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Sunshine From a Campus Perspective

by Mitchell Kukulka

During my time studying journalism at Central Michigan University, I've had plenty of opportunities to experience the difficulty and frustration that can come when trying to wrangle information from less-than-cooperative sources.

For many student journalists, innocuous questions like how much a new program costs can often be met with evasive answers at best and angry phone calls back to the editor at worst.

Stories like these are a constant phenomenon throughout the journalism experience, and one of the reasons why the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) can be such a blessing – and a curse – to prospective journalists and everyday citizens alike.

The Michigan Legislature passed the state version of the Freedom of Information Act in 1976 as part of a national wave of openness following Watergate and the Vietnam War. In theory, FOIA ensures that state residents (at least those not in prison) can have access to information controlled by government institutions that may have otherwise gone unreleased. In practice, FOIA requests can be used to put a spotlight on data that in some cases government institutions would prefer not to be seen by the public.

State FOIA is routinely used by campus journalists across the state. But what should be a relatively routine and straightforward process too often can be expensive and drawn out.

On March 17, 2016, CMU's chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) held a symposium to present and discuss the results of a large-scale FOIA audit that they had organized over the course of the previous two months. For the audit, members of SPJ's e-board had sent FOIA requests to 13 different public universities within the state of Michigan. Three requests were sent to each university, one requesting police incident reports regarding sexual assault, one regarding board of trustees expenses and one requesting university president expenses.

I was vice president of CMU's SPJ at the time, serving on the e-board alongside president and self-described "FOIA fundamentalist" Arielle Hines, who had organized and spearheaded the project.

The goal of the audit was not to actually acquire the statistics, but to see how much money the universities would charge for the information. In total, obtaining the information would have cost us over \$19,000. The costs varied between universities, some requesting up to nearly \$6,000 for all of the information, while some literally gave it all away free of charge.

“What we found was that the ability to get public information in Michigan is basically non-existent,” Hines said at the time. “Newspapers do not have thousands of dollars to pay for the requests.”

The audit also shows, I argue, that institutions in Michigan often participate in FOIA practices only as a form of lip service. Records guardians at too many state universities know that campus journalists do not have the resources to actually acquire the documents, even the cases where they acknowledge the records should be public.

The use of FOIA isn't limited to larger-scale investigations; FOIA requests can be used to compliment news pieces of all sizes and open up avenues of communication between reporters and their subjects that otherwise would've remained closed.

Student journalists on CMU's campus regularly make use of FOIAs to enhance their reporting. Johnathan Hogan, a fellow CMU student journalist, has “lost count” of how many times he's filed FOIA requests. Working as a crime reporter for CMU's student-run newspaper *Central Michigan Life*, Hogan has used FOIA extensively in his dealings with local law enforcement, and believes that they should be a part of every student journalist's education.

“It's one of the most important tools for journalists,” Hogan said. “Otherwise you might not get this information.”

Just as the role of the journalist is to bridge the informational gap between everyday citizens and the world around them, tools like FOIA requests can be instrumental for journalists when it comes shining a light on information that may otherwise be left in the dark.