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## The Charger: A Case Study Of Leadership Decisions And The Oxford High School Student Newspaper

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THE CHARGER: A CASE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP DECISIONS AND THE OXFORD  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT NEWSPAPER

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Education  
The University of Mississippi

by

RONNIE KEITH MORGAN, JR.

May 2020

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## ABSTRACT

This case study uses qualitative interviews with administrators, advisers, former editors, and others, along with researcher observations and more than 50 years of archival documents to construct a comprehensive portrait of the history, successes, and challenges of the student newspaper program at Oxford High School, and how administrative decision making has affected that success and vice versa. The OHS student newspaper, called the *Charger* since the late 1980s, has consistently ranked at or near the top of the best high school newspapers in Mississippi and has at times been named one of the top high school newspapers in the nation. The study finds that neither the *Charger* nor its forerunners have ever been subject to any type of administrative prior review or restraint, and, not unrelated, finds the newspaper to have had a significant impact on the school, community, and the students whose charge it has been to produce and publish it. The study identifies a successive series of school leaders who have valued the program, committed resources to it, and entrusted students with the autonomy to report on school and community issues, even/especially uncomfortable ones, without fear of interference or reprisal from above. This hands-off philosophy of leadership has at times led to conflicts over unsavory coverage and has strained relationships between school leaders and the journalism adviser/staff, all of which is also detailed and analyzed in the study.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Will Norton, who is himself a case study in leadership.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the contributions and counsel of my mentor, Beth Fitts, and the rest of the administrators, teachers, and others who gave so freely of their time and memories during our interviews. They allowed me into their homes, offices, and classrooms, and many were extremely candid in discussing sensitive moments they might easily have preferred stay buried. Without their generous cooperation and thoughtful insights, many of these pages would still be blank.

I must also thank my advisor, Dr. Douglas Davis, for all his help and guidance during the dissertation process. His gentle shepherding of this project from an acorn of an idea to a fully-formed oak has been invaluable, as have the notes and edits from the rest of my committee. I am likewise indebted to my parents, family, and graduate cohort for their support.

Many of my colleagues at the University of Mississippi School of Journalism and New Media have let me use them as sounding boards and scratching posts, as have so many members of the scholastic journalism community in Mississippi and across the country. I count myself lucky to call all of these people my friends, and I am grateful they (usually) say the same.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge all the current and former school leaders and scholastic media advisers whose passion for media literacy, academic rigor, and student development make meaningful programs like the one at Oxford High School possible. My own career and educational experiences were indelibly shaped by working on my high school newspaper, and were it not for that program and the leaders and teachers who afforded me such an opportunity, I would probably be cleaning toilets somewhere right now, and doing so quite poorly.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

**Background.** Student-run news publications have enjoyed a long tradition as institutional touchstones in America’s public high schools (Spring, 1972). From print publications such as newspapers and magazines to more recent digital evolutions such as newscasts and websites, scholastic media outlets are as ingrained into the American public high school experience as letterman jackets, marching bands, and homecoming queens. But more than just empty symbols of student culture, scholastic journalism programs — in particular, student newspapers — offer a powerful curricular opportunity for developing students both socially and academically when schools choose to orient their publications and invest in them in such a way as to fully utilize these functions. *The Charger*, the student newspaper of Oxford High School (OHS) in Oxford, Mississippi, is an exemplar of such a program.

The Oxford School District (2019) is a large, A-ranked school district located in the small town of Oxford, Mississippi, which is also home to the University of Mississippi. The OSD serves more than 4,500 students, grades PreK-12. Oxford High School, the district’s lone high school, claims one of the state’s top graduation rates and has been ranked among the most challenging high schools in the United States (Oxford School District, 2019). As part of a comprehensive assortment of electives, clubs, and school-associated activities at OHS, the *Charger* student newspaper is currently run out of a for-credit course taught by a licensed journalism teacher who acts as the publication’s adviser. The publication is student-run, with student editors planning the content for each issue and managing a staff of other students as they

work toward completion. The staff produces monthly print issues of the newspaper while also managing an accompanying news website, [thechargeronline.com](http://thechargeronline.com). As with other multimedia news outlets, the work is rigorous, diverse, and constant. Students apply to be on staff and are accepted based on available space, schedule, and the student's journalistic talent. Students are allowed to retake the course multiple times for additional elective credits, allowing students the opportunity to remain on staff for multiple years and advance into editorial leadership roles.

Since the earliest days of its existence, the *Charger* has been consistently recognized for its excellence on the state, regional and national levels. In the 15 most recent years of existing Mississippi Scholastic Press Association (2019) records dating back to 2002, the *Charger* has claimed a total of 15 state championships, 10 of them for the school's monthly print publication and the rest for its online counterpart. In that same time period, the *Charger* has also earned seven All-Southern ratings from the Southern Interscholastic Press Association (2019), has been selected six times for a Gold or Silver Crown Award from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association (2019), and has also earned six national Pacemaker awards from the National Scholastic Press Association (2019). Former members of the *Charger* staff have gone on to become professional print and broadcast reporters, graphic designers, senior communication specialists, marketing strategists, and a host of other successful professional positions inside and outside the communication field. It has helped the school district consistently achieve above-average English Proficiency scores on statewide assessment tests (Mississippi Succeeds Report, 2019), and it has served as a reliable source of new and accurate information for the entire Oxford community, including, on occasion, breaking local news stories ahead of even the town's commercial publications (Oxford Eagle, 2016).

A program of such rigor, regard, and longevity is rare. In fact, Oxford's scholastic media success is an anomaly among Mississippi high schools. Compared to the *Charger's* 15 state championships since 2002, the next highest-performing print/online student newspaper programs during that time period are Tupelo High School's *Hi-Times* with four state titles and George County High School's *Student Report* with three (MSPA, 2019). In the world of Mississippi high school newspapers, the *Charger* could aptly be compared to the New York Yankees, New England Patriots, or the Alabama Crimson Tide. As one veteran publication adviser succinctly noted in a journal article written for secondary school administrators:

Like athletic teams, student talent moves in cycles and publications will have their good and bad years. But like schools that consistently produce top-flight teams, there are certain publications that have good years and better years. There are no bad ones. These usually are schools where an energetic adviser seeks good talent and offers as bait the rewards of producing a good product. Happily, there are youngsters in every school who will respond to this type of challenge, and it doesn't take very many of them to produce an effective publication. (Reichley, 1964, p. 20-21)

If consistent student success like that of the *Charger* can, as Reichley suggests, be generally attributed to quality teachers, and quality teachers neither hire themselves nor consistently succeed without institutional support, one of the differentiating factors in Oxford's journalistic success seems to be the amount of freedom, trust, resources, and responsibility students and their advisers are afforded by administration. the *Charger*, unlike most other Mississippi high school newspapers, is not subjected to administrative prior review before publishing. Students are in control of the publication's content and seem to take pride in and ownership of that learning environment. Once published, OSD administrators have been diligent in defending students'

reporting and content decisions after the fact, even when that content has been critical of or caused conflict or adversity for the school and district (Harris, 2016).

**Purpose of the study.** Having a journalism program that operates as a limited public forum, is not subject to prior review, and empowers student journalists to investigate and critique the people and systems that comprise their school and district can create a collaborative learning environment that benefits students on a variety of levels. This level of autonomy creates more meaningful learning experiences for students and places the responsibility for fairness, accuracy, and success on their own shoulders. However, this type of environment is not without its inherent risks. Students may report incomplete or misleading information. Students may choose to highlight information that casts their school district or its administration in a negative light. The newspaper or news site might publish content that opens the district up to potential legal liabilities. The students themselves may learn a lot from the publishing experience and benefit greatly from the real-world learning environment, but they may also create more problems for local administrators than they solve. Thus the long-term success of such programs would be impossible without the backing and trust of the institution's adult decision-makers. This case study will seek to explore this cost/benefit dichotomy and the way it has affected administrative decision-making at Oxford High School.

**Research Questions.**

1. How have administrative decisions contributed to the establishment, success, and continued success of the *Charger*?
2. What benefits have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?

3. What challenges have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?

**Significance of the study.** Through archival research, observation, and qualitative interviews with current and former administrators and publication advisers, this study will examine administrative actions and decisions, past and present, with regard to the operation of the *Charger* student newspaper and within the existing contexts of Oxford and the Oxford School District. The work builds on similar research by (Vogts, 2018) and (Taylor, 2019), who studied student publication phenomenology from rural and private school perspectives, respectively. As a case study, the objective of this research is to explore, not to predict or explain. The resulting data will illuminate the impact the *Charger* has had on its participants as individuals, on its school culture, and on its school leaders. Though not generalizable to other high school newspapers, high schools, or journalism programs, the study and its findings should prove vicariously useful to other practitioners interested in preparing for similar realities within their own school environments, or to those weighing the benefits and challenges of creating such realities in their own environments.

This research will also add to an existing body of knowledge in the field of educational leadership that has been derived from case study methodology. Whether studying the impact of school leaders' actions and decisions with regard to cultural responsiveness (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), rural environments (du Plessis, 2017), or implementing place-based learning (Hankins, 2015), case studies have proven to be an effective way to study school leaders and broaden understanding of their role and value within the educational environment. Further analysis of the data generated through this study may connect those findings to other relevant

case studies, adding to the overall understanding of the complexities of practicing school leadership in a contemporary setting.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To understand the relationship between the *Charger* student newspaper, its local school administrators, and the school, school district, and community both seek to serve, it is necessary to understand the unique and evolving role of scholastic journalism and other similar school-associated student activities in the history of American public education. This literature review will seek to situate knowledge relevant to this understanding into three topical sections: a broad overview of the development, roles, challenges and benefits of school-associated student activities as a whole, a more-targeted overview of the development, roles, challenges, and benefits of scholastic journalism specifically, and finally, a look at the historical relationship between school leaders and scholastic journalism, how that relationship has evolved, and the benefits and challenges for school leaders in fostering such programs in the modern educational landscape. By grounding the case study in these contexts, the author will seek to establish the student newspaper at Oxford High School as both a standard, natural outgrowth of the movement toward multifaceted student education in America, yet still also an anomaly in terms of its relationship with the administrators guiding the school and district where it resides.

**Student Activities.** From the earliest days of formal education, school activities have accompanied the core curriculum in some form or fashion. In the schoolhouses of the ancient Greeks, children were taught how to play sports, perform music and plays, even how to organize a student government. Secondary-age students helped manage school affairs at Winchester College in England in 1383. German and Italian schools emphasized writing and speech

activities at their schools in the 16th century. By the 17th century, school-associated sports and activities were such a part of the European culture that after his defeat of Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington remarked that, “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton [College]” (Robbins & Williams, 1969, p. 6).

In America’s earliest schools, the concept of student activities was not initially popular. Public schooling was limited to core subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics, and most young people were expected and preferred to be laboring on behalf of their families in some way for a majority of the year. As the country and its communities became more settled in the early 20th century and formal schooling became more prevalent, extracurricular experiences such as athletics, debate, and newspaper and yearbook publications crept into the hours immediately before and after schools. Teachers and administrators were skeptical at first, but by the 1920s such student activities were deeply ingrained into the fabric of the American high school experience (Robbins & Williams, 1969). Public schools were becoming the centerpieces of local communities and economies, the social incubators of American life. By mid-century, young adults who wanted to attend college, join the workforce, or otherwise contribute meaningfully to society needed to be able to do more than just recite facts and figures. The scope of public education had expanded again, and schools were now being called on to produce more well-rounded, adaptable graduates capable of handling the challenges of an ever-complexing society. The National Education Association’s (1952) Education Policies Commission summarized these goals:

Schools should be dedicated to the proposition that every youth in the United States— regardless of sex, economic status, geographic location, or race— should experience a broad and balanced education which will (a) equip him to enter an occupation suited to



his abilities and offering reasonable opportunity for personal growth and social usefulness; (b) prepare him to assume the full responsibilities of American citizenship; (c) give him a fair chance to exercise his right to the pursuit of happiness through the attainment and preservation of mental and physical health; (d) stimulate intellectual curiosity, engender satisfaction in intellectual achievement, and cultivate the ability to think rationally; and (e) help him to develop an appreciation of the ethical values which should undergird all life in a democratic society. (p. 32)

In this ideological environment, school activities bloomed. Progressive educators such as John Dewey were advocating for a more experiential-style education in the United States, and school activities offered leaders a way to augment and expand the existing school curriculum without abandoning it completely. As Spring (1972) noted:

The basic principle of the comprehensive high school was the maintenance of a differentiated program within one institution with unity and socialization being achieved through extracurricular activities. Since unity was not inherent within a differentiated educational program, it had to be imposed. The methods paralleled markedly the factory activities of clubs, outings, assemblies, magazines, and the other means used to create corporate spirit in industrial firms. In the American high school it was clubs, athletics, assemblies, student government, and school newspapers. These, in fact, became the symbols of what a high school in the United States was all about. (p. 83-84)

As the significance of these symbols grew, schools expanded their offerings by adding elective classes to the core curriculum. Whether advanced activities such as drama, choir, and school publications were organized as curricular, for-credit elective offerings during the school day, or as extracurricular clubs meeting before or after school depended largely on the goals, values, and

resources of community (Frederick, 1959). Either way, the benefits of such offerings were clear. Though daily attendance was compulsory, the diversity and import of these activities both inside and outside the regular school day kept students interested, engaged, and offered many a sense of belonging. Students who were not involved in some type of school activity were far more likely to abandon education altogether and drop out (Graham, 1964).

Today, student activities continue to play an important role in secondary schools both in America and around the world. A Harvard study by Marsh and Kleitman (2002) concluded student activities “foster school identification/commitment that benefits diverse academic outcomes, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged students who are least well served by the traditional educational curriculum” (p. 464). A recent study of high school students in Australia found that students involved in school-based extracurricular arts programs were not only more satisfied with their high school experience, but thought themselves more likely to attend college (Geagea et al, 2017).

**Scholastic Journalism.** The earliest scholastic newspaper in America actually predates the United States Constitution. Students at the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia distributed the first handwritten copies of *The Student Gazette* in June 1777 (Robbins & Williams, 1969). A smattering of printed publications began showing up in the latter part of the 19th century, but it was not until the 1920s that student newspapers, along with yearbooks and a small number of other early student activities, really began to proliferate the landscape of American high schools. As one high school journalism textbook in 1950 wrote:

The rapid growth of the high-school newspaper between the years 1920 and 1940 was not accidental. The educational values of the project, once recognized, caused the movement to sweep the country like wildfire. Half of the school newspapers that exist today had

their origin during those twenty years. This growth has come because student journalism presents a field of worthwhile endeavor that is alive and stimulating, one in which students like yourself can see themselves develop through meaningful educational activities. (Spears & Lawshe, 1950, p. 6-7)

The explosion described by Spears and Lawshe was not hyperbole. By the early 1960s, one secondary education textbook estimated the United States had “some 30,000 high school newspapers, magazines, annuals, and other publications, produced by 15,000 high schools and involving 1,000,000 pupils and \$16,500,000 in annual expenditure” (Alexander & Saylor, 1960, p. 605). Many of these publications were organized first as clubs, with optional members meeting before or after school to plan, write, and produce each issue. Later, many became for-credit elective classes with a faculty adviser, a set staff, and a grade attached to a student’s performance.

As school newspapers increased in popularity, so did debates over their mission and purpose. Some schools viewed the newspaper as a student-owned plaything; just another way to keep young people engaged and regularly attending school. Others saw these publications as excellent opportunities for community engagement, and an effective vehicle for positive messaging and good public relations on behalf of the school district. In between, an entire gamut of views and functions could be attributed to or expected of the school newspaper and its staff, everything from historical record-keeping to the marshalling of school spirit. Drawing on definitional data from a variety of published sources, Ervin (1973) summarized the accepted functions of a high school newspaper into four categories: 1) a learning device, 2) an avenue for professional/vocational journalism training, 3) an outlet for student voice, and 4) a public relations tool for the school. With those categories in place, Ervin surveyed students, student

journalists, teachers, and administrators in two different states and found that a majority ranked its professional training function as the school newspaper's most important. Public relations, even among the surveyed adults, was the least important function.

Such debates over the goal of student journalism continue today, though on the whole Ervin's described functions are not mutually exclusive. Participation in high school journalism does train and encourage students to pursue careers in professional journalism (Becker et al., 2014). Student voices are strengthened and empowered, and students do develop a stronger sense of community when they are involved in producing youth journalism, especially online (Neely, 2015). School newspapers do present a powerful public relations opportunity, as Hickman (1962) argues:

Only a correctly informed public will support the schools. The taxpayer is becoming more and more conscious of how his tax dollar is spent. He will be more sympathetic toward directing tax money into public schools if he is kept informed about what is going on inside the classroom. Because the school paper is a rather complete and informal picture of school life, it also takes a valuable message to the parents who read it. (p. 20-21)

For many journalism educators and their students, though, the greatest function of school journalism is as a learning device for developing students. In their article *MediaShift.org*, Maksl and Fromm (2014) contend that the actual product students produce in the journalism classroom, whether newspaper, website, yearbook, or other, is "no more the central purpose of a scholastic journalism program than winning a football game is to team sports. Instead, it's about the process, how students engage and work together, and the level of responsibility teachers encourage throughout." In the same article, teacher Sarah Nichols, later elected president of the

national Journalism Education Association, expanded on the educational value of student publications, noting that the “ongoing process of questioning, experimentation, reflection and analysis combines autonomy with a supportive ‘OK-to-fail’ environment, boosting confidence in students as they struggle with real-world challenges and find solutions.”

Other research also supports the tremendous potential learning value of high school journalism participation. Students who have served on their school’s newspaper or yearbook staff perform at significantly higher levels than their non-journalism peers on both the ACT college readiness exam and in their first year of college coursework (Dvorak & Choi, 2009). Students report that their scholastic media classes teach them how to communicate clearly and concisely, engage in critical analysis of current issues, manage deadlines, multitask assignments, and work collaboratively as a team (Enfield, 2013). Marsh (1992) found that working on school publications was one of only eight extracurricular activities that had multiple statistically-significant positive effects on students without any counterbalancing negative effects. Another study by Marsh and Kleitman (2002) found that student publications trailed only academic clubs in terms of exclusively positive effects on students. It also found involvement with school publications to be positively associated with higher grades and more Carnegie units, while another national study found a positive relationship between participation in high school journalism and students’ voting habits after graduation (Bobkowski & Miller, 2016).

**Administrative perspectives.** Though early school administrators fought basically all expansion of curriculum and student activity programs, school newspapers were a logical place to invest school resources once that dam began to break, as they carried with them all the potential benefits outlined above. However, they also carried with them a significant amount of potential risks and uncertainties, two areas school leaders are almost universally inclined to

minimize. Navigating this risk/reward dichotomy has always fueled much of administrators' dialog about student newspapers, but the climate of this dialog has not always been negative. A thorough review of 20th century administrative periodicals and other contemporary resources by Konkle (2010) debunks the notion that school leaders and student newspapers have always had an adversarial relationship, or that the former would be better off by silencing the latter. The bulk of those resources urged school administrators to consider the potential curricular value of such a program for the students, the potential public relations value for the school, and the importance of both hiring a well-qualified faculty adviser and not overstepping the boundaries of censorship in the success of the publication. Konkle (2010) summarized his analysis by saying:

Naysayers who didn't want journalism and student publications in a school's curriculum could have been many, but based on the 70 scholastic journalism articles found in the study's six cited administration-oriented periodicals, in articles found in two teacher college journals, in highlights from highly read NEA convention proceedings and in 14 textbooks specifically written for school administrators, no article or book statement told readers that student publications or journalism courses *didn't* belong in a high school's curriculum. By virtue of this implied statement that journalism and publications did belong in a school's curriculum, at least during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, readers can readily assume that administrators believed in the importance of what scholastic journalism could offer their students, school and community. (p. 27)

Despite such early congruities, students and administrators tended to view the role of the student newspaper quite differently from one another by the end of the century. As school newspapers became cultural institutions, most students settled into the belief that their publications belonged to them. Most administrators, however, appeared to now believe those

publications were an extension of the official brand of the school, and that both they and the faculty adviser had the right to edit and censor them as they deemed necessary (Kopenhaver & Click, 2001). As previously noted, autonomy of expression is a critical facet of these programs' appeal to students, and administrative censorship can stymie the educational value of the experience to the point of making it irrelevant. Indeed one of the ultimate findings of a national inquiry by the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial on the status of high school journalism in America stated: "Censorship is the fundamental cause of the triviality, innocuousness and uniformity that characterize the high school press. Where a free, vigorous student press does exist, there is a healthy ferment of ideas and opinions with no indication of disruption or negative side effects on the educational experience of the school" (Nelson, 1974, p. 48). Or as Kopenhaver and Click point out: "How can students become responsible citizens when their advisers and principals are making decisions for them and acting as editors of their papers?" (p. 338).

As Abrams (1994) contended, just because some school leaders have the right to prior review and restrain student speech does not mean they should choose to exercise it. In fact, many of the school leadership articles Konkle (2010) reviewed advised principals to resist taking such an authoritarian viewpoint. In 1935, *American School Board Journal* counseled that, "... care must be taken not to supervise to such an extent that student initiative and interest are destroyed, or to give the community cause to feel that the paper is simply an exposition of the excellencies of the sponsor, or the administration as a whole" (Scott, p. 16). Decades later, a political science professor would write similar sentiments in the pages of the same journal:

Mosquitoes may deserve to die, but killing them with a sledgehammer is inefficient, at least, and possibly dangerous to innocent bystanders. Killing student publications with all-out, all-district efforts that include confiscation, prior censorship and student

suspensions also can be inefficient and legally dangerous to the districts that swing such sledges. (Leigh, 1973, p. 53)

Ultimately the issue would need to be decided by the courts. In response to a lawsuit filed by students who were suspended from school for wearing black armbands as a silent protest against the war in Vietnam, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) that public school students and teachers do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate” (p. 506) and that speech by an individual or group of individuals would need to be in danger of “materially and substantially disrupt the work and discipline of the school” (p. 513) before school officials were allowed to censor it.

For the next 20 years, this legal precedent — the *Tinker* standard — was widely applied and interpreted to include student speech published in the school newspaper. The standard reflected the progressive nature of both the court and the country in the late 1960s. By the 1980s, however, the country, its schools, and its highest judiciary panel had become markedly more conservative and authoritarian (Ross, 2015), and by the time *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) — a case where a school principal had unilaterally removed a section of the school newspaper over content concerns — found its way to the Supreme Court, a majority of the sitting justices were not as committed to protecting dissenting voices. In *Hazelwood*, the court concluded that administrators were within their rights to censor “school-sponsored speech” such as “school-sponsored publications, theatrical productions, and other expressive activities that students, parents, and members of the public might reasonably perceive to bear the imprimatur of the school” (p. 271). *Hazelwood* expanded *Tinker*’s material disruption standard for censorship to include “speech that is, for example, ungrammatical, poorly written,



inadequately researched, biased or prejudiced, vulgar or profane, or unsuitable for immature audiences” (p. 271), essentially giving school districts and their leaders almost total power in controlling or censoring content in school-sponsored student activities.

But what defines whether a publication is school-sponsored? The court spent a great deal of time in the *Hazelwood* case determining whether *The Spectrum*, the student newspaper being censored, had been operating as a limited/designated public forum for student expression or as a school-sponsored output. If *The Spectrum* had been operating as such a forum “by policy or practice” (p. 267), the court inferred it would have applied the *Tinker* standard to the case and sided against the principal’s right to control the newspaper’s content. Instead, the court determined that because 1) the school administrator exercised prior review of the newspaper before it was published and 2) the faculty adviser “was the final authority with respect to almost every aspect of the production and publication of *The Spectrum*, including its content” (p. 268), the newspaper was in fact functioning as a school-sponsored class project, and thus administrative restraint was within the principal's legal rights as the school leader.

The *Hazelwood* decision significantly expanded school administrators’ control over most school newspapers across the country, but it also significantly muddied the waters as to when using that power is appropriate and when it might be considered unconstitutional overstepping. Instead of being able to rely on and work within the confines of a universally-applied *Tinker* standard, school administrators post-*Hazelwood* must now determine which legal construct their school publications exist under before they can surmise the legal limits of their control. As Knight (1988) noted, "*Hazelwood* implies that in American public schools a continuum on the scale of control is possible. The continuum ranges from strong control by the principal/publisher to light-handed, *Tinker*-like management" (pp. 43, 45). Such nuances make the *Charger* and the

administrators of the Oxford School District even more interesting for study, as the district has purposefully elected to allow the newspaper to operate as a limited public forum. It is actively *choosing* not to exert prior review or to censor the *Charger's* content, despite most likely being within its legal right to do so. The district seems to have made a calculated decision to accept the potential legal and liability issues associated with such a stance in exchange for creating a more rigorous and relevant learning environment for its students.

Such ambiguity and nuance also makes it easy to understand why modern administrators self-report being somewhat ignorant about the legal limits of the First Amendment, especially when comparing their knowledge to other colleagues (Wagstaff Cunningham, 2014), and why controversies over publishing and censorship erupt almost continuously. In 2018 in Texas, Prosper High School's student news site *Eagle Nation Online* was censored and its adviser forced into retirement after students published editorial content critical of Principal John Burdett's decisions and policies (Gallagher, 2018). When students at Har-Ber High School in Arkansas broke news about five illegal football transfers later that same year, their district ordered the stories to be removed from the web and censured the publication's adviser for not clearing the story with the principal first, despite no policy requiring prior review (Perozek, 2018). Administrators in both of the above situations eventually bowed to public pressure and reinstated the publishing rights of their students, but not before garnering a damaging amount of negative publicity for themselves, their schools, and their communities. It would be a stretch to call the students and their publications winners, though, as this type of overreach, particularly the practice of threatening faculty advisers, typically has a chilling effect on future reporting and is damaging to the quality of the publication (Buller, 2011). In clashes over censorship and control, everyone essentially loses.

In the decades following *Hazelwood*, several states have individually sought to clarify the rights and responsibilities of the school administrators and student journalists within their borders by passing their own scholastic press freedom, or New Voices, laws. Spearheaded by the nonprofit Student Press Law Center, these New Voices laws generally require all public school districts within the state to amend or establish a local student media policy that essentially places all student publications, school-sponsored or otherwise, under the *Tinker* standard of administrative control. Many also include statutes that protect student media advisers from administrative retaliation, and some also include language exempting the school district, school board, or any individual administrator from being held liable for student content. So far, 14 states have passed some version of a New Voices law, and there are active campaigns in 10 others (Student Press Law Center, 2019). Mississippi does not have a New Voices law in place, nor does any organized effort currently exist towards passing one. Virginia and Texas both launched New Voices campaigns in 2018, but Arkansas is currently the only state in the Deep South to have passed state-level protections for student journalists. The Arkansas Student Publication Act was passed in 1995, and though it required all public school districts in the state to develop a student publication policy that acknowledged students' right to expression, extreme variability in local language led to continued censorship battles over content in school newspapers (Perozek, 2018) and yearbooks (Coutré, 2014) alike. In 2019, the Republican-controlled state legislature passed revisions to the act that clarified students' rights, expanded coverage to all forms of student media, and added language mitigating district and administrator liability (Dawson, 2019).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

**Research Design.** The uniqueness of the *Charger's* success among other Mississippi high school publications makes it and the school's administrators valuable subjects of exploration, and case study methodology provides the most appropriate avenue to research the phenomenon of their success within the context of the whole school environment. As Yin (2013) states of the case study method: "Whatever the field of interest, the distinctive need for case study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, a case study allows investigators to focus on a 'case' and retain a holistic and real-world perspective" (p. 4). Yin goes on to say that, "it's niche is when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked" (p. 14), which is precisely the goal of this study.

#### **Research Questions.**

1. How have administrative decisions contributed to the establishment, success, and continued success of the *Charger*?
2. What benefits have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?
3. What challenges have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?

**Data Collection.** The researcher will collect data from a variety of sources, including archival documents and physical artifacts, direct and participant observation, and, most importantly, qualitative interviews. Using multiple types of data collection will allow the

researcher to gain a more thorough grasp of the various school ecosystems involved, their participants, and how the relationships between those ecosystems and their participants may have evolved over time.

**Interviews.** The backbone of this study's data will be generated through the recorded recollections and perspectives of individuals strongly associated with the *Charger*. The researcher will seek to identify current and former OSD administrators at the building and district level who have dealt with the paper, its staffs and advisers, and/or the policies governing its rights and development. The researcher will further seek to identify current and former faculty advisers, staff members, and their parents to gain a better understanding of how administrators' policies, actions, and decisions were perceived and how they impacted the publication's operation. Interviews will last approximately one hour each and will be semi structured, allowing the researcher the freedom to ask follow-up questions and probe participants' responses for further depth and/or clarity surrounding the topics discussed. All interviews will be recorded with a handheld audio recording device. A general protocol for these interviews is included as Appendix A, but the primary topics of discussion are outlined above and in the study's central research questions.

**Observations.** Gathering observational data will allow the researcher to better establish and understand the inner workings (and inter workings) of both the staff of the *Charger* and the Oxford High School administration. The researcher will conduct a series of overt, non-participant site visits to OHS over a one-month period to observe student journalists as they produce an issue of the *Charger*, and school administrators as they manage the broader school environment during the same timeframe. Each visit will last approximately 60 minutes, with time split more or less equally between the staff and the administration. The researcher will

record detailed field notes during and after each visit to document the settings, happenings, and conversations observed, as well as his real-time thoughts/reactions to all of the above. This level of documented detail will inform the thick descriptions necessary to convey findings in this type of research (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010).

**Documents.** To provide external context and validity to the human recollections gathered via interviews, the researcher will attempt to corroborate the topics discussed through archival documents and records. Much of the history of Oxford High School, the Oxford School District, and the *Charger* can be explored through library holdings, media clippings, published histories, and high school yearbooks. The researcher will also collect and explore archived editions of the *Charger* both in print and online, as well as reactions to the *Charger*, its participants, and its reporting detailed in other media outlets.

**Participants.** Participants in this study will include current and former Oxford School District administrators, faculty advisers, student journalists, and other stakeholders. After requesting and receiving approval from the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher will select participants based on the extensiveness of their familiarity with the *Charger's* success, any administrative decisions related to the publication, and their proximity/availability to the researcher.

**Setting.** For those participants currently employed or enrolled, interviews and observations will be conducted primarily in participants' offices and classrooms within the Oxford School District. Other spaces will be used at the participant's request whenever applicable. Participants not currently affiliated with the district will be interviewed in person at a location where they feel comfortable, or by phone if location or scheduling issues prohibit a face-

to-face interaction. All interviews will be conducted with as much privacy and with as few distractions as possible.

**Data Analysis.** Once collected, resulting data must be subjected to multiple rounds of grounded-theory coding and analysis in order to discover any emerging themes and theories that might guide the study's findings (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Data will be transcribed and analyzed using initial coding procedures common to this type of study. The researcher will deconstruct the amassed data by breaking it down into individual bits, then sorting those bits into general topics or units of inquiry which emerged during the collection, transcription, and initial analysis phases. Once sorted, a second round of focused coding will organize data into more refined, thematic categories, then further analysis will attempt to develop a final framework for the findings using axial and/or theoretical coding, whichever method(s) best suit the findings (Charmaz, 2006). Final analysis will ultimately result in a synthesized narrative that addresses the central research questions of the study.

**Ethical Considerations.** All participants will be treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB). There are no known risks involved for participants in this study, but some advanced considerations do exist. Current OSD students and employees may feel uncomfortable critiquing the decisions or actions of their employer or supervisor. Administrators, current and former, may speak hyperbolically or become defensive about their decisions and actions in order to protect their position and legacy. Similarly, they may also exaggerate or over-criticize the decisions and actions of their predecessors/successors to achieve similar political or legacy-related outcomes. These considerations will be factored into each

stage of the research process, and every effort will be made to ensure all data is collected and presented in a safe, fair, and objective manner.

**Role and Background of the Researcher.** The researcher has observed the *Charger* and the administrative decisions involved with its operation from afar for more than a decade. From 2007-2013, the researcher taught at Starkville High School and advised the student publications there. As both schools were members of the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association, the researcher frequently attended conventions and competed against the *Charger*, becoming informally acquainted with its students and adviser. From 2011-2013, the researcher served on the MSPA executive board, working alongside the *Charger's* adviser and under the MSPA Director, herself a former adviser of the *Charger*. When she retired in July of 2013, the researcher succeeded her as MSPA Director, a position he continues to hold. As MSPA Director, the researcher has coordinated many of the contests the program has won at the state level and has occasionally, though not often, visited the *Charger's* newsroom, consulted with current and previous advisers and administrators on the direction of the program, and traveled with its students and advisers to various out-of-state events. Though the researcher has more than a passing familiarity with the OHS journalism program and the decision-makers involved, the type of deep, formal conversations involved in studying the topics outlined in this proposal have never occurred naturally and would not present a conflict of interest for any of the involved parties. The researcher is, by career, an obvious proponent of the value of scholastic media, but as the administrator of a statewide organization and a student of school leadership at both the master's and doctoral levels, he retains a balancing interest in viewing those programs through an administrative lens.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Chapter 4 of this study is written as a single, decade-by-decade narrative that explores the history of the Oxford High School student newspaper, its interaction with and impact on the school and community, and its ever-evolving relationship with both school and district-level administrators. This narrative is informed by 15 qualitative interviews, content analysis of more than 60 school yearbooks and approximately 30 years of student newspapers, 12 hours of school observation, and several other print and archival sources. This multi-layered research provides readers at least one firsthand, oral account of every school year since 1971, with additional human and written sources used to verify/measure the accuracy of those accounts. Where sources and memories are inconsistent, diverging viewpoints have all been included. Once readers are thoroughly acquainted with the history of the OHS student newspaper and its contextual significance within the larger local school and community ecosystems, Chapter 5 of this study will use that knowledge to address its specific research questions and analyze the impact and significance of its findings.

**Early History.** The small, Southern town of Oxford, Mississippi, was founded in 1837, just a few years before the state legislature declared it would soon be home to the state's first institution of higher learning, the University of Mississippi. The university opened to a handful of students in 1848 and both it and the city of Oxford began to grow exponentially after the American Civil War ended in 1865. In 1886, the city built its first public school for high school-aged children, a brick building just off the town's central square which is today the site of a

federal courthouse. “All twelve grades were accommodated in the two-story school, which served as a model for all of northern Mississippi. Four high-school teachers shared, with the teachers of the other eight grades, six classrooms, an auditorium, and a library” (Work, 1965).

In the late 1920s, the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) and its College of Education struck a deal with the city to begin educating local high school-aged students at a laboratory school on campus called University High School. The laboratory school, which gave student teachers from the College of Education firsthand teaching experience without ever having to leave the university campus, was a revolutionary concept. “Other universities throughout the country had secondary schools under their direction, but these were private institutions. University High School in Oxford, Mississippi, was the first public school under the sole direction of a university” (Work, 1965).

UHS’s first building opened in 1930 and an expansion was completed in 1956. Though it appears there may have been other iterations of a UHS yearbook as early as 1931, the first volume of the *Colonel’s Clan* yearbook was published in 1953. The school appears to have been a typical American high school of the era. A letter is included from Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis offering their choices for the school’s “beauties.” Dr. Gerald Forbes, chair of the journalism department at the university, is thanked in the 1954 *Colonel’s Clan* for contributing special photography to the publication. “His interest, patience and ability are appreciated,” it reads.

The 1953 edition includes mention of a student newspaper called *The Colonel* with an adviser named Mr. Smith (no first name included). At some point the name was changed to the *Colonel Courier*, as an AP report found in the *Ottumwa (Iowa) Courier* on March 27, 1962, states that a high school newspaper by that name was distributed as an extra bi-weekly section in the local *Oxford Eagle*, which was at the time a weekly newspaper. “In return, journalism

students at the school sell advertising in the *Courier*, with the income going to the *Eagle* to pay printing costs” (p. 7). Rapid changes were on the way, though. Just six months after that report, the small town of Oxford would become the epicenter of a national news story when an African American man, James Meredith, tried to enroll in the historically-segregated University of Mississippi. Riots ensued on the university’s campus and federal troops were called in to quell the violence. Two men died.

As the university grew and the volume of student teachers continued to increase, UHS could no longer accommodate them all, and the college began farming out placements to other districts. An exclusive laboratory school on campus was no longer needed. The city built a separate Oxford High School, which opened in the fall of 1963, thus permanently closing University High School and ending the town/university partnership. Despite the riots of the previous fall, Oxford’s city school system remained segregated, and the new Oxford High School kept the former University High School’s Confederate rebel mascot and all of its associated monikers, including the *Colonel’s Clan* yearbook and the *Colonel Courier* student newspaper. Principal William Thompson Jr.’s note to the students in the front of the first OHS yearbook (1964) reads:

This has been a good school year -- the first in the new Oxford High School. I hope that your memories of the year are all pleasant. You have set tradition and established patterns that will be followed for many years. I hope you will remember that you make history every day. Be sure the history you make is such that you will not be ashamed of it tomorrow.

Robbins & Williams’ (1969) textbook on student activities says the *Colonel Courier* was at that time distributed community-wide in the *Oxford Eagle* bi-monthly and cited the student

newspaper as a national example of how publications can help interpret a school to its community. “This has resulted in an invaluable benefit for the school” (p. 118).

A few black families began taking advantage of “school choice” starting in 1967, but in December of 1969, the school shut down for an extra month at Christmas and reopened fully integrated. The sports teams and student publications remained branded as the Colonels that spring, but by the fall of 1970 all such Confederate iconography was gone. In an effort to aid the community’s transition to a homogenous, integrated school system, the district rebranded itself as the Oxford Chargers. The University of Mississippi remains the Rebels.

**1970s.** OHS graduated its first integrated senior class in the spring of 1971. In the fall of 1970, the district rebranded itself as the Oxford Chargers and did away with all its previous Confederate iconography. This change affected not just the school’s sports teams, but its student publications as well. The *Colonel’s Clan* became the *Flashback*. The *Colonel Courier* became the *Charger Gazette*. Copy on the opening pages of the 1971 *Flashback* states: “Our school is but a great mold. We are poured into it, allowed to harden briefly, and then we emerge with our minds, bodies, and our ambitions bearing the mark of the mold.” Students of both races are photographed attending class and goofing off. Cheerleaders of both races can be seen leading the football team onto the field wearing short yellow skirts and long sleeve blue sweaters featuring the team’s new logo — a large ‘O,’ in bold, collegiate font, with a lightning bolt striking across the center. Copy on one page read:

Oxford High School is a complex community of people. Regardless of race, creed, or color, all may come and learn. And so we do come — rich and poor, strong and weak, bright and slow — yet each individual is different, unique and a separate personality. Our

people are wise and silly, good and bad, loners and crowd-lovers. We all fit in an imperfect pattern to form our school. (p. 13)

As for the *Charger Gazette*, the staff photo in the *Flashback* shows a staff of 17 students, two of whom were male and eight of whom were black. Patsy Zeidman was the first adviser and Nancy Franks served as the first editor. That first year, journalism was only offered a semester-long class. The students were enthusiastic about it though, and by spring they had convinced the administration to make the class a full-credit course for the next school year. Under the leadership of incoming editor Russell Lamb, the staff spent the summer preparing. The next fall, the *Charger Gazette* would be reintroduced to the student body with a new tabloid size, a new publisher in nearby New Albany, and a new adviser in Judy Butler. Originally from Pontotoc, Butler had worked at the school the previous spring as a teacher's assistant. OHS principal H.D. Wade liked her well enough to hire her full-time for his open English position, and in doing so handed her the reins of the *Charger Gazette*. She would advise the publication out of her second period journalism class for the next three years. Butler remembers:

We worked on it during the class period, but of course we worked on it after school too. You could never finish in that kind of time. We covered school events, sports events, features. All those things that normally go in the newspaper. Really, I cannot remember outside of school content what we might have covered. My editor was very good, and I depended on him quite a bit for layout, and writing, and all sorts of things.

