

A Protocol for Free & Responsible Student News Media

By Shawn Healy, Resident Scholar and Director of Professional Development, McCormick Foundation Civics Program

Scholastic journalism is vital to the civic mission of our schools. This past February the McCormick Foundation Civics Program proudly convened more than fifty student journalists, their advisers, administrators, school board members, superintendents, representatives of professional media, and organizations dedicated to student media to craft a *Protocol for Free & Responsible Student Media*.

The link between certain extracurricular activities and lifelong civic engagement is well documented, particularly those organizations that pursue a collective outcome, such as student government, youth service clubs and, perhaps most prominently, scholastic news media. However, all too often student media fall victim to the inevitable tensions associated with schools' perpetual balancing act between freedom and structure. Lack of structure invites sloppy journalism that reflects poorly upon the school it represents. Lack of freedom fails to prepare tomorrow's journalists for professional responsibilities and obligations and tomorrow's citizens for news consumption critical to informed democratic participation.

The Protocol for Free & Responsible Student Media is the McCormick Foundation's best effort to find balance between freedom and structure. It is a consensus document that student journalists, their advisers and school administrators can turn to repeatedly during times of both harmony and discord. When a controversy surrounding a student newspaper gathers headlines in the professional press or ends up in the courtroom, all parties lose. On the other hand, when adversaries become allies, when contentious issues are resolved through consensus, and when student journalists practice their craft with the proper mix of freedom and structure, all parties win.

The Protocol represents the hard work of report writer Randy Swikle, a dedicated journalism educator who has devoted his career to this cause, and Kim Ruff and the entire staff at the Illinois Press Foundation, our partner for the February 2010 conference that inspired this important document. It also reflects the enormous contributions of the fifty-plus attendees of the conference.

The Knight Foundation's annual survey of student appreciation for the First Amendment shows that students are much more likely than their teachers or administrators to take for granted the First Amendment's five freedoms. However, students enrolled in classes with First Amendment or media content show higher levels of support for freedom of expression. Additionally, when First Amendment freedoms are rooted in their daily lives, students are much more likely to protect not only their own rights but also the rights of others. Such a reciprocal commitment is the best way to preserve First Amendment freedoms.

The Protocol is designed for immediate use at your high school, and can be downloaded and printed free of charge at the following link:

<http://mccormickfoundation.org/publications/pdf/McCormickFoundationProtocolReport.pdf>. It promotes the realization of students' First Amendment freedoms, embodies the ideals of key stakeholders in scholastic journalism, and maintains the necessary balance between freedom and structure within the schoolhouse gate. Here's to free and responsible student media!