

Howard's Student Newspaper Halts Publication

Contributed by ShaunteL Lowe - Black College Wire
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Only daily HBCU paper hasn't paid printing bills

Howard University administrators have halted publication of the university's student newspaper, the editor in chief and the university spokesman told Black College Wire this week.

Drew Costley, a Howard senior and The Hilltop's top editor for the 2007-08 academic year, said the action was taken because of more than \$48,000 in outstanding printing costs. He also said \$20,000 is missing from the paper's account. Costley was reached in New Orleans where he was participating in alternative spring break to help Hurricane Katrina victims.

Costley said administrators "went against protocol" and independently decided to stop publication of The Hilltop indefinitely after it was revealed that the newspaper owed its printer, The Washington Times, \$48,000 for printing during the fall semester. The Hilltop is the nation's only HBCU student newspaper that is published daily.

Costley said the decision to stop publication resulted from an "illegal vote" taken without a quorum at a March 6 meeting of the policy board that governs the paper.

Ron Harris, director of the office of communications, confirmed that publication of The Hilltop has been suspended. "The university administration is not happy that school newspaper is not being published. They're having conversations right now to discuss how did this happen, are there systemic problems, and what do we need to change to make sure it doesn't happen again." Harris also said discussions were underway to determine if the printing bills could be paid.

During the March 6 meeting, Costley said administrators suggested stopping publication, but Costley said he motioned to continue publishing through March 21.

"The board started discussing my motion without verifying what the words were. It somehow got twisted that my motion was to stop publishing," he said.

After 45 minutes to an hour of "talking in circles," Costley's motion was passed and the meeting was adjourned without a solution to the financial problem, he said. At a board meeting on March 12, five pages of minutes from that meeting were approved after one minute of review. Costley said the minutes of the meeting stated, in error, that he had motioned for the paper to stop publication.

"These administrators that sit on the board took it upon themselves to decide that the newspaper wasn't publishing any more," Costley said.

Harris said he had been informed that it was the editor's recommendation at the meeting that publication be suspended.

Costley said the administration did not adhere to the requirement of having a quorum of 11 voting members choose. At the March 6 meeting, Costley said only "8 or 9" members were present and 11 were required for a quorum. There was no vote at the March 12 meeting, he said. Conflicting reports of board meeting

The issue of the quorum remains in question. Harris, who was not present at the meeting, said a board member told him there was a quorum. Howard University Student Association President Marcus Ware initially told Black College Wire a quorum was not present, but later amended his statement, saying he was unsure because "there were people entering and exiting the room." Ware added that the chair is supposed to call for quorum prior to a vote, but that did not happen.

Ware also agreed with Costley's statement that he did not recommend halting publication of the paper. "The motion that was made didn't say that we should stop publishing," Ware said.

Costley, a former Black College Wire intern, said of the \$48,000 owed to the printer, \$20,000 is at least 120 days outstanding and the remaining \$28,000 is between 60 and 90 days outstanding. He said \$20,000 was taken out of the newspaper's account in January, and has not been replaced or accounted for, even after an audit. "I'm not sure who, I'm not sure what, and I'm not sure why," he said, referring to the missing funds.

According to Costley, on the evening of March 12 he heard that administrators were halting publication, and when he called one administrator to complain, he was warned "to be aware of the repercussions of not listening to the board." Letter to advertisers sent

Soon after, The Hilltop's business manager, Ashley D. Marshall, sent out a letter to the paper's advertisers notifying them that the paper would not be publishing for the rest of the school year. "We are looking forward [sic] to a more prosperous publication year beginning in the fall, and hope to continue business with you then. We extend our apologies for any inconvenience this notice may serve you, but we will be in touch if publication resumes any time before the publication year ends," the letter said.

That letter was a surprise to Costley, who said he had sent out an email telling his staff to continue working just before he heard about Marshall's letter.

"The letter was sent prematurely without my authorization or the authorization of the policy board or board of directors or review and it was completely incorrect," he said. Costley said he told Marshall she needed to send out a correction.

The letter cited "the lack of advertising and extensive difficulty in receiving [sic] collections from some of our partners and clients" as financial precursors to the paper halting publication.

Marshall could not be reached for comment.

Costley said in December 2007, he found out that the business staff had not sent out invoices to advertising clients for a month and a half, causing \$40,000 to \$45,000 in lost revenue.

He said tearsheets to show clients their ads were actually run, also had not gone out, so clients refused to pay. Costley said by the time he found this out, the assistant business manager had been fired for an unrelated reason. Marshall was not fired over the incident.

It appears that miscommunication and alleged mismanagement are at the heart of The Hilltop's financial woes. Costley said he could have exercised more oversight, but that the traditional dynamic of The Hilltop has been for the editor in chief to handle the editorial side and let the business manager run the business office. Budget, workload presented challenges

"I think I went wrong in not being closer to the business office," he said, adding that he spent two weeks during the fall in the business office watching how things were run. He said overseeing a paper with a \$250,000 budget and a staff of 40 people was more of a challenge than he expected.

"I expect other people to bring their sand to the beach. I might be naive for that, but I would expect people to do what they are saying they're going to do," he said. Costley said he has advised his staff to continue working as though they will be putting out an issue on March 25.

On March 20, Costley said an administrator told him the university was pulling together money to cover the printing bill and has scheduled a meeting for Monday, March 24 to discuss whether the newspaper will resume publishing.

Harris mentioned speculation that the move to daily publication in 2005 was too ambitious.

But Ruth Tisdale, the paper's top editor from 2004 to 2006, said daily publication is possible with proper organization and management. Tisdale, now a reporter at The Roanoke Times, led The Hilltop's transition from weekly to daily publication in February 2005. She was named the National Association of Black Journalists' Student of the Year in 2006.

Though Tisdale did not want to comment on the current situation, she said that all student newspapers need to be more independent of university support. "You have to work in the present. People that have come behind me still have to work hard to ensure that the paper remains financially whole and produces news for Howard University," she said. She said there were some difficulties between her and her business staff, but it was necessary to find "common ground" with the business manager during her tenure.

The Hilltop's managing editor, senior Josh Thomas, said it's important for the paper, as the first and only HBCU daily, to continue publishing and he hopes the situation will be resolved. He said it would be "erasing history" if publication stops.

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