includes dental assistants and residents.

Anyone will be able to receive care at these practices. Patients will be charged according to a sliding scale of fees based on the type of provider they see — student, resident or faculty.

The clinic will serve a need in the community, officials say.

“Dental care is one of those challenges we have in this community,” said Jennifer Palestrant, the president of the Elizabeth City Chamber of Commerce. “When we first moved here 10 years ago, the dentists weren’t taking new patients. Since then we’ve added some private dentists, but dental care is one of those things that often isn’t covered by insurance and there are people who lack proper care.”

Construction on the Elizabeth City clinic will start “in the next week or two,” said Billie Wilson of A.R. Chesson. Chadwick said some final paperwork must be completed first.

The first groundbreaking for a clinic occurred in Ahoskie in August. That clinic will share a new 8,000-square-foot, two-story building with Roanoke Chowan Community Health Center. The clinic will serve the residents of Hertford, Bertie, Northampton, Gates and other surrounding counties.

A 2006 study conducted by ECU and UNC-Chapel Hill called for a coordinated response to the need for dentists in rural areas. North Carolina ranked 47th nationally for dental care. Today, four North Carolina counties — Tyrrell, Jones, Hyde and Camden — have no dentists at all. Three counties have one dentist, 28 have just two.

So far, five clinics have been announced. Two are east of I-95, where ECU says the need is greatest in Ahoskie and Elizabeth City. Others are set for Harnett County, Jackson County and Mitchell County.
Economy expected to continue growing

By K.j. Williams

With economic indicators pointing toward slow and steady gains, the health of the U.S. economy requires taking steps to shrink the federal deficit and to train a more skilled workforce, a financial expert said at a Tuesday economic forecast luncheon.

“The challenge in my mind is we don’t have the political will to fix it,” Rick Niswander, vice chancellor for finance and administration at East Carolina University, said about the deficit. The cure would require both tax increases and spending cuts, he said.

He cautioned members of the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce to look at trends, not monthly figures, to gauge the health of the economy, at the event held at the City Hotel & Bistro.

The unemployment rate and the decline in housing construction are two indicators that aren’t showing enough improvement, he said.

Looking at 1990 to 2010, he said the data shows that the economy has shed more unskilled labor jobs and added more jobs requiring education above high school.

The majority of jobs lost in North Carolina were in manufacturing. In 1990, one of every four jobs were in manufacturing, compared to one in 10 in 2010. Nationally,
manufacturing output isn’t down, largely because industries today are more automated, requiring fewer workers.

Jobs requiring more education now comprise nearly half of the jobs created nationally, compared to one in three in 1990.

All the jobs with declining numbers are ones requiring nothing more than a high school diploma. Among growing occupations, 70 percent require an associate’s or bachelor’s degree or something higher, Niswander said.

“It’s a fundamental shift in the proportions (skilled and unskilled), and our workforce isn’t ready for it,” he said. “Education matters, and we have to pay attention to it.”

In the long term, that’s the only way to fix the unemployment problem, he said, adding that it’s slowly getting better. Nationally, about 8 million job losses have been attributed to the Great Recession.

“When you lose that many jobs, it’s going to take you a little while to get out of it,” Niswander said. “We are moving in the right direction. The world is not coming to an end.”

While Pitt County unemployment hasn’t changed much since 2009, the county’s rate remains below the state’s rate. However, both rates are above the national average.

Niswander said his projection last year that the gross domestic product would grow by between 3 percent to 3.5 percent in 2011 held true, and he echoed that prediction for 2012.

He said that data shows there has been some recovery in personal income, discretionary income and consumption. Retail and food service appears headed in the “right direction and in a sustained way. There’s also been upward movement in vehicle sales and production and sales of industrial products. Private investment is gaining but couldn’t be classified as in recovery yet.

There are more trouble spots from housing foreclosures to a slow construction climate. State budget cuts to higher education and federal cuts to the military also have affected eastern North Carolina since those sectors are crucial to the economic makeup.

