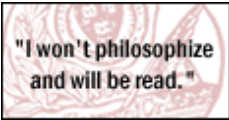




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News

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Editor Resigns Over Cartoon

Friend says HBS student paper's chief 'scared' by administration

By [LAUREN A. E. SCHUKER](#)

Crimson Staff Writer

The editor-in-chief of The Harbus, the weekly student paper for the Harvard Business School (HBS), resigned suddenly last Wednesday to protest what he called threatening action on the part of the HBS administration.

After administrators criticized a cartoon that ran in the Oct. 28 issue, editor-in-chief Nick A. Will was called into a meeting with Steven R. Nelson, executive director of the MBA Program.

According to Will's resignation letter, Nelson threatened him with disciplinary action in a Nov. 4 meeting.

"I know that Nick is very scared, and I know that the Harbus staff is very scared," said Will's close friend, who is a second-year student at HBS. "Nick didn't resign because he felt like it, but because he thought he might get kicked out of school. He's had some people tell him that these guys play hardball and you're not necessarily safe."

Both Will and cartoonist Matt Stovcsik declined to comment yesterday.

According to Will's letter, Nelson told Will that he would be held "personally accountable as a student for all content in The Harbus...should someone else in the administration disagree with [his] editorial judgment."

The editorial cartoon mocked the persistent bugs that have plagued Career Link—the server that students use to post resumes and sign up for job interviews. It depicted a computer screen cluttered with pop-up announcements—a spoof of the messages Career Link sends out to students when they attempt to post resumes on the overcrowded server.

Most of the announcements were lighthearted messages, such as "Please attach three random documents to sign up for interviews."

Some were more caustic in tone: "Career Services absolves itself of any and all responsibility for the functionality of Career Link despite the fact we selected the

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vendor.”

The words “incompetent morons,” which appear in one of the pop-up windows, provoked administrative response when HBS Career Service Officer Matthew S. Merrick told senior administrators that he felt offended by the phrase, according to HBS Senior Associate Dean Walter C. Kester.

According to students, the cartoon was intended solely as a critique of Career Link.

“Most students thought the cartoon was intended as an attack on the computer program—its unreliability was the primary source of frustration with recruiting this year,” said Annemarie C. Jensen, Student Association co-president.

But administrators and career service staff read the cartoon’s humor differently.

“That phrase seems to attack people—namely career services—rather than a computer program,” Kester said.

“But if those two words were not in the cartoon, we probably wouldn’t have sought any meeting at all.”

But the administration called a meeting to discuss the cartoon, with HBS Dean Kim B. Clark ’74, Merrick, Kester and Nelson present.

“We concluded that the phrase ‘incompetent morons’ was deeply hurtful and demoralizing for the career services staff,” Kester said.

“We then agreed that it would be useful for one of us to sit down and informally talk with the editors about why we felt the cartoon pushed the boundaries of normal discourse, and to urge them to employ greater care with satire,” he said.

The group selected Nelson, who called Will into his office for a 7 a.m. meeting last Monday.

At the meeting, Nelson issued a “verbal warning,” the first step in the HBS Community Standards disciplinary process, Will reported in his resignation letter.

But the meeting was supposed to be kept unofficial, according to Kester.

“Our understanding was that the meeting [between Nelson and Will] was going to be informal and strictly verbal—nothing would appear on student records,” Kester said.

“Anytime someone is treated disrespectfully, rarely do these violations translate into more than a casual conversation. It would be incorrect to think of the meeting [between the editors and Nelson] as the first step of a disciplinary process, or as the triggering or escalating anything,” he added.

According to Will’s resignation letter, Nelson warned him at the meeting that he “could be called in for further action in the future which could register on [his] personal student record.”

Miscommunication between the deans on the subject seems to be part of the issue.

“We all agreed to say nothing that could be construed as intervening with the content of the paper, or the content of articles regarding Career Services,” said Kester. “We wanted to narrowly focus our message on the impact of those two words.”

Clark agreed, adding that the administration did not want to encroach on The Harbus’ editorial policy.

“I think that the University should have no control over what The Harbus prints. We support freedom of expression and free inquiry,” Clark said.

But according to Will’s letter, this was not the view Nelson expressed in their meeting.

“He suggested I steer clear of all questionable content in further issues,” Will wrote.

According to Will’s letter, Nelson also criticized The Harbus’s photo coverage in the meeting and suggested that The Harbus should provide writers with the opportunity to enhance the image of Career Services in future issues.

The deans complained that the cartoon violated HBS Community Standards, which stipulate that HBS community members must have “respect for the rights, differences and dignity of others.”

“We do not want students to engage in discourse that hurts others,” Clark said.

But the Community Standards have never been invoked before to restrict editorial content.

“Invoking Community Standards to supersede editorial judgment and issue personal threats against those involved in the paper is in my personal view as unreasonable a posture for the administration as it is an unsustainable one,” Will wrote in his resignation letter.

Will added that he ran the cartoon in its original form.

“The words made no specific reference to any specific entity, and sufficient measures were taken to ensure the cartoon was clearly distinguishable as satire,” Will wrote.

After his meeting with Nelson, Will contacted The Harbus News Corporation legal firm’s chief counsel, who affirmed that the cartoon was printable according to free speech laws.

“In fact, each reviewing attorney...was shocked that the HBS administration invoked Community Standards to take any action at all,” Will wrote.

The administration expressed regret at the miscommunication that precipitated Will’s resignation.

“In subsequent conversations, the cartoonist made it clear that it was not his intent to attack career services,” Kester said. “If we had known that, we would have approached the whole issue differently—I regret that we didn’t learn that earlier.”

“We are sorry and distressed by Nick’s resignation,” he added. “It does suggest that our reaction to the cartoon is subject to misinterpretation.”

Students were also upset that the administration’s reaction to the cartoon led to Will’s resignation.

“About half the students were outraged after Nick resigned—they couldn’t believe that the school tried to interfere with the newspaper,” said Dan Erck, HBS first-year and Harbus reporter. “The other half don’t know what happened yet or don’t really care.”

Jensen and fellow Student Association co-president Sal Kahn set up an online message board on Friday to discuss career services and related issues.

Clark is also hosting an open forum on Nov. 25.

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