Not much stands out to Butler about her time with the *Charger Gazette*. The paper was published monthly, and she remembers driving over to New Albany to deliver the page proofs to the printer. She remembers the staff sold subscriptions, which meant that on distribution day they had the arduous task of counting out how many newspapers needed to be delivered to each

individual classroom all over the school. She does not remember whether Wade or any other administrator ever reviewed the newspaper before it was published, but, “I’m sure we probably gave him articles. I know I probably had anything that could have been controversial run by though principal, just knowing me as a person.”

Having the newspaper published in New Albany did not last long, and the *Oxford Eagle* quickly resumed its role as printer. Butler did not last long either, at least not as an adviser. “Really journalism was not my field. I was an English teacher and that’s what I wanted to do.” She gave up advising the *Charger Gazette* at the end of the 1973-1974 school year, but stayed on to teach English at OHS for the next 27 years. She retired in 2001. After Butler withdrew, Wade tapped her colleague Linda Davis to take over as adviser. Like Butler, she taught journalism as a course, but Davis appears to have viewed that class time less as a standalone elective and more as a jumping-off point for something bigger. Within a couple of years, she had established the *Charger Gazette* as its own, independent entity. Woody Woodrick, who graduated in 1976, remembers: “The newspaper itself was a club. But we did have a journalism class, and most of the students in the class contributed to the newspaper in some fashion. Some on a real regular basis, others as a one-time thing.”

Woodrick’s family moved around a lot while he was growing up, but he considers Oxford his hometown. The family moved to Oxford in the fall of 1971, just in time for him to enroll as a freshman at Oxford High School. As a senior, he signed up to take Davis’s journalism class on a whim; he needed an extra course. “I think subconsciously I was wanting to do it because I had always kind of been interested in some kind of writing. I can remember early on wanting to do some ‘reporter-type’ writing, and I enjoyed reading newspapers.” Woodrick was also best friends with Danny Phillips, son of *Oxford Eagle* publisher Jesse Phillips, and Danny

was serving that year as the *Charger Gazette*'s editor-in-chief. "He had a guy as his sports editor, and then that guy decided not to continue doing it, so Danny asked me to become his sports editor." Woodrick was a sports fan anyway, so he agreed to take the position. That experience, combined with what he learned in Davis's journalism class, changed his life. He decided to major in journalism in college and spent most of the next 20 years reporting on high school sports and other news at publications across the state:

I remember I learned how much I really liked doing it, how much I liked reporting and writing about things. Because that was the first time I really had an opportunity to write what I wanted to, as opposed to having to write a term paper or something to that effect, required writing. It was writing because I wanted to write. And I got a feel for how journalism was supposed to work. I learned you'd better make deadlines. I think I also learned — although maybe it wasn't readily apparent then, but looking back later — I think I started learning a little bit about dealing with people, and sometimes having to do some things that were not always real pleasant to deal with, controversial things, and having to kind of give everybody their fair say. Understanding that you have to get both sides of the story, and that when there's more than one party involved, both of them need an opportunity to talk to you.

During his year as sports editor, the school's athletic teams were pretty solid. The Charger football team finished with a winning record and went to a bowl game. The boys basketball team, which Woodrick was also a manager for, made the state tournament. Woodrick remembers one story that still makes him particularly proud. Instead of writing yet-another piece about a coach or athlete or something great that was happening on the field, he decided to write a feature on what it was like to be the wife of a high school football coach. He talked to them

about the amount of time their husbands put in at the school, how much they were away from home, and what it was like to sit in the stands watching their games with the other fans. “Nobody I knew had ever done anything like that.” The story illustrates the *Charger Gazette*’s bottom-up style of generating content. Woodrick said the idea for the story came one day when he and Danny Phillips were just hanging out. “It was one of those things where we were just batting around story ideas, and I can’t remember if I had a coach’s wife as a teacher, or maybe just knew a couple, but it went from there.” Since he and Phillips were best friends, these types of brainstorming sessions were common. The two would often workshop ideas for the next edition while they were hanging out at each others’ houses, going out to the movies, or doing other things. Other staff members generated their own ideas too, then everyone pitched their best ones to the larger group in a more formal staff meeting-type setting. “We were pretty much free to come up with our own story ideas and then produce those.” Woodrick remembers the *Charger Gazette* as being a monthly 8-page tabloid produced by a staff of 12-15. Members of Davis’s journalism class contributed, but the bulk of the work was done by outsiders, and there were advertising and business managers who were definitely not part of the class.

Though Davis was the adviser, he recalls a publication culture that was decided student-driven:

I think she mainly took on an advisory role. I don’t remember her doing a whole lot of hands-on stuff. But it wasn’t like we had to run things through her very often.

Occasionally we did, but not... it was usually more, ‘Maybe we ought to let her look at this before we publish it,’ or something like that.

He is likewise sure that neither Wade or nor any other administrator ever prior-reviewed or censored the newspaper. He remembers the *Charger Gazette* as being almost completely



autonomous. “I’m sure Mrs. Davis had some idea of what was coming out. I’m sure she and Danny at some point sat down and went over the news-hole budget, but I don’t remember us having to sit down and get ‘approval’ for anything.” This is not to say Davis was uninvolved or disinterested. Woodrick remembers her as taking her advisory role “pretty seriously,” and he remembers her teaching them about their legal rights and responsibilities with regard to censorship, etc.:

And we always felt like, I remember feeling like, as long as we did it in the right way, we could write about whatever we wanted to. I don’t know what the administration might have said to her about stuff, but other than that one time, you know, there was nothing. But a lot of what we wrote, I mean it was mostly just surface-type stuff. Looking back now, a lot of it was more focused on feature-style stories, because we weren't coming out currently enough to do a whole lot of live stuff. But it was a lot of fun. It gave me a good excuse to hang out with my best friend and go to all the high school games and stuff. I really enjoyed it.

“That one time” was the day school superintendent Gene Meadows called Phillips to his office to talk about a story the staff had run in that month’s edition. Woodrick cannot remember the story or what Meadows’s issue was with it:

It was more, I don’t think they were really trying to say, ‘Don't publish this,’ but they didn't necessarily like the way it was presented or something to that effect. It wasn't a huge deal — of course it was to us then — but overall we felt pretty, I remember Danny felt pretty strongly that he was on solid ground with the story itself. I just can’t remember exactly what it was about.

Woodrick went on to study journalism at Ole Miss. After graduation, he took a job as a news reporter at the McComb (Miss.) *Enterprise Journal*. Two months later, the sports editor left and he slid into that role for the next 18 months, then went to the *Natchez Democrat* and spent about 18 months there in the same role. “I figured if somebody wanted to pay me to go to a ballgame that I was probably going to go to anyway, then hey, that was a pretty good deal.” He eventually moved to Jackson, Mississippi to join the staff of the *Jackson Daily News*, and worked for it and its sister newspaper the *Clarion Ledger* for the next 14 years. He is now a high school teacher.

Davis continued to advise the *Charger Gazette* for the remainder of the decade. In the fall of 1978, Danny Phillips’s younger brother Tim became the newspaper’s editor. Staff member Cynthia Waller does not remember there being an actual class period devoted to journalism then, but she said the staff would meet weekly, somewhere, to work on that month’s edition:

A lot of times we didn't even meet at the school, we'd just meet at Tim's house or somewhere else. There wasn't really a coffee shop, but we'd go hang out somewhere at a restaurant together after school or in the evenings. It was just a neat little bunch. I remember thinking it was almost an elite feeling. Like, this was fun. This was my niche.

Waller was born in Oxford and grew up attending its public schools. She said the staff at that time was a rotating cast of 15-20 people, but not everyone showed up to work every week. In the absence of being tethered to a class period, the staff felt more voluntary, like an ad hoc friend group. She remembers the group dressing up in trenchcoats one time and posing for a story photo in a dark alleyway with their backs to the camera. “I can't remember why, but I remember doing that. It was kind of a creepy feeling.” Some of the work was done at the school. Waller

remembers developing photos in the school's darkroom. Mostly, though, she worked on selling and designing the local business advertisements that funded the newspaper's printing:

You'd have to draw them, you know, with a calligraphy pen, and then you had that border tape that you put around it. [Kids today] don't have a clue what all that is. It was so different. Like that you had, there was no computer. You'd type it, and then you sent the stories in, and I think the newspaper must have put it together because we didn't have any of the waxer and all that stuff that they used to use. We didn't have access to that.

Tim probably could have done it himself because his dad owned [the *Oxford Eagle*], and he worked out there.

Waller said when the finished product was distributed at school each month, "that was the greatest feeling in the world. We were really proud of it." Like Woodrick, she remembers Davis as being an engaged adviser, but one with very little input on the publication's content. "[She] would read it, I remember, and she would tell us what we were doing right and wrong. I remember her doing that and then me getting mad, thinking, 'Ugh, I spent hours on that!'" Waller recalls having little contact with the school's administration and recalls no prior review or censorship at any level, however she also does not recall the staff ever *attempting* to publish anything controversial:

It was all very positive, and it was all very, just, 'here it is.' There wasn't a lot of digging for information. You'd do interviews and those kinds of things, but you didn't have anything controversial, and we didn't even put anything in there that might have been a little bit off color or whatever. We were still children, and we knew our place.

Waller's senior year at Oxford High was also the last year for principal H.D. Wade. In the fall of 1979, Meadows hired Clarkdale High School principal Terry Mood to lead the school.

Mood was a tall, slender man, not yet 40 years old when he arrived at Oxford High School. As a child, his family had moved to the Mississippi Delta from Indianapolis so his father could work at the Mississippi Chemical plant opening in Yazoo City. He graduated from Yazoo City High School in 1959, one year behind *My Dog Skip* author Willie Morris, then attended Belhaven College in Jackson on a basketball scholarship. He would lifeguard in the summers at the pool behind his father's plant, where he taught comedian Jerry Clower's kids how to swim. After graduating from Belhaven in 1963, Mood began teaching and coaching at Canton High School, and he took summer courses at the University of Mississippi in Oxford to earn his master's degree. After a brief stint in Corinth, he returned home to Yazoo City to teach and coach from 1965-1972. He moved to Clarksdale to become a head principal, first at Clarksdale Intermediate School, then at Clarksdale High School. While living in Clarksdale, he earned his Education Specialist's degree from nearby Delta State University.

Mood arrived at OHS during a critical time in the school's history. The school had about 500 students in 1979, but it and the rest of the community were growing at a rapid pace:

It was a lot of pressure being the [only] principal of the high school. We finally got an assistant principal there and that helped a lot. We had a lot of fires, you know, that we had to put out. Normally the good kids, we didn't have to deal with them. We just had a few little knuckleheads we had to handle. But it was an outstanding school, and really had some outstanding teachers. We had a few we had to work with, and that's to be expected, but we had a strong faculty.

Change was in the air for the *Charger Gazette* as well. That year, Davis and the staff switched from a monthly 8-page paper to a 4-page paper every two weeks in an effort to bring the student body more relevant stories and coverage. The 1980 edition of the *Flashback* also says the staff

attended “workshops in Mississippi,” presumably offered by the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association, and took a field trip to Memphis to tour the WMC radio station and *Commercial Appeal* newspaper offices. Eleven students are listed as being members of the staff and the youngest Phillips son, Andy, was the *Charger Gazette*’s sports editor. By all indications, the publication was healthy, stable, and improving under Davis’s leadership.

Since such was the case, Mood did not concern himself very much with the school newspaper. He had other problems on his plate, like a controversial band director firing, the still-new wounds of integration, and cheerleader problems, among others. He was a taskmaster who always carried a little notebook with to-do lists in his back pants pocket, parents were going to the school board because they were unhappy with the rigid way he was enforcing the rules in the student handbook:

Well, just like keeping hands off of girls. Boys would have their hands all over the girls. And I remember saying things to them. I didn't really like to do it in the hall, but it got to where I didn't have time to call them to the office, and I didn't want to call them to the office to say it. So I just politely ask them, you know. But I remember one particular time that I asked one of the boys to take his hands off a girl, he just had a stroke. You know? A doggone fit. He just thought it was terrible... And the parents think that their kids can do no wrong, some of them do, and so if you’re just trying to enforce the rules in the handbook that they were supposed to be doing, you’d get in trouble sometimes.

Mood remembers this entitlement being a big problem at the school. For example, students weren’t supposed to leave campus during the day. If they did, they had to check out in the office and they had to have a note from a parent. Some would attempt to slip off, and if Mood caught

them, he'd discipline them. "And sometimes I'd run into some flack because of whose child that was and what their status in the community was... I never had that problem in Clarksdale."

**1980s.** After a full decade of publication and one year of operating in its new shorter, more frequent format, the *Charger Gazette* rebranded itself as the *Charger Flash* at the start of the 1980-81 school year. The volume number on the publication masthead was reset to Vol. 1, and a new era of student-run news at Oxford High School began. The good times, however, would not last. At some point between 1980 and 1982, Linda Davis and her husband divorced, and she left the school district. Mood does not recall exactly which year this happened, and the staff pages from those years in the *Flashback* do not mention the name of the adviser. The next time the *Flashback* lists an adviser for the *Charger Flash*, it was Darby Taylor in 1982-83, but by then the program appeared to be losing steam. Mood remembers:

It was not a real big thing. It was just kind of a minimal thing, really. They didn't have to put out many papers, and I think the *Oxford Eagle* did it for them. They did not do a regular monthly or weekly or whatever paper. They just, whenever they could get it together, they would get up enough to make a page or two. Seems like it was maybe a front and a back or something, you know. But the kids always looked forward to getting one.

The publication was referred to only as "newspaper staff" in the 1983-84 yearbook, and at the end of the year, Taylor left the district altogether and moved away. The school newspaper wasn't included at all in the 1984-85 yearbook, though it absolutely did exist. In fact, the 1984-85 school year would prove in retrospect to be one of the most pivotal in the history of the publication, because that was the year Mood hired a young teacher named Beth Fitts to lead the program. She would go on to become one of the one of the most decorated and respected high

school journalism teachers in the country, and she would turn the Oxford High School student newspaper into a national powerhouse.

Fitts ended up as the journalism adviser quite by accident. She had taught English the first few years of her career at tiny Independence High School in rural Tate County. She and her family only moved to Oxford that summer because her husband worked for the U.S. Postal Service and had been forced to relocate. It was a week before the school year was to start, Fitts had two young daughters at home, and she needed a job to continue helping support their young family. Taylor's departure meant there was an open English position at OHS, so Fitts applied.

Mood remembers:

We took the applications, and reviewed them and interviewed all of them, and after I looked at all the applications, I felt like Beth would be the one that could fulfill the English [duties] for sure. And that's what I was looking at was the English, at the time.

At the end of her interview, Mood offered Fitts the position, and she accepted. However, Mood also needed someone who could teach journalism, since that had been part of Taylor's duties before she left. Fitts remembers she literally had her hand on the doorknob to leave when Mood said, "Oh Mrs. Fitts, I forgot to tell you. You have to teach one journalism class and sponsor the newspaper." She smiled and said she wouldn't be qualified for that, since she'd only had 3 hours of elective journalism credit as part of her master's program. She remembers he replied, "Well, you have three more than anybody else." Fitts had reservations, but ultimately acquiesced. "She was glad to get the job," Mood said, "and a little apprehensive about the journalism, but I felt like being an English teacher and writing a lot, I felt like she could do that." At that time, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) required 12 hours of college credit in the area to be certified to teach high school journalism. Mood said he could cover the expense

of these courses through a reciprocity agreement the school district had with the university based on the number of student teachers the district hosted, so Fitts, on top of acclimating herself to a new town, a new school, and a new prep, enrolled in afternoon journalism classes at the neighboring University of Mississippi to meet the state's licensure requirements.

Fitts was not at all certain she had made the right career decision. Judy Butler, the former *Charger Gazette* adviser who was now Fitts's colleague in the English department, told Fitts that advising the newspaper was the worst thing she had ever had to do, because she wasn't trained in it, and she didn't want to do it. Fitts took those critiques to heart and decided she was going seek out training, seek out help, and make the best of the situation she had found herself in. With Mood's tacit support and his attention elsewhere, she was given virtual free reign to develop the journalism program as she saw fit. Despite its history of quality and independence, though, the publication Fitts inherited in the fall of 1984 was not a thriving enterprise. On the first day of school, she walked into a classroom with one older-model typewriter and 10 bewildered students:

They didn't know why they were there, except for maybe the editor. Very poor writing skills for most of them, maybe one or two [good writers]. We didn't have any technology. We literally *wrote* the articles, and the editor would type them up on the typewriter, and we would send them in a packet to the *Oxford Eagle*, and they would lay out the whole newspaper for us. That was it. Which in hindsight might have been okay, considering I didn't know what I was doing.

She got the feeling that journalism had become a "catch-all class" for the school: "If you don't have anything going on, go here. It's an easy 'A'." Fitts, an outgoing Southerner with a genteel, approachable demeanor, forged forward anyway and built relationships with the staff that helped



ease the transition. She remembers that first staff as being sweet kids, kind and compliant, just not altogether interested in improving the quality of the product they were putting out. That entire first year was rough. Fitts worked with her *Charger Flash* students as best she could, tried to keep her head above water in the other English classes she taught, then left school each afternoon to head across town and learn more about journalism from her professors at the university. “My goal was to learn. If I could learn, then I could teach them and they would get better,” Fitts said. As she learned more about what a high-quality newspaper looked like, and what it was going to take to produce one, she came to the conclusion that her next staff was going to need a much higher level of skills than her current one:

It became evident to me that you had to get people who were good in grammar, who were good at writing, who were good at interviewing, who had people skills, who could put things together and visualize things. And for that, I thought, well, that means I've got to try to recruit some people.

Fitts recruited hard that spring, visiting the school’s Advanced Placement (AP) English classes and asking students to join her staff. Judy Butler was impressed: “She jumped right in, and she does everything well. She’s very creative, and she was just a shot in the arm. It was a big student draw.” Fitts convinced several of the school’s smartest students to join the *Charger Flash*, and by the end of the summer she had also finished earning the 12 hours of journalism credit she needed for certification. All signs pointed to the 1985-86 school year being a much better one than her first. However, this would not be the case. Mood informed her that MDE was now requiring teachers to get 18 total hours in a subject area instead of 12, so Fitts would again spend the next year taking additional afternoon/evening classes. Her AP recruiting turned out to be a

mistake, too. She said many turned out to be academic know-it-alls and did not take instruction well at all.

Fitts was still spending much of her day spread out all over the school. She would teach English in one room, then journalism in another room halfway across the building, then back across to another room to teach English, as so forth. Nevertheless, the quality of the paper was improving and the program was growing. Fitts resumed a monthly publication cycle, and her new, intelligent staffers were indeed strong writers. She restructured the *Charger Flash*'s business model. Instead of selling the newspaper, the staff would give it away for free and make up the difference with increased advertising sales. Free copies were handed out in the cafeteria. Stacks of free newspapers were placed around the school, and others were delivered around Oxford to all of the newspaper's advertisers. With their audience no longer restricted to paying customers, interest in the publication grew. "They wanted to see what was in it," Mood said. "There was a lot of interest in it, as I recall. They were hyped up about it."

Fitts enjoyed her university journalism courses that year, especially Dr. Samir Husni's magazine design class. She was quickly developing a passion for visual storytelling and design, but she still needed a *Charger Flash* staff that was moldable enough to listen to her advice and dedicated enough to put in the long hours it would take to make the publication great. So when she went out that spring to speak to classes and recruit students for the 1986-87 staff, she expanded her scope beyond AP English. Instead of exclusively targeting students who were academically elite, she decided to start looking for students who were creative, independent, and hard-working. Over a two-week period, she visited every one of the school's English classrooms. She asked her colleagues to allow her the first five minutes of class for a quick pitch:

I would say, 'I'm Beth Fitts, and I'm teaching journalism next year. I want to tell you a little bit about it, because some of you would be wonderful.' I said, 'You're going to get to develop your own magazine... I am going to teach you how to do advertising, how to change people's minds. We're going to do a law and ethics lab. We'll have lawyers come into class, and, you know, kind of counsel you on how to be defendants, and you'll be the witnesses, etc. We'll talk about how to write, how to interview. We're going to do TV, we're going to do radio, you'll be over the intercom system every morning with the radios. It's going to be super fun. BUT... journalism is a world of deadlines. And if you can't do deadlines, do not sign up for this class. You've got to be able to take what I give you, and know that you're going to learn from that, and then we're going to put our feet on the ground and we're going to do it together. But you have to be on time, you have to make your deadlines, and you have to do your best work. There's no sloughing off and there's no excuses. It's a lot of work, but it's probably the most fun class you will ever take at Oxford High School. So if you're interested, come and talk to me later.' That made the difference. Because then I started having people who knew what to expect, and knew the criteria that would demand that work. So then I started getting some AP students, some regular students, and it didn't matter. The point is they liked to write, they liked to talk, they like to take pictures, and they already knew that they were interested in it. But they also knew it was going to take work, and that they had to be on time.

The strategy worked. The next year's staff picture in the *Flashback* shows 18 students. More than half were male, more than half were African-American. Mood was impressed with the way Fitts recruited, her passion, and the way empowered her student leaders:

I think more kids got involved because of her demeanor and her charisma. They just loved her, and they worked hard for her, and wrote the articles that she asked them to write. And then she taught the kids how to become editors and different things in the newspaper, and put the strong students where they needed to be, etc. She knew how to handle them.

Mood had been principal of OHS for seven years by then and was in search of a new challenge. In the summer of 1986, he was promoted to assistant superintendent and director of operations. He began managing the district's transportation and maintenance departments, among others, and Gerald Hasselman took over as principal of the high school. Mood worked with three different student newspaper advisers during his tenure and says he never reviewed any papers before they were published. "Just didn't feel the need to," Mood said. Hasselman came to the district from Warren Central High School in Vicksburg, and biology teacher Britt Dickens recalled him as someone who invested a lot of time and resources into raising the calibre of the school's sports and other student activity programs. He made high-quality hires and made those programs points of pride. "It was always a good school and we always had bright students," Dickens said, "but their programs were not always good." Fitts remembers Hasselman calling her into his office once to talk about some typos he'd found in that month's edition, but otherwise the two never crossed swords during his tenure, and he never attempted to prior-review or censor the newspaper. That year the state upped the elective certification requirement again, this time to 32 hours, but by then Fitts did not care. "By this time, I *loved* journalism. It was my passion." She continued taking classes, soaking up knowledge, and channeling it directly back into her students. Her affiliation with the university also exposed her to the resources of the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association (MSPA). MSPA was founded in 1947 by the chair of

the journalism department as a way to enrich the quality of work being produced in high school publications across the state. The organization partnered with local newspapers to host regional workshops each fall, then held a statewide convention at the university each spring to award all that year's top publications. The setup was mutually beneficial: high schools got a chance to enhance their students' skills, showcase some of their best work, and improve the quality of the publications they were sending out into the community, while the university got the chance to showcase its campus and its programs to potential students. Fitts embraced the help the organization was offering, and by the spring of 1987, the *Charger Flash* was besting other schools in many of the major awards. The publication was quickly becoming not just an engaging curricular experience for the staff, but a point of pride for the district and, according to Judy Butler, a valuable asset in improving school culture:

Of course the journalism class was so important [to the staff], because it introduced them to that world, but I think [the paper] just helped tie the school together. I think it helps the students be more involved when they have an interest in the paper, and I think it gives them a little more school spirit. I just remember seeing students after the paper was given away, just like, during lunch, in the halls and all, looking at the paper. I don't know, I just think it was kind of a neat thing to see.

The 1987-88 school year appears to have brought with it two major changes for the program. The first was a technological upgrade. "It was in 1988 we got our first computer," Fitts thinks. "It was when the Macs first came out. The very first one had that little floppy drive." The other was a name change.

I had a very talented artist [on staff] and we decided we needed a new look. By then I had been taking classes at Ole Miss for three years and was beginning to realize that [what we

had] wasn't it. So I had him redo the masthead, which as I remember was a horse with a lightning bolt or something like that, so we shortened the name to the *Charger* [to make room]. Some years later we standardized the font and went to a computerized font.

The 1988 yearbook refers to the publication for the first time as "The Oxford High Charger," and also notes that senior Heather McKibben was elected MSPA's state president that spring. The 1989 and 1990 yearbooks revert back to calling the newspaper the *Charger Flash*, but Fitts says this was not accurate, and there was never any further discussion about the name. The OHS student newspaper is still known as the *Charger* today.

**1990s.** Administratively, Rhonda Patridge took over for Gerald Hasselman in 1990 and was followed by David Sullivan in 1991. Neither interacted much with the journalism program. By the early 1990s, Fitts had found her footing. She had finally completed her second master's degree, this one in journalism. She started a literary magazine, *Progressions*, which also became a perennial award-winner. She successfully lobbied MDE in Jackson to add Journalism III and Journalism IV to the state curriculum, allowing students to stay in the program and develop throughout all four years of high school, should they so choose. She was equally successful in lobbying at the local level for additional sections of Introduction to Journalism, which excused her from English duties and had her teaching journalism all day. Those introductory sections meant she could train large quantities of students on the technical and curricular aspects of journalism, then select only the best ones to matriculate onto her publication staffs. The *Charger* grew from an 8-page tabloid to a six-page full-sized broadsheet. The program was evolving in its scope and size, but unfortunately so was the school. Between 1990 and 2000, the town's population grew almost 18 percent. Space at OHS became premium, and the journalism program was jostled around to fit other needs. Fitts recalls:

[We] started on the very front hall, then moved to the very, very back hall by the counselor's office. We ended up having a little bitty office on a side hall that was just big enough for our one little Macintosh computer, so people could go in there to type. Then they moved us out into a trailer, and we were out in the trailer for two or three years.

The trailer was a portable classroom, a common fix at the time for schools with overcrowding issues. Fitts said the trailer was "old and decrepit," and pretty regularly someone would slam the door or trip over a wire, and the computer would shut down, erasing all of their work. She made the staff start hitting 'save' every five minutes to avoid having too many delays in their production schedule. Ever a historian, Fitts had collected and saved a box of the publication's old issues dating all the way back to the earliest 1970s issues of the *Charger Gazette*. But during one of the staff's many moves, those newspapers were thrown away. The moving crew thought it was a box of trash.

America in the 1990s was quickly transitioning toward the digital age, and Fitts saw that the *Charger* needed to keep pace with the changing technology if it wanted to stay relevant:

We only have one little computer in one little closet at first, and I told the English department chair, 'We can't do it with one. That only gives one person experience with trying to do layout.' We had wax and you would glue it on and all that. So she helped me get approved to get another one, and then supported me to go to community organizations like the Rotary Club and ask for help. In fact, we started doing the Rotary Club's bulletin. They would pay us each month to do their bulletin so that we could earn money to get a Macintosh. We would do that, we would go to the hospital and ask if they had any funds to help in education, etc.

She and the staff worked hard to raise their own money, and Fitts enlisted her students' parents to help lobby the district for more technology, too. "We ended up with about 15 computers, but it was a hodgepodge," she remembers. "But here's the thing. You can't get good until you've got the technology to be able to do the design. We were beginning to get the right ideas, but we needed to figure out the design." Dan Phillips — the same Danny Phillips who used to pal around with Woody Woodrick and was editor of the *Charger Gazette* back in 1976 — had recently taken over for his father as *Oxford Eagle* publisher, and he helped train Fitts's staffs on how to use their new computers and on the principles of newspaper page design. Fitts considers him a huge ally, because he was always commenting on the paper, taking an interest in the students' work, and offering his resources to help them learn more:

Dan had a high school journalism heart. He would have technology people come in, and he's hiring these people and paying for all the expenses. But he wanted them to show us how to run Photoshop, how to get the right colors, how to make sure that the lines were right, etc. And that was huge, because that's your local person buying into what you're doing and helping you get better. He was always saying, 'This was a good issue, I like the way you did such-and-such. I like what the kids... look! This is good on page four. I like that, that was a good article.' So he's giving you feedback. Because you don't get much feedback, you know, from administration or from teachers.

A faculty member at Ole Miss had followed Fitts's work with the *Charger* and encouraged her to enter the Dow Jones News Fund's annual National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year competition. Scholastic media advisers from across the country compete annually for the honor, and the program has three tiers of winners: a small group of Special Recognition Advisers, a small group of Distinguished Advisers, then one National High School



Journalism Teacher of the Year. Fitts was intrigued and applied for the first time in 1992. When the results were announced, Fitts was among those selected as a national Special Recognition Adviser. She applied again the next year and won again, this time recognized as a Distinguished Adviser.

In November of 1993, she attended her first National High School Journalism Convention to receive her award. The convention was held in Washington, D.C. and was co-sponsored by the National Scholastic Press Association (NSPA) and the Journalism Education Association (JEA). More than 3,000 high school journalism students attended the convention, and Fitts was amazed that there were this many people who loved high school journalism as much as she did. She attended sessions and meetings and luncheons, and made connections with other educators who she would later call friends. One was adviser Rik McNeill, who introduced her to the Southern Interscholastic Press Association (SIPA). SIPA is an organization of like-minded southerner educators, and it hosted a regional high school journalism conference each March in South Carolina. Already regularly winning best-in-state honors at MSPA, Fitts began busing students 16 hours round trip to Columbia, South Carolina, the next year to attend and compete at SIPA. Later she began taking students to some of the JEA/NSPA national conventions and the annual Columbia Scholastic Press Association (CSPA) convention in New York City as well. In Fitts's estimation, those conventions were invaluable experiences, both for her and her students, and really helped turn the *Charger* into an elite publication:

If you ask around at conventions, you know who's top quality. You know who to go hear. If you went to those sessions and took notes, well those became part of my teaching notes. Every time I would go somewhere, I was taking notes. And I would take them back and say, 'This year, this is what we're doing.' I didn't teach from a textbook. I taught

from this huge, fat notebook, because it was all stuff I had learned at conventions that I never would have known otherwise. And our administrators were great about letting me go.

Fitts added a second section of Advanced Journalism in 1993-94 to accommodate a growing morning broadcast and radio program. Terry Mood's daughter, Jeannie, took Fitts's Introduction to Journalism class as a sophomore in 1994, and really loved it. Her first published story was "Students learn Spanish-style dances" (Mood, 1994). The staff handled all its own finances and still developed photos in the darkroom; it was all so professional. "I think a lot of those kids came through they didn't realize that that was going to be their forte and that they were going to move on in that," Terry Mood said. "I remember my daughter had some friends that, they just took into it and went into journalism." Jeannie Mood joined the *Charger* staff the next year as an assistant editor, then served as editor-in-chief of the publication during her senior year. She thought she wanted to pursue journalism as a career and even started off as a journalism major in college, but eventually decided to pursue counseling instead. She earned her master's degree from the Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans and is now a Christian counselor in Bend, Oregon. She still considers her time working on the staff of the *Charger* to be one of her most formative high school experiences.

In 1994, the district hired John Jordan to replace the retiring Bob McCord as superintendent. Jordan was raised on the northern, Delta-end of Yazoo County. He graduated from Yazoo City High School in 1970, where he had actually been a student in Terry Mood's classroom. He earned his bachelor's degree from Mississippi State University in 1976, taught junior high school for three years, then went back to MSU for his master's and doctorate degrees, finishing in 1982. He worked for a year in the university's curriculum research unit, then moved

to Natchez to become principal at Cathedral (Catholic) High School. In 1987, he moved to Jackson and became an assistant superintendent in the Jackson Public School District, the state's largest, and served there until Oxford offered him their head job.

His only previous experience with high school journalism had been working to restart the *Green Wave* student newspaper while he was principal at Cathedral. He thought having a student newspaper was an important piece of improving school culture, important enough that he hired an outside professional to come in each day to teach and advise the students. "It was very, very elementary, but it was at least something that was challenging kids to write and to report the goings-on in the school," Jordan said. The *Charger* was something completely different. The publication was already a well-established commodity by then, and so was Fitts. Jordan recalls: "She was one of those people who just took care of her business, you know? In a very good way, where it did not take a great deal of input from me whatsoever." He remembers reading the paper and being very impressed with the publication, its format, its reporting and its regularity:

But being a new superintendent, I have to be quite honest with you, the checklist of things that you worry about — I'd been a leader at a building level, but that's a whole different deal when you move to a place with a community that's actively involved in the public school district as Oxford is, Oxford being a college town and education being kind of a cottage industry. You come in and step lightly. You want to be very careful how you handle things like that.

He knows he never required Fitts to show him the paper before publishing, nor did he think any of his administrators should ask to see it. "It's just not part of my makeup to be a controlling person, so I'm not going to demand to see everything a student writes before they publish it," Jordan said. He recalls no instances of censorship. He does remember a student prank

slipping through around graduation time, one where the first letters of several words equaled a hidden message of some kind, but he's not sure whether that was in the literary magazine, yearbook, or somewhere else entirely. Either way, it was not a major concern:

I never had any reason to worry about that. You know, there's just too much to think about and manage when you're trying to do a good job as a young person... I knew I could do the job, but my experience level probably wasn't the greatest at the time. So I was trying to pay attention to other things, and that one was not on my radar as a problem. And it never became a problem.

What Jordan was concerned with, though, was making sure the Oxford School District was living up to its full potential. His predecessor McCord had been superintendent since the mid-1980s, and Jordan described him as an old-school type of leader who went about his work very quietly and efficiently. Thanks to McCord's conservative, even-keeled leadership, Jordan inherited a district that was fiscally sound and in many ways already excellent, but he still saw untapped potential in the district's relationship with the community:

But there are other things that are as important [as money], and that is telling your story. You've got to tell your story. You've got to let people know what you're doing, and the Oxford community, I'm not sure other than a few parents, really knew the details of how good of a school Oxford High School really was. They were pleased, but they just didn't know where they ranked in the state of Mississippi or even in the country. So once we started telling that story, the pride even grew.

Jordan saw what Fitts was doing with the *Charger*, and upped her role with the district to include doing public relations work. "There was no one doing that type of work," Jordan recalls. One of the first things he had Fitts do was to get her students to take photos of every adult in the district,

then use those to create a single document that paired pictures with names, so he could learn them and use them in conversation. Jordan had picked up this practice from Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*:

I'm not trained in the area of public relations by any stretch of imagination, but I know one thing: there is nothing more pleasing to the ear of a person than for someone they don't know so well to call them by their name.

This was the 1990s, so avenues of communication were fewer. There was no email, no Facebook groups, no Twitter. Jordan relied mostly on fax machines. He installed fax machines and phone lines in all his board members' homes, at the district's expense, so he could send them a weekly summary of issues and happenings every Friday. Communication among stakeholders was critical, and being excellent in high-profile areas was important for community relations. The *Charger's* success helped Jordan with both: "It was all part of the puzzle. I didn't plan all this out, but in retrospect I can see. I mean, you've got a first-class publication. You've got a first-class band program. You've got a first-class choral program, etc." Fitts agreed with Jordan's vision and used his trust and enthusiasm to help grow her program and create more opportunities for students. She would send staff members out to do features or cover events at the district's elementary schools, awards luncheons, and other functions, then have them submit their work for publication in the *Oxford Eagle* and elsewhere. The positive public relations-style stories helped the district build awareness and curry favor with its taxpayers, while the additional writing practice helped students improve the quality of their work for the *Charger* and the professional bylines helped boost their resumes. Fitts lobbied Jordan for additional equipment, and he allowed her to add a semester-long photography class to the OHS curriculum which then fed the *Charger* staff with stronger visual students. When he asked her to start clipping positive news articles

about the district and having them bound into an annual scrapbook, Fitts started doing the same with all of the year's editions of the *Charger*. She presented one set to that year's editor, and kept the other on file in the newsroom to preserve as a reference tool. Fitts says having such support from the superintendent's chair was huge:

Because when you found out Dr. Jordan was behind the newspaper as a superintendent, that flavors the principal. That's where other staffs [at other schools] make a mistake. They don't involve the upper-echelon people to get them excited about the program. But it trickles down.

As coverage amped up and became more real, the chance of administrative strife increased. Now the paper was covering things like Jordan's hiring, a proposal for year-round school, Sullivan's resignation as principal, a debate over abortion. Fitts says she always encouraged students to avoid sensationalism and stick to relevant local issues, but she also did not want to discourage students from going after major stories just because they might make the community or administration uncomfortable:

I [recruited] some really outstanding students who didn't mind pushing a few buttons. And it was neat because they didn't ever go over the line. They would have to talk to the editor if they were gonna put something in there that would be controversial. They would talk to the editor, and he or she would say, 'Are you willing to take the heat for this? Because somebody's gonna be coming to you.'

Mac Curley became principal in 1995, but left to take the same job at Tupelo High School after only one year. He was followed in 1996 by Britt Dickens. Dickens was a short, stocky man with spectacle glasses and a dark mustache. He grew up in Carthage, Mississippi, then attended Mississippi State University, a short drive North up Highway 25, and earned a pair

of degrees from the school in 1975 and 1977. He taught high school for seven years in Carthage and Forest, then moved to Oxford to pursue a Ph.D. in exercise science and a second master's in school administration from the University of Mississippi. In 1983, just as he was finishing his coursework, a football coaching job opened up at Oxford Middle School. Dickens thought returning to the classroom could provide him an income while he finished his dissertation, then he'd be headed off somewhere to become a college professor. "So I did that, and then... I just decided to stay," he recalls. Dickens ended up working for the district for the next 20-plus years. He taught for a while at Oxford High School, including a stint under Hasselman, then became an assistant principal at the elementary school, then worked at the central office coordinating professional development under McCord and Jordan until returning to OHS for his first head principalship.

When Dickens arrived on campus as principal in 1996, the *Charger* was already "rolling," so he just let it continue to roll. He could see, like others, that Fitts knew her subject area and cared deeply about the kids and the program. The only thing she really needed was "a high school principal that stayed out of the way," Dickens said. "I think that part of being a good administrator is to hire good people, let them do their job, and stay out of the way and support them as needed." As a first-time building leader, he tried to keep his focus on academics, an area he knew was not his strongest. As a teacher he'd taught Biology and U.S. History, and he worked hard to engage his students. However he was always juggling his coaching duties — first football, then later tennis and cross country — which always kept his attention divided. "I worked hard in my classroom, but also worked hard [coaching]," Dickens remembers. "My time was split. So in my academic leadership knowledge, I had to grow. I had to build and grow over

the years.” Having people like Fitts who could develop and manage their own programs outside the core curriculum was critical to Dickens’s strategy for survival:

I think communication is first and foremost, and building relationships a second. So you do that, and have good people, and trust them to do their job. You observe them, check in some, offer suggestions as needed, and pat them on the back, you know. That allows you to focus on those areas that need more attention. Those teachers that need more attention, and those academic areas that need more attention.

On the whole, Dickens’s relationship with the *Charger* was a positive one, and he doesn’t count having such a robust news source operating in-house and looking over his shoulder as something he was constantly concerned about.

