

My classmates and I experienced censorship at our Christian university's student newspaper, and naturally we thought that was wrong. I set out to research how other Christian universities dealt with their student press, figuring if I could show that they had more lenient policies, I could convince my university to follow suit and abolish its censorship policies.

I asked my friends to join me. We created a comprehensive survey asking specific questions about each school's journalism program, prior review and censorship policies, campus climate, and administrative oversight. We consulted with professional journalists to get help with crafting specific and unbiased questions.

I divided up a list of 150 peer institutions among us, and we began contacting each school. We couldn't simply email the survey to general inboxes because we weren't sure if a student editor or a faculty advisor controlled those accounts. We had to confirm a student newspaper for each school, identify the student editor, and then contact them directly to see if they wanted to participate in the survey. That took a month or about 100 hours of work between all of us.

When the responses rolled in, I realized this censorship problem was much bigger than our little school in the cornfields of Indiana. Student editors reported numerous censorship instances, and like us, they didn't have anywhere to turn. Our schools were private and administrators were within their rights to censor us.

I asked my friends if we could pivot and use our research to create a public advocacy project. It was a hard decision for all of us; we were mostly seniors, and we relied on our professors' recommendations to get jobs. But we decided it was worth it. We made charts to show our findings, wrote editorials to establish our stances, followed up with some of the respondents to fact check and ask for more in-depth responses, and reached out to school administrators to hear their sides of the story.

We faced significant backlash from our school's administration throughout the process.

In the days after we published our website, several news outlets covered our findings. It sparked a national conversation and I heard from students who were thankful to learn they were not alone.

My school changed its censorship policies the following semester, and the students can now report the news. I was given an award from the Society of Professional Journalists for my organizing efforts. Occasionally, I am invited to present our findings to groups. A professor from a sister school expressed interest in making this a recurring survey so that Christian schools are held accountable and prospective students can be aware of any censorship policies before they enroll.