Nationally, there are factors abroad that could pose risks to sustained recovery, he noted, referring to the European Union’s debt crisis and the potential for spikes in oil prices from Middle East flare-ups.

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Top Pitt health issues reviewed

By K.j. Williams

After hearing a report on the top health issues facing Pitt County, the board that advises the Pitt County Health Department voted unanimously Tuesday to pursue three key objectives that included addressing the increase in sexually transmitted diseases.

Board member Tina Dixon asked Jo Morgan, health education director, if the health department had any ability to improve education about STDs at the school level.

“They’re all going up, and they’re all more often affecting African-American” residents, Dixon said.

Board member Dr. Keith Ramsey said the reason for the rising rates was unknown.

Ramsey, a professor at East Carolina University’s Brody School of Medicine, said he already was discussing the issue with other doctors.

There are educational efforts under way, he said, adding that schools could be problematic.

“We are a very conservative community here,” said Ramsey, the medical director of infection control at Pitt County Memorial Hospital.

Dr. John Morrow, director of the health department, said Pitt County does a lot of testing for STDs, and that could be one reason for its high rates.

Pitt has the 15th-highest rate of HIV disease in the state, an increase from its previous health assessment ranking. For eastern North Carolina, statistics show that three-fourths of the cases are in the black community, with about three-fourths of those in men.

For other STDs, blacks also had higher rates than whites, including for syphilis.

Chlamydia in women is more than double the state rate of cases, averaging almost 1,500 cases annually from 2008 to 2010. Gonorrhea cases in Pitt County occur at a rate of about 540 cases annually, more than double the state’s average.
Ramsey said that when PCMH tests emergency room patients for suspected urinary tract infections, if the laboratory results show the problems is an STD, the patients are sent letters.

Dixon suggested that frank prevention talks might address the problem, especially among younger groups.

“Sometimes you just have to tell the truth,” she said. “This is what will happen if you do this.”

The report also listed information including various diseases, the leading causes of death by age groups, the availability of health care, population and poverty data, and information about middle school and high school students previously discussed by the school board.

Morrow asked the health board to approve four key priorities that the health department will concentrate on for the next four to five years.

In addition to communicable disease control, including STDs, other priorities supported by a unanimous health board vote include primary prevention services like prenatal care and child wellness, risk factor reduction ranging from nutrition to substance abuse, and health assessments with assistance from screenings, vital records and other methods.

Board member Judith Kuykendall, a nurse, said the list was comprehensive but also allowed for a flexible approach.

In other matters, Morrow said there’s room for dozens more children in a free dental clinic to be held Feb. 3, where dentists will be donating their services. Children ages 6-12 may qualify if they don’t have insurance or a dentist.

Call the health department at 902-2300 for information.

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Blue Edwards enjoys watching his daughters play basketball against UAB Sunday afternoon at Minges Coliseum. (Scott Davis/The Daily Reflector)

Former ECU great now a spectator

By Ronnie Woodward

During all but one of East Carolina’s home women’s basketball games this season, Blue Edwards has sat in the same spot inside Minges Coliseum — behind the scorer’s table, about three rows up.

He watches his daughter play on the same court that he excelled on during his college days. He doesn’t show much emotion, but that’s not because he isn’t into the games. Edwards said after last Sunday’s contest against UAB that holding in his raw emotion is part of his personality.

His twin daughters, Britny and Whitny, transferred to East Carolina last July after beginning their careers at Virginia. Britny is playing with the Pirates this season and Whitny is redshirting, which will allow the twins to play together next year.

Britny is third on ECU in scoring (8.7 points per game) and first in rebounding (8.3 rpg).

“I try to keep a calm demeanor (during games) because I know every once in a while they may look over at me for some type of direction, instruction or encouragement,” said Edwards, who is the only ECU men’s basketball player to be drafted in the first round of an NBA draft. “I certainly don’t want them to see any negative emotion from me, but that’s how I watch the
Edwards played two seasons with the Pirates and his 26.7 scoring average during the 1988-89 season was sixth in the nation and is still an ECU single-season record. He was selected by the Utah Jazz with the 21st pick of the 1989 NBA draft and he played in the league until 1999. His professional highlights include participating in the 1991 slam dunk competition and recording the first triple-double in Vancouver Grizzlies’ history with 15 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists in ’96.