I don't think it creates any real challenges as long as you communicate with them regularly and they understand your expectations and you understand their expectations. That's one of the big failures of school leaders is they don't communicate enough. They don't, they don't let everyone know their expectations. And if you communicate regularly, you know, just check in — which I, which I didn't. That's one of my lessons learned as I've gotten older and, uh, somewhat wiser is to communicate and check in. You know, being present.

Dickens did have one incident with Fitts and the *Charger* where he now believes taking his own advice might have helped him. One page of coverage led to a heated argument between principal and adviser that both Dickens and Fitts independently recalled more than 20 years later, and it seems a pivotal moment in the publication’s history of independent control. The incident occurred in November of 1997, Dickens’s second year as principal. The Oxford school board had recently adopted a new zero-tolerance discipline policy. Students caught with drugs were to be



immediately suspended. Students involved in a fight were to be taken directly to jail. The *Charger* covered the story and obtained what they thought was the final text of the actual policy. The story ran on page 7 of a separate “Insider” section with one factually inaccurate sentence: “Students who are caught even with such drugs as Tylenol will be suspended just as someone with marijuana would be” (Walters, 1997). Fitts recalls the mistake: “We had gotten the original, but they had revised it and did not give us the revised version. Well in the revised version, Tylenol was not in there.” This certainly was not the first error by a student journalist at Oxford High School, nor is it most likely the more egregious. But taken in context with the rest of the page, it did not help matters. The rest of the article was similarly straightforward and alarmist. Students were warned that if administrators saw even one punch, students risked jail time and possibly a permanent blemish on their record. One passage read:

Students who break the rules may think zero tolerance is a bad idea, but the administration does not value the opinion of those people. Assistant Principal Tim Carter said, ‘We do not consider the thoughts of the rule breakers because they are the ones causing trouble.’ (Walters, 1997, p. 7)

The harsh tone of the story, combined with the Tylenol error, combined with the draconian reality of the real policy became the talk of OHS. Sophomore Katie Howell remembers there being a “buzz” about the story and the photo that accompanied it. It is the photo that Dickens remembers so vividly all these years later. The photo is what put the coverage over the top:

We had a school resource officer, and I was in the hall with an assistant principal, and we're just in the hall talking one day. One of [Fitts's] students comes by and says, I don't even know how she phrased it, but she wanted to take a picture of us dealing with a student. And so we had a student lean against the wall, and the officer had his hand on

him and was handcuffing him. And so we were just joking. Well, all of a sudden, the next week it comes out in the paper with this picture. And, and there was a story and a headline like, ‘School leader —,’ I don't even remember, honestly. But it presented us in a bad light.

The headline actually read “The Zero Tolerance Policy,” and the student being handcuffed is actually female. Nevertheless, the appearance of the image is as Dickens remembers. The photo makes it seem as if the photographer stumbled upon an actual arrest in the middle of an OHS hallway. The officer is holding the student’s arms behind her back as he tightens the handcuffs. The student’s face is up against a brick wall. Dickens appears to be mid-sentence, with his face leaned in close to the student’s. The caption read, “A police officer enforces the new policy.” Nowhere does it say the photo was posed.

Dickens didn’t think much about the photo, and wasn’t really bothered by it, until his boss, Jordan, called him over to the central office to chew him out for allowing it to run. Jordan does not recall this event:

If Brit said it happened, I guess it happened... As far as my reaction to the picture I don’t remember exactly what my issue was. I think maybe that it was that the picture was staged and a little over the top... But I can tell you now, I wouldn’t have particularly cared for a picture of a kid with handcuffs on in one of my schools. I’m all about safety now, don’t get me wrong, but I’m not about making schools a place where kids fear to come to... In retrospect today, it doesn’t seem so offensive to me at all, to be honest. But back in those days, I guess I was trying to protect [the district].

When he got back to school from Jordan’s office, Dickens summoned Fitts to his office. He felt like if his boss yelled at him, her boss needed to yell at her too. The two of them met in his office

alone. He told her that if she couldn't handle the supervisory demands of managing so many publications, then she'd need to give one of them up. "Because you have made us... this has made us look really bad. And my superintendent has told me how bad it made us look," Dickens said. Fitts responded defensively, and the two had "a pretty good blow-up." Fitts says Dickens told her she was going to have to start bringing everything to the office before it was printed. Dickens does not remember threatening prior review specifically, but admits he "probably did." Fitts says she tried to defuse the situation by asking to hear more about how this looked from his perspective. Then he wanted to hear how things looked from hers, and they talked, eventually clearing the air. "And we were fine after we talked it through," Dickens said. "After we understood each other, we were fine. And had I communicated my expectations, then that probably wouldn't have happened. That's where communication is really important." Both agree the next couple of weeks were pretty tense, but eventually things returned to normal. "It was kind of tough there for a while," Fitts recalls, "but he never demanded that I do any of the things he had said when he was mad."

Reflecting on the incident some 20 years later, Dickens says he probably could have handled the situation differently as a leader:

I probably shouldn't have gone into the meeting as mad as I was. I could have maybe had it the next day or something, when I'd had more time to think about things... But I didn't. And sometimes getting mad is okay. It's not always a bad thing. And I wasn't out of control or anything, but I was... I made my feelings pretty strong.

Fitts spent more than 20 years advising the *Charger*, and she says this is the only time an administrator ever threatened censorship of the publication. She considers the entire episode a learning experience, though: "It was one of those things where we learned to be more careful,

and he learned not to blow his cool. Brit was a good man, a good man, but he had a temper.” Dickens is certain he would not have reacted so strongly over the page if Jordan had not reprimanded him over it first, a fact Fitts did not know. For her part, Fitts says looking back at the page now, she understands how the combined effect of the elements on the page could have been problematic, even sensational. “I don’t remember the picture, but that would make sense,” Fitts said. “I can see that. [Looking back now,] that [photo] bothers me more than [the Tylenol discrepancy.] It’s fake news.” Dickens says despite what he may have told Fitts in the heat of their argument, he seriously never considered instituting prior review of the newspaper: “I had better things to do than to prior review a great newspaper that produced a great product every month or bi-weekly or whatever it was. I was not interested in prior review at all.” The two fully repaired their relationship, and neither harbor ill will toward the other today over the incident. Dickens remained a believer in the autonomy of the student press, and later, at Fitts’s invitation, spoke on a university panel of school administrators defending student press freedom.

Despite the zero-tolerance controversy, the *Charger* continued to push the envelope in its coverage and continued to be recognized regularly as one of the best high school newspapers in Mississippi by MSPA. With so much interest in the program and a growing desire to become more competitive regionally and nationally, Fitts needed a system to ensure she was selecting the best staffers. There was not enough room in the class to enroll every student who requested to be on staff, so she instituted an application process and began requiring applicants to list three teacher recommendations, to which Fitts then sent a survey:

I didn’t ask for a lot of specifics, I asked for things like level of responsibility. Did they meet deadlines in your class? Did they have good grammatical skills? What was the attitude like? Were they mature and responsible? Some something about the quality of

their work I think I had in there too. So then the teachers would give me them back, and I would simply do a number system and rank the top 15. So some of them didn't get in, but they chose the teachers that ranked them.

Fitts believes staff selection is critical, and no position more critical than selecting a good editor-in-chief:

It makes a huge difference. I remember there was one guy that was probably one of the smartest editors I've ever had. Like a National Merit finalist, that type thing, but a cool guy too. And he started off the first deadline and he said, 'now you people better have this done on time because I am in charge now, and I say it better be done, and I don't wanna stay late after school.' I didn't say a word. And I called him to my desk and I said, 'Honey, the key word in here is we.' And he said, 'what are you talking about?' I said, 'when you talk to your staff it's 'we' have a deadline. This is probably 'our' best paper ever. 'We're' going to work together. If you need any help, let me know and that way 'we'll' be through on time.' He said, 'Oh.' It's just neat to see that kind of camaraderie.

Investing time and effort into that autonomous editor position became crucial for Fitts. She wanted student leaders who were in control enough and cared enough about the finished product to solve problems for themselves and to brainstorm new solutions when things were not quite working. One such student was 1999-2000 *Charger* editor Katie Howell. Howell started her education in a small local private school, but switched to OSD for high school and quickly got involved in a number of the school's eclectic list of student activities. She joined the student government. She was active in multiple service clubs and recreational sports. She got involved in the school's award-winning drama program and helped produce the annual musical. Her passion, however, was journalism. Howell knew from a young age that she wanted to be a journalist.

When she was 9 years old, she and a friend produced a regular newspaper to pass out around their neighborhood. Her grandfather was a newspaper reporter, and she enjoyed writing. The *Charger* was an established brand with a great reputation, so she eagerly enrolled in Fitts's Introduction to Journalism class as soon as she got to campus as a freshman. "[Fitts] was the driving force of all things journalism at Oxford High School. She was a charismatic teacher, an encourager. She had a unique way of motivating students to work hard and to get involved." By October, Howell (1997) had already earned her first *Charger* byline with "Pep rallies excite students and players," a story about all the behind-the-scenes planning involved in OHS pep rallies and whether the players were actually 'pepped' by them. She remembers the beginner class being fairly large, but Fitts had a knack for being able to get students involved and keep them involved.

She was always eager and willing to learn more herself. Obviously in the late 1990s, technology and things like that were changing a lot. She was always on top of it to kind of keep up with what was new, what we needed to be doing, what the changing state of journalism was, so she could pass that on to her students.

Howell worked her way up the staff ranks over the next three years. She recalls no instances of "butting heads" with administrators over the *Charger's* content, though she does remember the spectre of school uniforms and other potential security measures being a hot topic after the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999. The next August, she began her senior year as the *Charger's* editor-in-chief. She remembers overseeing a redesign of the paper during her tenure, updating the masthead, the fonts, the publication's visual identity. She managed a staff of other editors, who in turn managed their own staffs of other writers, photographers, and designers. It was a big job for a high school student, one with lots of moving

pieces that could blow up or fall through at any time. However, as Howell recalls, that was exactly the point:

I did feel that responsibility. It was not a game. I did feel like, you know, it could come back on me to an extent if we messed up. And I think that's important. It was definitely a learning experience, and one I've thought back on and built on.

Howell and her peers felt the publication belonged to them. "It was pretty clear we were on school property and using school resources, but we felt ownership over the content," she said. Such a feeling of ownership meant that she would often spend her hours outside the class reflecting on the program, identifying areas that needed to be improved, and how best to achieve those improvements. That year, what was not working was the writing. Fitts recalls the problem:

If you're gonna make a good writer, you have to be able to show them how to get their writing better. And that's not in a comma. That's not in quotation marks, or in the grammar or the words. It's like, what's missing? How did this need to go together? Why would this word be better? And did you interview? So I spent countless hours writing all this stuff out, and then on the final copy it would come back basically the same. Hadn't been changed.

Fitts said Howell approached her one and said, "Mrs. Fitts, isn't it frustrating that after you and I both edit these things, we get back the same stuff? They put the commas in, but they don't go see the person, they don't get the extra interview. I have a plan." Katie's plan was that she would write the total number of corrections she made at the top of the rough draft. After they turned in the final copy, she'd go back through and see how many corrections they actually made, and write that number above the total suggested corrections. That fraction would convert to their grade. Fitts recalls the results:

It only took one month. I mean we warned them ahead of time that that's what we were doing, but they didn't get it. But that was a huge thing. Because then they started looking to see, 'How do I get it better?' And the more they did it, the more the writing improved. Howell recalls the grading conversation as being more of a collaborative effort. "I think she's being very generous in giving me credit for that," she says. "But I do remember that, and I do remember that frustration, for sure. And I do remember the amazement, after making that one change, at how it made people's stories better." Howell is proud of the paper's coverage of Title IX inequality issues during her tenure as editor, and the staff's coverage of the aforementioned post-Columbine policy proposals. On the lighter side, she also remembers the district shifting its beverage contract from Coca-Cola to Pepsi as being big news that year in the high school world:

We had infographics and everything. I remember that being kinda fun to report on and get people's opinion on. But it was kinda fun to do everything, really. It was fun to get to interact with so many different parts of the student body. Because we did want it to be a paper for the student body, you know, not just for the star athletes on the football team and the president of the student council and that kind of thing. It was supposed to be for everybody. And so I feel like we made a good effort towards that, looking back.

Another big instructional leap happened during Howell's tenure as editor. Fitts attended a day-long high school adviser workshop that fall at the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* in Tupelo, and the editor there began talking about a new content strategy method their newsroom was using called the Maestro Approach. Fitts watched a video on it and thought, "We can't use this because we don't have this many people, but we need to develop something similar for high schools that would work." She took the concept back to Oxford and reorganized the way her staff planned each issue:



We started dividing up into teams. So here's a feature team and here's a news team and here is our editorial team. And, of course, the editor is the maestro. So if this one group of kids knew they were responsible for the feature section, then all month long they were thinking of features. What were some topics for features? And this other group knew they were responsible for sports, so they were looking for sports. The method helped them think about what was coming next. Before that, I was handing out a sheet of yellow notebook paper and saying, 'Write down whatever articles you think would be good for next month.' And of course whoever got it first would choose, and usually my worst writer would sign up with the best article. Well see, now the whole class in advanced journalism was deciding on the content of the newspapers. It was *their* newspaper. It wasn't the editor's newspaper, it wasn't Mrs. Fitts' newspaper, it was theirs. So they began to take ownership. When a student starts to take personal interest and ownership of the whole thing, they want it to be the best it can be. It's not about this, 'Oh I gotta go to journalism class, let's just come up with something.' It's about *our* newspaper. And they started taking pride in that.

Fitts eventually met Maestro inventor and University of Kentucky journalism professor Buck Ryan at a conference in Toronto a few years later, and he was amazed at her adaptation of his work to the high school setting. The two struck up a friendship and became frequent co-presenters at journalism conferences across the country. Fitts believes the audience-first, collaborative outlook her students were able to generate through those maestro sessions might have been the single most important factor in turning the *Charger* into one of the nation's truly elite high school publications:

The key to maestro is 'Why would my reader care?' I think we were writing about some stuff that the reader didn't care about. We had, 'The school district is going to have a new building. It will cost \$8.4 million and it will be so-and-so, so-and-so.' Well that was on a different campus! The kids weren't even gonna use it. I mean, what do high school kids think about that? We were putting National Merit Semifinalists on the front page. Well, why would my reader care? And this is what we're discussing as a group. And we'd say, who's gonna read this article? Parents, grandmas, and maybe their best friend. And other than that, they get a cursory glance and in some cases, 'Oh, we had four this year.' 'Okay.' So we still covered that, because that's important, but it wasn't front page. They started making decisions where your lead article was a big 'Wow.' It's a big thing. The lead article on the features page was your biggest one. It wasn't just plopping stuff down anymore, and here's the neat thing: We knew we were doing something right because we gave out the newspapers at lunch, and we started looking around and the whole cafeteria had the newspaper up reading it. That was so exciting for my kids.

The student body and local community were not the only readers taking note. Howell was named OHS's first ever Mississippi High School Journalist of the Year by JEA that spring, and the *Charger* won its first ever All-Southern classification when the staff travelled to SIPA. Howell graduated a few months later and enrolled in Washington and Lee University, an elite private college in Virginia, that fall. She double-majored in journalism and geology, and has spent the bulk of her career covering energy and environmental policy for a publication in Washington, D.C. Howell notes that she views her student newspaper experience through the lens of someone who went on to become a practicing journalist, and admits the program may

have had less impact on other students, but her recollection is that her time on the *Charger* staff changed her life:

It was a fantastic learning environment. I look back on my high school journalism experience, and I got a more solid foundation in journalism in high school than I did in my college journalism major. And I think much of that has to do with working on the school paper. Mrs. Fitts was a fantastic teacher, and we learned a lot in the classroom setting too, but the hands-on, getting to do it ourselves, that was great.

**2000s.** In the fall of 2001, the *Charger* went global. Most major news outlets had established at least some presence on the internet, and that summer editor-in-chief Steven Griffin and managing editor Michael Atkins worked long hours on their own to design and launch the first *Charger* website. Now the staff could publish even more content for its audience in the time between its regular monthly issues.

John Jordan left the district in 2002 and moved back to Jackson to become deputy state superintendent for the Mississippi Department of Education. He left there in 2005 and since has worked a variety of jobs in the private sector. He currently owns and operates his own education consulting firm, CORE Learning, which he started in 2012. He remains proud of the Oxford chapter of his career, especially the work he did with Fitts and selling the district's value and success to the community:

I think it's a direct benefit today, what you see in 2020. I mean, you're talking about 18 years since I left Oxford, and it's done nothing but grow. And its reputation continues to be one of the finest districts in the state of Mississippi.

Jordan is referring to the district writ large, but at the classroom level, Fitts and the *Charger* were following the same strategy, marketing their own value and successes to the rest of the school

community as a way to build momentum and goodwill for bigger, more ambitious goals. Fitts says most of her program's progress came from being diligent about contest deadlines, winning bigger and bigger awards, and learning to make sure she publicized her students' achievements as widely as possible. She wanted to let the students do the talking for the program, and there was much for them to say. The program had been on a consistent upward trajectory since Fitts took over in 1984, but in the 2000s, *The Charger* produced some of its most impressive, prolific work and finally began earning recognition on the regional and national levels. The *Charger's* All-Southern rating from SIPA in the spring of 2000 kicked off a string of six straight All-Southern ratings. After two years of using the maestro method to plan their coverage, Griffin led the publication to its first National Scholastic Press Association Pacemaker award in 2002. NSPA began honoring Pacemakers in 1927, and the larger wooden plaques are awarded each year to only the nation's most outstanding high school publications. A typical issue from this period included an 8-page full-sized broadsheet of school news, sports, and opinions, plus a 6-page broadsheet of "Local Color" with features, entertainment news, and lighter-hearted fare. Each issue — published once a month, eight times each school year — totaled between 45 and 50 written stories.

Britt Dickens also left OHS in 2002 to become the superintendent of Philadelphia (MS) public schools. He stayed four years there before retiring from the public system and returning to Oxford. He spent the next several years doing consulting work around Mississippi and teaching Education Leadership classes as an adjunct professor at Ole Miss. In 2013, with their parents aging and requiring more attention, Dickens and his wife decided to move back to the Jackson area, where he now teaches full time as an Education Leadership professor at a private Christian university, Mississippi College.

In 2003, a decade after being named a Distinguished Adviser, Fitts was finally named National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year by the Dow Jones News Fund. It is the highest honor a scholastic journalism teacher can receive. Director Richard Holden called Fitts at her home one evening to tell her the news. Fitts recalls she said, “Can you say that one more time?” The award came with a \$1,000 scholarship for a senior at the school. A special article was included in the faculty section of that year’s yearbook. Always one to capitalize on an opportunity to improve her program, Fitts used the buzz surrounding her award to lobby the district for a classroom set of new Apple computers, finally ditching the hodgepodge of machines she had worked so hard to cobble together funding for a decade earlier.

After Dicken left, Bill Hovious took over as OHS principal. Jerry Webb was hired as the district’s new superintendent in 2003. Fitts said administrative support was a huge factor in continuing to accomplish the goals of the publication: “We didn't have prior review, we didn't have censorship, but I tried to keep them involved.” One way she tried to build positive relationships with administrators was by having the staff host a brief reception for their frequent sources at the beginning of the year, yet another tip she had learned from a session at one of the national conventions (CSPA):

I don't remember what I called it, but usually about two weeks into the fall, the advanced staff would send out invitations to everybody that we normally interview: superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, assistant principals, head coach, athletic director, main coaches of every sport, counselors, sponsors of the major clubs, etc. We would send out invitations and we would say, 'We would like you to come to a lemonade and cookie party, in the journalism room after school on Tuesday in two weeks. And we will remind you. We'll only be 30-40 minutes at the most, but please come and be a part.' And then I'd

have assigned everybody to have a person to contact individually. Like, 'Mary, you make sure you touch base with the superintendent.' And so about a week before, those people would contact them and say, 'Remember, we've got our party coming up Tuesday afternoon... for y'all. So will you please come, we'll get you some lemonade, some cookies and talk.' And then we'd set it up so that there was always somebody very friendly at the door, and usually a backup for that person. Sometimes it was the editor, sometimes it wasn't, and they would say, 'Oh hey, Dr. Webb, we're so glad to have you today,' or, 'Coach So-and-so, we're so glad to have you. Let me take you over here to our sports editor to meet him,' or, 'Here's our news editor. I want you to talk to him today.' And so then they would hand them off to the different staff members, who were ready, and they would talk to them. And then here's what happened. We'd say, 'Now can we just sit down for about 15 minutes. And so all these people, adults everywhere, and the editor or the assistant editor, usually the editor, would get up and say, 'Thank you for coming. We need you.' You see how important that was? Because administrators sometimes think of journalism as trouble, but we would say, 'We need you. The truth, the background, the facts of our articles are going to be absolutely right. That's why we need you. It's going to take time. It's going to seem like we're worrying you to death. But we want to pledge to you that this newspaper will be the best newspaper Oxford High School has ever put out. But we can't do it without you.'

Fitts recalled that at one of these receptions in the fall of 2004, after editor-in-chief Ryan Whittington gave a similar speech to the one described above, an assistant principal in the room piped up and said if his name was ever mentioned in the newspaper, he would like to review a copy before it was printed. Fitts cringed:

That's what you don't want. But Dr. Webb was the superintendent that year. And Dr. Webb stood up, and he said, 'Ryan, you have just told me that this newspaper will be the best one Oxford High School's ever done.' He said, 'I've watched this for the last few years, and you get better and better every year. And you have told me that you will cover both sides of an issue before you print it, that you will always seek the truth. I don't want you to ever show me anything ahead of time. You just do what you do and what you told me you will do, and I support this newspaper.' Then he stopped and he said, 'Secondly, there will come a day where I don't necessarily like what's on the front page of this newspaper. But if you have done what you just promised me to do, and you have sought the background, and you have sought the opinions, and you sought the facts, and you've printed what you believe is true, then I'll support you anyway.' Huge! And that paper won so many awards, it was unreal.

Whittington doesn't remember this exchange specifically but said it doesn't surprise him: "I remember thinking, 'Why are we doing this? What is the purpose of this?' Looking back now, it makes perfect sense." Whittington grew up in Oxford. Like Howell, he attended a small local private school during his elementary years, but transferred into Oxford's public schools in the seventh grade. He began attending Oxford High School in the fall of 2001 and immediately sought out Fitts's well-respected journalism program. Whittington also loved sports, and collecting baseball cards, so sports journalism was an especially appealing career option. He says:

I remember very clearly, as a freshman going into high school, knowing that I wanted to do something that had to do with words or writing. I remember it clearly because Mrs. Fitts was, in addition to being an outstanding teacher, she was an outstanding performer.

She could get up in front of a crowd of students, no matter the age, and she could sell you on just about anything. So I remember in my Introduction to Journalism class, the first few days of the class she told us what working for the *Charger* is like and what it would feel like, and probably by about two months into that course, I knew that I wanted to be a member of that staff. I wasn't really thinking of the future, wasn't really thinking you know about leadership at the *Charger*, but at the time I remember knowing, 'That's pretty freakin' cool, I want to be a part of that. How do I be a part of that?' She would impart this feeling that, look, we are doing great work here. Our writing is outstanding. We have great students who lead this. They do this without being paid. They're sacrificing their time. It's a commitment. It's a grind. There's a level of resiliency and tenacity that's necessary to be a journalist and to be a high school journalist. So she really sold it. She said, you know, these students are, they are doing the work that a college student is doing right now. But they're doing it in high school. So just the way that she put it all together showed us that you can, you can receive something tangible from your experience in high school and do something at the highest level of a craft that was meaningful. It was powerful. She really kind of instilled a passion in me, and a drive for not only accuracy, but quality journalism.

Whittington remembers Fitts drilling the introductory students on AP Style, and he remembers the role of deadlines being stressed a lot, but he also remembers Fitts's unorthodox teaching demonstrations that helped drive the content of the lessons home. One such lesson he still remembers vividly almost 20 years later was the day Fitts brought an assistant principal into class to briefly chat with students about a stabbing that had just happened in the cafeteria. No such stabbing had taken place, but the students did not know that.



He closed the door, so it was just our class, Mrs. Fitts, and him. And he said, ‘Y'all, I'm here to share some really sad news with you, and we felt like this could be a good learning experience. We know that you're interested in journalism. I only have a short period of time before I have to go talk to members of the media, but at lunch today, there was a stabbing.’ And you can hear a pin drop. We're all just kind of looking around. We're trying to understand what's going on. And he said, ‘I don't have a lot of details right now, I can't share the name of the student, but it was a student at Oxford High School, this gentleman was a junior...’ You know, shared details that he could share. There were some people in the classroom that were shocked. No one knew who it was, I remember there was one person who, who, you could tell that she was rattled. You could tell the tears were close. We're still all looking around trying to understand you know, what has gone on. And I remember Mrs. Fitts had to kind of kick it off, and she said, ‘Thank you for sharing this. Can you tell us the name?’ And he said, ‘I can't share that right now, we have to inform the parents. The media are coming to the school. I've got about five minutes left,’ and she says, ‘Ok, class. Does anybody have any questions?’ And so that kind of kicked off this round of, ‘Oh crap. This is real. We need to ask any questions that we have.’ And so there were some kids that engaged. I think someone asked a question, you know, what time did this occur? Can you tell me about the weapon? And he shared a little bit here and there. He left the classroom. And we're still, you know, very, very... Everyone's buying it. And she closes the door, and said, ‘Look, I know this was a shock. And I need to tell you that none of this was real.’ And so there's this sigh of relief. You know, this is something you probably can't do today. And thinking back on it. I remember that there wasn't any anger, though. There was just relief. And

there was this moment of, we get it. Like, this is what real news looks like. And in that moment, I think I knew I wanted to be a part of something that would be able to tell a bigger story. That this was information that people needed to know, so someone had to tell that. And, you know, it has to be us. It has to be me. So that was that was important. It felt exciting. You got the adrenaline rush, no one else is going to tell the story, you've got to tell the story.

Whittington's freshman year was the same year Griffin and Atkins launched the *Charger's* website, the same year the program won its first Pacemaker. Whittington became a sports writer for the *Charger* his sophomore year, and he remembers sports editor Will McKenzie telling him one day, "You know, you're pretty damn good at this. Like, have you thought about, you know, doing it next year, or taking on a bigger role?" Midway through the year, McKenzie even let him lay out one of the pages in the sports section. Whittington was hooked. He progressed to managing editor as a junior and ultimately served as editor-in-chief of the publication during his senior year of 2004-05. He remembers his year as editor-in-chief being especially edifying, but scary:

I felt like it was a huge position. So it was a lot of pressure. It was a big weight, but always knowing that I could turn to her and say, 'Alright, I don't know how to do this, how do I do this?' But then sometimes her answer was, 'You have to figure it out. You're gonna have to have some difficult conversations.' So that kind of being a leader as a peer was a challenge, but it was invigorating; knowing that the whole staff was counting on you if you didn't get your work done.

Whittington said the paper was never prior-reviewed during his four years at, but he does remember two controversial stories that drew some sharp criticism from the school's leadership.

The first was a story on the relatively small stipends the district was paying their athletic coaches for taking on extra duties. He remembers getting an angry call from Johnny Hill, the school's athletic director at the time:

It was eye opening for a 17-year-old who probably didn't understand the value of a salary at the time. But we dove headfirst into a lot of salary figures. And we got to understand how much coaches really meant to our community, and how little they were paid for it. And I think with that story, we were able to change the narrative in the school and in the school district. It's a narrative that I think that the coaching profession, especially in high school, fights against, which is: they're a high school coach, they're always going to be a football coach, what are they going to do? Teach economics? History? We showed that the average coach at Oxford High School, was putting in, you know, 15-hour days and getting paid pennies on the dollar. And they really weren't getting paid for the extra work that they were putting in. And I remember one coach who, later on, he pulled me aside at the hallway one day, and he said, 'I appreciate what you did.' And that made me feel good. Knowing that you made an impact.

The second was a story about underage drinking. Oxford is a college town with a notable reputation for partying. Underage students slipping into bars and drinking was as big of a problem in the early 2000s as it is in the 2020s, and a university student had just been killed in a drunk driving accident the year before. The Oxford Police Department promised to crack down on bars who served minors, but the scuttlebutt around the high school was that nothing had changed. So one of the *Charger's* news writers, Emileigh Barnes (2003), came up with a plan for a journalistic sting operation. The staff would send a 17-year-old white female and a 17-year-old

black male to several local bars on a busy Thursday night before a home Ole Miss football game and report their results in next month's edition.

Fitts remembers clearing the story with both students' parents, then getting the school resource officer to clear things with the police department. They set up a schedule, and the resource officer agreed to go downtown with them to monitor their safety. Fitts insisted she accompany them too:

The resource officer told me he'd know where they were at all times, and I said, 'Well I'm not letting my kids go out [without me]. I'm not going to go into the bars, but I'll stand and walk around on the sidewalk outside the bars.'

Fitts suggested they start their experiment at 9 p.m., which drew a chuckle from the resource officer. "He said, 'Mrs. Fitts, you obviously have not been doing bars lately. Let's try about 11:30.' And I said, 'At night?!?'" They settled on 10 p.m., and in less than two hours the pair attempted entry into nine different bars. The female student used a series of excuses as to why she did not have her I.D. with her, then tried to flirt her way in. The male student simply carried his real, 17-year-old I.D. with him, but only pulled it out if he was specifically asked. One or the other of the students got into seven of the nine bars. Four bars let both of them in. The next day in class, Fitts instructed Barnes to contact all the bars, tell them what happened, and ask for a quote. One bar owner claimed the story was false and threatened to sue the *Charger* if it put his business name in the story. Barnes replied that her father was an attorney, and the bar owner could check his own video cameras if he didn't believe their reporting. She also visited City Hall to find out which bars had recently been fined or had staff members lose their licenses for selling alcohol to minors and included those bars in the story as well.

The story ran in the November/December edition, and generated quite a buzz around both school and town. Whittington says Hovious called him into his office and was upset he was not given a heads-up:

The conversation never went anywhere. He said, 'You know, I would have liked to have known about the story.' And I said, 'Look, you know, we have a policy whereby we don't, we don't share this.' We didn't want prior review. And he said, 'I understand that, but you know, you have to see it from an administrator's standpoint; this gets to be a safety concern.' And I said, 'I understand that. We were safe. We consulted with the proper authorities. We made sure Mrs. Fitts knew. The parents were comfortable with this approach, and we feel like our story is a good one.' And I remember him saying, 'Look, the story's a good one, you did good work with this.' But he was frustrated. He was angry.

Whittington says he went straight to Fitts after the confrontation, and he remembers her not being happy that Hovious had tried to intimidate one of her students. Fitts does not remember Hovious calling in Whittington, or even being upset at all. In fact, her recollection is that they did clear the experiment with him beforehand and that he was pleased with the story. "Typically we did not tell the principal what we were going to do. I just thought we did with this one because of using the students and the police, but maybe we didn't," Fitts said. She is not surprised by the confrontation, though. She remembers Hovious as a decent administrator, but one with a short temper much like Dickens. The article was otherwise well-received, and Fitts believes it ended up winning several 'Best News Story' awards at MSPA and beyond. A few weeks after the story was printed, she got a note from the police department requesting 20 copies of that month's

edition. She contacted Tom Thornton at the police department and asked if they were in any trouble. It turned out to be just the opposite:

He said, 'Oh no, no. We have been telling the people in Jackson at police headquarters for years that we have a problem here, and they will not give us the extra people to work these nights at these bars. So we want to send them the article so they will understand that what we've been saying is true.

Such was the calibre of journalism the *Charger* was producing regularly in this era. The staff worked hard, and demanded long hours of themselves. Every page was meticulously planned, debated, and retooled across multiple iterations. After completing their initial story budget, editors would mock up layouts on the computer and paste them on the wall to critique as a group, all before they ever started writing. Whittington thinks the OHS administration's commitment to instructional time, allowing the staff to meet for a 50-minute period or two every single day, was instrumental.

That allowed our staff to do a hell of a lot more work than any other high school staff in the state or even maybe in the country at that time. I remember very clearly, you know, you had students — sophomores, juniors, seniors, even freshman — writers, who would come into the classroom at 7 a.m. School didn't start until 8 a.m. They'd come in at 7 a.m. and they would do work, or they would talk, because we developed a lot of great friendships then, and that's where relationships were built. They'd also come in on their lunch break to do any work on the computers, and then after school up until 5 p.m., that room was full. So there was a work ethic there, that I think was instilled by Mrs. Fitts, that said from the time that you stepped foot in that classroom, like, hey, you've got to

make a decision. Are you going to go all-in on this? Because you can't just use it as a class. It's all-in or nothing.

The climate created by Fitts and the rest of the school had so motivated the students that they were stealing minutes from any source they could find. “We used every moment we could find to get back in that room. It was that important to us,” Whittington remembers. Those moments paid off. After the *Charger* won its first Pacemaker in 2002, they won another in 2003 under editor Ryan Yates, and another in 2005 under Whittington. Whittington went on to study journalism at the University of Mississippi, but focused more on broadcast and design than print news. After graduating, he did a brief stint at Georgia Southern University working in their sports marketing department and taking graduate courses, but ultimately returned home to Oxford and finished his master’s degree in journalism back at Ole Miss. Whittington now directs the marketing and brand strategy divisions of the university’s communication/public relations department, and he credits his experience with the *Charger* as being one of the most formative experiences of his life:

All the blood sweat and tears that I put into that program, yeah, I still use to this day. It's lessons learned from how to how to talk to people in a way that's respectful, but managerial, to how to own up to your failures, how to write, how to put together a picture, how to design a layout, what makes a good layout, how to speak to elders and talk to people who are above you in every rank and file. I mean, every little thing that I didn't know I was learning at the *Charger* has helped me in my current capacity. And it, it put me on a path to get to where I am. If not for Beth Fitts’s Intro to Journalism class, I wouldn't be in this position. I think I'd probably still be trying to figure out how to formulate some sentences.

Fitts retired in 2006. In her 22 years advising the *Charger*, she thinks she had approximately 60 students graduate and eventually work in journalism or some type of communication-related field:

To me, what that says is, it opened the door into something they never would have seen before. You don't have to be a doctor. You don't have to be a lawyer. You don't have to be whatever. You could be a journalist. They all went into different areas, but see, teaching journalism is not just about creating a newspaper. It's about creating a talent in a kid they never knew they had, and then being able to foster that talent.

Those were not her only successful students, though. She taught future doctors and lawyers and untold numbers of students who went on to be successful in other professions. Steven Griffin is now a lawyer in Jackson. Ryan Yates is a doctor in Oxford specializing in cancer and rare blood diseases. Whittington's classmate Jake McGraw coordinates policy and civic engagement issues for a racial reconciliation nonprofit group. Will McKenzie, the senior sports editor who took sophomore Whittington under his wing in 2003, joined the Army and served overseas. He graduated from West Point and now teaches there. He currently holds the rank of major. While he was in school at West Point, he wrote Fitts a letter thanking her for all she taught him. He said all his Advanced Placement classes didn't help him a bit, but high school journalism was the only reason he wasn't drowning like the rest of his peers at the elite military academy. Fitts has a strong Christian faith and believes God throwing her into advising the newspaper in 1984 was nothing short of divine intervention:

I believe that God backed me into journalism because I would never have started another career with two young kids at home. I would probably have been in English to this day. But it was the love of my life, and I loved every minute of it. It was fun, and it meant



something. I mean, I know English is necessary. And I know literature helps us, but journalism — if teachers can only get it. You don't just read a textbook and give assignments. You gotta put life into it. You gotta get down on the floor and have them draw ads as a team. You gotta get them on the computers and let them be creative. And you feel like... I mean, every teacher impacts somebody. One of my sports editors, Will MacKenzie, said, 'Every year a student gets closer to graduation is one less year a teacher has to change the world.' But in journalism, I think you can quadruple that. Because you're not only changing the world in a student's life, but you're also changing the world with what they print.

After Fitts's retirement, Cynthia Ferguson took over as adviser for the 2006-2007 school year. Ferguson's maiden name was Waller, the same Cynthia Waller who spent her free time selling and designing ads for the *Charger Gazette* or hanging out at Tim Phillips's house in 1978-79. After graduating from OHS, she went on to study audiology at Ole Miss, but left the university one Spanish credit shy of her degree to take a job doing graphic design and advertising for Tim's father at the *Oxford Eagle*. She worked there for 15 years, then returned to Ole Miss and ultimately finished with a degree in education. She started off teaching special education at OHS, but maintained a love for newspapers, especially the *Charger*. When Fitts retired, she campaigned for the job, even going so far as to take and pass an additional PRAXIS test to earn certification in secondary English. Hovious was impressed with her passion, and she got the job, becoming the first *Charger* staff member to return to the school and serve as its adviser. Now a mother in her mid-40s, she remembers finding a few old copies of the *Charger Gazette* buried in the newsroom, and from time to time she would go through them with a few students and point out, "I drew that ad!"

Ferguson's new role would also include advising the *Flashback* yearbook, something Fitts had never done. That part of her job would be a contentious transition. Hovious had had a number of problems with the previous *Flashback* adviser and staff, so much so that when he decided he wanted Ferguson for the job instead, he not only removed the adviser (who stayed on at the school as an English teacher) he removed *the entire existing staff of students* and told Ferguson she needed to start the whole thing over from scratch:

And the adviser at that time, she was very upset. And rightfully so. I didn't know what I was walking into. I just thought I was doing the yearbook. She had been asked to go away from the yearbook, but still teach there, and the staff then said, 'Well, I quit if she's not doing it.' So there was loyalty, and I understood that. So I had to start with this brand spanking new staff. I'd never done yearbook in my life. Well, I did it in high school. So it was a tough little road for a while. [The adviser] was not very happy. She didn't help. She didn't like me. She held that against me for a long time. And finally one day, I went and I said, 'Look, I didn't come in trying to take your job, I promise.' And I said, 'I did not know that when I started,' and I said, 'We've got to be able to get along.' And it took a while, but she quit butting heads with me. And we're friends. It was just, it was hard for her. And it would have been hard for me. And so I have never even to this day understood what went on there, where that had to happen.

Ferguson recruited a new staff and stressed to them the importance of a fresh start. She says she would not allow any negative talk about the previous adviser or staff, and she tried to bring a new journalistic slant to the publication. Within a couple of years the school was producing some of the most informative, visually-engaging yearbooks of its more than 50-year history and even placed in MSPA's Best Yearbook category in 2008 for the first time.

In stark contrast to the transition situation in yearbook, Ferguson's new role with the award-winning *Charger* could not have gone more smoothly. She and Fitts had known each other for a long time and even attended church together, and she knew Fitts had a wealth of knowledge and expertise:

And Beth was so wonderful to just to pass that knowledge down, you know. She helped me, I could call her... But then at the same time she stepped away from it enough that, and let me do it by myself. Very wise, very wise. And I credit her with a lot of that. She told her students, the staff, 'You do what she says.' She said, 'Now, there will be times when she's gonna do something different from me,' The kids told me this later. 'There will be times when she's gonna do something different from how I do it... It doesn't matter. You do as she says. She's gonna be your adviser and you need to help her.' You know, and that was amazing. It was such a difference from the yearbook... It was challenging. But you know, it was one of those things too, where I said, 'I can't let it go backwards.' So I worked my fanny off, literally, to learn as much as I could. From her, from going to school, going to these conferences and sitting in on the adviser sessions, researching and looking... I mean, I probably did enough to do a dissertation just getting, you know, in the door and getting my feet wet with all of that.

