

# Effective Publicity

By Stewart Harral

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is a condensation of an article by Stewart Harral, '36ma, director of the University of Oklahoma News Service, which was printed in *School and Society*.

ONE of the greatest obstacles in the progress of higher education at present is the fact that the public does not have an adequate understanding of its character, purposes, processes and results. If educational institutions do not themselves define their purposes and interpret their policies, others will eventually perform the task for them.

A college or university may issue pamphlets and viewbooks by the thousands, get itself "mentioned" in national magazines, present radio programs and receive enough newspaper clippings to fill the reading room of the library, but always the question to be asked is, "Was it effective?"

Different institutions have varied methods of testing the degree of effectiveness in a program. One school may be interested in a higher enrolment, another is seeking to impress legislators that its appropriations should be increased, while another may be trying to correct certain wrong impressions in the minds of the public.

The manufacturer of a certain product may invest thousands of dollars to learn what the public thinks about his commodity. But the institution of higher learning probably cannot make such an expenditure to check the results of its publicity program.

One must grant that if a university does accomplish one of its desired goals in creating or changing a certain opinion, the publicity phase is but one of many factors. Publicity cannot take all the credit nor can it assume all the blame in the success or failure of the acceptance or rejection of certain ideas.

Since educational interpretation is a newcomer in school circles it is little wonder that so few institutions have any definite program or policies. The whole field of effectiveness of various school publicity media is practically unexplored, but great advances are being made in various techniques and procedures.

What kind of releases should come from the college news bureau? The director of publicity, provided that he possesses an educational and journalistic knowledge, should be a better judge of what is news and what isn't news on the campus than the president or members of the faculty. It is easy to find an administrative official who holds to the naive belief that a newspaper will publish any story from his university. The facts in question may or may

not be news, but the decision should be left to the judgment of the director of publicity. He cannot guarantee that any news from his office will be published. Newspapermen have the final voice in the matter.

College presidents and others, probably because they do not understand the problems and philosophies of newspaper workers, often say that the press gives little attention to news of education. Contrary to popular belief, newspapers are very generous in devoting space to news of an educational nature.

Too many institutions release stories which are devoid of news value outside of the college community. Editors have complained of the great amount of "chaff" which comes from schools. Time and effort spent on sound and interesting feature stories would yield greater results than the common practice of releasing quantity rather than quality offerings.

Effectiveness of a program cannot be judged in spasmodic stories from time to time, but rather in the impact and strength of the sustained program which must be in operation just as much during the Christmas holidays as it is on the opening day of school in the autumn.

PUBLICISTS and administrators often have exaggerated immediate happenings for the sacrifice of long-range goals and functions. As one president told me, "These are uncertain times. We cannot think of planning our publicity program more than a few weeks ahead." But he failed to realize that it takes much time and planning to execute a sound campaign. And he forgot that public opinion isn't made overnight, nor can it be changed as speedily.

Lack of funds sufficient to operate a worthwhile program is another obstacle to effectiveness. Even a novice in publicity work often learns that officials who continually demand more results do not make enough funds available for the maintenance of a program of any appreciable worth. High costs of engraving, printing and photography limit the activities of many news bureaus. Administrators should see that the bureau's budget is considered in the same bracket with other administrative functions.

Those in high positions should realize that when an unpleasant story breaks the only sensible procedure is to permit the news bureau head to give newspapers all desired facts. If co-operation is not forthcoming reporters may concoct a story from rumors, hearsay and gossip, and the result is likely to be more sensational than a factual story. This suggestion is in no

way to be interpreted that a publicist must ransack every nook and corner of the campus for a skeleton which may be hidden in the collegiate closet. Moreover every college and every university have certain problems and matters which for obvious reasons cannot be spread on the front pages of newspapers. Even an institution of higher learning is entitled to a few "family secrets."

Since higher education is in no sense perfect, it is absurd to think that a publicity director should write only those stories which portray his institution as a perfect one. His biggest task is that of interpreting educational events and movements in such a manner that the public will get a better understanding of his institution and what it is trying to accomplish.

Some general observations, in the nature of conclusions, may be drawn from the data upon which the preceding discussions are based. They are:

1. There is a need on the part of educators to give more thought to the problem of interpreting higher education through the press.

2. Since many colleges and universities do not have well-defined programs, publicists face the problem of trying to interpret a situation which is confusing.

3. Since higher institutions know their life better than any other agencies, they are in a better position to relate these facts most accurately to the public.

4. Co-operation with newspapers if at all possible, is the sensible course to follow when an "unpleasant" story breaks.

5. Newspaper publicity is but one phase of the school's public relations program and therefore should not be the sole medium used in keeping the public informed.

6. Administrators should realize that a sustained publicity program rather than spasmodic attention in the press will yield better returns in public understanding.

7. Recognition must be made of the fact that editors are inclined to judge every story on its reader-interest possibilities rather than to give first consideration to the cause which it promotes.

8. The program of the news bureau must be adequately financed if it is to achieve any measurable success.

9. There is a decided need on the part of college news bureaus to release informative, sound, well-written articles rather than a deluge of trivial stories.

10. The worth of any program of educational interpretation is to be judged in the quality and influence of published stories rather than in the number of press clippings.

11. If institutions are to receive continued support from the public they must maintain a close contact through the press and other media.

Granting that educational interpretation, although largely unexplored, does have great possibilities for good, what lies ahead? Directors of publicity will continue to busy themselves in watching the beat of the educational pulse and at the same time keeping abreast with the ever-changing tone of the press. Where there is faith in education, there will be support. By understanding each other and working in the closest fashion, the press and the school will continue to be vital agents in improving the common public good.

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## In the Mail . . .

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4)

decent of the boys in the Legislature to come down and put all the cards on the table. I feel that many of the other folks present understood, perhaps for the first time, that we have a bunch of men in the Legislature who know the school.

HICKS EPTON, '32law  
Wewoka

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To the Alumni Secretary:

Thanks very much for your letter of December 13th and the copy of the month's *Sooner Magazine*. I'll be quite glad to help the Alumni Association in whatever manner one can at such a remote spot, but I'll have to depend upon you for suggestions.

In my four months here I have as yet run into no other O.U. men and only one from Oklahoma.

TOM BLAKEMORE, '38law  
Tokyo, Japan

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To the Alumni Secretary:

I have before me your letter dated December 5, 1939 in which you notified me of my appointment as chairman of the Advisory council for Caracas. As I am no longer in that town, I regret deeply that I cannot cooperate with the other members of the council. May I suggest Mr. Edmundo Luongo as a candidate? Mr. Chirinos is not in Caracas either. I think he is working in Caripito, Estado Monagas, but I do not know his exact address.

I am now living in Maracaibo, and, as I understand, Mr. E. T. Warren is the chairman of the advisory council here. I am ready to work with him.

It goes without saying that I shall be more than pleased to furnish you with addresses of people or with other data you may wish.

SANTIAGO E. VERA, '39eng  
Maracaibo, Venezuela

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To the Alumni Secretary:

The College Guidance Exhibit of the University Women's Club, the Kansas City branch of the American Association of University Women, is being held this year March 15, 16 and 17. The only material that is needed for our part of the exhibit is a new catalogue. Would you be so kind to send me one so that I can get it to the Committee in charge of the Exhibit.

This Exhibit is so worthwhile, we feel, for many of the High School students are guided to make the proper and logical choice of school for the furtherance of their education. All of the major schools, colleges, and Universities of the United States are represented and needless to say the University of Oklahoma is one of them.

Thank you so much for sending this and best wishes for the good of our School.

DOROTHY H. MOYER, '30  
Kansas City, Missouri

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