He lives in Charlotte but travels to Greenville for ECU home games. He admitted that sitting in the stands in Minges was a little weird for him at first, but he has since acclimated.

“It is a special connection for us,” Edwards said of his daughters being Pirates. “When I come to the games to watch, I’m just a proud dad.”

Blue said Britny decided she wanted to transfer from Virginia last season and he knew if Britny was going to transfer, Whitny would too. Blue admitted he was little hesitant about them coming to ECU because of the pressure they might face, but he said he thinks they have handled it well and it’s been a smooth transition.

Britny enjoyed one her best games as a Pirate during the team’s last outing, a 44-39 loss to UAB.

Because of injuries and a suspension to the team’s leading scorer, East Carolina only had seven players available to play and Britny was the Pirates’ main post player. The 6-foot-1 junior responded by grabbing a game-high 12 rebounds and scoring nine points.

“We were undersized so we just had to fight and outwork them to get the board,” Britny said. “We had to defend and really box out.”

Blue said he wants the twins to continue to develop on the court, which includes taking a leadership role despite them having the low-key personality they got from their dad.

“The biggest thing for them is they just want to fit in and sometimes you don’t need to just fit in, you need to take charge,” Blue said. “Coming to this program from UVa., I felt they could be more leaders here because there they were pushed a little differently there.”

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Robert Champion, a drum major at Florida A&M University, sustained a beating at the hands of bandmates, authorities said.

Questions Swirl Over What Led to Florida Drum Major’s Death

By ROBBIE BROWN

ATLANTA — Almost two months after the beating death of a Florida A&M University drum major, new questions have arisen over why he might have been singled out for violence.

On Tuesday, the parents of the student, Robert Champion, revealed that their son had been gay. But they said they believed that did not play a big role in the beating the authorities say he sustained at the hands of bandmates on a bus after a football game on Nov. 19.

“Robert’s being gay may have been a reason for his hazing, but it wasn’t the main reason,” said Christopher M. Chestnut, the family’s lawyer, who said he had conducted a private investigation. “This was a hazing crime, not a hate crime.”

That Mr. Champion was gay was “a private thing, not something he advertised publicly,” his mother, Pam Champion, said in an interview.
Instead, she said at a press conference in Orlando, Fla., on Tuesday, her son had been targeted as retribution for his well-known stance against hazing.

Many former Florida A&M band members have alleged that the prestigious university band, the Marching 100, has a culture of musicians punching, slapping, paddling and forcing one another to perform degrading acts. Last month, a band member left the university after claiming she had been punched so hard during hazing that she was hospitalized with a broken femur, deep bone bruises and blood clots. Three students were arrested in that case and charged with hazing and battery.

The former band director, Julian White, who was fired after Mr. Champion’s death, suggested on Tuesday that this might have been an isolated case of homophobia. He said the bullying “could not have been predicted or prevented.”

“It is entirely possible that Champion’s tragic death was less about any ritualistic hazing and more tantamount to a hateful and fully conscious attempt to batter a young man because of his sexual orientation,” said Dr. White’s lawyer, Chuck Hobbs.

The line between hazing and homophobia is often blurry, said Shane L. Windmeyer, the executive director of Campus Pride, a national group for gay students, and author of several books about gay life on college campuses.

“Hazing often gets taken to a new level when its against someone who is gay,” he said. “Obviously someone’s own prejudice or fears will motivate them to haze and, in many cases, to take more extreme actions.”

From a legal perspective, Mr. Champion’s family wants assurances that the university and the band director are held responsible. If the death is tried as a hate crime, it could carry harsher criminal sentences. But in a civil lawsuit, it could undermine the family’s argument, allowing the university to distinguish a hate crime from a longer tradition of hazing, Mr. Chestnut said.

Mr. Champion did not want to be known for being gay, his mother said. “Robert was not known or defined by his sexual orientation,” she said. “He was more known for his stance against hazing.”