Her staff was usually 20-22 students, and though they still practiced the bulk of the Maestro Approach, everyone got a chance to write and design and everyone was responsible for selling ads. At Ferguson's first MSPA convention, the *Charger* won top honors in Online Excellence, Layout & Design, News Writing, and School Service, but finished second to George County High School's *Student Press* for Best Newspaper. The next year in 2008, however, the *Charger* was back on top at MSPA and finished as a national finalist for another Pacemaker award.

Entering the *Charger* and the students' individual works in all those contests each year was a slog for Ferguson, but like Fitts before her, she understood their importance not just for the students who won, but for the forward momentum of the program itself:

Those are your bragging rights when it comes back and they've won. But that kept them on their toes. It wasn't about just Oxford, Mississippi, you know? Their competition was in New York, California, Texas.

Ferguson's relationship with Hovious was strong. The two shared a mutual respect for each other, and Ferguson remembers him being extremely supportive of her and the staff:

I remember [him] coming in, every year he'd want to come in and talk to the staff at the beginning of the year. And he'd tell them, 'Now if I mess up, I want to see my name on that front page.' He said, 'That's your job. Your job is to get out there and get it right, you guys. But if you come in and don't get both sides of the story, I'll have your tails.' You know? And it was like, he would tell them, you know, 'I expect you to do the right thing.' And if they didn't, if they didn't get both sides of something he'd come in and tell them that, too. 'You didn't get it all, you need to go back and fix that right now. But, you know, he was, he was funny. Sometimes you didn't know what he was going to say. But he did support the journalism program. And he told them, you know, you need to get both sides of the story, you need to do it right, you need to be fair. And he said, 'And it's not about what I think, It's about what's going on. That's a newspaper's job.' And there were a couple of times where [he] would come to us and say, 'Okay, you're fixing to hear some stuff. And I'm going to come to you first.' And I can't remember exactly what it was. He goes, 'But you're gonna get the scoop on this and here it is.' There was a pride factor there, too. They were proud. For the most part, they're very proud of it. They knew it

could make them look good. But they also knew, you know, if I mess up, it's going to be there too.

Ferguson would occasionally let Hovious or another administrator see a transcription of their own comments, or maybe a reporter's notes from their interview just to check for accuracy. Sometimes when she would do this, administrators would then ask to see the article before it was published. But she would always politely decline to go that far. "I just stuck to my guns. But you had to stick to your guns. I mean, that would have set a precedent for prior review," she said. She remembers a particularly sensitive series of stories Cathy Chen did on abortion. She went to Hovious to let him know they were coming out, "'and you might get some pushback from some people because they're really digging into it.' Ferguson thinks that type of freedom and autonomy was critical to the publication's success not only in terms of contests, but in terms of the quality of the learning environment it created:

We taught them from square one, in Intro to Journalism, that the newspaper was the watchdog for the society. Okay, so for that to happen, you can't have somebody telling you what you had to print or what you couldn't print. And I think that the school looked forward to it coming out because they never knew, you know? The other students, they'd love to see what they were working on. They would have some inklings because they knew who people were interviewing in different areas, but if there was controversy, I don't remember any specific ones, but they would wait for it to come out. You know, if there was even, like, graffiti or a broken window or something, you know, they were looking for that. And then when we got to doing online more, we could do that update every day. It was where [kids] would go look for that kind of stuff. They would love to read it, and then we would distribute to the community also, and the other schools. So

people look forward to that, because they could see what was going on. Not just the sports, but just what's going on in the schools and in the community, because they reported on a lot of community things too. So, you know, had they not been able to do that? It would have been old news. I think it kept it alive. And it wasn't just, it didn't get stale. And it kept them interested, probably. I'm trying to think about how they would have felt if they knew they were going to be, if it was going to be read before it went out in print. They would not have been as likely to, to go out and dig for all the interviews they had to have or for all the stories they had to have. We were competing with the *Oxford Eagle*, and, you know, they'd want to scoop them sometimes.

At one point Ferguson had problems with the literary magazine staff, which she also advised. The staff was supposed to be collecting a certain number of literary pieces from the student body, but were instead just including more of their own works written anonymously. Ferguson shut the publication down for a while. With the *Charger*, such adviser-staff conflicts were rare. She recalls only one instance of a student making up quotes for a story, and she recalls only one instance of a senior trying to slip a prank into the paper after all the pages had been finalized and ready to go to the printer:

The newspaper called and said, 'Did you know that this was in there?' It was just something about the Class-of-Whatever, you know... 'Gotcha!' or something. And I said, 'Oh. My. Word.' And I remember running down to that newspaper office and looking at that, and I said I know exactly who did it. I know exactly when she swapped it. She had swapped the file. So I made her, No.1, pay for printing the paper again, it was like \$500, and No. 2, apologize to the staff and the principals. She came to me later and said, 'I understand now. I didn't understand then, I thought it was just a silly prank.' The irony

was, she had just won a \$500 scholarship or scholarship, I think it was just a \$500 award for newspaper or something from the Oxford Eagle. And so her momma made her pay for it with that. Every now and then they'd try to get something over on me and try to get something in there that might be a little off-color or something. But they didn't do it very often. And they're just smart kids. They would, that was something they would try to do. And that's when you have to go back and say, 'No, you've got a responsibility. That's not where you do that.'

By the end of the decade, Ferguson had established herself as a premier journalism adviser in her own right. MSPA named her Newspaper Adviser of the Year in 2008. She knew how to manage the program, and she recruited a staff of students who had their own drive and vision for what the *Charger* could be. She brought a different style and demeanor to the role than Fitts, but she was every bit as committed to pushing her students to realize their own potential.

Webb retired as superintendent midway through the 2008-2009 school year. He was replaced the next summer by the district's first female superintendent, Kim Stasny. Stasny had spent 19 years as an administrator in the Bay St. Louis-Waveland School District on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the last decade of that stint as superintendent. She guided the district through the devastating aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and was praised by then-Governor Haley Barbour for her efforts. She was named Mississippi Superintendent of the Year in 2007. At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, Bill Hovious retired. Ferguson says there were some conflicts between him and the school board at the time, and he was not a universally adored figure when he stepped down. As far as his dealings with her and the *Charger*, though: "He definitely believed in high school journalism," she says. "And he believed in the correctness of it."

**2010s.** The 2010s would ultimately turn out to be the most tumultuous decade in the publication's history, but the *Charger* began the first full school year of the period with another national finalist finish in the NSPA Pacemaker contest, its second under Ferguson. It also won its fourth CSPA Silver Crown award for publication excellence, its first under Ferguson, and editor-in-chief Cathy Chen was named MSPA's Newspaper Editor of the Year the prior spring. Administratively, the district hired Mike Martin to replace Bill Hovious, and Martin's initial impressions of the *Charger* and their work was positive:

I had been at the high school in 2009. I spent a year as an assistant principal, and I got to see how the newspaper works and who the people were and the students that went into the journalism class. But there was great leadership in the journalism class, and I'll be perfectly honest with you, it was already rolling, like you said, since the 1970s. We had a great journalism department and student newspaper. And so to be honest with you, I just approached it like, if it's not broke, we'll just roll right on through with it.

Martin was originally from the small town of Tchula, deep in the Mississippi Delta. His undergraduate degree from the University of Mississippi is in history, and he stuck around Oxford long enough to complete one year of law school and work a brief stint with the state's welfare department while his wife finished pharmacy school. The pair moved to Greenwood for her first job, and Martin earned his teaching credentials, then two master's degrees in social studies and school administration, from Delta State University. After six years in Greenwood, they moved to Jackson, Tennessee, where Martin taught, and ultimately became principal, at North Side High School. In 2007, with their kids now grown, the Martins moved back to Oxford. His wife got a job working with a local drug sales company, and he was able to get on with the school district, first at the middle school and then at OHS.



Martin had a deep love for newspapers. As a boy, his family couldn't always afford a home subscription, so he struck a deal with his cousin, a delivery carrier, where if Martin would deliver copies of the *Jackson Daily News* to the 14 other subscribers around his block each evening, his cousin would give him a free copy. He did this for three years. He loved that the paper carried the late sports scores from the night before. He loved working the word jumble, and still does. "I just wish that you could earn some money at jumble words," he says. "I was really good at it." Martin went to high school at Cruger-Tchula Academy, and wrote for the school paper, the *Colonel*. It was a single sheet of printed paper, he says, with articles on the front and back. He recalls:

It was not real good quality. It was not, I know. I wrote on it for two years, and looking back at some of the things that I did, it was just... I either didn't have it in me yet or didn't take the time. Leadership certainly had something to do with that. And as a result, my high school was not nearly as enhanced as it would have been if it had a good quality newspaper.

Martin covered sports for the *Colonel*, which was hard because he played most of them too. "Sometimes I can remember feeling a little apprehension about writing about myself," he said. "You know, scoring a touchdown and putting your name in print and such as that, but I enjoyed it." Martin worked behind the scenes as stage manager on several of the school's drama productions and sometimes wrote about those too, but he remembers: "I just did not do quality work. I can remember writing those sometimes the day before they were due. And I shouldn't have. That's like studying for a test the night before." Martin graduated in 1974. The school closed in 2001. "So I've loved the newspaper forever," he said. "It's an invaluable source for learning how to read the news, to learning how to read the sports or the leisure section or

whatever, when you practice reading it.” As a social studies teacher teaching U.S. History, government, and economics, Martin used the newspaper as a regular teaching tool in his classes. He purchased classroom sets of the *Jackson Sun* and would have students do scavenger hunts to find certain facts within each edition. “If you know the newspaper inside and out, there's millions of facts of data that you can use at your benefit to reinforce historical things and governmental things and economics.” He learned to use the newspaper as an instructional tool in one of his graduate education classes at Delta State.

It was a methods class, and then part of the methods was [using the newspaper.] And this teacher was renowned for that in the education department. During her methods class, she had a six-week part of her 18 weeks of the semester on teaching newspaper in the classroom. And as I said, I loved it. I loved newspapers, period, and then I got into that and it was just like a textbook. A whole world.

Martin thought the journalism department at his previous school was good, but he had never encountered anything at the high school level on par with the work the *Charger* was producing:

We just didn't have the caliber. I'm just telling you, the caliber of kids [at Oxford]... there's a reason Alabama wins football games on Saturday. They've got really good football players. They've got great leadership. And they have great, you know, recruiting. They have really great football players. And we have really great kids here. So it's not that we didn't have a good journalism department at Northside. It just was not the level of writers and people that just got it. I mean, our math scores are through the roof still in this district. And we've got great math teachers, but you've got great math students that come through. So I liken it again to having the quality of people that continue to feed into the

program, get trained by the expertise that is there, and not only teaching, but also the students.

The school itself was not performing at such a high calibre, though, and as an assistant principal at OHS the year before Martin had not liked what he saw. The school was badly overcrowded. Oxford's population had more than tripled in the 47 years since the school was built. A new high school was in the planning stages but still a few years away. The tight confines of the campus made it easier for tempers to flare, and he says there had been 47 fights under Hovious the year before. Martin valued order and structure, and he instituted a more authoritarian leadership style:

You just have to know how crowded we were. We had, when bells would ring, we had to have, in my estimation, one-way halls. The cafeterias were so crowded, they only held 300 people, and we had more than 300 that needed to eat in all three lunch periods. You do the math on that. Some of the worst times that they had the year before were in the cafeteria because somebody got somebody's seat. So what I did is, I gave them a week to find the seat that they wanted. We got extra chairs in of course, obviously, and after a week, that's your chair. Every day you come in, that's your chair. And if you ever want to move, you can, but you have to tell me where you're moving to make sure you're not sitting in somebody else's chair. I didn't call it assigned seating. I called it reserved seating, much like when you go to a restaurant. Well, I guess it's a play on words but I was really trying to sell them on it, because we were going to have to do it. Because we weren't going to have fights in the cafeteria because Billy sat in John's chair, and they're both football players or high-strung or whatever, and instead of giving the chair up, they, you know, one pulls it out from under him. I mean, little things that we did. We had a lot

of people that we're not, we're not able to be served, because we had to feed 325 per lunch. Now I'm not running the school district down, it was just, Oxford was growing. It was a massive time and that's why we built the building that we built. So little things like: when you went to get your tray, if you got your tray and then gave it to the lady, and then she filled it up and gave it back to you, you lost about three seconds of the lady grabbing the tray. Well everybody was going to get a tray, so [we changed it to where] the lady just grabs the tray. Well, three seconds times 325, you do the math. You gained about almost 10 minutes during lunchtime just based on how the trays were done.

This is how Martin approached almost every problem. He assessed what was not working, dug as deep as possible into related details and data to determine what underlying factors might be at play, then issued rigid edicts that removed as many opportunities as possible for undesirable outcomes to occur. Brian Harvey, then an assistant superintendent for OSD, recalls Martin's management of the school at that time:

Mike is very much an order/structure leader, which is great. I've learned a lot as an administrator from Mike, just from the standpoint of his thought process: If we want kids to be in school, if it's important for them to be here — they can't learn if they're not here, and it's important for them to be here — then we can't give them the opportunity to mess up, which would then put them out of school. And that's his right as an administrator. He came from a situation [in Jackson, Tenn.] where there were rival gangs [in the school], and, you know, it was one of those things. And at that time, there were conversations, things being said at the board level about there being bullying going on at the school and kids not feeling safe, etc.

In the cafeteria, Martin had read enough of the verbiage on last year's fighting incident reports to know that one of the main sources of disagreements were between aggressive kids who were breaking in line to eat. This also caused non-aggressive kids to hang back or not eat at all in order to avoid confrontation. So he assigned each of the five tables — where students already had reserved seats — a day of the week to eat first, and by the end of the week, each table had cycled through all five positions. Administrators monitored the cafeteria, as well as all before and after school spaces, so teachers had zero duty assignments, other than to enforce the rules (one-way halls, etc.) during the school day. The gym in the mornings before school was another source of fights, so Martin divided the gym into male and female sections, ninth grade on one side, tenth grade on the other, and created a steady rotation schedule of coaches to monitor the crowds. Juniors were allowed to congregate in the cafeteria, and seniors got the commons area. The kids called it “segregation,” but Martin called it successful, and said they finished the year with only three fights:

Our scores went through the roof. Kids felt more comfortable. I'm not saying that's the reason why, but we were written up in The Washington Post as a top school from there. In other words, I think it allowed... if kids are not, if kids don't feel safe at school, for whatever reason, the learning is disrupted like you wouldn't believe. If you're not safe, everything else is just a mess. You can have a great teaching staff, but if kids are walking around in overcrowded halls, and they're fearful of a fight or something going sideways, the learning environment is just destroyed. And as a result, I might have been overboard on some of them, looking back. I would like to think that I could have done a lot less and gotten it done. But like I said, with the situation I inherited — and it was not a bad

school. It was not a bad school. It was just an overcrowded place that needed monitoring with rules and regulations. And that's what we did.

As such radical changes were enacted across the school's cultural landscape, though, the *Charger* staff used its publication to echo student concerns and voice their own criticisms of Martin's leadership decisions. Martin recalls their coverage as being unfair:

You would think young people would automatically embrace change. But with this, that was not the case. Nobody wants their cheese moved, and I get that. But anyway, we had a lot of changes that came through, and they printed them. But there were even some, some comments that were strong like, you know, 'treating us like children' and such, and without investigating and finding out the why. Even if you heard the why and you didn't like it, fine, but they didn't investigate all the whys.

Martin says he asked Ferguson whether he could address the class with his concerns, and she agreed. He remembers:

They were totally opposed, as a general class of 25 leading journalism students, to what was happening, the rule change that was happening. And that's okay that you're opposed to it, but when you, when you jot that info down on that newspaper, we don't care what your opinion is, and that I tried to relate to them. And they got it. When I say they got it, once again, they wanted to argue with me about the justification of what was wrong, and I said, 'I'm here as the principal. And you might not agree with what I'm doing, the one-way halls, the reserved seating in the cafeteria. We had a lot of things that we *had* to do those two years of overcrowding before we moved into [the new building]. And we did it because it was helpful in the movement of students. And I'm not caring whether I'm trying to explain myself for you to agree with it or not, but those kids did not like it. And

as a result of that, the articles — they were not [supposed to be] commentary, they did not have their picture there. They were supposed to be news, and that was one of those few times where I went to them and just, I didn't chide them, I just said, 'All of you that are supposed to write news columns: report the news.' I said, 'For instance, no one interviewed me.' And they said, 'Well we've interviewed you in the past, Mr. Martin, and you've just given us a party line.' And I said, 'So you just you're never going to interview me again? Well, no. That would have been an ideal time. I could have told you why we had one-way [halls]. Also, I could have told you why we have reserved seating. I could have explained it to you. You didn't have to agree, and you could have come back in a commentary part and just said there's a lot better way of doing this, we don't like it. But when you report, you have to report my quotes and what I said. And if you find teachers or anybody that doesn't like it, you can put that in there as well... When it's a news story, it needs to be news. It doesn't need to be biased just because you don't like it and you're all students and you don't like that [change]. You can't report it like that. Now there were some scathing commentaries! Where they put the picture and it's an editorial opinion. And I get that. That's, that's what they're there for, and they were well done, too. They were well written. But that's okay. That's, that's perfectly fine. That's what it's supposed to be. It's a student driven newspaper, and it's for students and that's, that's what it should be... So that was the strongest administrative oversight that I ever had. And that was, there was never a threat of before you publish. Because they have a teacher in that classroom. And of course, she was listening to the exchange between the students and I, and I said, 'That is your teacher's job to teach you this. Not to tell you what to write, but to give you direction between the news and an editorial.' And I said, 'Though it was well-

put and all your fellow students loved it, what you did is you presented a news article that was inaccurate. You did not... you didn't do what you were really supposed to do here.' Now there was no retraction, there was no anything like that, but that was as close as I ever came to [interfering].”

Given the freedom and openness Ferguson and the staff had enjoyed under Hovious, Martin’s challenging of the *Charger*’s journalistic integrity — and more poignantly, Ferguson’s teaching — did not sit well. Instead of clearing the air, the classroom confrontation only deepened the divide and further stifled open communication between him, the staff, and the adviser. Martin could not understand this. In his mind, he had actually loosened restrictions on the staff as compared to Hovious, especially regarding classroom attendance. He viewed students leaving campus or moving around the campus independently of other students as a type of academic field trip, not subject to the school’s normal rules and policies:

My predecessor had had a little bit different thoughts on, you know, kids don't need to get out of class during third period to go cover the gas leak or the fire or whatever. I do not. I do not feel like that. You can't cover it if you're not there. It's all hearsay then. So there was a lot of loosening of the controls, you might say, when I was there with regard to the comings and goings of students. Instead of leaving for the fire drill and going with their third period class, if they needed to cover the fire drill to see what shortcomings were going on, or what strengths were going on, they've got to leave that class and go all around to take pictures, etc. But you have to teach them that. You're in a position where one day, if you're writing for the *Commercial Appeal* covering a football game on the sidelines, there's a decorum. There's a way that you handle yourself. So I loosened a lot of that from what they had been in the past.



All Martin asked of Ferguson in exchange was that anytime things needed to be covered, she should send him a list of kids ahead of time. This was an extra step for her, but in the black-and-white world of Mike Martin, the list helped maintain quality control and kept students from having to leave the room one-by-one using the standard school hall pass, which at the time was a giant piece of color-coded wood.

At the district level, tragedy had thrust Harvey into the superintendent's chair. Only two years into her tenure in Oxford, Stasny developed a brain tumor and died from complications. She was 55 years old. Harvey took over leadership duties on an interim basis in 2011, then officially filled the role a year later. Harvey was a graduate of Oxford High School, and he had worked his entire educational career in the district. He began teaching at Oxford Middle School in 1995, then quickly moved up to the high school, where he spent seven years as a history teacher and head baseball coach. In 2005, he moved into administration. He spent one year as an assistant principal at OHS, then one year as head principal at one of OSD's elementary schools, then one year as head principal at Oxford Middle School before moving into the assistant superintendent's role in 2008, Webb's final year leading the district. Harvey is a towering, affable man who seems more comfortable with managing the differing opinions of his constituents and subordinates than Martin. Nevertheless, the overcrowding and safety issues at the high school had to weigh heavy on the mind of a 40 year-old first time superintendent, and Martin remembers Harvey having some questions about the *Charger's* coverage of Martin's policies:

I'm not saying he was unhappy with what transpired, but he had some questions about it. Because it wasn't news. I mean, it was opinion. And I had conversations with my newspaper adviser, and I just said, 'Oversight. You have to express oversight on this.' I

said the last thing in the world ever want to do is pick up your paper two days before it goes to press and say, 'This article and this article [can't run].' I said, you know, basically, do your job. Just like I would have an English teacher that needs to, you know, needs a little talking to or whatever you want to call it. But there was nobody put on a performance plan, no threat of anything other than: do what you're supposed to do.

Though he was technically speaking in hypothetical terms, it would be reasonable to call Martin's words here a threat to censor. In February 2012, the staff ran a scathing editorial in the opinion section criticizing what it called "misinformation" and "closed-door policies [that] borderline on a desire to keep the [tax] money rolling in and the students beside the point":

Questions are deflected at every turn, even in student assemblies regarding graduation and the senior awards program. This lack of transparency is doubly dangerous. At first glance, many teachers and school employees are simply too scared to give any information because they fear administrative backlash. Frankly, tentativeness like this poses a direct threat to the health of the educational environment Oxford works so hard to create... The resulting atmosphere of distrust promotes educational funk and defeatist thinking. (2012, p. 7)

The editorial went on to thank two administrators by name for their openness and honesty in dealing with the newspaper staff, neither of whom were Martin. Ferguson remembers Martin being especially angry about the story and doubling-down on his tacit threats of censorship:

And I remember that day he came up to me and was just in my face yelling at me, yelling at me about it. And that was kind of it. From that point on was when he started wanting to read everything before it ran.

The situation had devolved into an almost ideological battle of wills between Ferguson and Martin, with the *Charger* simply serving as the battleground upon which they were waging war. Ferguson felt like she was defending her students and their right to a free press against a tyrannical administrator bent on silencing their voices. Martin felt like one of his employees was fomenting insurrection while he was just trying to guide the school through an especially tense period. Since the newspaper's coverage appeared to him to be overwhelmingly anti-Mike Martin, he felt the publication's adviser must be subversive at best and openly defiant at worst. Harvey was aware of the rift and was hearing from constituents on both sides. However, he felt he had to back his administrator:

One or both of them may say it was the other. And I think that's fair. When you're in the middle of the storm, that's probably how you see it. But being outside of it, there were other things at play, and there were other pressures. When the board is saying, 'What are we gonna do about this?' and then I look to the principal, well he's got to do what he thinks is right. I'm not over there running the school. No matter how I would have done Cynthia, I'm not the one doing that. You know, he is.

The *Charger* was not an exclusively needling outlet during this period. It covered positive school items with regularity. It covered restaurant openings and closings around town. It also published deeper educational pieces like news of the state's new texting-while-driving law, a 50-year retrospective on the James Meredith riots at Ole Miss, and what new developments were being approved through the city's planning department.

The relationship between Ferguson and Martin deteriorated further once OHS moved into its new building in the middle of the 2013-14 school year. Dating all the way back to the Fitts Era, the *Charger* newspaper class had been scheduled during the block of the day that also

included the 20-30 minutes of the day earmarked as lunchtime. The longer block gave journalism students the option to work through lunch if they wanted to continue writing stories or moving around the building searching for interviews. It helped maximize the staff's class time and minimize their disruption of other classes. Both Fitts and Whittington spoke of this scheduling tactic as being a huge advantage in terms of the volume and quality of the work they were able to churn out. So when Martin announced that all food was banned in classrooms across campus, Ferguson saw the move as a direct threat to the *Charger's* success:

That was the way [Fitts] had set it up, so they could work, they could talk, and, you know, make things happen during lunch. So about that time is when he kept saying we couldn't eat in the room, and then when we moved to the new building we for sure couldn't eat in the room. Now the building was built with a place for, you know, eating and a refrigerator [in the journalism room]. We never got that refrigerator. It was just a big blank spot in the wall where the refrigerator was supposed to go... He started cutting times down. Effectively, they wouldn't let us work [through] lunches anymore, and that just took all of the time element out of it. I've got some stuff at home where I'd written like, 'We've got to have the time to do this.' I kept saying, 'You're basically taking a third of our staff time away, and expecting us to continue doing the same job.'

Martin recalls his reasoning for the new food rules as being about preserving the sanitary conditions of the new school:

When we moved to the high school, and this was a brand new high school, little did she know that there was more than just me behind this decision. We did not allow students to bring food from the cafeteria to the journalism room upstairs. And for years in the old building they had been allowed to do that, having working lunches... I told her, I said,

‘That food is going to get spilled and there's going to be roaches.’ And the roaches we had had at the old Oxford High School, this is terrible talk about, but some of them, we called them cell phones. The big cell phones? You know, the ones when they first came out? They were not small, they were bricks. And [the roaches] were, they had been there for eons. They’d been there a lot longer than any other human had been there, put it that way. And I did not want that to start here, nor did the leadership necessarily want it to start either. So I compromised. And I said, ‘We've got this great area right here, the commons area here with the high stools and stuff like that.’ Everybody had laptops. I said, ‘Bring your laptops here.’ It's a different place that they can go, they can eat there, and nobody else can but journalism students. But that was a source of conflict. And students were not allowed to. Because she felt like one of the things that people liked about being in the journalism class was they got to leave out of the cafeteria and go eat up there. So that was a source of conflict, it truly was. And I stuck to my guns about it. She didn't like it. She didn't like it a bit, but that's where the kids got to go. And like I said, eventually, I think there were 8 or 10 kids each lunch period that would go into these little tables, tables for two or four depending on how many chairs there were, flip the laptops up, eat their hamburgers and sandwiches and interact and talk there. They could do their interviews there. Because if they had journalism fourth period, which they did at that time, it was lunch. Everybody had to go to lunch. So you could do your interviews during that time. So anyway, it was once again I'm not trying to convince you it was the right way but it was a source of conflict because the kids had always gotten to eat in the journalism room.”

Harvey understood Martin’s rationale, and even supported it:

Probably the journalism kids had had more freedom than the rest of the kids, and when Mike started clamping down on that, well, then it started changing schedules, and for good reason. I can't blame him for any of it. But it caused Cynthia to have to change the way she did some things and the way she had been operating, and change is hard for all of us. None of us choose to change, you know? We'd much rather just kind of move on... But I think ultimately it was that the journalism department under Beth Fitts, with Mr. Hovious, had some freedoms that they no longer had when Mike came along. Whether that's good, bad, or indifferent, times change, and there were other things that were happening... The other thing, from his standpoint, is that the other teachers go, 'Well she's getting to eat in her room, why can't I eat in my room, right? These are just the things that administrators have to think about. Then you've got the custodians, who we [at the central office] were in charge of, saying, 'I can't keep the building clean. We've got mice, we've got roaches, we've got every... I can't keep the building clean when all these garbage cans are full of food.' And then parents start calling. 'Hey, what's going on?' So it's not just about [the newspaper], you know. There's a whole bunch of things. When they moved to the high school it got reported that I did not want food in any room, and that I despised it *so much* that I was going around to check garbage cans to make sure food wasn't in garbage cans. And when I heard that I was like, 'They really don't think I have a whole lot to do.'

With her instructional minutes tightened and her staff demoralized, Ferguson felt like Martin was borderline harassing her:

Looking back on that now, I took it a lot more personally then. I can look back at it now, though, and say, 'Okay, I get it,' you know. He was unhappy with us and he was going to

do whatever he could to kind of rein us in... It was, you know, there was a constant calling into the office. The way I felt was that I had a target on my back, and he really didn't want me to continue doing it. And I knew that I could — my philosophy has always been, if you don't like who you're working for, find another job. Because you don't need to be miserable, and it was pretty miserable. I cried a lot. I would go home upset a lot. And [my fiancé] Jim [Parkin] and I were about to get married at that time, and he was kind of like, 'You can't keep doing this.' And I said, 'But I've gotta do it, I've gotta do it.' And he'd say, "Why? Why do you have to do it?" And I'd say, 'Because the kids need me.' And he'd said, 'But you're, you're unhappy, and it's going to go downhill if you continue, because he's not gonna let you do what's right.' And I, you know, and I looked at it from that point of view, and it was true.

Eventually, Ferguson says Martin designated assistant principal Duncan Gray as an intermediary, and the two mostly avoided each other. Within a few months of moving into the new school, Ferguson had had enough:

I finally decided, I just can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing it the wrong way, which was what they wanted me to do. So that's when I started to look for a job elsewhere, and I told them that. That I couldn't keep doing it that way. I said that's, that's asking me to do something that's against the way it should be done, and the way the *Charger* should be run. And I remember, you know, after I finally decided this is, I just can't do it anymore, I went home and I picked up my chicken, I had a pet chicken, and I sat on the porch swing and petted that chicken and just cried and cried. Because I was leaving something I loved.

She applied and was hired for an open position at Oxford Middle School teaching special education, her original teaching endorsement.

At one point, when I was fixing to leave, and I'd already told him I had taken the job at a different place in the district. I think he called me in and there were no chairs for me to sit in. And the assistant principals were sitting over to the side at a table, and I stood in front of him and he says, 'I just want this for the record. Are you leaving on your own free will?' And I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'I just want to make sure, for the record, are you leaving on your own free will?' And I said, 'I'm leaving because you've made my life miserable. But yes, I chose to leave.'

Fitts was still tangentially involved with the school at this time; her daughter Marni was an assistant principal working under Martin. "She liked him," Fitts says. "She liked that he always had her back." Fitts, like Harvey, could understand both sides of the conflict. "He was hired to get the school back in order again," Fitts said. "You have to walk a tightrope. You've got to try to print something that's important, that will matter, but you've got to be careful."

While Ferguson was going through the worst few years of her professional life, her students were producing some of the finest work of her tenure as adviser. The 2012-13 staff won the school's sixth and Ferguson's third CSPA Silver Crown award, and after two near misses, her last staff was finally awarded an NSPA Pacemaker in the fall of 2014, just a few months after she started her new teaching position across town. Ferguson advised the *Charger* for a total of eight years, and despite all her battles with Martin she still considers it one of the most meaningful chapters of her career and life:

Just getting to touch as many lives as you get to touch in that high school adviser field, it's amazing. You get to watch them go on to be successful. In the job I'm doing now, I don't get to see a lot of that. You get to change the way they look at life. And you know, you get them coming in a little sarcastic, a little cocky, and they have to work really hard



and then, by the end of it, they can see things with a different eye. They would start writing stories that they see one way, and then they get in touch with people and learn that's not really how it happened. So you're helping them to be able to think for themselves... I love doing the classroom teaching, but watching them on those staffs where they, they *become* that newspaper, you know, it's just different. You don't get that with any other teaching spot I don't think.

After Ferguson left, Martin hired a young adviser named John Wilbert. Wilbert was a New Hampshire-born transplant to the state, a young man still in his 20s with short dark hair and boyish features. He had taught the previous year at Winona High School in Central Mississippi, and before that had worked as a sports and general assignment reporter for the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* in Tupelo. He was not Martin's first choice, but another candidate fell through late in the interview process.

It was a drop down in the program, I'm not gonna lie to you. And I'm not trying to run the gentleman down, but he had not come from a program that had a first-rate newspaper. It's just hard finding really good journalism teachers of the ilk that Oxford turns out. It really is. I just don't think that he had come from a place that had the expectations that we have at this district. I did not make a real good hire there.

Wilbert was immediately overwhelmed with the job and all of its demands. He lacked the personality and classroom management skills needed to effectively teach and motivate his students, and he lacked the logistical experience and business acumen necessary to advise such a large and demanding operation. Wilbert's transition could accurately be described as being like a young football coach at a small school like San Diego State University being suddenly handed the head coach's position of the Green Bay Packers, along with the full complement of

expectations and pressures that come with it. Martin had multiple conversations with Wilbert during that first year, but knew almost immediately he may have made a mistake:

I tried to coach him up, for darn sure. And to his credit, he would always improve. But sooner or later, that coach at San Diego State that went to the Packers had better figure out what is going on in the NFL.

The *Charger* won MSPA's Best Newspaper contest that spring, but mostly on the strength of a staff recruited by Ferguson. Several underclassmen staff members did not sign up to return to the class next year. The program was in its worst downturn since the early 1980s before Fitts was hired. The problem would be someone else's to fix. At the end of the 2014-15 school year, Martin shifted out of his principalship and into a new role as the district's athletic director. He remains in that position today and was recently named Mississippi Athletic Director of the Year by the Mississippi Athletic Administrators Association. As far as the state of the *Charger* when he left, he says:

I regret it, you know, because of the bad hire. And sometimes you don't make as good of hires as you need to. I think he might could have grown into it, or I would not have hired him. But then again, I had to hire somebody.

Harvey had to hire someone too; he needed a high school principal. That someone turned out to be Bradley Roberson, a familiar face to both Harvey and the high school. Roberson has been in education for 20 years, 18 of which have been with the Oxford School District. He and Harvey coached together at OHS, where he was a math teacher for nine years before getting into administration. Roberson left the district in 2013 to become head principal at Senatobia High School, but returned two years later when Martin's job opened up.

Roberson is an energetic if unconventional leader. He has thin red hair and a fair complexion, but is anything but timid. His leadership style and that of Martin's could not have been more different. Martin was rigid, Roberson was flexible. Martin wanted rules, Roberson wanted freedom. Martin lived in a world of processes and details, Roberson lived in a world of relationships and big ideas:

My leadership style in and of its own is not one of compliance and conformity. You know, there are lots of things that I did as an administrator that probably — not probably, I *know* — had a lot of teachers standing on their heads. Cell phones. Why are we making such a big deal over cell phones? A child wants to walk down the hall and text somebody, big deal. They want to talk to somebody at lunch? Big deal. As long as it's not messing up instruction in the classroom, then I'm fine with it. And by the way, if a kid is texting someone during the class, then maybe you're not being real engaging as a teacher? So maybe you take a hint from that, right? Instead of always seeing it is a compliance problem and a student issue. So my whole tenure at Oxford High School was principal was to get us away from compliance and conformity and start working our way towards creating problem solvers, you know, through what we do in and outside of the classroom. Roberson recalls he had a government teacher who wanted to have class outside in lawn chairs. Roberson encouraged him to do it more often. The spacious new school building had created an environment that required less of Martin's skillset, but was ripe for Roberson's.

Roberson says he was an avid reader of the *Charger* during his teaching days. Fitts was running the program then and the two were friendly. He also felt like the laboratory environment of a journalism class was most similar to what he wanted all courses at OHS to be: challenging, fun, and student-centered:

It all starts with the teacher in the classroom. It all starts with the sponsor of the *Charger* newspaper, and what they truly bring to the table. It takes a creative individual with a creative mind that is not looking for compliance, but is looking for creativity when it comes to someone that is successful. I would think [that's true] in journalism in general, but in particular when you're trying to teach and guide young people in the capacity of having that way of thinking, as well. You know, in education, we tend to try to live in this compliance world where we put all these rules regulations around everything that we do in school. Yet we want the end product to be someone that is of a creative mind that can go out in the world and solve problems on their own. And finally, over time, I think we've come to the realization that that doesn't work. Asking for compliance for, you know, the first 19 years of someone's life, and then saying, 'Go be creative'... It's not a good recipe. Journalism education is one of the areas where I think that [Oxford's] gotten it right longer than in a lot of other areas, but you also see that in the arts. I think you see the success that we have in our theater program as very similar to our journalism program. It's when we're allowing, we're putting the people in place, as far as the educator, that is not looking for *only* compliance. Or, really, not looking *for* compliance as much as they are creativity. And it takes a special educator with a special skill set that has that ability to not only relinquish some of the compliance and conformity that regular classroom traditional teachers would demand, but also to get that out of their students.

Linda Davis had been that kind of educator. Beth Fitts had been that kind of educator, and Cynthia Ferguson had too. John Wilbert was not that kind of educator. Roberson remembers the *Charger* newsroom in 2015 as being a subpar learning environment:

The paper was struggling when I came in as principal. I think that was noted in the awards or lack of awards that it won over that time span at the beginning of my tenure. Some of that was the content, you know? We weren't pushing the creative aspect of journalism at that point. We were only working in the compliance and conformity realm. And I think some of the content lost its richness because our students weren't being creative. We had, we had moved backwards in the sense of conformity and compliance instead of working more towards the creativity side of journalism... There were concerns from students, I was having meetings with students. There were concerns from parents, I was having parent meetings as well. And a lot of those conversations were just making sure... they weren't questioning the ethical side of the program at all. It was just about the quality of the paper that was being published. Whether it was from grammatical errors or not proofing it well, or just oversight of the program in general, deadlines, things of that nature. Which again, if you don't have those — and let me go back and say that, because this is important — you have to have compliance within any organization for it to be successful. But compliance can't come at the expense of creativity. There is a blend that has to take place. There's this balancing act, this wire, that you have to work to stay on between compliance and creativity. Too much of one will kill the other. Creativity and no compliance? Well, that's great, but you just have, you just have a hot mess. Compliance and no creativity? Well, you've got marching orders, but blah. I mean, there's nothing. It's shallow.

Harvey was aware there were problems with the *Charger* as well:

Like anything else, if high quality work is not being done, we find out about it. As administrators, we find out about it. And as supervisors or human resource managers, it's

our job to help people improve, or help them be successful somewhere else. And just because they might not be a good fit here doesn't mean they won't be a good fit somewhere else. But in Oxford, the level of expectation is, is pretty high. And you know, we've got to meet that. And when people don't... you can't hide here. I don't I don't say that with arrogance, but you can't hide people. It's you can either do your job or you can't. We work with them to improve, but...

Roberson moved responsibility for the yearbook to another teacher in hope of lightening Wilbert's workload, but things still did not improve. At the end of the year, he asked Wilbert not to return. He had lasted two years.

For the 2016-2017 school year, Roberson turned his attention to Diala Chaney. Chaney was already teaching middle school English in the district and was well-liked by both her students and her colleagues. It was her experience outside the classroom, however, that made her an attractive candidate to Roberson. Chaney is an intelligent woman of color with dark hair and features. She graduated from OHS, but was never on the *Charger* staff. She does remember being a contributing writer on occasion. Her family is of Lebanese descent. Her father, Dr. Samir Husni, was the former chair of the journalism program at the University of Mississippi and remained one of the school's most popular and longest-tenured professors. He is an international expert on magazine journalism and design, and was one of Fitts's favorite and most influential professors when she was matriculating through the school. Chaney had grown up in a household that discussed the finer points of print layout and AP Style at the dinner table. She majored in journalism in college, then got her law degree and went to work as an attorney. By her mid 30s, though, she was a mother of three and looking for a more stable schedule and a better work/life balance than the law could provide, so she changed careers and became a teacher.

With Chaney, Roberson was presented with a replacement for Wilbert that excited him. Not only was she a good classroom teacher with aggressive energy and good student rapport, she had advanced knowledge of the content and a competitive desire to be the best in every task she took on. He hired her for the coming fall, and during her first year she would advise the *Charger* and teach Foundations of Journalism, while two other teachers handled the yearbook, literary magazine, and the school's broadcast news program. She inherited a staff that still retained a few senior standouts trained by Ferguson three years earlier, and she shifted the printing style from the full-sized broadsheet format Fitts had introduced to a 12-16 page tabloid design that more closely resembled a news magazine. The publication had a fresh visual identity and was back on an upward trajectory.

