

Clemson University, weekly newspaper spar over salary records

By John Staed
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CLEMSON UNIVERSITY — For the past 15 years, the Tiger Town Observer in Clemson has published the salaries of Clemson faculty and staff making more than \$50,000 a year.

This year, that publication was temporarily in doubt after the university at first denied providing the weekly newspaper an Excel spreadsheet of the salaries. But the newspaper finally did publish the information Wednesday.

University officials at one point directed Tiger Town Observer Editor Amanda Carey to pull the information from PDF files, a laborious process that requires converting the files into text form. In the past, the school has provided a spreadsheet, which can be more easily converted for publication.

According to a series of e-mails between the editor and the university, the Clemson provost, Doris Helms, at first denied use of the spreadsheet, according to the university's Office of Institutional Research.

"Unfortunately, we are unable to provide a spreadsheet of that report, as indicated by the provost," wrote Ben Sharp, a research associate in the Office of Institutional Research, in an e-mail to Carey. "The best we can do is offer this link to the pdf."

Clemson administrators have been criticized this school year in a faculty survey when some administrators received double-digit raises while most faculty and staff received raises of 3 percent or less. Publication of the salaries has been a touchy issue on campus.

Carey, 19 and a political science major, said in an interview that, "With everything that is going on right now ... it seems really odd that this year out of all the years that they would withhold information like that."

Carey said she e-mailed the provost Friday after being stymied in trying to get the spreadsheet.

"They've never done that before," she said. "I can't say for sure why. ... They didn't give me any explanation."

In another e-mail to Carey, S. Wickes Westcott II, director of the Office of Institutional Research, said the spreadsheet was not available and that he asked a staff member to "take the time necessary to prepare one for you. It is not, as you suggest, a task that takes no effort."

"I hope you will be able to develop your important news flash without further trouble," he wrote.

Westcott wrote in the e-mail that Carey took an “antagonistic approach” to securing the information.

Wescott, in another e-mail, said, “I hope you can develop your article from the pdf file that is available. If not, perhaps you will find something else that is newsworthy to fill the space.”

Cathy Sams, chief public affairs officer for Clemson, said in a response to questions about the incident that, “There was no opposition to releasing the information. The only question was about the format.”

Sams said Helms received the request for the spreadsheet on Friday afternoon, March 27, and the spreadsheet was made available on the next workday, Monday.

According to Carey’s e-mail time stamp, however, the first request came on Monday, March 23.

Carey said she contacted Helms directly after being unable to get the spreadsheet, and Helms “apologized for the misunderstanding and was going to copy the ... (OIR) director.”

“It was too late then,” Carey said.

Sams said the key point is the information was made available. Normally, a Freedom of Information Act request must be responded to by 15 business days, and Sams said the request was responded to quickly.

“And it does not require that an agency create a special report because the requester prefers a certain format — but we did,” Sams said in an e-mail response.

The request, however, was not labeled as a formal freedom of information request, Carey said.

The whole episode could have been miscommunication, Sams said.

“Perhaps there was not good communication between the reporter and the first staff member contacted, but the information was made available,” Sams said. “To say or imply that the university declined to provide salary information would be untrue and unfair.”

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