The family also announced Tuesday that it is suing the company that owns the bus on which the hazing allegedly occurred. Mr. Champion was hazed while the bus was parked and running, and no driver was aboard to supervise, Mr. Chestnut said.
Ray Land, the president of the bus company, Fabulous Coach Line, said his employees had followed standard procedures and responded immediately to the emergency.

“As soon as we were notified there was an issue, we responded and helped in the emergency,” he said. “We did everything within our power to keep our passengers safe.”
Penn State University President Rodney Erickson, left, leads a town hall forum in November. Students asked questions of top officials in the wake of the recent sex scandal involving former football defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky. (PAT LITTLE - REUTERS)

**At Penn State, crisis management meant monitoring social media**

By Jenna Johnson

On Nov. 1, Penn State hosted its second “Social Media Summit” for dozens of employees who oversee university-related Web sites, blogs and social media accounts. It was an event much like those happening at colleges across the country, as schools attempt to control their image and brand online.

In addition to learning the basics, a panel of journalists (myself included) answered questions about how we use social media, and the keynote speaker was a Pentagon official who does social media for the Army.

Four days later, former coach Jerry Sandusky was arrested and charged with sexually molesting young boys. Two university administrators were charged with lying to a grand jury and not properly reporting suspected child abuse. Penn State’s two most public leaders — football coach Joe Paterno and
President Graham Spanier — were implicated but not charged. All of the men maintain their innocence.

For days, the unfolding scandal dominated news coverage and workplace conversations. It endlessly trended on Twitter and was heavily searched on Google. The Penn State’s official Facebook page lit up with hundreds of comments from all sorts of people.

For university public relations staffers, crisis management has grown larger than dealing with a flood of calls and visits from traditional reporters. Now, there are also millions of random people online asking questions, making accusations and forming opinions.

Behind the scenes, top-level Penn State officials closely monitored the publicity and tried to control their messaging, according to memos obtained by the Associated Press through a public records request filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, as Penn State is largely exempt from state open records laws.

On Nov. 14 — a few days after Spanier was ousted, Paterno was fired, and students rioted near campus — newly appointed President Rodney Erickson sent a memo to Penn State trustees. “Review of Top 20 search terms on Google today shows no Penn State terms on that list for the first time in nine days,” he wrote, adding that “blogs, tweets, news stories, Facebook postings, YouTube videos, etc.” had declined 50 percent from the previous day and 90 percent over the prior four days.

In a memo dated the following day — which was soon after Sandusky was interviewed by Bob Costas on NBC — Erickson told the board that marketing staffers were developing a video and “more symbolic game day experiences” for the upcoming football game against Ohio State. Erickson also wrote that special attention was being given to reaching to prospective students, according to the AP.

In another memo, the AP reported, Erickson informed trustees that Penn State’s vice president for university relations had told deans and chancellors to emphasize a message of “remorse, humility and resolve.”

Such calculated messaging often rubs people the wrong way, especially so soon after a tragedy. But that’s how public relations offices at major universities — and many small colleges, too — now operate. That’s why there are all of these social media training sessions.

A week after a student gunman killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007, university public relations officials assembled a panel of students, faculty
and a counselor to speak to the media. In 2008, the Post obtained an internal memo about the event, which mentioned the panel members had been coached beforehand.

"If we had scripted this entire event, we could not have done a better job than these folks did, spontaneously," the memo read. “One of the professors, who did not participate, made a comment that if we got our participants from central casting, we would not have had better players.”

In December, I interviewed several marketing professors about how universities address scandal and tragedy. In these conversations, the word “brand” was used over and over again. And Virginia Tech was frequently cited as an example of what universities should do: memorialize the victims, support those affected and take action to prevent similar problems in the future.

“Every university should have a plan in hand for when these crisis happen,” said Kelly O’Keefe, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University’s Brandcenter. With sprawling campuses filled with thousands of young people, staffers and visitors, “you have to think of the university as a powder keg that could blow at any moment.”

For more higher education news, follow me on Twitter and Facebook.