Leading and advising a staff of ambitious teenagers was a new adventure for Chaney, and she would not have to wait long to find out how high-profile and combustible the position had the potential to be. In her very first issue as *Charger* adviser, the staff would publish the most widely-viewed and consequential piece of journalism in the newspaper's long history. Harvey recalls the events leading up to the article:

I went to a conference and saw where this school was doing something specifically for low income African American kids in the south. And that's something that our community has never put a stake in the ground over. We talk about it, and we want to help, and we do to an extent, but we get the same results. And so this was something that I talked to the board about, this school, which was called the Achievable Dream Academy. And we had a board meeting, we invited people, we invited the newspapers in. This was in the summer, and we had made plans to go visit this school. And it was a school that targeted, you know, kids from low socioeconomic backgrounds. And they

offered more resources, they offered, you know, just a wealth of things. We had kind of drafted a plan that said we might look at basically an elementary school design. I talked with some of the African American administrators and people here, and it was, 'Hey, I want to be the principal there!' You know, really all positive. We invited some college professors who were interested in education and it was fine. There wasn't any issue. That was in June. Then I got a request for an interview. Well I granted it. And it had been two months since we'd talked about it. This was mid-August and, I mean, school was starting back, there's 100 other things going on. And I made the comment that, 'this isn't going to be separate but equal. It's really separate but more.' For those kids who need it. And that one thing... It's one of those things that nothing was inaccurately reported, but there were some things that were left out.

The author was senior Miranda Grayzel-Ward. The story she wrote for the *Charger* (2016) from Harvey's comments said, in part:

While Harvey believes that this is a viable option to reduce the achievement gap, some criticize this approach seeing it as a form of segregation. 'That is a valid concern,' Harvey said regarding these criticisms. 'It is a conversation we need to have, and I'm not scared of it. Hopefully they will see what my motivation is. I certainly don't want to go back to separate but equal. In reality though, this isn't separate but equal; it may be separate but more.' For Harvey, race is not the issue; poverty is the issue. 'There is nothing that says that you have to be black to go to this school,' Harvey said. 'This is a socioeconomic issue. We have poor white people. We have poor African Americans. It, however, is a little bit touchier in the South because of the history we have. As a



superintendent, my job is to get all the kids to learn and give them the best opportunity to succeed whether they are black, white, yellow, or red; it doesn't matter to me,' (p.1)

Harvey did not think much more about the interview afterwards. Such interviews with *Charger* reporters were commonplace, and the possibility of a separate school had already been well-received by several critical constituency groups. Grayzel-Ward wrote up the story, and the students published it at the end of September. The story was published online under the headline, "District considers opt-in school for low income students" and on the front page of the print edition simply as, "DRASTIC CHANGES" (Grayzel-Ward, 2016). Chaney recalls:

The day before it went to press, I was telling Bradley Roberson and [Fitts's daughter] Marni Harrington, who was an assistant principal at the time, 'I don't know if anyone's gonna read the paper.' And then by lunchtime, we'd only ordered 1000 copies of it, and they were gone. The reason they hired me was they said, 'We're tired of finding papers littered around the school. No one's reading the paper. It's just, it's just litter.' Well that day at lunch when you walked in the cafeteria, you saw every person holding open the newspaper, reading the article to figure out what the heck was going on.

Since the *Charger* has never been prior-reviewed, Roberson had not read the article before it started generating so much attention around the school:

No, I wasn't aware when it was published, and quite honestly, when I read the article, I was like, 'This is a great article.' But I probably had some unintended bias, because I knew more about the big picture of what Mr. Harvey was talking about. Whereas maybe there were lots of details within that frame, maybe the big picture was what was missing from those articles. I really think, you know, that's kind of where it landed. Because,

again, when I first read it I thought, ‘This a great article.’ And as a matter of fact, you know, I think if you ask Brian that same question, he’d say [the same thing].

Harvey concurs. He read the article and was unfazed by it, “because really, the story was out there. But then when social media got it, that’s when it morphed and changed.” After they ran out of print copies, the only thing Chaney and the staff could do was try to track the story’s popularity on their website and social media accounts. *The Oxford Eagle* picked up the story, then the Associated Press. Eventually other statewide and national media outlets picked it up, almost all of them including some version of “according to a story in the *Charger* student newspaper...” Chaney remembers watching the story grow:

When it started getting retweeted and getting bigger and bigger, and the website had, you know, 90,000 views, and [Black Lives Matter activist] Shaun King retweeted the story about it, and the *Oxford Eagle* picked it up and redid the story, and... that’s when I started to wonder if I needed to call the Student Press Law Center.

By midafternoon, the story had gone viral and Harvey was being portrayed as trying to bring back segregated education in the heart of the Deep South. He recalls how the events spiraled from his vantagepoint:

I remember I was burning the candle at both ends, just for other reasons, and I want to say was one of the legislators called me at the time and said, ‘Hey, you better...’ So anyway, it blew up. And it was like throwing gasoline on the fire. It just caught... And before, you know, before anything could be done, we were going back to, you know, separating kids by race. And that was never — I mean, it was an opt-in [school] and by the fourth grade, you’re going to go back to the regular school. My own kids were saying, ‘Dad, are we going to have two high schools?’ And I’m like, ‘What are you talking

about?” And that wasn't printed in the article, but the word of mouth and social media, it grew into something that was never talked about, never discussed, never.

The timing of the article and Harvey's comments are worth noting for context. This was late September 2016, and the attentions of the American public were consumed almost entirely with a particularly vitriolic presidential campaign between Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump. Racial tensions had played a major role in the campaign, and Harvey's comments made for easy fodder in that ongoing war. Roberson feels like this zeitgeist played a role in the swift and overwhelming negative reaction:

Quite honestly, I don't think that was a journalism flaw in itself. I just think that there wasn't totality to the picture of Mr. Harvey's understanding, but it wasn't an issue with what was reported... I think a lot of it was the sensitivity of some of the things that were going on in society at the time, that are still going on now, that were just misinterpreted and taken to a different level. Which was never the intention of Mr. Harvey, nor was it the intention of the article... But as the administrator, you know, when I saw that I thought, 'Man, okay, this is getting a little crazy, you know?'

One of Harvey's other quotes in the story says, “We have a lot of smart kids and because there is not a private school or other real viable options this creates a gap...” (p. 1). Once people started dissecting the story, this quote was taken to mean that the city would be better off with a “viable” private school, which was the opposite of Harvey's meaning. By early evening, a crowd of around 100 parent and student protestors and media members had assembled outside Harvey's office. He could not believe how fast and how far his words to a student reporter had been twisted:

Then it was, you know, 'Let's take this sentence and assume that this is what he meant. Then of course the Memphis media, you know, they all wanted to be a part of it, and they were all gathered out here in front of the central office. And I wasn't... I wasn't ashamed because I didn't have anything to be ashamed of. I wasn't... what they were saying was never the intent. So I'm out here on the front lawn with 200 people and the newspaper cameras, you know, defending, I guess, the direction and my quotes, which had been taken out of context... I had one lady, she stood behind me and she said, "I was at those meetings. What these people are talking about is not, that's not, that wasn't what this was about." I had talked to ministers, etc. and they were all for it... until it turned. And then I was the one out there... But how do you, you know... I mean, you can't... I mean, it is what it is at that point.

Chaney did not know what to think. She wanted her students to uncover great stories and inform their audience about things they did not know, but she also did not want to lose her job six weeks after starting it. Her knowledge of the law was a calming factor, both for her and the staff:

It was pretty stressful. Especially because that was the first paper I'd ever put out. But I talked to Bradley Roberson, he's like, 'You're fine. Y'all didn't do anything wrong, you're fine.' And then when I saw Brian, and he was like, 'It's not your fault,' you know. So they were, you know, we weren't worried... I had a conversation with the students. They came to me and they're like, 'What do we do?' Like, you know, 'Are there any legal issues? Is something going to happen to us?' And so I kind of went over the First Amendment stuff with them and that they, you know, were covered.

Roberson was likewise astounded that a student newspaper story could spin this far out of control and cause so much bad publicity for the school and the district. He talked with Chaney

and he talked with Harvey. No one of the three believed any of the other of them had done anything wrong, so they were just going to have to deal with the fallout as best they could. Roberson thinks Harvey's reaction says a lot about him as a leader and about the district's understanding of the *Charger's* mission and purpose within the school:

But I tell you this though, Mr. Harvey handled that about as well as I think anyone could handle it. First of all, in his conversation with Mrs. Chaney, it never was a conversation about censorship or, or being upset with her, or angry about it, or anything like that. That never, never happened. And you would think in most cases where something like that happens, that would be the immediate reaction. But again, that's what makes him the leader that he is. And the very fact that he had the courage to go out and stand in front of a group of very upset and angry parents... and explain exactly, you know, what was missed, or what parts they were missing from the big picture. To try to explain, you know, what he actually meant. I mean, that's a bold move. And that's what makes him a strong leader, being able to do things just like that, but also not to pass the blame or the buck on to Mrs. Chaney or on to the students. Now, I will tell you, did he have conversations about maybe how that process could have been better for that particular article? Well of course he did. I mean, that's part of improving. He gave feedback. But even under those circumstances, he did not censor. And I'll tell you even more about him: it never entered the equation after the fact. I never had one conversation with him about him saying, 'I need you to tighten your rein down on the *Charger* newspaper. He never said that, never came to me and said that one time. Because I think he sees the value in autonomy and all of those things, even though that was about as tough of a situation as you could have asked for a superintendent to be in.

Almost four years later, Harvey remains firm about the accuracy of his quotes and his support of the newspaper's story:

It wasn't the paper's fault. It was my fault... That was her first paper. It was our first paper. So she's trying to get everything else going, and probably none of us really, I mean, I didn't think anything about it, because it was old news. I mean, it had already been reported in the paper. It was just, she just, she didn't catch it. I don't blame her for it. It's just one of those things that happens.

Harvey's biggest regret is that the controversy over the story effectively killed any chance of building the school: "I think it was something that could have been successful, but we'll never know now." Like Roberson remembers, though, Harvey says he never considered cracking down on the *Charger's* freedoms in the aftermath or instituting any type of censorship/prior review going forward:

Then it just gets, I think it gets worse. Then I'm dealing with something much worse. Because then you're trying to control what they said, and you know, you've got all these secret plans. So then you're dealing with the aftermath of that. It did make me more aware of the interviews that I gave and how they could be taken out of context. So that was a learning opportunity for me.

Though Harvey, Roberson, and the rest of the administration all supported her, Chaney does note that the community was somewhat divided in its reaction. Not on the story itself, but on whether or not the story should have been written in the first place:

Community members, friends of mine in the community were like, 'Y'all shouldn't publish things like that, that look bad on the school district.' And I'm like, 'Well, I mean, I've got to teach these kids about journalism correctly. You can't just, the newspaper's

not there just to be a fluff press, you know, for the, for the school. You can't cover only the good things. I mean, we made sure that we were fair in our coverage. The next month, the school district was like No. 1 in the state for something, and we made sure that we covered that just as largely.

Instead of laying low and trying to stay out of the spotlight, the *Charger* staff continued to produce strong, meaningful, and sometimes head-turning coverage. They wrote about continued overcrowding in the district and students' reactions to the divisive Mississippi state flag. They broke a story about student homelessness and published an in-depth interview [using a pseudonym] with an OHS student who was in the process of transitioning from male to female. Chaney is proud of these stories and proud they have not been silenced:

We've covered a lot of things that could be considered controversial, especially for a paper in Mississippi, and they haven't said, the administration hasn't had a problem with any of it. I think that they're thankful that we're bringing light to some of these things that are really going on. Like there's a big vaping concern now with students. And I think that when we cover it, they, you know, the students are more likely to listen to their peers about things than they are about listening to adults about things at that age. We did a big story about homelessness and some students who were homeless in the school district, and it really got the PTO on board, it got the administration on board, about being more mindful. And we did a couple follow ups on that story, and, you know, people in this town don't realize that there *are* students who are homeless. So I think bringing that to light and that attention, even though it's not always positive, is helpful. It's helpful to the students at the end of the day, it's helpful to keeping them in school, and getting graduation rates up, etc. It all kind of ties together.

Chaney recalls one story the staff did late in 2017 about OHS students abusing the prescription drug Adderall: “He had no idea that that many students were using Adderall or that that was the drug that's being abused for studying,” she said. “He did come to me and say, ‘Thank you, I had no idea.’” Harvey is not exactly excited about stories like these being placed front and center for all the world to see and critique, but he is realistic about their reasons for existing:

Well, you know, if you ask me, no, we don't want the number of kids who were homeless in our district in the newspaper. But at the same time if that's news, it's news. And just because we don't want it in the newspaper doesn't mean that it doesn't exist and it shouldn't be reported on. Sex education, or whatever. Yes, I would love for the newspaper to be a plain-Jane, everything is happy [publication], because then I'm not gonna have to deal with all the problems that come after the fact. And those kinds of things, whether it hurts public opinion, I'm not gonna say that, but it impacts it to some people. So that's always a concern. But it's also not something I'm going to say, ‘You know what, I'm going to control it,’ because it's just not worth that. Nor do I believe that's needed.

Harvey told the following story to illustrate his point. He grew up in McComb, Mississippi, and shared a neighborhood with Charles Dunagin, the longtime editor of the McComb *Enterprise Journal*. Harvey's father and Dunagin used to bird hunt together. McComb in the 1960s was known as the ‘Firebomb Capital of the World’ and was home to some of the most violent struggles of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. He recalled:

And in that neighborhood, a fiery brick was thrown through his window. And as a child, I never heard about it. Nobody ever talked about it. But then when I went back and read



about it, the comment he made was, and I'm paraphrasing, 'Just because you don't want it to be reported doesn't mean that it's not news.' And I think that's, that's kind of the general idea. We've got to face whatever facts we have. And I've come to admire him more than I ever really realized I should have at the time... And, you know, again, it doesn't mean that when I look at the newspaper sometimes I don't roll my eyes and say, 'Oh, gosh, here we go again.' But it's just not something I'm gonna, you know. They've got to learn through it and go through it and experience it and whatever. It is a learning experience.

Roberson was promoted to assistant superintendent in the spring of 2018, and one of his roles is to oversee the district's learning curriculum. That year, Harvey set out to create what he called the district's "Portrait of a Graduate":

That was really developed out of, we want our kids to be more than just test scores. And that's what the state is measuring now, is how all these scores from all these different grades come together, and let's give the school district an 'A'. Well, the only problem with that is, on its face, it leaves students out. That's not to say that students don't make up the individual [scores], but it leaves students out. So we started asking, our real question is, 'What do we want our graduates to be able to do? What are the skills, the abilities, the attributes that we want them to have when they graduate?'

Roberson recalls Harvey gathering a diverse group of constituents and putting the question to them:

He put together a group of about 30 to 40 individuals from across our community, from faith leaders to business leaders, to professors at the university, to students, to teachers, to parents, and literally sat in front of them and said, 'Okay. You guys in this community,

pay the overwhelming majority of the education costs of our students in our town. So what I want to know from you is, what do you want out of a graduate when he graduates from the Oxford School District?' And guess what it wasn't? It wasn't somebody that can do calculus, somebody that can do this content area or that, somebody that knows history. It wasn't any of that. They said, 'We want people that can show up to work on time. We want people that are responsible. We want people that can solve problems in new situations. We want people that are ethical, and have strong moral values. We want people that are creative.'

Ultimately the district released eight planks in their Portrait of a Graduate:

1. Effective Communicators
2. Culturally Aware
3. Ethical
4. Critical Thinkers
5. Creative Thinkers
6. Resilient
7. Personally Responsible
8. Active Citizens

Harvey thinks this list is a much more accurate representation of what the goals of a public education in his district through be compared to letting standardized test scores be the only metric of success:

All of those things, those eight things that we mentioned, that's really what we want. And if we take care of those things, not only will the test scores take care of themselves, but in the end, we're going to produce a higher-quality product.

From a curricular standpoint Roberson wholeheartedly agrees. He also sees these values as directly aligning with the curricular objectives of an independent student journalism program:

When you think about all of those things, journalism really encompasses a lot of those. It teaches them about solving problems, certainly about ethical behavior, how to communicate with others, the creativity aspect, collaboration was another one. Journalism encompasses all of those. So that's why it's so valuable to us in our community, because that's the type of student our community wants after he or she graduates from OHS.

Roberson was replaced at OHS by one of his assistant principals, Chandler Gray. Gray lasted only one year and newcomer Noah Hamilton took over the school in 2019. Chaney remains the adviser of the *Charger* and has since taken over as adviser to the *Flashback* yearbook and the *Evoke* literary magazine, just like Ferguson did. The *Charger* closed out a decade of extreme highs and lows with two SIPA All-Southern awards in 2017 and 2018 and three straight MSPA Best Newspaper awards from 2017-2019.

**2020s.** In January of 2020, the *Charger* was continuing to operate as best it could. The staff had been gutted this school year because of scheduling issues, and when the bell rang to start their first working class period of the spring semester, Chaney's class was down to nine students, including four males and three persons of color. The staff was mostly seniors.

The journalism area on the upper level of the campus's main building is the same one Ferguson and Wilbert used. It has a regular classroom instructional space with a large walk-in closet for the publications' equipment and archives, and it adjoins a separate lab space used jointly by Chaney's staffs and the school's broadcast program. The room has no clock. It has tables instead of desks, and the staff gathered around one set of tables when they entered the

room. Along one wall, there's a barrel-shaped end table followed by a series of old green couches. A large "Chaney's Pharmacy" sign hangs behind them. A series of cabinets take up the rest of the wall, with enough available counter space to hold the staff's minifridge, Keurig coffee maker, and a small, bright-red microwave. The new high school is six years old now, and the staff has returned to regularly eating their lunches in the classroom.

Two white boards sit on adjoining walls at the front of the classroom. One has a poster above it that reads, "If you change the way you LOOK at things, the things you look at CHANGE!" The other is filled with notes about the yearbook: font parameters, the project job number for the website, and other reminders from the editors, like "DON'T MOVE STUFF ON THE TEMPLATES!" or "USE IDENTIFIERS!" Several panels of glass separate Chaney's room from the adjoining lab, and posters are taped in them for decoration. A Charger football schedule. A graphical outline of the district's Portrait of a Graduate. "I'm a NEW National Board Certified Teacher."

Without any prompting, the students launched into "Maestroing" the issue together as a single group, planning coverage page by page, section by section. Their first issue of the second semester will go to print on Wednesday, January 29 and be distributed on Friday, January 31. They had less than four weeks. Amidst the typical classroom clutter — a paper cutter, an old cart, some back issues of the *Charger* from last semester — the students used their school-issued laptops, all uniformed with matching blue cases, to open up a new collaborative Google Doc and jot down page and story assignments for the issue.

The story ideas were common enough. An upcoming winter formal, an opinion about the school store "The Bolt" never being open, a rant about the latest season of "The Bachelor". "I'm not sure if this is from a reliable source or not, but I think the circus may be coming to town?"

one says. Other stories had more heft. The students discussed the recent riots at the Mississippi State Penitentiary and wondered how they could localize that story. The sports editor's mom is an assistant principal, and she says there is a student at OHS whose dad was killed in last week's riots. She also said she knows the student does not want that to become public, but the other staff members encouraged her to approach him about possibly being quoted anonymously. It is not even 11 a.m. and the sports editor is already sitting in her last class of the day. She is enrolled in only three: math, English, and newspaper. She works two different part-time jobs, one as a cashier at a local pharmacy and the other waiting tables. She's heading to the neighboring University of Mississippi in the fall, having already secured prestigious placements in both the Croft Institute for International Studies and the university's honors college. She is considering journalism as a double-major.

While the students talk, Chaney sits at her desk. Behind her are two National Academy of Arts & Sciences awards for sports coverage and a cork board filled with cards, notes, and photos of her children. One card reads, "Hard To Believe You're 50!" though she will only soon turn 40. A white bookcase houses several of her course reference materials, including books on feature writing, magazine design, media and culture, and a volume of, "Best of the High School Press." Stuck to the back of one of the shelves is a certificate from the Mississippi Bar Association recognizing Chaney for her service to its Young Lawyers Division. Chaney was busy working through her inbox and fielding messages related to one of her other school duties — assistant powerlifting coach. She was listening to their discussions, though, and when the conversation would begin to lag or become unproductive, she would jump in with suggestions or connections. When they started discussing the Parchman riots, Chaney brought up that she'd just

been part of a group from OHS that had visited the prison last fall. She gave them the contact information she had for the prison's communication director.

Chaney suggests a story about the school's Career and Technical Education classes. The district co-owns an off-campus facility with the neighboring Lafayette County School District and shares the cost of offering CTE courses to both populations. However, Oxford seems to want to end the 50-year-old arrangement and start their own programs. The staff liked the idea and launched into a group discussion of who knows who, and how they could get to the bottom of determining how this might affect OHS students. The brainstorming of story ideas continued. During this phase of the production process, nothing is off limits and their comments are sometimes stream-of-consciousness. Next year the school is trading out students' district-issued laptops for iPads. The staff had broken this news in their September edition, so someone pitched a follow-up story comparing the educational uses of two. "Let's just straight-up bash Brian Harvey," one said. "He hates us anyway," replied another. "Lotta people at this school getting arrested lately," someone else tossed out. They settle on a story about the recent unrest between the United States and Iran. To localize the story, they decide the angle should be student unrest about the potential of being drafted. President Donald Trump's impeachment trial also loomed. Chaney explains this process:

We have to balance between covering only what's local for us as a school and then also covering what affects everyone nationally. So they knew that the impeachment trials were coming up, they knew that students were talking about a possible war in Iran, and what had happened in Iran, and whether or not there's going to be a World War III, because that was trending on Twitter. Students were worried that they were going to get

drafted because apparently they paid zero attention in history class. And so they're like, these are our big stories that we know we want to cover.

A timid female student of color wearing a headscarf is the paper's features editor and business manager. She suggests a possible story on December graduates. They discuss coupling this with an infographic. Chaney pulled up the school board minutes and mentioned they contain a new district wellness plan and an issue with the budgets for some of the district's new construction projects, including a new fine arts facility being built for OHS. The students key on the over-budget construction story and plan to investigate. They also discovered the new wellness plan says the *Charger* will publish articles encouraging health and wellness, though no one has mentioned this to the staff. The sports editor is listed as being part of the school's wellness committee, but said she did not know this and does not recall them ever having a meeting.

The conversation turned to sports. The sports centerpiece for the issue will be on the Freeman family and their athletic history. The brother and sister combo currently play soccer at OHS, and their father is an NFL referee. The Harlem Globetrotters are coming to Ole Miss for an exhibition game, and the OHS dance team is performing. They make a note to reach out to the dance team coach for passes. Early National Signing Day for high athletes signing scholarships to play in college was in December and the main National Signing Day would be coming up in early February right after their publishing date. They decide to look at where OHS athletes are, or might be, going for a possible story. A former OHS wide receiver is having a great rookie season in the NFL, and some think this might make a good feature. Chaney said she thinks she has his agent's number. The *Charger's* editor-in-chief, a lanky white male, wants to write a column about Ole Miss hiring disgraced former Maryland coach DJ Durkin.

They shift to the entertainment section and make plans to go see the new film “Just Mercy” as a staff, then review it. “Sounds like a Christian rock band,” one student says. The sports editor and another girl circle back to really wanting to write about “The Bachelor.” They have many opinions. “Page 12 is still open,” someone says., but the editor is less than excited. Someone else suggests a story on local desserts for that page, with lots of food pictures. Chaney reminds them that food pictures are hard to do well. As the period draws to a close, the advertising manager gives the staff a report on ads sold for this edition, and they discuss their potential placement.

While the staff of the *Charger* sits upstairs in its newsroom trying to divine the most important stories of the month, principal Noah Hamilton is downstairs in his office living them. That day, he is trying to track down students who have been parking on campus illegally. The school is not nearly as overpopulated as it was during Martin’s tenure in the old building, but is still growing and space is already becoming scarce. In the student parking lots, there are more drivers than there are spaces, so the office stopped issuing new parking passes when all the spots are assigned. After winter break, some students decided to just start parking on campus anyway, wheeling into whatever spot was not yet occupied when they arrived in the mornings. A few scofflaws are always to be expected, Hamilton knows, but after enough complaints from the parking spots’ rightful owners, he knew he needed to crack down. He started working with his school resource officers to check hangtags, investigate and warn offenders, and tow repeat offenders. By the end of the month, he will have towed two cars.

Hamilton has worked in the education field for 23 years, most of them in public schools. He has a bachelor’s degree in exercise science from the University of Mississippi, and a master’s degree in Education Leadership. He is certified to teach in several areas, including English,



reading, and science. He has spent the last 10 years in administration, mostly at Resurrection Catholic School, a small private school on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and moved back to Oxford last fall when he was hired to lead OHS. Coincidentally, Hamilton actually spent one year early in his career as the journalism and student newspaper sponsor at St. Aloysius Catholic School in Vicksburg. “It was quite insightful,” he said. “And I think it has helped me through this process when I got into administration, just because I got to see what was behind everything.” Like many other high school journalism sponsors, Hamilton was drafted into the job instead of actively seeking it out. This was 1996. He was new to the school, teaching English, and the previous adviser had just left. He was in charge of *The Bolt*, a print publication printed quarterly by the *Vicksburg Post*. He remembers:

I didn’t know that it would ever really benefit me at the time. But when I got into administration and was at schools that had any type of print journalism, broadcast anything like that — and as you know, as things have kind of morphed over the years, more and more schools are getting into the broadcast part — and so the last... three of the last four schools I’ve been at have had some type of print journalism. One did not have a print journalism class, but still had a paper that was a club, and they put the paper together.

Though he once taught at the large, 6A-designated Hancock High School on the coast, OHS is the largest school Hamilton has been tasked to lead. Most of his administrative experience has been at schools with 150-300 students. OHS has more than 1,200 students. Comparatively, he says:

Really, I would probably liken it to a superintendent inside a school. It is more, it's not as managerial as I really thought it would probably wind up being. There is a lot of paperwork, but it is more superintendency in nature.

Hamilton spends a lot of his time in meetings with his assistant principals and counselors, who all have more direct contact and knowledge of what's going on in the school, "whereas in a smaller school setting, I would probably be in the middle of that fray," he says. He tries to make a concerted effort to get out into the school every day, though, whether through classroom visits or hallway monitoring.

So far at Oxford, he has worked some with the broadcast class on a few commissioned video projects, but has not had much interaction with the *Charger*:

My interaction with the broadcast is more selfish, because it's more things that I want to be a part of in the communication part. I want to use that to get some things out. But still, content-wise, I want to back off, I want to let them do their job, and I really want to be more of a supporter and overseer than a mandate and an enforcer. By moving into that realm, we kind of quash the communication aspect because then they don't feel like they can report or advise or whatever, what they really want to say.

He says he tries to be as hands-off with the adviser and staff as possible, "while still understanding expectations of promoting the school, and at the same time, understanding that issues will arise that they can report, get that word out, without stepping on too many toes." He believes the students are in charge of the paper, and he does not request prior review. "I see it when they put it out. When they print it," he says. When he was principal at Resurrection, the practice of prior review was in place and Hamilton ended it, but the publication soon folded anyway. In his mind, it is not a necessary practice:

There are pros and cons to it. You could, you know, you could have an article that names somebody, maybe not intentionally in a derogatory manner, but that's how the parents see it, and so now you've got that issue you've got to address. But I really think, especially here at Oxford, I think they have a pretty good grasp of what their responsibility is to every student here. I think they understand that the consequences can be damning if they're not very thoughtful in how they do this. And they're not really out to scoop a story. They're not out to embarrass anybody. And I think that's the key for them. I think they understand that, yeah, they want a great story, and they work hard to find those things, but they're not out to scoop anybody and embarrass anybody. And so a lot of their focus *is* on the great things that go on, while still trying to report what they would perceive as injustices or sure wrongs or whatever, without embarrassing or hurting or making the situation worse than it is. As long as the group's editor and writers understand what their responsibility is, more so than just, 'It's fun.' You know, it's not a Nancy-Drew kind of thing. It's, you know, there's a responsibility to it, and I think our sponsors do a really, really good job of teaching that to them. Whether those kids come out and go into any type of journalism field, it is part of that responsibility thing that we try to focus so much on here, and that's just one more aspect of it. As long as they get what their responsibility is and what the expectations are of them from their constituents, from their peers, then it makes that reporting less scary to me. Because I don't feel like I need to oversee that; I don't feel like that's a necessary part of my job."

Hamilton's comments above indicate he may not be fully aware of the publication's history, especially the massive attention generated by Harvey's comments to the paper in 2016, or their goals as a staff. The students do indeed view their job as scooping other media outlets and

publishing stories that would demand their audience's attention. Hamilton says he views the *Charger* as belonging to the students, however at the end of the day: "That's another arm of our communication," he says. "[Students] are more likely to read that paper than they are my emails every week." He also says he is not opposed to requiring the *Charger* to publish content he thinks is newsworthy:

I see some things on the horizon where I'm going to use that. But I don't want that. I don't want to form their paper for them at all. So when I see myself doing that down the road, it will be for a selfish reason. And it will be about, 'I need this information out there.' But at the same time, it would never be about, 'I need this *paper* to be about this. But you know, with 1,300 kids, there are only so many ways you can get the message out. And you have to try to find the ways that they're going to see it. I send out a newsletter every Sunday night that goes out to all of our student body, all of our parents, everybody. And it really is about what's going on this week, and then I try to, to give a nugget, I try to put something out there that I think — and it's really focused toward our kids — that I think we need to be talking about and focused on. The problem with that is, out of 1,300 kids, there's probably 12 that read my newsletter. So it's necessary that I have this arm sometimes. But here's the other part — you can't use it all the time. Because then it becomes the same thing as the TV screens and newsletter. It's just another piece out there. So you have to make sure that you use it very strategically and only when it's absolutely necessary that you get this out.

Hamilton sees the student press as having different rights as compared to a private, professional publication, especially when it comes to covering negative stories about the school:

You know, it's not like in the real world where we want that going into that paper. But at the same time, if it's a communication thing, it's a great arm to get the word out about both sides of the story, because of course, when I send an email out, it's going to be my perspective. Whereas this, the print, is going to be a little more unbiased. It's, obviously it's still going to be somewhat biased, but it's going to be much more unbiased and, and it's going to give them some flexibility to really be more lifelike and more real world.

Still, he thinks he would be less likely to find himself arguing for a story to be removed from the *Charger* than he would arguing to have one put in:

I think the worst thing you can do is tell them what to print, and the best thing you can do is just kind of shut up and let it ride, as long as they know what your expectations are... If it's a story break? Yeah, give me a heads up on what we're talking about, and let me give my perspective so that you have the whole story.

Nothing this school year has risen to this level in Hamilton's mind, but a few stories have caught his attention, like the story the staff broke on the district's upcoming shift from laptops to iPads. The *Charger* had found out the change was a possibility change long before anything had been decided and began asking questions. Some were directed to the superintendent's office, where they were helpful and informative, and some were directed at Hamilton, who was not yet aware of what the details or direction of that decision might be. The students' questions made him dig to learn more himself:

I appreciated the heads up, because I'd have hated for it to run, you know, bashing the transition, because they don't know the whole story. But they were able to get the jump on it. Our district office was able to give them information that they needed to get that out to our students and parents, to know that this is in discussion, this has been talked about,

and this is what it'll look like. So that's not as bad as what the rumor mills are churning out.

A week after their first Maestro session, content for the issue was still in flux. The staff had decided to table the new construction story until next month's issue, but the CTE story was heating up and the adviser says she thinks it'll be big news. The students principally want to know: are all their skilled labor classes being given to Lafayette, and if so can students still cross over and take those. There seem to be a lot of students interested in nursing, so those changes could have wide-reaching consequences. The editor reminded the staff writer handling the story that CTE director Steve Hurdle is in charge of all of this and needs to be a source in the story.

The prison story could be huge, but they needed a good source. The student whose dad was murdered had not been back to school yet. His dad's funeral was last Saturday, and his name was mentioned in the *Clarion Ledger* statewide newspaper. Kids in his grade have made the connection, but so far the whole school has not. The writer covering the story asks the sports editor whether she can interview her mom. If the affected student is uncomfortable or unavailable for an interview, the best way to keep this story in the issue might be to shift the angle and make it about how the administration was dealing with the situation. They spiral into a discussion of the conditions at the prison, then use the classroom's Apple airplay system to project the *Clarion Ledger's* photo bank of the conditions onto a large flat-panel television in the front of the room so everyone can see what kind of conditions the prisoners are living in.

The newest story to develop is that a former student, Emma Pittman, has finally made it to Broadway. She was a standout drama student when she was in school, and several staffers started to recall all the plays they saw her perform in. This might mean the Harlem Globetrotters story gets cut, or at least shrunk. Only seven students are present on this particular day, and the

sports editor is on the couch reading stories and looking over pages while the rest of the staff sits together at the main table. Two of them are working on stories, the others are just helping talk through them. With most of the issue's big stories still waiting on key sources to report back, the staff has reached the first basecamp of the production process. There is not much work that can be done right this minute, and the mood is very relaxed. The entertainment section layout is almost completely done. While they work on the few items they can, the staff casually talks through other recent happenings to see whether there are any other story ideas they may have missed. The school's swim coach was just nominated for a national coach of the year award. "He must be a good coach," the sports editor says. "He's a psycho," another student replies. "When does the new James Bond movie come out?"... "How many James Bond movies are there, anyway?" ... "Why does Clemson's mascot look like that?" The college football national championship game was the night before.

Chaney is distracted and mostly working independently. She has a lot on her plate. Tomorrow is the big movie theater field trip to go see "Just Mercy". All her journalism classes are going, plus all the legal studies students and others, 80 students altogether. They're taking a bus, and she's busy sorting through the trip permission forms so they can be turned in to the office. There was a substitute teacher earlier that day in the broadcast class next door, and one of their students had broken a brand-new Mac desktop in the shared lab. Chaney had to file an incident report with IT. Since the head powerlifting coach is out sick all week, she is also all of a sudden in charge of a parent meeting that night, running the week's practices after school, and getting all the team's paperwork submitted for next weekend's meet. While the *Charger* students were discussing their CTE story, a female powerlifter came to visit Chaney so they could discuss her weight and eligibility. A few minutes after that, an assistant principal came in and asked

Chaney to step into the equipment room so they could discuss her offering some free legal advice to a recently-arrested student. Amidst all of this, she realized she forgot to send out the link to a yearbook survey to the rest of the faculty. Students were supposed to be completing it schoolwide during that block, so she frantically composed an email and sent out the link. When she is finally able to plug back in with the staff toward the end of the block and ask for updates on their progress, the sports staff tells her they are short on content and would like to request, sarcastically, to take a field trip to Tokyo to cover the Olympics.

One staff member reminds everyone she will be out for two days next week because her family is going skiing in Telluride, Colorado. Discussing how to cover her assignments while she is gone reminds everyone how short-staffed they are, and how, with so many graduating seniors, next year's staff is looking really small. There is a lot of concern. Shifting things back to the issue at hand, the editor reminds them it is time to start thinking about which stories will be published a second time in Spanish on the paper's multilingual page in the back of the issue. He also reminds them that the month is half over, and they still haven't selected which story will end up on the front cover.

That same week, Hamilton was dealing with his own news crisis. Two separate vaping instances on campus had caused medical emergencies of enough severity to require ambulances to be called to the school. Hamilton knows vaping is a problem at OHS just like it is at most every other high school in the country in 2020, and like most other high school administrators, he is doing his best to fight the epidemic. With two ambulance-level incidents in one week, Hamilton decided he needed to send out an email to parents informing them about what had happened, reassuring them that things were under control at the school, and that their children were safe. He did so, but then over the next week two more medical emergencies on campus



required ambulances to be called to the school. These two incidents were totally unrelated to teen vaping, Hamilton says, but since they followed so closely on the heels of his email, many assumed they are vaping related too. Now he was trying to fight a storm of misinformation on and off campus while trying to balance the public's need to know with the health and privacy of the individual students.

He was also peripherally having to deal with the Oxford-Lafayette school districts' fight over the future of their CTE classes. Hamilton will soon be working on next year's master schedule, but right now he does not know which CTE classes will be offered or where they will be offered. He just knows the situation right now is not working for his students:

The issue is that both school districts are set on two separate bell schedules. I'm going to try to be as politically correct as I can be and say I think both sides are struggling to really find common ground from that perspective... So there are some periods our kids get there 30 minutes late, because it doesn't mesh with our bell schedule, and so they've missed 30 minutes of instruction out of 90. And then they come back here, and they may get back in the middle of one of our periods. So we have a place that they go, with a teacher, until the end of that period (basically a study hall). Generally, it's not more than about 20 minutes.

The two districts are still negotiating, but the goal is to bring several programs to OHS once the school's new fine arts facility opens in the fall. "I think that is going to lend itself better to our students," he said.

The third Thursday of the spring semester was a dreary winter day in Mississippi. The weather was cold and rainy, and the mood in the *Charger* newsroom was equally dour. The staff's lackadaisical pace from the week before was gone, and multiple deadlines were starting to

loom. A butcher-paper sign was hanging on one of the walls, handwritten in cutesy red and blue lettering. It read:

Deadlines:

△ Nov. 4

△ Dec. 9

Final: Feb. 14

It was late January, and the majority of the book remained unfinished. Since Chaney advises both publications, many of the staffers overlap and needed to start splitting their attention between the newspaper and the yearbook. Clubs were behind on submitting their rosters for the club section, so there is some confusion about which clubs from last year's book are still active and which need to be cut. Things were starting to get real.

On the newspaper side, the issue was starting to take final form. Today was supposed to be page-check day, but few are completely final. Two students discuss making the 2020 Winter Formal headline bigger. Staff Oscar picks are due, and the same two students discussed the proper formatting for handling character/actor names. The reporter for the CTE story got told no-comment, so she was stuck. Other staffers suggested she do talk directly to the program director, Mr. Hurdle, but an hour later she still had not gone. The mood was productive, but tense. Folks were unhappy, and it showed in the intensity of their comments. "Jesus Christ, I want to slit my wrists," one said. "Your breathing is distracting," another said to a classmate during a silent moment. "Why would anyone want to graduate in December (early)?" someone asked. "Because this school sucks!" another replied. One student asked the adviser who all was going to be on staff next year. "We're not having one," Chaney said sarcastically. "Good," the student replied.

The sports editor was absent. She was covering the district's Teacher of the Year luncheon off campus. Several members of the staff are unhappy with her, and there seemed to have been some recent infighting about her tendency to procrastinate and micromanage. One

writer hypothesized her bad attitude might be because she was recently asked to contribute a story to the *Charger's* website, which she thought editors weren't supposed to have to do, but the staff is small and everyone else had been helping out wherever it was needed. "She hates all of us," one said. The sports section was missing her article on the Harlem Globetrotters' game. "I have a sneaking suspicion that she hasn't started it yet," the editor said. Over the last week, she had apparently been lobbying him to cut the story and replace it with a review of the new war film, "1917." The editor did not want to do that, though, because it would bump up the total number of reviews in the paper to three, plus the Globetrotters' visit was locally significant.

Chaney is used to these kinds of squabbles:

They are so much like family. These kids have been, especially the seniors, they've been together for the past four years. Some of them I even taught in seventh grade, so they've been with me for almost six years now. And so they fight like brothers and sisters sometimes, you know? They smart off, whatever. But I think outside of here, they would defend each other, you know? To the death.

The Trump impeachment trial was dominating the news that week, so the staff decided an illustration of his face could work for the issue's front cover. The editor was tediously creating the cover graphic in Adobe Illustrator. He had worked a few hours on it the night before and continued working on it the entire class period. He appeared to be around halfway finished. As for the coverage they would use that front cover to tease, there was debate over whether they should write a single staff editorial about the impeachment or let individual staffers write contrasting opinions. An editorial was more powerful, but also harder, because they'd have to discuss it and come to a consensus, a monumental task in the current political landscape. "Opinions would be easier," someone said. "Ok everyone, stop what you're doing and write an

opinion about impeachment,” the editor joked. Ultimately they decided to go with the editorial format. Chaney:

They have to decide what's the most effective, the best cover we can put together to draw attention, to get people to pick up the paper, because essentially that's what you want them to do. So they went with Trump on the cover with the stamp ‘IMPEACHED.’ And it's almost clickbait. Because people automatically assume that we're, you know, the newspaper kids are against Trump, it's gonna be totally a liberal paper, etc., which they love to say. But then when you actually read the staff editorial, the students actually said the impeachment trial is not impartial. Even though plenty of them may believe that there was enough evidence to impeach, they still found that there wasn't, you know... as a whole, when they decided to write it as an editorial, they decided it wasn't impartial.

For those conversations, the staff moved out of the newsroom and into the separate, adjoining lab for privacy. Chaney prefers that they do this:

I try not to put any political sway on them whatsoever, in one way or the other... I think they talked about it, one of them wrote it, and then they sent it back around and said, ‘Look at this, let me know what you think and whether you want to change things.’ And that's how they ended up writing it.

Back at work in the newsroom, they digressed into the types of random conversations teenagers often do. They compared their favorite ponytail styles. They compared their favorite noodle styles. “Has anyone ever drank Hummingbird water?” The adviser is stressed about the yearbook and is almost a non-factor on this day. The staff's field trip forms for JEA's national spring convention in Nashville are due tomorrow. The few students who will be returning in the fall

doubt they'll want to go to JEA's fall convention in Orlando. "Who would we hang out at Disney with?"

The next Wednesday, January 29, there was a scuffle in the cafeteria. It was only a verbal sparring match, diffused before any punches were thrown, but for Hamilton it still meant a couple of hours of talking to participants and witnesses, then teachers and parents, gathering statements and writing up the paperwork for discipline referrals. It was not how Hamilton wanted to spend the middle part of his day, but such incidents would always be part of the job. They were still rare at OHS, though. Hamilton said this was maybe the third or so "fight" of the year.

While Hamilton was in the cafeteria sorting through his disciplinary issue, the *Charger* staff was working through lunch. This was Deadline Day, and each page of the issue had to be saved as PDFs and sent over to the Oxford Eagle by later than afternoon. The class was in a much better mood. Most of the stories had finally come together over the last six days, and the paper was in a pretty advanced state when class began. Still, there was plenty left to get done. Everyone was on-task in some form or fashion, with very little talk of outside work. Printed pages were being passed out and line-edited, laptops were open for making corrections. Some staff members would read sentences aloud to one another to make sure they sounded ok to the ear. The sports editor was back in class, and those relationships seemed to be at least somewhat repaired. She sat alone on the couch to do her work, though, while everyone else sat together at the table. The editor airplayed PDF versions of individual pages to the TV so everyone could group-edit the layouts.

Chaney is vocal during these critiques, but does not bark orders. She states her opinion and asks whether they agree. The Trump cover, which took the editor three more hours to finish,

has a screen behind the masthead. Chaney thinks it would look better without the screen, so they try it and all agree it does. There is a blue background on the teaser boxes across the bottom, and Trump's graphic has a blue background too, but the blues don't match. The staff works through several variations together, before the quiet advertising manager in the headscarf suggests making the teaser backgrounds black to match Trump's suit. The change was a huge visual improvement and ended up being the published version. They worked through several other pages: The "Just Mercy" page has a mis-cropped head photo and all the elements are too close together. There's a yellow background on the page the staff finds distracting. The Broadway page needs the headline and subhead placements swapped, and Chaney suggested they lose the red background on that page too. "We have to get away from using colors for color's sake," she said. On another page a caption needs editing to bold the names of students, per the publication's style. They debate inconsistent spacing on the dessert and early graduation pages. Next they started pairing pages on the screen to make sure facing pages do not clash or lack engaging elements as a spread. As the period wore on, the staff debated details of grammar, like whether the Freeman students' father was a/an NFL referee.

At the height of trying to juggle all these minor changes, with everyone talking over one another and trying to avoid letting any small error slip through into print, the front office sends a message to Chaney that she has a package waiting downstairs. She sent a student down to retrieve it, and the student returned with a document-sized envelope. While everyone else in the room kept typing and scrolling and shouting at one another over changes, Chaney opened the envelope and pulled out a certificate. "Congratulations, *Charger*, y'all got a Gold Medalist from Columbia," she said. A CSPA Gold Medalist is the organization's top rating in their critique service. It is different from a CSPA Crown award, but indicative of the same type of publication

calibre. There are a few excited reactions and requests to go to New York City in March for CSPA's national convention, but the entire certificate celebration — representative of a full year's worth of work and worry — is only a 30-second distraction. Chaney sat the certificate to the side and everyone went right back to work.

The editor made himself a note listing all the pages that were not yet finalized. At 11:50 a.m., with 25 minutes left in the class, there were four pages left to make corrections on. Chaney tells him she thinks the opinion pages are “a snoozefest.” “The most boring pages I've ever seen in my life,” she quipped. Lots of this issue's pages skew text-heavy, actually. The Parchman page is another of them. At the last minute, they decide to find a courtesy photo of the student group that visited the prison and redesign the page. At Noon, the unfinished page count is now back up to five. Chaney recalls:

The design was, she designed it to look like the front entrance of Parchman. But we kind of got dinged, or somebody mentioned [in a critique], that we were using a little too much stuff that looks like clip art. Even though they were making it in InDesign, it still looked like clip art, and so we've been more mindful this year to use less clip art and use more design for useful purposes or real purposes and then add more photographs. We had a photograph of the students that went, so she added that in, and I think that changed the look of the whole page.

Adding the photo meant they may need to cut part of the story. A student began line-editing it to see if there were any unnecessary sections. The final version of the story had no mention of the student whose father was murdered, nor the administration's support of him. Chaney explained:

The student didn't feel comfortable talking about it, so they angled the story more about how my law classes went to visit Parchman last semester. They ended up just using the angle that the classes had been visiting, and then this happened shortly after.

As the number of remaining pages dwindles, side conversations begin popping up. They recap this week's episode of "The Bachelor", then someone quotes a line from the movie, "Catch Me If You Can", which leads to a short blow-by-blow recap of the scene the line came from. They start drilling each other on grammar and AP Style for the JEA Quiz Bowl coming up in Nashville in April: Mailperson is now a preferred term. Alumna is a female graduate. The word of the year is "they." Chaney shifts her attention briefly back to the yearbook. The publication's final deadline still looms on February 14, but functionally that deadline is really February 12 because Chaney is leaving for Key West on February 13 for a 40th birthday trip with her girlfriends. She looks through a series of submitted senior ads and questions a few staff members about whether one student even goes to this school. No one on staff recognizes him. They look it up — he does. He's just new.

By 12:08, the unfinished page count is down to two, and those will be completed remotely by one student later that afternoon. They do one last check, change 'prisons' to 'prison' in a headline, and then it is time to leave. Chaney reminds them they will celebrate with pizza and cupcakes tomorrow while the paper is at the printer. Friday will be distribution day, and next week's objectives (aside from finishing the yearbook) will be to select all of their individual entries for MSPA's spring contest, then begin the maestro process for the February issue. The whole process would soon begin again.

The January issue of the *Charger* was distributed during lunch on Friday, January 31. It did not garner any national media attention. Friday was a calm day at the high school, the first



calm Friday Hamilton could remember this semester. As school was dismissing that afternoon for the weekend, though, someone pulled a fire alarm, and Hamilton rolled his eyes:

I was out here talking to the APs (assistant principals) about the time the bell rang, getting ready to go to our places. And we were just chit-chatting, and kids are going by and then all of a sudden the fire alarm goes off and we all went, ‘Are you kidding me???’... It was the first Friday of the semester that we had not had anything going on that was a crazy something. And then we end our day with that. Boom.

He knew it was most likely a student prank, but he still had to check every room, make sure there was no fire, etc. By the time he could confirm there was no threat, the fire department was already on site. Then he had to spend the first few hours of school Monday morning doing a bit of detective work to try to find the culprit, which he did, thanks to a snitch. “It just eats into your day,” he said. By then the student newspaper had been out almost four days. “Bradley Roberson and Chandler Gray would look at the paper and say, you know, ‘Great job,’ ‘This is great,’ ‘Great story,’” Chaney said. “I haven’t gotten very much feedback from the new principal, but I assume he reads it.” Hamilton had yet to look at it, but no major public relations disasters stemming from it had reached his desk either. He said the only feedback he had heard about the newspaper was about the front cover. One group — possibly a group of teachers, but he could not remember — had casually mentioned they felt the ‘IMPEACHED’ stamp across the president’s face was misleading, since most people believe impeachment equals removal from office. He echoed Chaney’s appraisal of the students’ reasoning: “That’s a little bit of journalism there, I guess... you gotta get people looking and reading,” he said. As he skimmed through the newspaper, he liked that there were so many stories with depth and relevance, including one on the future of the school’s CTE programs:

They've got some good articles, some things other people might not pick up on. It's not just the typical scuttlebutt that's going around the school. Typically, I don't know that you would hear so much about that CTE [battle] in just any other school. I don't know that that would be something that kids would really jump into, but they're getting on that to find out what's really going on, and that's pretty cool.

From Hamilton's chair, the CTE discussions appear to be rocky:

They don't want to change, and we're ready to move forward and try to really meet more of our students' — I mean, when this consortium was put together 40 years ago, however long it's been now, it was based on, I think Lafayette probably 200 or 300 kids and Oxford maybe has 300 or 400, so you're talking about around 500 kids. Well now, between the two school districts it's over 2,000. It's close to 2,200. So the numbers that they're basing it on just don't match.

This is the source of the tension, that OSD wants to get more kids involved and cannot. They believe getting more students engaged with those programs could help the district with its graduation rate and help more students find their potential career.

Hamilton was impressed with the program's ability to foster this type of critical thinking in its reporters. "They really teach them those areas to maybe get the nugget and start picking through that nugget and start finding what's really there," he said. He does not seem overly concerned about the paper, even if some of the stories end up touching on divisive issues. "I really feel like we do things the right way," he says. "We do what we're supposed to do, and I mean, we don't always make everybody happy. We understand that." There are far bigger issues on his plate, he says. The district is still struggling to get a handle on how to address its achievement gap — the same gap Harvey was trying to address with the opt-in elementary

school. Though such gaps usually develop in the early years of a child's education, Hamilton must deal with the end results of those gaps every day as high school principal:

I was told on the front end that there's a large gap. So what we have is we basically have a very high-end student, and then a very low-end student, and we don't have much in the middle. And so while they told me that, it doesn't register until you get here and see it.

When you have one kid who comes in whose dad's a doctor who's struggling in a class and 20 minutes later, you have another kid that comes in who's from a single-parent household on government assistance, barely getting by, and they have the same problem.

Hamilton says that while that gap does skew toward reflecting students' socioeconomic differences, there's more to it than that:

We have quite a few who are low, very, extremely low socioeconomic, but very high achievers, very high performing. And so where you would think, out of 1,300 kids and that big gap, your socioeconomic would be on the very bottom and your wealth would be on the top, it is really a very good mixture of who's top and bottom. So that was something that I didn't anticipate. And it makes program planning a little trickier.

Because it's not normal. You have to work through the whole thing.

In trying to combat this, he is taking a hard look at the way the school will handle scheduling in 2020-21. OHS runs on a modified block schedule, where students take a mixture of periods and block-length classes throughout the day, enabling different-style learners to be placed in whichever class length gives them the best chance of success with that content. He says:

And while that is great in theory, that is not how the scheduling worked out. Scheduling was not really done for the student. So in this first semester, that's what we've discovered.

We just have too many scheduling problems and issues. We have kids that are in a block class that probably should not be in a block class.

The school is working on a workforce program that would allow students to attend school part-time and also get workforce training. He has seen that students not interested in college are checking-out mentally around the 10th grade. “They may be here all the way through their twelfth-grade year, but we’ve lost them,” he says. “Their achievement, their success rates dwindle, because they just don't see the benefit of an academic class.” All of these plans and possibilities are on the table at this point, just like the brainstorming phase of each *Charger* production cycle. From here, Hamilton says he will be sprinting until May:

The first semester is really kind of slowly going up the hill, and then you hit Christmas and for an administrator, it is running down the hill. Because now you're not just going through your day to day of what it takes to keep the school running this semester, you're having to plan for the next semester. So you're looking at two school years at the same time.

In the *Charger* newsroom, Chaney and the staff had already dissected the issue and moved on to the next one. Chaney says they are their own harshest critics: “They tear it apart themselves, and then I'll pitch in.” They also get criticisms from others, she says:

Oh, we get criticism all the time. Not necessarily from the administration, but from the community and from other students who think that our paper is too liberal, etc. Or this issue, we got an email from a community member telling us it was too Republican, too conservative. Which is not usually the case when it comes to these papers. Yeah, we got told that the editorial was not impartial, and that it was too conservative because the

students said the impeachment evidence was not impartial. I mean, this is the exact opposite of what we've ever gotten, so it was almost amusing to some of them.

From her perspective the issue was a success. With just 13 unique stories, it does not cover issues on the same grand scale other staffs have in the past, but most of those staffs had more writers, time, and resources, and those situations may only get worse for her students going forward:

I think they did a great job in covering a broad range of local stories, statewide stories and national stories in this issue. I'm always impressed that they get it together as quickly as they do, because it almost seems like they goof off for a long period. But I think what I'm afraid of [going forward] is, this year they get to take their computers home and work on their own. Next year, we're dealing with a whole different animal when they no longer have computers and only have iPads. So they're going to have to use either desktop computers or a laptop cart in the room to do the work. So it'll be interesting to see how the dynamic changes. I think it's a terrible thing, but I've voiced my opinions on that. We'll see. I've told them what I need. You can't do InDesign on anything but a computer right now, so I'm supposed to get some, but Harvey says desktop, [Roberson] says laptop cart, so we'll see.

Scheduling has obviously been a problem for the staff as well. Chaney's teacher units are needed for the new law elective, so many of her introductory journalism classes have been shifted to the middle school. So far, the program is still turning out quality work and quality graduates, but she anticipates some tough days ahead:

I don't know about next year because we have no idea what the schedule is going to look like because it changes every single year. But that can be dealt with. As long as it's before

lunch, I don't lose seniors. But the way the schedule has been built this year is that we've had two block classes in the middle of the day. Well there's so many other classes that are only offered during those times, that from first semester to second semester I lost four people on staff because they have to take other classes at the same time. Now they've promised me they're coming back, but there's no guarantee... I think it kind of hurt us to send Foundations to the middle school and not have me teaching it. Because the teacher there didn't really want to do it, and she kind of burned some kids on journalism. But now Shenita's there and I've heard really good things, so I think hopefully it will be a rebuilding program to where people will be more interested and I will get more students, but I mean, we'll probably spend the next two years rebuilding the staff.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

Chapter 5 will apply the relevant parts of the previous chapter's narrative, along with additional print and interview data, to the specific research questions of this study. Each of the study's three research questions will be explored in depth, followed by an extended analysis of the study's results from a broader, more summative context, including its ultimate significance, major takeaways for both educators and administrators, and the potential for future research on these and other related topics.

#### **Research Questions.**

1. How have administrative decisions contributed to the establishment, success, and continued success of the *Charger*?
2. What benefits have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?
3. What challenges have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?

**1. How have administrative decisions contributed to the establishment, success, and continued success of the *Charger*?** No successful student activity of this nature could exist or succeed without at least tacit support from school and district leaders. Their decisions shape educational experiences in all aspects of student life, and the student newspaper program is no different. Based on the data collected for this study, these decisions have been categorized into three major strands: values, resources, and trust.

**Values.** The first strand of administrative decision points appears to be the selection of the administrators themselves. The seven administrative subjects interviewed for this study shared, for the most part, similar philosophies of education, management, and leadership. They all profess to value free thought and student expression. They all profess to value transparency and diversity. Most of them profess to abhor micromanagement and prefer bottom-up initiatives to top-down edicts. They share enough similarities with each other that it is reasonable to infer their selection as administrators in the Oxford School District is a reflection of the values and ideals of the community that chose them as leaders.

Ferguson was an OHS graduate and an alumna of the *Charger Gazette*. She and her classmates were given almost total control of the publication in the 1970s, and she had watched Fitts's staffs operate in much the same manner once she joined the OHS faculty:

So my assumption was, when I started doing journalism at Oxford as an adviser, that everybody was like this. All the schools are like this, all the schools in Mississippi are like this, all the schools in the nation are like this. Yay, okay. And it was really an eye-opener then when I started realizing, 'Nobody else in Mississippi does this!' You know, there are a few [publications] that hit-and-miss sometimes, but it was, it was a huge thing for me to realize what we have here in Oxford.

Ferguson remembers seeing the disparity most starkly when she was attending out-of-state conferences or entering the *Charger* in regional/national competitions:

... and there were never any other newspapers at the contests from Mississippi, you know, and I thought, 'Why?' ... I remember thinking, 'Why is Oxford so good?' A lot of it had to do with leadership. And then a lot of it has to do I think with just the community itself, and the community that's here, you know, the way they look at education, the way



they look at what they expect out of the schools around here. The expectation is higher for Oxford in a lot of ways, not just journalism for sure.

The role of the Oxford community in shaping the consistent quality of the *Charger* high school newspaper cannot be overstated. When asked about their decision-making with regards to the program, almost every administrator cited the community's expectations, involvement, or values as playing a major role. Dickens said it is a "somewhat unique" place:

They just expect good things from all of their programs. All of them. And it bleeds, it carries over to everything else. And that's the way it should be. You should strive for excellence. As Vince Lombardi said, 'Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.' So you may not reach perfection, but you will reach excellence as long as you keep striving for it.

The uniqueness of the *Charger's* success in the state of Mississippi may ultimately be a reflection of the Oxford community's uniqueness in the state of Mississippi. Even with its explosive growth over the last 20 years, Oxford is still a town of less than 25,000 people. However, the town also houses the University of Mississippi, an R-1 research institution with more than 20,000 students from all over the world, giving it the cosmopolitan population of a much larger city. Roberson knows firsthand how this dynamic impacts the town's school leaders and their decisions:

You know, the one unique factor that we have a lot of other communities don't have, though, is the amount of people that we have move into our town. Far more transient, but, you know, transient in a good way. University professors, retirees, people that are seeking to come to a quality school will come into our town. If someone has come from out of state, Atlanta, whatever, we get tons of those kids, tons of those people... It is the

community we live in. We have a more diversified community than I daresay any community around the state of Mississippi. When you talk about racial demographics, when you talk about religious belief systems, when you talk about political views, liberal and conservative, I don't know that you find a more diversified community than what we have here. And I don't believe you can be a strong, successful leader in this community unless you can identify with all of those different subgroups within our community, and you also have to have to be able to empathize with their points of view and perspectives. I think Brian [Harvey] does that well, and I think when you look back at people in this community that are not successful leaders, it's because they don't have that skill set... Every community is only as strong as its school system, and every school system is only as strong as this community. I mean, the people that are in our schools come from our community. So the same demographics that we're talking about, political views or ethnicity or religious views, those same people are inside of our small community as a school. So all of those same values and beliefs are there.

Jordan saw as much 25 years ago when he moved to town:

Oxford's not an average community. You know, a college town in Mississippi, seeing as the [statewide] literacy rate is still very low, probably. Hopefully it's gotten above 60 percent, but I think it's still below that. And then we go into a town where the public school district is *the* school in the community and it's not, the resources are not all being syphoned off. And by resources I mean the social resources, the intellectual resources that are brought into play in a public school district where people have access to capital, whether it's social or financial. And to have everybody there, and those kids, a number of them, are coming from a group of highly intelligent, well-educated individuals that are

associated with the university, I was impressed by that mere fact. That's one of the contributing factors to the success of the paper, and the types of kids that we had in that school, and the commitment of the community to make sure that public school district stayed at the top, and that it was never really an opening or a thought by any of the community members to leave the public schools and go form a private school, which would start syphoning off those resources. And again, when I'm talking about resources, I'm talking about people and money. The people resources are as important as the money part.

Jordan has seen the way such siloing of resources has affected other communities, most notably in his home region of the Mississippi Delta:

Those towns in the Mississippi Delta are almost bankrupt because a community decided, back when the federal government stepped in and required something that should have not, that should have always been something that was accessible to all people in the Delta, i.e. the integration of schools. The community that had the resources at the time panicked and decided they'd run for the hills and form their own [schools] and not participate in public education. And therein lies the death of the Mississippi Delta as far as any type of social community or business community. Because that one factor, in my opinion, is what totally eliminated any cooperation between community members. And thus, the failure of schools... Greenwood's got lights on because of a stove company. Greenville struggles every day. Greenville used to be a fine city back in the 60s and 70s. Yazoo City, where I was raised? An unbelievable community. Of course it was unbelievable and accessible to only one of the races, but I didn't know that when I was 15.

It is not a huge leap to call the community's 1970 decisions to unite around one public school system and to remove all Confederate iconography from that school system some of the first key decision points in the *Charger's* later successes. Without other private schools to support, the community was able to channel all of its energy and expectations into the success of the public system. Mood remembers seeing this dynamic when he moved to town in 1979:

This is a unique community here, because the parents wanted their kids to excel in a lot of different things, and because of that, we became the place for it to happen. And that's how it got started in our school system. The community just demanded it, I felt like. And we had the superintendents that would stand behind the principals and try to get it done. They'd find the money, or whatever it took.

Dickens saw this commitment in the way the district supported Fitts and the *Charger*:

They gave her what she needed to produce that, and she was lucky to be in a place — we were all lucky to be in a school and school district — that supported basically all programs the best they could. Whether it was art or athletics or band or journalism, Oxford High School, you know, they just want to be excellent at whatever they do.

The financial stability created by having a supportive community played a major role in school administrators' ability to make supportive resource decisions. Those supportive resource decisions in turn made the school system better and stronger, which made Oxford a more attractive place for people with young families to move. As the population grew, so did the tax base, and the whole process repeated again in an upward cycle. As superintendent, Jordan considered himself lucky to be able to lead under those conditions:

I just came to Oxford at the right time... Oxford is a wealthy school district. It's not a given that they are, but their tax base has exploded in the last 25 years, and that's due to

the city leadership and the plans they've made to help and encourage that. And I'll be honest with you, when I was in Oxford — and I'm not a very frugal person, but I'm not an over-spender either — we would budget out what we thought we had coming in, and it seemed like at the end of the year, the tax base had grown so much that there were more funds than we initially thought we had. So we were able to put money aside to build a new building, or a new band hall when we needed it, without having to go through a tax referendum. It was pretty nice.

Much like Harvey's Portrait of a Graduate reflects today, Jordan said the community in the 1990s wanted its sons and daughters to enjoy quality educational experiences inside and outside the classroom, and that mandate meant school leaders were not afraid to invest whatever resources were necessary to make those experiences reality:

One of the things I noticed when I first got to Oxford was there were going to be three modern languages taught at that high school for four years, in other words four levels, and it was going to be funded every year regardless of the number of students who signed up for it. It was guaranteed. That was a commitment that school had to the community. A lot of schools would say, 'Look we've only got two kids signed up for German III this year, we're cutting that. We're not offering that this school year.' Well, that will destroy a program. So those were the kinds of commitments I saw when I got there from the community and from the school board... The focus on the extra-curricular activities other than football was really strong. You know football's always going to be supported. Especially in Mississippi and across the Deep South... There was not as strong of a commitment to girls sports, but we worked hard on that. We started more programs and supported the ones that already existed. And this was not something we did because we

feared Title IX, it's something we did because we wanted it to happen... So what does all this mean? It means that it does not surprise me that the Oxford *Charger* was a good newspaper, because that was just part of the plan. That's what they did. I didn't have anything to do with that. It was just that that's what Oxford demands. And I would contend that a case study could be done to show what can be accomplished when the public school community is combined in their decision making and when their demands and expectations are as high as they are in Oxford. Public school administrators will be twiddling their thumbs until the cows come home trying to make something like that happen without the support of the community. The community drives the quality of a public school district, not the people who are employed at the administrative level.

Such a drive to be "the best" can sometimes lead to extremes. With great resources come great responsibility, and it would be easy for a community like Oxford to apply intense pressure on school leaders to deliver sometimes-unrealistic outcomes. Harvey graduated from OHS and has worked for the district since 1995. The community certainly demands quality, he says, but pushes back on the notion that they are a town obsessed with winning above all else:

Having coached here and been here a long time, there's no pressure from the community or the [school] board to win games, or win awards in journalism, or win awards in band or whatever it is. That just doesn't exist, to win. Now the pressure that does exist is to have high-quality work. And if we have high-quality work in whatever we do, we're going to be competitive, because we've got the resources. And when I say the resources, the kids. We've got the kids who can compete at any level. That can be golf or bowling or journalism... And that's not a bad pressure, that's a good pressure. That there are high expectations for whatever we do. So I think that's where it comes out if something's not

going right in class. You don't have to win the newspaper award, the MSPA award, but we do want our kids to learn.

Part of learning how to produce high-quality journalism is learning how to gather information from multiple sources, verify or triangulate its accuracy, and publish the truest account possible. Removing inconvenient truths from students' scope of inquiry would undermine the educational objectives of the program. As a university town, large portions of Oxford's diverse and highly-educated population understand this dichotomy, and they value it. Roberson contrasted this dynamic with the town of Senatobia's community, where he spent two years as high school principal:

Senatobia is a very blue-collar community. They very much believe, from top to bottom, in their school system. I'd call a parent in Senatobia and say, 'Hey, little Johnny did such-and-such today,' and their response would be, 'Mr. Roberson, why are you calling me? From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., he's yours. You do exactly what you've got to do with him to make him do what you want him to do. You handle it between 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., I trust you 100% to do that. Outside of school, then I'll take care of him.' That's not how things work in Oxford. It's drastically different, drastically different. But, you know, that can be good and bad. It has its pluses and minuses as all communities do. Here in the Oxford community, you typically have very involved parents or [parents who are] hardly involved at all. Which again, is its own challenge in and of itself... Journalism or newspaper at Senatobia was more about compliance and conformity than about the creative aspect. But again, it's from a blue-collar community, you know? They wanted the news reported exactly as the facts. There was no imagination or creativity to it. You read the article just to read the facts, not to make you think about, 'Okay, where is this

going from here?’ or, you know, that kind of thing. Which is one reason I love to read, when I read one of our *Charger* newspaper articles, I'm left with something to think about. Which I think makes a quality newspaper. If I just read something and then throw it to the side, well, okay. I may have learned a little bit here and there, but I want to leave thinking about something. It's kind of like a good movie that doesn't have just the perfect ending, but that makes me, that's thought-provoking and that makes me continue my thinking.

Could a community like Senatobia — which has the same level of commitment to its school system but lacks the resources and diversity of thought central to Oxford's community identify — ever develop a high school journalism program of the calibre of the *Charger*? Roberson says yes, but with a few caveats:

Could they? Absolutely. With the right sponsor, right students, it can happen, and they have both of those, they can have both of those within their community. But I think the difference is, there is no demand for that outside of the school doors. If we put out a paper, a *Charger* newspaper, that wasn't at a certain standard — which that's obviously happened, you know, within the last 10 years — it wouldn't be accepted. And that goes back to the community. The stakeholder expectations. Just like if [drama teacher] Mr. Davenport rolled out a bad theater program. In this town? It wouldn't work. It wouldn't be accepted. No different with the academic teachers or the AP programs that we have at the high school, or our athletic teams or journalism department. There is a level of expectation in our community, and it drives everything that we do within our schools. But on the flip side, we as a school system have that same level of expectation when it comes to our community to invest in us. The bond referendum to build a new elementary school.



The bond referendum to build the new high school. The bond referendum to build the new fine arts facility. So again, it goes back to that continuous loop you want to have. It's fine for our community to have high expectations for us, but if we want to maintain them, then we have expectations as well, and it's that kind of thing that I think more of our blue collar communities that don't have the tax base that we have would struggle with. Making that connection as strongly as our community sees it. They clearly see the connection, whereas I think a lot of communities don't.

That much seems clear over the last 50 years: the town wants a free and independent student press. Whether principals and superintendents have supported or fought with the *Charger* during that span, they have done so within the context of knowing it was a program the community valued and wanted to see continue. Roberson never remembers getting a single call from a parent or community member about the journalism program in Senatobia. "And it's constant in Oxford with yearbook and newspaper," he said, especially when the program was struggling under John Wilbert.

Not all school leaders would be attracted to working under such conditions. The Oxford community appears vocal in its support and equally vocal in its critiques of administrator's leadership decisions. Mood says it is obvious the university plays a large role in such high levels of community engagement and that being an administrator in Oxford was, "probably a little bit harder, a little bit harder here." Roberson says the job requires patience and understanding:

You have to be able to empathize with the people, the constituents with which you're working. You have to put yourself in their shoes. But at the same time, you also have to take the time to not only listen, but to try to understand their perspective... Regardless of my views and my perspective, I can't write you off. It's important that I listen. It's

important not only that I listen, but that I seek to understand. I think you see that with Robin Tannehill, our mayor, and any other successful leader that you see in our community. But the reason that culture has existed here for a long time, is because you can't exist outside of that culture, simply because of the diversity that we have in just about every aspect of our town.

Thus their comfort with and ability to navigate dissenting voices has often been a determining factor in both the school leaders Oxford has chosen and the school leaders who have chosen Oxford, and those characteristics have colored all further administrative decision points related to the success of the *Charger*.

**Resources.** The next big strand of administrator decisions regards resources. Oxford's school leaders have had to make a continual series of decisions over the last 50 years about how much support to give the *Charger* and in what ways. As Jordan states in the previous section, the term 'resources' is multidimensional. In relation to their support of the *Charger*, administrators appear to have allocated, helped to allocate, or simply chose not to interfere with resources in many ways.

The first and most significant resource investment is in the teacher. Like any other subject or scholastic program, high-quality, successful outcomes depend largely on the classroom teacher who is fascinating that learning environment. Funding the position, seeking out quality hires, and communicating regularly with them about current realities, visions for the future, and what their needs are for bridging the gap between the two are all decision points for a principal or superintendent in ensuring success. Harvey says it starts with making a quality hire:

As with any other program, it really comes down to the personnel involved. We've been very fortunate to have good quality people leading the journalism program at Oxford

High School. And we've had a year or two where, you know, we haven't had that same quality. And when that happens, that's when we haven't been as successful.

Decisions in the field of human resources are critical for school leaders, and they can have long-lasting consequences. For example, Mood's decision to hire Fitts back in 1984 set the program on a 22-year path of continued success. "Boy a hit a home run with that one, didn't I?" Mood laughs. Conversely, Martin's decision to hire Wilbert in 2014 almost torpedoed the program. "Like I said, he was a step down from what we had," Martin said. "And he only lasted, he might have lasted two years... He did not work out very good."

The actual hiring of the teacher might be a one-time decision, but it is the decision from which all other resource allocation-related decisions flow. If a teacher, coach, or sponsor is producing quality results and has been a good steward of the resources they already have, administrators are far more likely to offer them greater levels of support going forward. Mood says anytime he surveyed the landscape of his school and was trying to decide where to invest his support, the first thing he looked at was the quality of the person in charge:

If we got a person that was really interested in it and doing a good job, I'd try to support them, that was my philosophy. If they weren't too interested in it, didn't want to do too much with it, then that was a different thing. And the kids could see through all that, I think. If they've got a sponsor that they don't think is doing a very good job, or is really not that interested, they pick up on that. So, if the teacher was trying to do the right thing for the kids, and trying to help them in the right direction, I tried to support all that.

In seeking a quality journalism teacher, administrators must consider many facets. The job requires a teacher with advanced content knowledge and/or a passion for the subject, coupled with a classroom demeanor that can both motivate extremely intelligent students and maintain

authority in the classroom by earning their respect. Dickens remembers Fitts having all of these qualities:

She was dedicated to our students and dedicated to her craft and wanted them to produce the best possible product. And she worked with them well, she had good relationships with them, and they wanted to perform for her. And they did.

Ferguson is another example of an educator humble enough to know she needed to learn more herself before she could lead students at the level of quality the program had come to expect. She remembers being at the end of her first year as the *Charger's* adviser and carefully crafting an application letter for a two-week national high school journalism workshop in Nevada. Being accepted would mean spending a significant portion of the coming summer away from her family, working. However, she says:

I remember my letter said, 'I need help. My students know more than I do, and please, please let me come to this institute, to learn, at least, to be able to compete with them, because I'm supposed to be leading them.'

Harvey mentions Keith Scruggs, the high school's current broadcast journalism teacher, as being another example of a classroom teacher who has been a catalyst for student engagement and improvement:

We've never been really into that. We've had a couple of kids who, because of their own initiative, did some things. We've just kind of dabbled in it, there's been a class of some kind, you know. But now he's building a program, and again, that's due to *his* work with it and the expectation that they're going to produce quality stuff. Same thing with print journalism.

While the classroom teacher has unquestionably been the driver of the *Charger's* success, it is the school leaders' responsibility to make sure that person is guiding students in a successful direction. When the program was floundering under Wilbert in 2016, the district had to decide whether to continue trying to work with him to get better or to go in another direction. Harvey feels like it is in these situations where an administrator must decide what the goals of the program are and whether or not this person has the ability to achieve them:

That's no different than really any classroom, whether it be history or whatever. There is a certain level of professionalism and responsibility, and the student newspaper, student journalism, you know that class comes with a little more responsibility to the extent that we give a stipend for it with all the after-hours stuff, etc. So, you know, if what's going on in the classroom is not up to par or high-quality, then that's going to yield in the paper, and that's where you have mistakes, you have things that they don't come out on time, etc. All of that goes into producing something. Because our ultimate goal with education is that we will help students develop the skills that will help them be employable, and part of a newspaper is producing something that — they're not professionals yet, but it is providing an experience and opportunity for them to develop those skills that one day they will hone and be a true professional.

Behind the strength and enthusiasm of the adviser, the next most critical resource in the *Charger's* success has to be the calibre of the students involved. Mood recalls OHS students in the 1980s as being highly self-motivated:

In those other higher-level classes, those kids had to make certain grades to get in, and they wanted to. They would work hard to get an 'A', and I'll tell ya, that's the way it was at that school. It was a competition within themselves, I think.

Martin said Oxford's student body still included some of the highest-achieving students in the state during his tenure almost 30 years later:

The students here at Oxford are superior. When I say superior, they're just outstanding. We have of course a strong connection to the university, and those kids that come here, education is the first-and-foremost. And people at the university are fairly smart people themselves, therefore genes beget genes and apples beget apples and they, they go to school here at Oxford. And our ACT scores, our number of, I mean, we had one year when I was principal, the second year I was principal, where we had we had nine perfect scores on the ACT test, that were STAR students. I mean come on. I mean, I mean, nine perfect scores on the ACT? So that's the type of calibre of students we've got, and of course, there's a trickledown effect from that, and then there's a lot that made above 30. I want to say like 35 or 40 that made above 30.

Though it does not appear that any administrators were ever really involved in specifically assigning students to the program, they did encourage students to get involved in high quality educational experiences that aligned to their interests. Martin remembers:

So we're talking really intelligent kids that went to an existing program and fed off of it. Because the program was so successful, it had a tendency to draw kids in, and as a result of that, they kept really high IQ kids going into the program, and the people running the program were also outstanding at doing what they did. They inherited a program that was good and just kept going. So I mean, it begets itself. Alabama football, for instance. You know, they have a good program, they recruit well, they've got good leadership, and it begets itself. This is where people want to go to become NFL players or if they want to be on a really good team. So it's kind of the same process.

School leaders have also supported *Charger* student reporters by choosing to share information with them, allowing them to have special privileges on and off campus, and availing themselves regularly for interviews. Harvey says the district tries to be as open and supportive of students' requests as possible, because every request is another learning opportunity:

We stream all of our board meetings now, so the wealth of information that kids have access to and the conversations they can hear secondhand, maybe not firsthand, but from the people who are making the decisions, you know, that helps a story. But then helping them to understand there's a public records request process, and we try to help them in any way that we can without, you know — I don't want them to spend any money, I'll sit down with them anytime, etc. — but there is a process that you have to learn about. And don't ask for an interview and be unprepared.

In enumerating all the ways principals can support scholastic journalism, Dickens zeroed in on instructional time. He said making sure the newspaper was attached to a class and that the students had regular, dedicated instructional time to produce the publication was critical. Making the *Charger* an institutionalized part of the school day meant its value extended beyond the novelty of an interest club and into the added-value realm of credit towards graduation. Other than Ferguson's recollection of there being no school period attached to the *Charger Gazette* in 1978-79, the OHS student newspaper's status as a curricular endeavor appears to have been a near-continuous norm at OHS for the last 50 years. At no point in *at least* the last 35 years has the school not scheduled one or more sections of journalism, and in many years they have scheduled two or more sections of it, plus multiple additional sections of an introductory journalism class, far more instructional units than any other high school in the state allocates towards its student media program. When Howell recalls her time as a student at OHS in the late

1990s, she thinks the school's level of commitment to the program was disproportionate to its size:

Oxford was a smaller place, a smaller school in those days than it is now. The fact that a school that size could have such a thriving journalism program, you know, which is pretty much an enrichment class, was, I think, pretty amazing. When I went on to college and you know, just kind of compared notes with my peers there, it was pretty clear that I had come from a unique background.

This type of dedication to elective course scheduling is exactly the type of student-first, budget-be-damned attitude Jordan recalled witnessing in the school's commitment to its foreign language offerings. Whether there were eight students interested in publishing a school paper or 25, the class was never cut from the schedule. Balancing the numbers of teacher units needed to keep class sizes manageable in core courses with those needed to earn the curricular and cultural benefits of expanded elective offerings was a consistent challenge at the school. Mood recalls it being an annual problem, especially during his time when the school was smaller but there were just as many student programs to accommodate. "It wasn't real easy, but it could be done," Mood said. Dickens also says it is important for administrators to make sure the class is not abused as a dumping ground for problematic students. "If it's just an elective that allows students who are not really interested, or are *disinterested* in getting the credit [to still take the course], then that makes the job of the teacher more difficult," he said. With unbalanced course rosters being a common gripe amongst faculty and overcrowding an ever-present problem, it would be easy for a journalism class to fall into this trap. The fact that it never appears to have been used or thought of in that manner speaks to the respect OHS administrators seem to have had for the program and for preserving the integrity of its instructional time. Administrators' decision points



regarding time did not stop at simply deciding the class should exist. The class has almost always been scheduled during the same period or block as lunch since that is the longest instructional window of the day. Choosing to schedule the newspaper class during that window — and choosing to allow students the special privilege of eating their lunches in the newsroom instead of in the cafeteria with the rest of their peers — afforded a group of motivated students additional instructional time to practice their craft and improve the quality of the publication. The period where Martin and Harvey suspended these practices was also a conscious choice of leadership. They were attempting to balance the needs of the publication against the needs and realities of a broader situation.

Space and technology were also key resources. If the *Charger* was going to be offered as a curricular course, administrators needed to find a physical space somewhere on campus for the program to be housed. That space seems to have moved around a lot, particularly during the school's first wave of overcrowding in the 1990s. Once those upheavals subsided, Whittington believes the classroom space the staff had during his time on staff in the 2000s was a major benefit. "We also had a space, a room that was conducive to learning and also to practical application," he said. The journalism room of the 2000s had a regular classroom space in the front, with two white boards and a small desk area for the teacher. There were enough desks for 30-35 people. He continued:

In the back, though, that's where the magic was made. It was a windowed off space where you had about 15 to 20 Macintosh computers and stations where students could go back and be laying out the newspaper while Mrs. Fitts could be teaching a class.

There was a small darkroom attached which staff members had used since the 1970s, but by the early 2000s it was mostly used as a private interview space. This mix of adjoining instructional and collaborative spaces greatly aided workflow for the staff. Whittington recalls:

It was a big enough space that, you know, for our staff meetings if we wanted to break off into six different teams, you could have sports section over here, news section over here, creative & layout over here, photographers over here, etc. We could go on our separate space and neither one of us could hear each other. Because it was constantly a bustle.

There was always something going on. So I think the environment that was created was conducive to the success we had.

When the new high school was built, the *Charger* staff was given even more instructional space from which to conduct its business. School leaders did not treat the publication as an afterthought. Ferguson was adviser during the building's planning phases and recalls being consulted about the program's needs and which designs would best accommodate them. The resulting space is large, includes multiple areas so as to allow for differentiated instruction, and is centrally located in the school's main building, directly above the administrative office suite, to allow reporters easier access to all areas of the school for conducting interviews and gathering visuals. For most of the *Charger's* history, technology was not an area in which the school district chose to allocate much support. Fitts and her students generated much of the revenue needed to buy computers, cameras, and other equipment themselves. Webb did purchase the set of Apple computers Whittington remembers the staff using — Fitts says they were a reward after she won National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year in 2003 — and it has made a significant financial investment in providing all of OHS's current students with Apple laptops.

Hamilton, Roberson, and Harvey will have more decisions to make in this area soon as the school pivots to iPads.

Oxford's proximity to the University of Mississippi has proven a useful resource for the OHS journalism program over the years. Fitts says having such easy access to the university's journalism department (now the School of Journalism and New Media) was a huge help in developing the journalism skills she was then able to teach to her students. When she first moved to town, she happened to begin attending the church with the journalism department's faculty chair, Will Norton. When Mood told Fitts she would begin teaching journalism just a couple of weeks later, she immediately reached out to Norton for help:

I called and I said, I am new in town you remember me? Beth Fitts? And I have to take six hours because I have to be certified in journalism. What do I do? And so I think it was [his wife] Susan that suggested an editing course first... And then later on as I began to realize I was going to get the master's, then Will was my chair. So he would kind of -- it was very intimidating sometimes when I took his classes, statistics and news writing and stuff like that. But he was really good. And the funny thing is, I graduated before he left to [become a dean at] Nebraska, but I would send the newspaper to him. When we would get some kind of award, I would send the newspaper to him and say, 'Thank you for getting me started.' And he never failed to write me a note back [saying] how gifted this is, how much better this is than it used to be, you know, the kids are doing such a good job, that kind of thing.

Her journalism education gave Fitts a huge advantage over other advisers, many of whom were thrown into the position without any kind of training or knowledge. Mood was able to fund Fitts's university courses through a special arrangement the district had with the university,

something other leaders would not have at their disposal. Proximity to the university also meant taking afternoon and evening courses did not saddle Fitts with long commute times or force Mood to cover her classes with a substitute teacher. With so much applicable knowledge and talent constantly flowing in and out of the university, Fitts was able more easily than teachers in other towns to invite professors and professionals to speak to her students, or to send her students to campus to cover something meaningful or newsworthy. Mood watched Fitts develop herself and her staff using the resources of the university, and by the time he became assistant superintendent, he says Fitts was an expert:

And I would go in, and go by and see her, but I didn't really feel like I could help her a whole lot because she knew more than I did in journalism, because she'd been taking all her coursework over at the university.

The university also houses the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association, which OHS has been affiliated with for at least the last 35 years. MSPA's largest event is its annual statewide spring convention, where 500-600 high school journalists from across the state descend on the University of Mississippi campus for a full day of breakout sessions with professional journalists, professors, and other industry leaders. This is also where students learn how well their publications and their individual works fared in MSPA's annual Best of Mississippi contests. Administrators appear to have seen the value in having students attend these conventions and allowed the *Charger* staff to miss a full day of school each spring to attend the event. Doing well in MSPA's contests gave the *Charger* stronger legitimacy and capital around the school and in the community, and the knowledgebase students gained from attending so many of the convention breakout sessions increased the quality of their product even further. These resources were available for all high school journalism programs in Mississippi to take

advantage of, but for Oxford this event was right across town. Since they were not having to fund any of the related travel expenses other programs were incurring to get to Oxford, OHS began sending all of its introductory journalism students to MSPA as well. Organizational records from the mid-1990s indicate Fitts regularly brought 60-70 students to the event while schools traveling in from other parts of the state were mostly limited to 15-25. Ferguson would later bring almost 100 students to the event. Field trips for clubs and athletic teams are fairly routine, but it is a significant administrative decision to allow almost 10 percent of the high school student body to miss a day of regular instruction for an elective workshop. The benefits for the publication, though, could be likened to economies of scale. With that many students enrolled in introductory journalism classes, only the best of the best would ever make it onto the actual staff of the *Charger*. If those staff members had been attending and competing at MSPA for four years by the time they became seniors, they would almost automatically be performing at a higher, more-polished level than their peers at other schools who were experiencing all of this for only the first or second time. School leaders consistently chose to give the journalism program maximum leeway in missing school to grow its talents and improve its craft.

Before long, MSPA was just one rung the ladder of outside educational experiences the program was allowed to participate in. One of the ways Fitts was able to leapfrog the rest of her adviser peers in Mississippi, aside from her university courses, was her increased access to the best and brightest high school journalism educators in the field through the myriad of conventions she attended. She and a student editor attended the school's first national convention in the fall of 1993. After that, Fitts and sometimes a few upper-level staff members would regularly attend JEA/NSPA and/or CSPA high school journalism conventions in cities around the country. Many of the speakers at these conventions would be innovative high school

educators who ran top-flight student media programs. Others would be recognizable media professionals like Bob Woodward or Peter Souza. Mood remembers:

She came in and started going to meetings in the state areas. Next thing I know she was going all out into the United States to places, and just did a wonderful job. And I just didn't have to look back on it. I mean, she completely took over, and I didn't have to worry about anything that was going on over there, really.

These conferences are not free. Students would often pay their own way or Fitts would use any surplus funds from that year's advertising sales to supplement part of the trip costs. For her own travel, though, the school would cover her expenses. Fitts was always dreaming big and identifying new conventions, contests, workshops, and organizations she wanted to get involved with, but Mood and subsequent school leaders usually acquiesced. Mood says he knew a dollar invested in Beth Fitts was one that would return great dividends for his students:

Usually I was attentive to her desires, whatever she was wanting to do, and we tried to get the funds or whatever was necessary to do what she wanted to continue doing. And I think that was the biggest thing, because I did support her in any way that I could. If we could get the money to do the things she wanted to do, a lot of times she'd take some kids with her and go places and do things with them. They'd go to conferences and things. So I just tried to support her the best that I could, because she did a good thing for the school when she took that position.

When these decision points are considered collectively, they describe a series of school leaders who enabled student success by investing significant resources into creating learning environments, enrichment opportunities, and special privileges that furthered their students'

journalism education. They removed barriers to that success when possible and capitalized on geographical advantages. Ferguson summarized things this way:

I think probably the resources available at Oxford have had a lot to do with [our success]. I mean, financial resources, building resources, the resources of the community. You know, it's a university community, we've got some people who are thinkers here. I want to say a support of the administration probably had to do with it, because I've seen both sides of that. I know the administration has played a part in it, because it's administrators who can hire and get the right people in there. I think another thing is the way that the community valued it. the school board took it seriously. They've stood up for it, and stuck up for that newspaper, for journalism.

Fitts agrees:

So many advisers are stuck because they don't have the avenues of support to get to conventions, to get more equipment, to learn more themselves. And if they can't get more, there's no growth. That's why the *Charger* grew. They soaked up the 'more', which made them want to give more. And when it became theirs... They loved it. And as an adviser you cannot help but sit there and watch them and think, 'This is what it's all about. This is super fun.' What a great career.

**Trust.** The third strand of relevant administrative decisions are those that deal with school leaders' trust and the publication's autonomy. The *Charger* appears to have always operated as an autonomous entity. It has never been subject to prior review or to administrative censorship, and this practice appears to have originated as part of a broader philosophical attitude about leadership from OHS/OSD administrators. Fitts says administrators were more or less hands off during her time running the program, especially during her first decade, while she was

laying the groundwork for turning the *Charger* into a national powerhouse. “It wasn't a lack of support,” Fitts said. “It was a lack of knowing where we needed support. They had a huge school to run, and it seemed like everything was going along fine.”

Mood confirmed this. Fitts was doing a good job in his mind, so he focused his attention on other things. He said he was never one to micromanage his people, and that none of his bosses ever looked over his shoulder either. This type of leadership style was pervasive among the OSD administrators interviewed for this study, and it extended into their management of the *Charger*. “There was this notion of, ‘We've got a classroom of budding journalists running around... let's embrace this, and let's see what happens from here,’” Whittington remembers. Most of the OSD leaders did not want to be involved in the day-to-day aspects of jobs they had hired other people to do. They tried to hire trustworthy, competent people, communicate to them their vision and expectations for the task at hand, then step back and let those people figure out how best to accomplish those goals. If the adviser was successfully motivating students to produce quality work, why get involved?

Jordan:

I'm not a micromanager. When I determined, after a year or so there in that district, that I had a competent person in charge of something, they had it. It was off my plate and was not something I was concerned about.

Dickens:

I'm not a meddler. I'm not a micromanager. I believe in letting people do their jobs and trusting them to do that. And so, you know, that was one where she was doing a great job that was one less worry off my plate. I didn't have to worry about journalism for the most part.



Hamilton:

I do think that the person sitting in the big chair many times, gets hung up on that responsibility and starts putting their finger in a lot of pies. They're always afraid of a problem. So what's the best way to keep a problem from happening? Make sure that I have complete authority over what's going on there. And I think that's what happens a lot of times. I've had some administrators that wanted their finger in every pie. They wanted, they had to know everything. I think they forget [what it's like to be in the classroom]... But I really, truly believe that we all have a job, and we all have a responsibility. Do your job and do your responsibility. And so if our, if the adviser is doing what they're supposed to do, giving our kids understanding, making sure they completely understand what their responsibility is, and what all that all entails, then I don't have a problem. And look, I get bitten. I get bitten almost every day by somebody that doesn't do something they're supposed to. It's just human nature, and it happens everywhere throughout the United States, every day... but it becomes an opportunity for somebody to understand what their real role is. That their real role is to see those things, do those things, and to make sure that it doesn't get to me. And when it does, you know, we deal with it.

Such a laissez faire stance on leadership requires high levels of trust on the part of the administrator. Ferguson recalls:

It took a lot more time than, you know, your average teacher, because you're there until 10 o'clock at night, 12 o'clock at night. And that was another thing, you know, to be able to have the administration trust you enough to have that freedom in the building after hours, and to just know that you're going to watch those kids and you're gonna have them in the right place. Administrators are very important... And I guess on the autonomy note

too: we always kept our business end of it away from the school. You know, the staff, it had to run through the financial lady in the office, whoever that was, but we raised all of our funds through ad sales... If the school holds the purse strings, then the school can have control over it, and so just being able to have their own money and their own accounts helped us be able to print what was needed, no matter what.

With that autonomy came additional accountability, though. Any mistake the students made was magnified, and could potentially come back on the adviser. Fitts said:

English teachers think you do the same thing they do. And I would try to be kind... One time I remember thinking, 'yes, we do [both] teach kids how to write. But 1,500 people see mine, and Mama sees yours.' So it's a different load of responsibility.

The *Charger* is controlled by the student editors and the rest of the publication staff. The adviser does not appear to control the content any more than the principals or superintendents have. It has been a real-world publication experience for the students involved, and both leaders and pupils seem to view the paper's content as belonging to the students. "In my mind it was their publication, not mine," Jordan said. "It was not a tool for me to use to put out information to parents that I wanted them to know. I can do my own publication for that." Harvey agrees with his predecessor, but with the caveat that plenty of overlap exists between the two audiences:

It is theirs. But to say that it couldn't be used or shouldn't be used to highlight the things that the district is doing? I don't necessarily agree with that either. And I think that's where you have a good relationship. If we're trying to get a message out, then that's obviously something we would like the student newspaper to cover. I mean, you know, about Portrait of a Graduate and our strategic planning, etc. And so, no, they're not our primary means of communication, but that's newsworthy, relevant to what's going on in

the community, and they should be involved in it. I guess it's not their responsibility to do that, but it is an expectation that you're going to cover the important stories that are happening for our school community.

Roberson also believes the publication belongs to the students, which is why making sure the right person is guiding their learning as the adviser is so critical:

I believe the key to that is, and we've already talked about it a little bit, the sponsor and that trust element. As a principal, because it can get sticky, as we mentioned to begin with, if you have someone in place that you know, that you trust, that can guide. And what I mean by guide, I mean asking students the thought-provoking questions to make them more responsible journalists. For example, a student comes up with a sensationalized title or heading. Having a sponsor in place that can ask questions, not tell the student, 'No, that heading is sensationalized, we're not using that,' but having a sponsor in place that can ask the guiding questions to make the student think about that title. And then change the title on his or her own, because he understands through the questioning of the instructor. You know, I can't tell you the number of times throughout my principalship that I heard the sponsor ask questions about, 'Hey, this article is very one-sided? It's fine, I love the topic, but now make sure you go any ask about the other side.' So when the student realized that he needed to go ask for the other side of the story, either he or she would go ask for the other side, or in some cases, if they weren't comfortable in that, guess what they would do? They would scratch the whole idea entirely. Now that's not censorship at all. That is having a sponsor in place that understands journalism, that understands that we don't want sensationalize things. We have enough of that now, that you don't even know what news is news anymore. And we

certainly do not want that within a school newspaper. We want to create responsible journalism students that are creative in their work, but are also ethical in their work. Ethics, being ethical, is part of our Portrait of a Graduate. There is no better place that they can learn to be ethical than in journalism.

Such high levels of trust in both the *Charger* and its advisers, combined with an overarching leadership philosophy of pragmatic autonomy and freedom, made a marked difference in terms of what the publication has been allowed to cover and the freedom it has been given to do so. Dickens says:

And I don't remember everything, but they wrote about some controversial topics. They probably wrote about abortion. They probably wrote about date rape. I don't know about that specifically, but they covered some good stuff and as long as it was, as long as it was done with taste, and truth, then why not? Why not let them print it, you know?

Would Dickens have asserted prior review of the paper if the students' work had not been of such high quality? "Possibly," he says:

As long as you're telling the truth, and presenting the truth and the facts, then I don't have a problem with it. But when the facts get skewed or distorted, and that brings up questions, then problems can arise... If they're putting out untruth, or questionable material, then sure.

Harvey does not want the *Charger* to answer to an administrator, and he is comfortable with the paper publishing negative stories about their school district:

I think it's the trust of the people. If you're not, if you're not doing anything wrong, you don't have anything to fear. It's one thing if they put something out there that's true. If the students expose something that's true, that's your own fault. If you got yourself into that,

that's your own issue. And so, you know, having exposure to both sides, I think that's important... That's not to say that, you know, every story that's gone in the *Charger* I've said, 'Boy, that's great!' But that's not really my place, either, as superintendent. I don't want that responsibility. I think that's why it's a student newspaper, and they need to learn and grow through that process... That's one thing that we've worked really hard to be. Transparent. From the decisions that are made... again all of our board meetings are streamed. We send information out ahead of time with all of the attachments of the things that are going to be considered at the board meeting. We ask for comments at the board meeting. Even if, let's say you can't come to the board meeting, but you've got a comment about something, then give us that. It goes straight to the board. We have a public participation. So all of that plays into it.

Harvey sees the *Charger's* freedom as being perfectly natural:

That's part of living in a community and living where we have freedom. That's part of being that. I don't get to choose all the stories. But I have the choice to stop reading anytime I want. And how many people are reading your stuff is kind of important. What kind of an impact are you having?

From a legal perspective, Oxford school board attorney Paul Watkins says:

I don't know that I've ever actually had a conversation about a legal issue that's come up. I know I've been in tons of meetings where I've seen the *Charger* has won, you know, 15 awards, or that the staff has been recognized, and I feel like I have a vague sense that I've known when they published something that ruffled somebody's feathers in some way, but I don't recall the superintendent ever calling me and saying, 'Can we do this? Can they do this? What's the outer parameters of that?' It's just not something that comes up.

Watkins grew up in Vicksburg, and at one point actually wanted to become a reporter. As a high school student, he freelanced for the *Vicksburg Post* covering local sports, and he came to the University of Mississippi originally as a journalism major in the fall of 1999. After taking a media law class as part of his journalism degree requirements, Watkins got hooked on the law and decided to shift course. He ultimately finished with a degree in psychology, stayed in Oxford for law school, and has been working with his current firm, Mayo Mallette, ever since. Mayo Mallette has represented the Oxford School District since 2003. Watkins thinks he's been their primary attorney for around the last 5-6 years. Mayo Mallette has at one time or another represented a number of educational institutions, public and private, which was something that drew Watkins to the firm in the first place. Watkins attends most school board meetings and is in regular communication, several times a week, with the district's senior leadership.

I'm not super involved directly in the schools usually unless something has gone horribly wrong. But I always joke that when I go to eat lunch with my kids up at the schools, half the teachers are looking at me nervously, like, 'why is he here now?' My oldest daughter always says, 'Everybody seems to know you around here.' I'm like, 'Yeah, they usually wish they didn't.'

Watkins is currently representing the district in negotiations over the School of Applied Technology building the district co-owns with the Lafayette County School District.

We sure hope that we can work to find an agreement that makes sense for everybody. Both as, you know, educators and as joint owners of that facility. It's just, you know, when something operates one way for a long time, it's, you know, change is hard.

He says the decision by administrators, conscious or not, to never prior review or censor the *Charger* constitutes an active choice:

I guess you start from the perspective that, you know, they can. I mean, the Hazelwood line is pretty permissive, and it was a deviation from the Tinker case, recognizing that student newspapers are different, they're funded by school funds or school activity funds or something like that. They're usually part of an educational mission related to a journalism class or journalism department. So there is intrinsically almost a legitimate educational interest in being able to limit what folks say, as opposed to Tinker where you're disciplining somebody for some other type of speech.

Still, Watkins thinks administrators are probably wise to stay out of the review process, because once they initiate that role, things become murky:

You've got to have something showing that there's some actual disruption, as opposed to just, 'I don't like this, this is wrong, I don't think this is good.' But I guess big picture, once you start doing it, you've got to figure out how much you're going to do it and how often you're going to do it, and if there are guidelines. It seems to be constitutionally permissible to say, you know, I don't think this is appropriate for the educational mission of the journalism class, and just because I find this offensive, I think it's inappropriate for 14-15-year-olds to be reading that. But I guess you could run to a situation where it would present a problem for you if you're just making ad hoc decisions, because then the rationality of your decisions is more difficult to justify if you're just 'calling it like you see it.' It's like the old Potter Stewart obscenity line, you know. 'I'll know it when I see it.' That's always an issue you've got to be very careful about, just for the sake of consistency. Because the less consistent you are, even though it's a low bar under Hazelwood, you still have to show that your action, your interest, had some legitimate pedagogical interest and that it was actually in furtherance of your educational mission.

And if you're inconsistent internally, I mean, that could cause problems... The flip side is, if you are more consistent, if you do take steps to have, you know, some kind of system of monitoring content, then you've put yourself in it. You've you set yourself up as a content reviewer, and you'd best be doing it according to the system that you set up, and you'd best be sure that you're reviewing it not just for propriety's sake, but that you're performing the work of, you know, a super-editor. That you're checking behind everybody to make sure that it's, is this actually defamatory? Do we know that you have, you know, gone through and rechecked with your source? ... But that's why you have the journalism adviser, right? That's their job. To teach the kids, 'This is what you're supposed to go out and do. This is the right way to do it. I'm going to look over the newspaper and if there's anything, you know, problematic, we'll have a teachable moment about that, and we can clear that up.' ... It's just my personal opinion, but if you pull that ultimate control up to a higher level, it seems to me it'll be difficult to disentangle yourself. Meaning that once you start doing it, at what point do you say, I either don't want to do this anymore, or I'm less interested in this week's edition of the paper than I was last week, because it's not as controversial a topic or something like that. Again, the less consistent you are with the way you want to review things and the way you want to monitor the content of what's going out there, the more likely you are for somebody to come along and say, 'What legitimate educational purpose is this serving? Why have you put these guidelines on us if you're not paying any attention to us?' On a First Amendment issue, there's always some underlying constitutional rationality threshold, just in kind of a generalized due process sense, that as long as you can come up with some reason to justify what you're doing, it's not, you know, against the Constitution. But



if somebody comes along and says, 'Hey, this literally makes no sense. The decisions you're making are literally irrational, there's no connection between, you know, the known facts and evidence and the decisions that you're making,' those cases are few and far between that they actually win, but that's what I always tell, my public institutional clients. You can have a policy. You can do this. But you've got to make sure it's applied consistently, and you've got to make sure it's applied rationally.

Harvey says just because administrators have the right to exercise censorship does not mean they should use it:

The first and obvious answer is, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what the ramifications of doing such (censorship) would be and the issues that would come from doing that. The second thing, I think, is really an understanding of the purpose behind what the student newspaper is. That it is a learning tool, and that's part of learning... They're kids. They're learning. They're going to make mistakes. And that's okay. Honestly, we need to encourage kids to make *more* mistakes. Because that's how they learn. If school is going to be where you learn, then it should be a place that's safe to make mistakes. Unfortunately, we've created a place where we glorify perfection. And we don't allow kids to make as many mistakes as we probably should.

When the *Charger* does publish problematic content, Harvey tends to see that more as a failure of teaching than a problem with the students:

Now that's not to say that there's never been a conversation with the sponsor, 'Hey, this is your job. To help guide them. I mean, it's your responsibility to make sure that we don't put ourselves in this position, and to lead and guide them.' We've never had administrative review or oversight or anything like that, but from time to time, there have

been one or two conversations with one or two individuals about, you know, 'Hey, we expect you to guide and lead, and help them to avoid some of these issues.'

In Martin's estimation, not prior-reviewing or censoring the *Charger* made the publication better than it would have been otherwise:

What you get is you get motivated people, because they're getting to do what they want to do. And I think everybody is like that, to some extent. I think journalism kids are like that, journalism teachers are like that, teachers are like that in general. So, hold the standards? For darn sure. But don't micromanage. Or micromanage just as little as you possibly can to get the desired result, which in this case, is a great quality newspaper... [Being] non-censored allows the freedom of kids to love to do what they do. I don't even know, to be honest with you if my high school paper was censored. Our English teacher, which we only had one in the school, was also our journalism teacher and also head our student newspaper. Now I'm sure she read over it for accuracy, because I'd get stuff back, you know, and she would correct me, but what you get on that is much like what you get from a coach.

Martin says he approaches being an athletic director the same way. It is a coach's job to coach his or her sport autonomously. The athletic director's job is to give coaches what they need to succeed, communicate expectations, and assess whether those expectations are being met. He continues:

But I would never tell my football coach to run the sweep or the reverse. I would not micromanage that. So I would like to think all my coaches are secure in their jobs, they're supported in their jobs, but their jobs are also being monitored to the extent of quality control.

Jordan, like Harvey, realized the potential exists for the *Charger* to publish damaging or embarrassing stories. That never made him support prior review or censorship, though:

Sometimes it goes wayward. You give full trust to the student publications, and there are times. But that doesn't mean you stop that trust. You deal with that particular case, and try to keep it as an isolated instance, and then move on.

Dickens thinks most issues between principals and advisers could be solved with more communication from the school leader. He pulled a well-worn book off his office shelf and held it up. "Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals: From Good to Great Performance" by Elaine K. McEwan (2003). He brought the text with him from his time at Ole Miss, and uses it as part of one of his MC classes. "The first trait is communication," he said. "Teachers, students, parents, community. It's most important." Ferguson and Fitts both stressed the importance of communication and trying to keep administrators in the loop when potentially sensitive coverage was being considered. Ferguson recalls:

The interesting side of it is that as an adviser, and Beth did this too, I think you had to have enough relationship with the administration to be able to walk in there at some point and say, 'Okay, the kids are fixing to do an article on 'blank'. I want you to be aware. I want you to know what their viewpoint on this is. I've had them interview this, this, this, and these people... is there something I'm missing?' And you know, you have that relationship with your administration so that they know it's kind of coming? I always tried to do that, and it keeps, it helps keep the relationship nice. Now, I would not take... I would never take an article in for them to look at, but I could always give them a heads up. That way they can make sure they're getting the interviews that need to be, maybe an opposing side or something, and I can guide the staff in that way... I would just kind of

make sure that, behind the scenes, my job as the adviser was to make sure that we're right in all directions. And I just kind of could give them a heads up. And they appreciated that.

Roberson, like many of the other Oxford administrators, takes a longer view of censoring student speech. Even though doing so might save him a headache or two today, it will ultimately prove futile, he says:

I'll give you a great example of why I don't believe in censorship. In leadership we call this the law of right/wrong conflict (DeBruyn, 2011). If I have a problem with you, and I am your superior, your authority figure, it is very easy for me to say, 'No. We're not going to do it that way. You need to do it this way.' Perfectly fine. If you want to keep your job? Simple. You go do it. We move on. But I have not changed your perspective. There is no sustainability in what I just did. it may last for that instance, but when that instance is over, you have no reason not to think about doing that the next time, or bringing that issue back to me again. Whereas the law of right/wrong conflict says that is my job, as the leader: to change your perspective. But it takes time. It takes time for me to change your perspective. So a lot of leaders don't believe in the law of right/wrong conflict because it takes time to change the perspective of another individual. They like just saying no, go do it this way. I think that's what a quality journalism sponsor does. They live in the land of the law of right/wrong conflict. I'm not going to tell you, I'm not going to censor you by telling you not to do this, but I'm going to change your perspective in the long run because it's not ethical, responsible journalism. And that's the beauty of having a quality journalism teacher in the classroom.

The *Charger*'s autonomy was established in the 1970s. Wade never prior-reviewed the paper, and Mood did not either once he arrived in 1979. The dip in quality caused by a high adviser turnover ratio in the early 1980s could have eventually led future principals to request final approval, especially after the Hazelwood court decision in 1988 gave them further leeway in controlling student content. However, Fitts brought such stability and rigor to the program at around the same time, nothing of the sort ever occurred. That continuity of quality contributed greatly to future administrator's views of the program and would color their decisions on censorship for decades to come. Harvey says:

I think whenever you build a program that, you know, has the kind of numbers that you're talking about, stability and longevity undoubtedly play into it somewhere. That doesn't just happen, you know, overnight. Now it can quickly go the other way. But any program at the high school, you've got to have a good foundation, which is always the students, but then you've got to develop those students and give them opportunities to grow and be successful. And so if you're asking me, it's certainly not been the superintendent. I can't say that it's been the principal. But it has undoubtedly been the sponsor, and I think the commitment of the sponsors over that period of time, both in providing direct support, and also indirect support of, you know, the kids who were in that program.

The freedom of the *Charger* therefore became almost a foregone conclusion for Oxford's school leaders, as did their expected level of support. "It had been decided before I was the principal that that's what they were going to do," Dickens remembers, "and it was, it was a good thing." After leaving his principalship, Mood was assistant superintendent for OSD until he retired in 2000, and he says other district administrators never questioned the *Charger* either. "It had a reputation," he says. "Everybody could see what it was like, you know." Whittington remembers

school board members and others treating *Charger* reporters not as children, but instead sometimes giving them the same guarded answers or factual obfuscations they would give a professional reporter:

So it was like, alright, our reputation precedes us. There's something here that you don't want to talk about. But that wasn't our role, you know? Our role was to get the story and to report the news. So we always found a way. But no, never any hostility from other administrators.

He remembers the same respectful deference being true of the way others responded to Fitts:

By that time, she had capital. People knew that when Beth Fitts called, they needed to answer the phone. And they knew she needed something, but also knew there was a reason for it. So that was, that was already helpful, especially for advertising, to already have your foot in the door.

Chaney feels like this perpetual wheel of trust and respect has continued all the way up through the *Charger's* current operation:

I think it's kind of a word of mouth thing from one principal to the next, is what I've found. Like, the students on the newspaper are ethical students, and we haven't had a problem with them so far, so just, you know, leave them alone and let them do their thing.

Martin is by far the most micromanagement-prone administrator interviewed for this study, and his battles with the adviser and publication in the first half of the 2010s represent the most significant threat of censorship the *Charger* has ever endured. Even so, he speaks highly of the program and its value today and says he would not necessarily recommend such a heavy-handed

approach to other principals at other schools: “I'm not in their shoes, but I just know that coming here and having a great existing paper that was not micromanaged by censorship was working.” Ferguson knew how important it was to keep the newspaper “great”, as Martin put it. The higher the quality, the less likely her students were to give the principal a Hazelwood-valid excuse to exert control. She says:

I taught the kids if you're doing the right thing, they don't have that right. If you start messing up, they do. They can get that right to do it if you've messed up and not gotten things right. So we made sure they got it right.

But does its history of freedom and quality actually protect the *Charger's* future freedom?

Watkins does not think so:

I don't know of any legal reason why they could not [censor]. The whole point of Hazelwood — in addition to talking about the administrator's interest and how that plays against the student's interests — was it also talked about it in the context of the forum. Like what kind of forum is it? And we know it's not a public forum, right? Because not anybody can come in and do whatever. So it's always going to be, to the extent that it's in the context of a student-published newspaper that's associated with an educational class, I don't know of a legal hindrance on the part of the school district to change the nature of that forum.

Chaney, who is also a lawyer, argues that with such a long history of independence, the *Charger* now constitutes a limited public forum, and it would be difficult for the district to legally re-exert control at this point. She opines:

You look at the standards under Hazelwood, and yes, it is a newspaper that's put out during a class period, and it's a teacher paid for by the school district, but it's never been

under prior review, it's never — there's no budget from the school, everything is paid for by ad revenues, all the other factors that you look at under Hazelwood, and there's not really... I mean, it becomes a limited forum, a limited public forum newspaper, and so therefore, there's no way for them really to stop you from doing that.

Watkins agrees with Chaney's designation, but not her interpretation of its meaning:

It's some kind of designated or limited public forum. There are situations where public entities can, over time, lose the ability to tell the public that a particular area, a particular park or something like that, is not a public forum... because you treated it as a traditional public forum, as a courthouse-steps or as a sidewalk that anybody's entitled to use for so long, you're restraining your ability from going back and doing that just because you want to. But when something was always a designated or limited public forum, you can usually change the manner in which you treat that forum. So I don't think that the passage of time alone would change that. But there could be a case out there that says that I'm wrong.

The Hazelwood decision gave school leaders a wide berth in determining content in student newspapers that are deemed to be 'school-sponsored'. Watkins continues:

Because of what the standard they announced actually was, regardless of how they treated the facts and talked about the policies — because they were looking at the factual context — I have a hard time concluding, given the words that they actually give us, that if that principal had in fact decided to change policies, or the policies had been different leading up to that point, that they were constitutionally prohibited from doing that. Now, we have no way of knowing that, because the Supreme Court made it up, right then. It doesn't matter why they came to the conclusion, doesn't matter what the facts were, and



we'll never know. But they could tomorrow tell me, you know, 'No, actually your read of that is wrong, and we do find that under some kind of forum-based analysis once you've opened it up...' But I think that would be a pretty significant abdication of what Hazelwood said, at the end of the day. Because if what they find is that a classroom-tethered journalism program and student newspaper may be treated and regulated in the same way that other portions of the educational programming is, it's sort of difficult to backtrack from that line of reasoning, right? But again, I don't have a black robe... Until you have a set of facts, it's all so high level. It's all just talking in generalities until you can sit down and look at what's actually happened.

The district does not currently have a school board policy in place regarding the freedom or control of its student media programs, and no one interviewed for this study recalled such a policy ever existing in the past. Should it so choose, Watkins says the school board could adopt a policy instituting administrative prior review any time it wants. "I'm not aware of any constitutional constraint that would preclude administrators, or the superintendent or the board from adopting some policy that affected the way the journalism program runs the student newspaper," he says. No such policy appears to be on the horizon. In 2020, the *Charger's* autonomy has become an entrenched part of the culture of Oxford High School and the Oxford School District, as has a pervasive leadership philosophy that enables such programs to thrive. Roberson sums this position up best:

My leadership philosophy is to lead as if you have no power. Now, let me explain to you a little about what that means. That means that my focus as a leader — and I like leading an organization around this principle — it's not only my job to make myself better, but my main focus is making those around me better. And think about leading an

organization to where each individual organization is not worried about their own improvement, but is worried about the improvement of the others around them and are working to help them improve. But in return, guess what's happening? There are other individuals in the organization that are helping that individual improve. And think about how strong of a team you have when you're leading that type of organization. Because there's improvement going on in its entirety, continuously, within an organization if you can get that type of leadership. And when I say leadership, it's somewhat misleading. Because it's not about a hierarchy. At that point, it's about the improvement of the whole by focusing on the others. If everybody in the organization has that philosophy, everybody is improving. And if everybody's improving, the organization is improving. And then of course, there's sustainability and longevity within your organization. You can institute technical changes within an organization and they come and go. That type of leadership builds a culture. Culture just doesn't come and go. If you can establish a culture, I can walk out the door and leave and that culture remains. And that is the most important part of what I believe makes an effective leader, an effective journalism sponsor, and also an effective teacher modeling that kind of principle inside the classroom... And I think in the long run, what you see from that, is if you can get past those first bumps in the road, and you start building an organization that is centered around trust — which is what you have to have to relinquish a journalism program without censorship to a sponsor and to students — if you relinquish that trust to them, the return is far greater in the long run. Are there going to be bumps in the road? Absolutely. There's a learning curve with anything, right? There's always a learning curve with change. But I've found as far as sustainability within a program, that's the way to go. You

build trust, and you build longevity, and you build sustainability by giving those that work for you, and alongside you, autonomy to do their job to the best of their ability. I'm really big on autonomy.

The combined effect of these three strands of administrative decisions — values, resources, and trust — has been a robust curricular journalism program with a 50-year history of impacting the lives of students, stakeholders, and the community at large. Oxford's school leaders have demonstrated a near-consistent pattern of support and perspective over that span, and their combined decisions helped the advisers and students beneath them build and sustain a powerhouse. Echoing Reichley's (1964) words in Chapter 1, Dickens summarizes this phenomenon like this:

You know, they built a program, just like the New England Patriots program. And the pieces change, but the results are the same. They have great leaders. They have leadership from the principal, they have leadership, great leadership from the adviser. And obviously the students provide leadership too. The seniors and juniors provide leadership for other freshmen and sophomores and... I just think they have developed the program and the expectations are high every year and they have the support and.. I don't know. They just have the hard work and the trust and communication, and all of those things, you know? I think every principal that's been there has had the same viewpoint that I did, you know? Just get out of the way and let them do their thing as long as they're doing it right, the right way.

**2. What benefits have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?** Oxford administrators have invested significant resources

in the journalism program over the last 50 years, and in return, the *Charger* has yielded several tangible benefits to the school, some curricular, others cultural.

From an educational standpoint, students enrolled in the program are given the opportunity to practice communication, critical and creative thinking, cultural awareness, and a host of other skills in a real-world learning lab. “[Curricularly], I think it's incredible,” Roberson said. “It is so aligned with our Portrait of a Graduate and the type of student that our community demands.” Hamilton views the curricular value of the newspaper class as being “really, kind of a big, big deal.” He continues:

You know, my mother told me when I was probably nine or 10 years old, that if you can communicate effectively and efficiently, you can do any job in the world. You can be a janitor, all the way up to the top. And I see that with these journalism classes that I've been around. I see that their communication skills, from the day they walk in to the day they walk out, their communication skills are different. They're probably better than just your average student at being succinct in what they need to talk about. telling you the important things. It would probably be interesting to see how well they take notes when they get to college. Know what I mean? They get the stuff out of the conversations that you need to know. And they're able to fluff it when they need to, but that's... it's that communication thing. They just kind of, I think through the process, it hones those skills on what's important. What are the things that I need to know, so that I can communicate them with other people and not miscommunicate what I've heard, or what I've seen or whatever. And so that's huge. That is so huge in today's technology world, with how text messages and Snapchat and Instagram and all those things are — can be and many times are — forms of *miscommunication*. And so when you got kids that can better pull the

meat out of the things they hear and see, and give that to others, I just think curricularly that's... that's the mushroom. That's a big deal. You would love for all of your kids to be able to go through that.

Jordan measures the publication's benefits on a broader scale:

The benefits of school publications are that they go hand in glove with what the classroom teachers are trying to deliver on a daily basis, and that is literacy, first and foremost, and proper communication and all the issues that go along with that. You know, most of the standardized tests that the state of Mississippi requires for graduation from high school are nothing more than reading tests. They call them science. They call them history. But other than algebra, mathematics, the rest of them are based on a child's literacy level. And that's the reason you can find a well-read child, and by the seventh grade, you give them the ACT and they score a 27, 28, 29, and it doesn't surprise me. But one thing I will know is that that child has been reading their entire life, and writing their entire life. Because that's all the ACT is as well, is a literacy check. And that is the benefit of participating in a school publication.

Harvey agrees with Jordan on this point wholeheartedly:

And I've seen this with my own kids. It's not that they can't think, it's that they don't know how to think. It *is* possible to be able to get credit for calculus and not understand how stuff works. I mean, that's possible. You can do that. And I'm not sure that's exactly what schools need to be doing. We need to think, 'How does all of this stuff fit together?'

Harvey said he recently met with the district's fifth and sixth-grade science teachers. His case to them was simple: it is not that kids do not *already* understand large concepts like Newton's laws of gravity on a practical level, because they do. They live on this planet every day. What they

actually lack is the language to explain such phenomena to others or to properly engage with its application. “So is it a science problem?” he asked. “No, it's a communication problem, and it's a thought-process problem. But if they can't communicate, guess what? We think they don't know science.”

The program also appears to have taught students various business and marketing skills. Dating all the way back to the *Charger Gazette* of the 1970s, the newspaper's printing budget has been fully funded through ads and subscriptions sold by the staff. Students were required to solicit money from local business and community groups, pitch and design advertising concepts, set their own rates, keep their own records, etc. To raise money for computers in the 1990s, the staff freelanced their publication skills to the local Rotary Club to generate additional funding. Ferguson sees this as a key piece to the learning environment that is often overlooked:

I mean, I had to teach them how to be an accountant, you know? They had to pay their own bills, they had things, like, that had to be invoiced and things that had to be accounted for, and if they didn't have enough ads, I wouldn't let it run. You know, it's like, ‘You don't have enough ad sales this month to print that many pages.’ And they said, ‘Well, we got this stuff we gotta, we gotta put on the page.’ And I said, ‘Well then you better go sell some more ads, because you can't print it if we can't pay for it.’ And I was not gonna go to the school to ask for the money. So it taught them a little more to be responsible for that... A lot of those kids that came through, they were smart anyway. But for them to get that four years of experience of running a business? And having the responsibility of, ‘it's got to be done by deadline,’ and, ‘it's got to be done *right* by deadline,’ and, ‘I've got to keep putting the hours in, and the work in, and getting it

right'? It taught them so much, and they'll come back and tell you, I learned how to live and be a productive citizen in journalism.

Ferguson thinks students who came through the journalism program and the school's debate program probably have a greater capacity than other graduates for considering all sides of an issue and communicating them concisely to an audience. It is the soft skills Ferguson mentions, though, that stand out to Chaney:

I just think it teaches them more life skills probably than any other thing that they can do in high school. You've got deadlines to meet, you've got your own personal responsibility for things, you've got to help out with others. When you're an editor, you're reviewing other people's work and they're meeting your deadlines, and then you're talking to adults on a daily basis, interviewing people, and I just think that it teaches those skills, just communication skills, and how to balance your time wisely more than anything else you can do in school.

Dickens recalled the way his journalism students learned skills that would benefit them in other areas of their personal lives, their education, and their careers:

Obviously the writing. The storytelling, the fact gathering, the research. Producing a great product, or a good product. Taking pride in what you do. A lot of those students went on to college and majored in journalism, and they're doing writing stuff probably all over the country.

Martin likewise praised the program's ability to prepare its staff for careers in journalism or, well, anything:

And I can't count the number of our students that left the student newspaper in the student journalism classes and went to Ole Miss and became journalism students there. And there

were several others that went to other places that I kept up with for a while too, but like I said, time and distance. It's been five years since I was in the principal's chair. But it preps them just like mathematics, just like social studies, just like English. If you have a strong journalism class, the kids are prepped. They're prepped to go forward and not only enter that field, but also to read, and to be educated, and to make informed decisions. These are some really smart kids, they're going to surface somewhere in the field that they're in... And with them, they take that skill set and that knowledge to not only be journalism students, but one day also to be in whatever field they're in and be the leaders in whatever field they're in, and to be able to read educated material or printed material, like the newspaper... So it also served those kids well, going elsewhere.

Like Jordan, Martin talked about the program's benefits to the school in even broader terms. Beyond the students actually taking the course, he said the *Charger* has contributed to the overall culture of the school by offering all students a consistent source of relevant content and information:

It served a wonderful purpose for the school, having a great newspaper, so your students *read* a good quality newspaper. All 1,300 students get to read the student newspaper. They're discussed in class. You don't have to be a journalism student. Everybody gets a copy of the newspaper when it comes out. It's the rave! I mean, there's not a student in the cafeteria — it's the quietest day, in the cafeteria, the quietest day *or two*, even, when the newspaper comes out, because the stack stays in there. But it's sports, it's covering everything. It's the, you know, 'Vaping or not?' or whatever the issue is for the day. So *they* learn what good journalism is. *They* learn. They're exposed to what good writing is, and it serves them well then in *their* life to read and to make good decisions in politics,



etc. These kids read a good source of information in the printed word, or the online word, and as a result of that, they're better students because of it. I won't compare it to the good that they get out of algebra, or English III, but it's invaluable. It's something that's hard to measure. It enhances their life and their quality of decision making and all of the aspects that you have enjoyed yourself to get where you are, because when you read something, you comprehend it, you get it, it stirs conversation.

Harvey thinks having a fair and factual student news source is a great tool for increasing students' media literacy, especially with the divisiveness of the current professional media climate. "I can scroll through my phone... opinion piece, opinion piece, opinion piece, opinion piece," he says. "There's very little news that presents both sides, and that's not a good thing."

Roberson agrees:

True quality journalism can help shape our views on things without telling us what our view should be. And that's really the problem I have with a lot of media today. You know, you go to one side and it's very clear what your view should be. You go to the other side, and it's very clear what your view should be. There's nothing that just gives you the information and allows you to dictate or think about when views you want for yourself, or what you value for yourself.

High schools are made up of many disparate populations of students. Jordan says the *Charger* is yet another way administrators can engage a group of students who might not otherwise be being served and challenged by their high school experience:

Student involvement is just so critical. You know these high schools that go wayward? You know what's happened, don't you? Let me tell you who the strongest personalities are in an 800-student high school, if it's allowed: the strongest personalities are the kids

who are creating the problems. They're strong. They have leadership ability that's off the charts. It's just misdirected... Kids need to be involved. A student publication is part of what young people are responsible for at the high school level, and that in itself can bring great honor and great recognition for the school and thus the school district.

Jordan sees the newspaper program as being just like a sports team: "Teamwork, pay attention to detail, work hard, take pride in what you produce." He believes this same concept is true of all school activities, and he believes outsiders do not always understand the cultural value having great programs bring to a school system:

How things work better. How much more cohesive everyone is. How the respect is shown between the athletes and non-athletes in the hallways. How discipline goes down when your [programs are] doing well. It's just a connection. And people don't always get that, but it is.

Beyond its impact on students, the program has been a major public relations benefit in relating the district to the community. Parents read the *Charger*. Alumni read the *Charger*. Local citizens with no affiliation to the OSD can pick up a copy at any number of businesses around town. Not all of the stories the *Charger* covers are positive, but not all of them are negative either. In fact, the vast majority of the news coming out of the Oxford School District in the last 50 years has been that of continued success on a continuously larger scale. Even though the *Charger* operates as an objective publication, things in Oxford have mostly been objectively good. As such, the strength and reach of the *Charger* mostly serves to *further* the reach of the school's professional public relations efforts instead of stifling them. Jordan used Fitts for his own public relations purposes in the 1990s and 2000s, and viewed the *Charger* as another plank

in his quest to make the Oxford community more aware of the excellence of their school system, but he stops firmly short of saying this should be the publication's sole purpose for existing:

I think the first role is student development. Whatever you do, whatever decision you make, you ask, 'how will it benefit students?' and would a problem like that, how would it benefit students? So public relations would be a small part of it. Very, very small. It's for the students.

Nevertheless, even when factoring in the cost of some of the negative stories the *Charger* brings to light, administrators must weigh those costs against the benefits they have reaped from the additional awareness and engagement created for other topics through the newspaper's prolific coverage of school and local happenings.

Potentially even more beneficial to administrators than that the *Charger's* coverage is the sheer volume of outside recognition the newspaper itself has generated. "The things that they accomplished is what impressed me," Mood said. "They would come in with the top rankings just about all the time. That's what impressed me." The *Charger* has won more than 15 MSPA state championships, nine SIPA All-Southern ratings, six CSPA Crown awards, four NSPA Pacemakers, and four Student Emmys. Fitts, Ferguson, and Chaney all won multiple MSPA Adviser of the Year honors, and Fitts won three separate national adviser awards, including National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year. The program has accumulated countless other publication and individual student awards over the last 35 years, and each one of these recognitions gives administrators another opportunity to brag on the quality of their students, their community, their school, and their leadership. Ferguson says:

They like awards. Whether you're in drama, whether you're in debate, whether you're on a football field, they like awards. That makes the school attractive. So you play that game

with them a little bit, you know? We keep those awards coming in and, in doing that, the kids are working harder, they're going to the conferences, they're learning how to do things, etc. So yeah, you have to kind of play that little game with it to keep the school administration and the public happy with it, and [some of] those kinds of accolades are only gonna come for newspapers when there's a little bit of controversy involved. And in all the publications, like for the school district, there's 'award-winning journalism program' over and over. 'Nationally award-winning journalism program.' So they like that and they know if we're going to keep that in our publications, then we gotta keep the journalism program winning awards, and that may mean we have to look the other way on some of the stories that we don't really like. I think that all comes into play.

Ferguson's "they" could just as easily be interpreted as referring to administrators as to the community writ large. Both the public stakeholders of the district and the leaders they have hired to carry out their wishes seem to understand that they are getting more in return than they are giving up by allowing the *Charger* to operate independent of administrative oversight.

**3. What challenges have the success and autonomy of the *Charger* created for the school, district, and/or its administration?** Housing and funding a curricular program of the *Charger*'s calibre is not without its challenges. As previously detailed, the program requires a myriad of resources to continue to operate at a high calibre. Instructional units are getting tighter, as Chaney noted, and so are the program's student resources. An increased push over the last decade toward more AP and dual-enrollment courses has only exacerbated the problem. Every resource allocated to the *Charger* is a resource not being put towards other uses, so if the program is to continue, administrators will most likely be faced with challenging decisions on this front in the very near future.

Fears over the publication's content will always be a challenge if the *Charger* is to remain independent of administrative control, and indeed some of its content over the last 50 years has presented challenges for its school leaders. Jordan and Dickens did not like the newspaper's portrayal of the district's zero-tolerance policy in the 1990s. Martin did not like the newspaper's portrayal of his policies and leadership in the first half of the 2010s, and Harvey did not like having to defend himself against accusations of racism in the second half of the decade. Harvey says such concerns are all part of the process, though:

And I guess, to speak to the uneasiness that it makes, us being in charge of a school as the high school principal or superintendent, we're always cognizant of what is the perception. But at the same time, kids need to grow through that. And they have to understand. And that's why the adviser or the sponsor is there to provide guidance. 'If you do this, there are going to be other consequences. You need to be ready to deal with those consequences.' No matter how you feel about it, there are going to be consequences to it. And I think that's one of those things that, I'm not going to say it's never happened, but it's only happened a few times in the sense of: You burn me, I don't have to give you an interview, and they have to understand that. That when you're interviewing somebody, you're taking their time, and they don't have to. So I think it's helping them understand that relationship, and the best sponsors have done that really well.

Fitts's daughter is now an administrator, so Fitts has developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for school leaders' perspectives:

It's hard. We don't want to ever be guilty of thinking, 'Oh that mean person.' We don't know what they're going through. And I'm not saying back off on what you print, I'm just saying keep an open forum, and don't be afraid to lead your writer in the wisdom of their

words. Say the truth, but don't say it in a Yellow Journalism way. Editorials should tell us when there are some deficiencies, yeah, but they should also have quotes from people that say, 'These are the deficiencies that we're working on right now,' or whatever the case may be. We can't just lambast people without going to them and saying, 'Do you have a response to this that I could print?' And if I were in that situation, I would want a chance to respond before it went to print... I think so many advisers see administration as being the enemy. I think they want to push them away. And I've had a few over the years where you had a little bout over something. But if the adviser has the right attitude, I believe you can make an alliance. Not that they're going to support everything you do, but a friendly alliance.

Though she seldom felt much pressure from her administrators, Fitts imagines some of the *Charger's* reporting during her tenure might have made life harder for them, especially once the staff started aggressively pursuing stories "that mattered" to their peers using the maestro method:

But theoretically, what's important to the student should be important to administrators. So if it's a way to see that this is important, then maybe the administrators can see that this is something that they need to look at and pay attention to? And then sometimes they will come up with the topic or policy that they *want* us to cover; that would help them to get the truth of the situation out there.

Fitts's thinking aligns with other collected data points. Roberson learned about his school's Adderall problem in the *Charger*. Hamilton, and to lesser degree Harvey, said the newspaper can be a great vehicle for advancing stories they want students and parents to be aware of. Ferguson

imagines the students' work is sometimes uncomfortable for school leaders, but like Fitts says, sometimes also necessary:

I think it just makes you more honest. It would be hard as an administrator, sometimes, to step back and make sure that you're taking into consideration not just the production of it, but the curricular part of it. What is it, as a school, we're trying to teach these kids?

Administrators are trained to be risk-averse. The uncertainty of an independent journalism program is a major challenge for a leader who is set on achieving what Roberson called "conformity and compliance" from all parties beneath him or her. Such a mindset will eventually kill students' interest in the program, as happened during Wilbert's two years as adviser, and in Oxford that would have created its own set of administrative headaches to deal with. Of course, had Wilbert been retained, Roberson doubts Harvey's comments about the opt-in school would have ever made it into print:

Very honestly, I don't think the article would have ever materialized under the previous journalism instructor. Mrs. Chaney is not going to shy away from a journalism topic just simply because it may make someone uncomfortable. As long as the article is written well, with both points of view, and it has not been sensationalized, and it's truthful.

Another challenge school leaders must consider is the issue of liability. If the *Charger* was to publish content that turned out to be libelously false, the publication could be sued for damages by the offended individuals or entities. This has never happened in Oxford, nor does Watkins see it as a likely occurrence, but it remains a possibility, he says:

The first place you always look at is the content creator, the person who actually put the words on the page together. I mean, I would guess that in practice, you wouldn't see a student high school student journalist get sued for defamation. The same way you are

much more likely to sue the *New York Times* company rather than the reporter, right? I mean, it's blood from a turnip.

In such a suit, the district and/or its leaders might also be named as defendants. Watkins thinks he recalls seeing cases where liability was hinged to the publisher of the offending material, however:

The school district — or a school district, in the abstract — is not a publication company. It's not doing that. So I bet there are cases out there that talk about the level of control being exercised at any given level. I mean, I would be surprised for example, if a high school principal, who had nothing to do with the day to day operation of a high school newspaper, could be found to have defamed somebody by virtue of content in that newspaper... So I wouldn't guess that a school district would just be automatically liable because it is a school sponsored activity. But I could be wrong about that... I just wouldn't think that that's the sort of liability that could just be imputed to other individuals or to the organization writ large just because it was a school program. I mean, defamation is usually more of a personal tort. That's what my gut tells me, but I don't have a crystal-clear answer on that.

In such a situation, the principal or superintendent lack of prior review might actually work in their favor, Watkins said:

It would not surprise me if that were the case. I mean, if, for example, you had a high school principal who went the nuclear option and said, 'I will be the final level review for everything you put in your paper,' and he looks at a statement that turns out to be untrue and didn't go back and tell the student journalist, you know, 'You need to go check your facts,' or something like that, I mean, he's certainly more clearly in the chain of potential



defamation than a principal who didn't do that... The truth is, I don't think there's a whole lot of that type of litigation with student newspapers. The constitutional litigation you usually see is with students saying that their rights have been violated. Not a whole lot of people are suing high school student newspapers. Defamation, just writ large, is not a huge practice area. Defamation cases are notoriously difficult to prove, and that becomes more so the more important, the more public the potential plaintiff is. But even from a small scale, even if we just have a negligence standard as opposed to an actual malice standard, I mean, the truth is an absolute defense. And you'd be shocked how much there's always a grain of truth.

Relationships between administrators and advisers have been a challenge. Martin's biggest challenge in dealing with the *Charger* was primarily about his relationship with Ferguson and her reluctance to comply with his demands. Martin recalls:

She was outstanding at doing what she did. She was outstanding. I inherited her. Did we clash swords from time to time? Absolutely... Anyway, we when I say we clashed or drew swords, no more than I would have with anyone. But it all worked out in the wash good, because they continued to turn out great newspapers with no censoring and moving forward on that. So yes, we had some, we butted heads on a few things. For darn sure. But to me it was good head-butting. It was nothing more than leadership and teachers working out problems.

Ferguson did not see their disagreements as good-natured:

He knew what buttons to push. But as an adviser and somebody who, I mean, I poured time and energy and money and love and all into the program, and wanted to continue. And I was seeing kids graduate with, and go on to do journalism things, and other things

that were amazing. And they'd come back and say, you know, 'I learned a lot in journalism.' And I wanted that to continue, and so to get that pushback, that, 'No, we're not gonna do it that way anymore,' it was hard. It was hard... And you know I've looked back on it and thought, was it something I did? To just irritate him or whatever? And I keep thinking, I don't really think I did. I stood up to him, you know, and I told him, you know, I would very respectfully tell him, try to tell him, what I was, why we were doing what we were doing, and show him the things from the conferences and things we went to, and... He was a person who'd like to have that, that say-so over what was going on. He liked that control factor over what was going on. And he knew that with no prior review, he wasn't going to be able to do that.

Martin defended his actions this way:

There's always administrative reasons and rationale. Now from your chair they may not be right, but there are reasons for doing them. Much like the overcrowding and the reserved seating in the cafeteria. Play on words for darn sure, but we didn't have any fights that year in the cafeteria, and we had three fights that entire year. At a high school. Now that was never reported, but that's one of the biggest pride things that I've ever had since I was an administrator. Not that I'm just about no fights, but the previous year there'd been 47 fights before I was principal, 47 at that school. And the reason I know that is all you have to do is get on the computer, and there's the data right there. Well like 16 of those were in the gymnasium. Like 12 were in the cafeteria. Have you ever been in the cafeteria when a fight occurs? Not a pretty sight. It's nowhere to go. It goes sideways bad, there's plates, there's trays, it's a mess. And we had no fights in the cafeteria that year. That wasn't necessarily reported, and I didn't necessarily want them to, because I

knew. I knew what we were doing had some validity to it. There might have been a better way but I knew that worked.

Watkins:

But you know, there's a fundamental inconsistency with some of that stuff. You know, part of the role of the school administrator is law and order. It's disciplinary, it's making sure, and you've got to keep those kids safe. And sometimes that means, you know, weeding out a bad seed or making sure this person is not here or this person is where they're supposed to be... And the way these issues arise can be subtle sometimes. I mean, it's easy for good and smart people to not appreciate that, 'Oh, this actually may be getting into a speech area. What I'm upset about is that this person is expressing themselves somehow.' As opposed to, 'What I'm upset about is this person is acting in a way that I don't like.' That line is really difficult to visualize sometimes.

Watkins thinks all leaders in public positions of authority, not just those involved with public schools, set themselves up for trouble when they begin limiting subordinate speech:

The thing about looking at speech and wanting to control speech is that very often that desire comes from a single incident or small subset of incidents that got somebody fired up. And so the instinct is to say, 'Well, you know, we're going to make sure this doesn't happen again.' So you set up a policy or make a group of speakers think that they're being monitored more closely. But you were really just angry about this one thing that somebody said. You don't really want to be in the business of policing everything that everybody said. Maybe in some instances, you're *better off* just in a one-off way saying, 'Hey, we're not going to do this this time.' So there are pros and cons either way. Are there situations where a school administrator absolutely should get involved and say,

‘This one time, you may not print this?’ Absolutely. And that's what the principal in the Hazelwood case thought he was doing. He just thought that the teen pregnancy stuff, you know, was inappropriate. Now does that seem a little prudish to me? Sure it does. But he was making a pedagogical decision that that's not part of our curriculum, and that's not part of what we're distributing as part of our journalism programming. So there can certainly be legitimate reasons for it. There can certainly be downsides to it. But, you know, the First Amendment writ large is like that. It's all about balancing interests. You know, sure there are going to be clear cut cases where this is clearly a prior restraint, and that person... any idiot off the street would have known that you can't do this. But so many of these cases, I mean, you go and read a 40-page case out of the Fifth Circuit discussing a First Amendment issue with three different dissenting opinions and nobody can quite get it right. And that's because the Supreme Court sends us down this stuff. They'll send us a case like Hazelwood, then they'll send us a case like Tinker and say, ‘Students don't shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gates. They have some but not a whole bunch.’ Where does that line go? ‘Well, we don't know. It depends. It depends on the circumstances.’

It also depends on the judges assigned to the case. Watkins brought up the Itawamba County case where a student was suspended for publishing rap lyrics on YouTube that were perceived to be threatening a teacher. Judge Graves in Jackson wrote a length defense of the rap's context within hip-hop culture and a three-judge panel ruled in favor of the student, but then a full panel of 5th Circuit judges reversed the decision and sided with the school district. Watkins:

And they're using the same words that the Supreme Court has given us. Everybody agrees that the Tinker case says what it says, but you imprint yourself on the process. A lot of

constitutional law is like that, because the Constitution is... it is what it is. God love them, and they gave us the words that they gave, but there's a lot we've got to fill in. So the Supreme Court does what it can do, it gives us some vague outlines, and it comes down to the lower courts. The lower appeals courts try to fill in the gaps a little more and say, 'Well, what have some other circuits been doing,' and, 'Maybe we can give a little more specificity on what the Supreme Court has given us.' And then you get down to the district courts, who actually have to have these people in court, have to have trials and hear testimony and try to apply the law that these appeals courts have given to the actual real world, to the words that these people have spoken, and it's a very difficult thing to do. So then all that filters out to the real world, and you've got guys like me who you call and say, 'Can we do this?' ... That's a really complex question... In figuring out where the lines get drawn, I mean, my clients rarely get a straight answer from me on stuff like that. The best I can do is say, well, you know, here's what Hazelwood said, here's some of the issues that they talk about. We need to talk about, you know, what's the nature of this school newspaper? Where does the funding come from? How is it set up? Who is supervising and who is reviewing the content now? How much autonomy have these people been given in the past? And what is the concern? Is it a one-off concern, is it a systemic concern? What's the proposed remedy? You've got to put all those things in the blender, measure it against what we've got, and then just give it your best shot. And you say, 'Maybe you'll be okay if you do... this.' 'The most conservative approach would be to tell them x, y, z, or to tell the adviser that this is the procedure to follow in the future.' And, you know, there's no guarantee that that won't end up getting you in trouble

anyway. That somebody doesn't come along and say, you know, 'I'm gonna go ahead and file a lawsuit because I read Hazelwood other way or I read Tinker the other way.

For his part, Martin wishes he had handled his relationship with Ferguson and the newspaper staff differently:

What principals should do – and I think that I probably needed to do a better job of this when changes were instituted or things need to be moved, whether it was the new hire or the previous advisers – is to bring them in and say, 'This is what I need for you to accept and to do,' rather than just put it out to the entire staff. In other words, telling the entire staff we're not going to eat in our rooms, well they had been doing that a long time, right? So maybe to have nurtured a, a position of change with that particular sponsor, more so than just a scatter-gun, 'This is the rule.' Nobody else had much of a problem with it. A lot of teachers wanted to bring kids up during their lunch time, to study and to do tests. I simply asked that they finish their meal in the cafeteria first. But... if you nurture those changes with people, whether it's the journalism class or whoever, and you need one-on-ones, you would be much better to have those one-on-ones to get compliance than you would just to scatter-gun it and get the rules out. I feel like that's what happened with the journalism department to some degree, that the freedoms that I know I gave, and the latitudes that I did give, I don't know that they were reciprocated back. Then again, I didn't waste a lot of time. I had a lot of things on my mind, a lot of other things to do with regard to that. But if I had that to do over, I probably would do a better job of nurturing that change by having a one-on-one — which we had a bunch of one-on-one sessions, that wasn't the problem — and giving the cause and the reason and adjust for it, rather than just doing them and expecting acceptance, if that makes any sense. That would be

what I would tell any administrator to do. And knowing where those particular spots are comes in really handy as well, too.

**Summative analysis.** The student newspaper program at Oxford High School has left an indelible impact on the school, the community, and the students whose charge it has been to produce and publish it, and within this school and community's ecosystem, its import seems to be at least on par with other large-scale student activities like sports, band, chorus, and drama. None of this would have been possible without a successive series of school leaders valuing the program, committing resources to it, and entrusting students with the autonomy to report on school and community issues, even/especially uncomfortable ones, without fear of interference or reprisal from above. Much of this support may appear on the surface to be something more akin to apathy, however at most every turn over the last 50 years, administrators have either empowered and invested in successful advisers or critiqued and removed unsuccessful ones in order to keep the program progressing as a viable vehicle for impacting student development. This indicates an underlying commitment to the program and an understanding of its value, even when leaders' direct involvement was minor or nonexistent.

Much can be learned from this case study. This research is relevant and potentially instructive to teachers and leaders seeking to start, grow, or maintain scholastic media programs at their own schools. Many of the same challenges faced/created by the *Charger* will be common to other such schools and publications trying to achieve similar results, as will many of the strategies Oxford stakeholders used to navigate or mitigate such challenges. Teachers and leaders alike might find some of the leadership perspectives and decisions detailed in this study to be instructive for their own schools, whether in the context of scholastic journalism or with regard

to other student activity programs. They may also find some of these leadership decisions and philosophies to be counterintuitive, causing them to rethink previously-held assumptions.

**Future Research.** While this research illuminates for other educators and administrators the powerful potential benefits and the very real challenges of embarking on and maintaining such a robust and autonomous scholastic media program within their own schools, the limitations of this case study are many and obvious. The *Charger* is but one student newspaper at one school in one state. It exists in an anomalously progressive university town with a transient, educated population and no large-scale private school competing for its local resources. Future research might involve replicating the methodology of this case study at other schools with similar scholastic media programs but different contextual groundings, then comparing the results. Further research could also compare the leadership characteristics of OSD administrators to those of districts with a history of prior review/restraint on their student publications to determine whether any significant differences exist. Lastly, an unrelated but fascinating leadership study could also be conducted on OSD's 1970 decision to drop all of its Confederate monikers and rebrand itself as the Chargers, even though the neighboring University of Mississippi did not begin the process of disentangling itself from its own divisive symbols until the mid 1990s and continues to wrestle with them publicly today.



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## APPENDIX



Appendix A  
Interview Protocol

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

**Purpose:** The purpose of these interviews is to explore the experiences of current and former Oxford School District administrators, faculty advisers, student journalists, and other stakeholders regarding the administration's oversight of and relevant decision making regarding *The Charger* student newspaper at Oxford High School.

**Subjects:** Subjects are current or former Oxford School District employees, students, or stakeholders who have been involved in some capacity with *The Charger* student newspaper at some point during the last 30 years.

**Setting:** For those participants currently employed or enrolled in the Oxford School District, interviews will be conducted primarily in participants' offices or classrooms. Other spaces will be used at the participant's request whenever applicable. Participants not currently affiliated with the district will be interviewed in person at a location where they feel comfortable, or by phone if location or scheduling issues prohibit a face-to-face interaction. All interviews will be conducted with as much privacy and with as few distractions as possible.

**Consent:** Before the interview, the researcher will provide each subject with an information sheet detailing the parameters of confidentiality, risks/rewards of participation, etc. Continuing with the interview will imply the subject's consent.

**Beginning Script:** First of all, thank you so much for agreeing to sit for this interview. I'm hopeful that your insights into *The Charger* student newspaper and its operations will be

informative and result in some engaging discussion. I come into this project with multiple interests. I'm a former high school journalism teacher, and I'm still heavily involved in that field through my work as director of the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association, so I obviously appreciate the value and caliber of a publication like *The Charger*. I'm also a licensed school administrator with a master's degree and soon a Ph.D. in that field, so I can also sympathize with some of the sticky positions a student publication can put an administrator or adviser in. My goal with this research is not to critique or pass judgement on any of your actions or decisions related to *The Charger*, but rather to better understand the rationale behind those happenings and to gather your reflective perspective on the associated benefits and challenges. With all that said, I'd like to begin the interview with a few background questions.

**Questions:** Initial interview questions for each subject are listed below. Further topics and follow-up questions will emerge during the course of the interview, particularly as subjects begin describing individual experiences and judgments related to their experiences with *The Charger*.

1. How long and in what roles have you been associated with *The Charger*?
2. *The Charger* is by far the most successful high school newspaper in Mississippi. To what factors or conditions do you attribute the publication's unprecedented success?
3. What level of administrative oversight or censorship is *The Charger* subjected to? How did those policies or practices come about?
4. How have administrative decisions contributed to the establishment, success, and continued success of *The Charger*?

5. What benefits have the success and autonomy of *The Charger* created for the school, the district, and/or its administration?
6. What challenges does housing and supporting a free-ranging student media publication like *The Charger* create for the school, the district, and/or its administration?
7. Can you describe any other specific examples of challenges or conflicts related to *The Charger* and how they were handled?
8. Based on your experiences, whether in Oxford or elsewhere, what do school administrators as a profession get wrong when dealing with scholastic publications?

**Ending Script:** I believe that's all the questions I have for today. This has been extremely helpful. Once I've transcribed this interview, I will send you a copy of the text to check for accuracy and clarity, and if I have misquoted or misrepresented any of your statements, you can request a correction. If there is nothing else, we will officially conclude the interview.

**Transcription:** Data will be transcribed and analyzed using initial grounded-theory coding procedures common to this type of study. The researcher will deconstruct the amassed data by breaking it down into individual bits, then sorting those bits into general topics or units of inquiry which emerged during the collection, transcription, and initial analysis phases. Once sorted, a second round of focused coding will organize data into more refined, thematic categories, then further analysis will attempt to develop a final framework for the findings using axial and/or theoretical coding, whichever method(s) best suit the findings. Final analysis will ultimately result in a synthesized narrative that addresses the central research questions of the study.

**Member-checking:** Subjects will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview afterward for accuracy and clarity.

**Storage:** Data will be stored on the researcher's University of Mississippi Google Drive account, with access limited strictly to the researcher and other supporting members of the project.

## VITA

Ronnie Keith Morgan, Jr.

### EDUCATION

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- Ph. D. University of Mississippi, May 2020  
Educational Leadership, 4.0 GPA  
Dissertation: *Case Study: Leadership Decisions and the Oxford High School Student Newspaper*
- M.S. Mississippi State University, August 2012  
Educational Leadership, 4.0 GPA  
Concentration: School Administration
- B.S. Mississippi State University, May 2007  
Curriculum & Instruction, 3.2 GPA  
Concentrations: Secondary Social Studies and English

### ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

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- Director, Miss. Scholastic Press Assoc. School of Journalism and New Media, University of Mississippi, July 2013-Present

Instructional Associate Professor	School of Journalism and New Media, University of Mississippi, July 2019-Present
Instructional Assistant Professor	School of Journalism and New Media, University of Mississippi, July 2013-July 2019
Instructor and student media adviser	Starkville High School, Starkville, Miss., August 2007-July 2013

## **AWARD/HONORS**

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2020 Master Journalism Educator certification, Journalism Education Association (pending)

2018 Leadership and Service Award, Journalism Education Association

2018 Beth Dickey Distinguished Service Award, Southern Interscholastic Press Association

2016 Certified Journalism Educator certification, Journalism Education Association

2013 Paul Cuicchi Innovative Educator Award, Starkville Foundation for Public Education

2013 Yearbook Adviser of the Year, Mississippi Scholastic Press Association

2012 Newspaper Adviser of the Year, Mississippi Scholastic Press Association

2011 Broadcast Adviser of the Year, Mississippi Scholastic Press Association

2011 Finalist, Mississippi Teacher of the Year

2011 Teacher of the Year, Mississippi's Third Congressional District

2011 Best High School Teacher, *Starkville Daily News*

2011 STAR Teacher, Starkville School District/Mississippi Economics Council  
2010 Teacher of the Year, Starkville School District  
2009 Reynolds High School Journalism Institute Fellow, American Society of News Editors  
2007 Section Editor of the Year, *The Reflector*  
2006 Staff Writer of the Year, *The Reflector*  
2005 Sports Writer of the Year, *The Reflector*

## **PRESENTATIONS & RESEARCH**

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### ***Journal Publication:***

Morgan, R. J. (2020). Principals and the press: Factors affecting censorship in scholastic media.  
*Communication: Journalism Education Today*, 53(3), p. 15-24.

### ***Research Paper Presentations:***

Principals and the Press: Why Censorship Continues in Scholastic Media – AEJMC National  
Convention, Toronto, August 2019

Freedom Flashing: Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and the Delta Folk Jubilee of 1963 - Media & Civil  
Rights History Symposium, University of South Carolina, March 2019

Principals and the Press: Why Censorship Continues in Scholastic Media – AEJMC Southeastern  
Colloquium, University of South Carolina, March 2019

Effects of PBIS Methods on Student Behavior at Starkville High School – Mississippi Positive  
Behavioral Interventions & Support summit, University of Southern Mississippi, March  
2008

***Multi-day Workshop Faculty/Facilitator:***

Overby Adviser Institute Facilitator, Oxford, Miss., June 2013-Present – Host a three-day workshop each June for high school journalism advisers in Mississippi. Teach multiple sessions, invite additional speakers, recruit attendees, coordinate logistics, facilitate group discussions/relationship building outside the prescribed classroom time. Event has grown from three attendees to 31 under my leadership.

JEA Adviser Institute Faculty, New Orleans, July 2020 – Invited to lead multiple sessions related to journalism, IMC, and scholastic media advising to a national audience of high school journalism teachers.

JEA Partner Project Facilitator, Gautier, Miss., August 2019 – Served on a three-member embed team at Gautier High School. Team worked with the school's yearbook, newspaper and broadcast staffs in an intensive three-day skills-training session that culminated in a press conference with the building administrator and guided coverage of a Friday night football game.

Convergence Retreat Facilitator, Athens, Georgia, July 2017 – Hired to work with the award-winning Odyssey Media Group staffs at Clarke Central High School as they worked to merge their print and online publications into one streamlined brand. Led focus group discussions, helped staff leaders identify goals and obstacles, consulted on a remodeled newsroom workflow, taught sessions on reporting, interviewing, audience engagement.



***National Scholastic Media Convention Sessions:***

Using beats to effectively ‘covfefe’ your school – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Washington,

D.C., Nov. 2019

Avengers, assemble! – JEA Advisers Institute, New Orleans, July, 2019

Chicken Wings & Other Sticky Things – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Anaheim, April 2019

Principals and the Press: Why Censorship Continues in Scholastic Media – Columbia Scholastic

Press Convention, New York City, March 2019

Building Bridges, Not Burning Them – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Chicago, November

2018

How to Think Like an Uber Driver – JEA/NSPA National Convention, San Francisco, April

2018

Maple Syrup Journalism – Columbia Scholastic Press Convention, New York City, March 2018

Texas-Sized Sources – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Dallas, November 2017

The Great Journalism Lock-In Adventure – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Seattle, April 2017

The Principal Will See You Now: Building Relationships with Administrators – JEA/NSPA

National Convention, Indianapolis, November 2016

Localizing National Events, or “Let’s Do a Story About ISIS” – JEA/NSPA National

Convention, Los Angeles, April 2016

Blue Chip Sourcing – JEA/NSPA National Convention, Orlando, November 2015

How to Coach Journalism Like Nick Saban, JEA/NSPA National Convention, Denver, April

2015

***Regional & State Convention Sessions, Panels & Speeches:***

What's in Your Fanny Pack? – Southern Interscholastic Press Convention, March 2019

Anchoring the News: Broadcast TOP Competition – Southern Interscholastic Press Convention,  
March 2018

Yearbook Copy That Matters – JEA-Louisiana State Convention, February 2018

Reporting, Interviewing, Sourcing – Mississippi Youth Media Project guest speaker, June 2017

Sports Reporting – JEA Areawide High School Workshop, Lafayette (Miss.) High School,  
September 2016

Showstopping Photos, Captions that Count – Ala. Scholastic Press Association Fall Workshop,  
October 2015

News Writing & Reporting – Mississippi Scholastic Press Fall Workshop, September 2012

Sports Writing & Reporting – Mississippi. Scholastic Press Fall Workshop, September 2011

The Value of Scholastic Press – College Public Relations Association of Miss. (CPRAM)  
luncheon, August 2014

Engaging Your Audience on Social Media – CPRAM state convention, May 2014

Keynote Address: Why We Teach – Miss. State Future Educators of America, September 2011

***Invited/Featured Speaker, Individual High Schools:***

Sparkman High School – Huntsville, Alabama

Bullitt East High School – Mount Washington, Kentucky

Lakota East High School – Liberty Township, Ohio

Various high schools – Mississippi

Fort Mill High School – Fort Mill, South Carolina

Wando High School – Mount Pleasant, South Carolina

Richland Northeast High School – Columbia, South Carolina

Prince George High School – Prince George, Virginia

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology – Alexandria, Virginia

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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### *University of Mississippi (2013-Present):*

JOUR 102	Introduction to Multimedia Writing (lead instructor)
JOUR 271	News Reporting (lead instructor)
JOUR 361	Journalism Explorations (Hamer Depth Report, assigned Spring 2021)
JOUR 400	International Journalism (Prague, Czech Republic)
JOUR 473	Writing with Voice (assigned Summer 2021, Florence, Italy)
IMC 102	Introduction to Integrated Marketing Communication (both college and dual-credit versions)
IMC 205	Writing for Integrated Marketing Communication (assigned Fall 2020)
IMC 390	Advanced Writing: Integrated Marketing (assigned Fall 2020)

### *Starkville High School (2007-2013):*

Foundations of Journalism	Advanced World History
Broadcast Journalism	Mississippi Studies
Print Journalism	World Geography
Journalism Lab I-IV	Personal Finance

## ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

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### ***MSPA Director:***

- Manage logistics, budget, mission & vision for network of more than 100 high school media publications.
- Plan/execute statewide high school workshops, contests, camps & conventions, all of which have grown under my leadership.
- Design and maintain promotional materials, internal/external communication systems and a cohesive brand identity. Manage communication and messaging in times of crisis.
- Expanded scope of scholastic outreach to include Integrated Marketing Communication.
- Fundraised to establish financial endowments that now stand at more than \$100k.

### ***Scholastic Media Adviser:***

- Advised *The Jacket Buzz*, *The Yellow Jacket*, *My Morning Jacket* at Starkville HS
- Managed staffs of 10-20 students to produce monthly tabloid newspaper, 160-page yearbook, and daily newscast
- Set budgets, advertising rates, production schedules, sales/marketing goals and strategies
- Built strategic partnership with external stakeholders to secure additional resources and opportunities for student development

### ***Curriculum Development:***

- Wrote course plans and curricular benchmarks/objectives for the state's three high school journalism course options – Mississippi Dept. of Education, January 2014.
- Focus group leader for state's Common Core curriculum adoption team – Mississippi Dept. of Education, March 2011.
- Helped develop and troubleshoot new statewide teacher evaluation tool – Mississippi Dept. of Education, March 2012.

## **MEDIA EXPERIENCE**

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Freelance Writer. *Associated Press*, Jackson, Miss. (August 2006 – Present)

Freelance Writer. *Commercial Dispatch*. Columbus, Miss. (August 2016)

Internship. *Starkville Daily News*, Starkville, Miss. (June – July 2012)

Freelance Writer. *Northeast Miss. Daily Journal*, Tupelo, Miss. (August – November 2008)

Sports Editor. *Reflector*, Starkville, Miss. (April 2006 – April 2007)

Freelance Writer. *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tenn. (August - November 2006)

Freelance Writer/Blogger. *Sporting News*, St. Louis, Mo. (August 2005 – May 2006)

## **ACADEMIC/PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

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### ***Executive/Advisory Board Appointments:***

Mississippi Free Press (2020-present)

Mississippi Youth Media Project (2020-present)

Journalism Education Association State Director (2013-present)

Southern Interscholastic Press Association (2013-present)

Mississippi Scholastic Press Association (2010-2013)

### ***Professional Memberships:***

Association for Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication, Scholastic Division

Journalism Education Association

Southern interscholastic Press Association

***Departmental Committees:***

Willie Morris Writer's Series Lecture (2020-present)

Talbert Fellows Committee (2019-present)

Diversity Committee (2019-present)

Co-Chair, Recruiting Committee (2019-present)

Scholarship Committee (2013-2019)

***Campus Organizations:***

Chapter Adviser, DECA (2020-present)

Co-Sponsor, Farley Ambassadors (2014-2019)

Co-Sponsor, Society of Professional Journalists (2014-2015)

***Scholastic Media Judging:***

National Scholastic Press Association

Columbia Scholastic Press Association

Journalism Education Association

Southern Interscholastic Press Association

South Carolina Scholastic Press Association

Ohio Scholastic Media Association

Interscholastic League Press Conference (Texas)

Virginia High School League

JournalismSTL (Missouri)

Michigan Interscholastic Press Association