Communications & Current Events

Case Study: In a Time of Politics
IRS Legal Exemption Requirements: Civic Engagement as a non-profit 501(c)(3) School

“To be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, an organization must be organized and operated exclusively for exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3) ... In addition, it may not be an action organization, i.e., it may not attempt to influence legislation as a substantial part of its activities and it may not participate in any campaign activity for or against political candidates.

...Section 501(c)(3) organizations are restricted in how much political and legislative (lobbying) activities they may conduct. For a detailed discussion, see Political and Lobbying Activities.”

*Political activities: organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office.
*Legislation (Lobbying) Activities: In general, no organization may qualify for section 501(c)(3) status if a substantial part of its activities is attempting to influence legislation (commonly known as lobbying). Organizations may, however, involve themselves in issues of public policy without the activity being considered as lobbying. For example, organizations may conduct educational meetings, prepare and distribute educational materials, or otherwise consider public policy issues in an educational manner without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status.

Case Study

How Calhoun Responded to the 2016-17 Presidential Campaign and Election
Who We Are:
Calhoun’s Mission Statement

Calhoun inspires a passion for learning through a progressive approach to education that values intellectual pursuit, creativity, diversity and community involvement.

Calhoun’s mission is repeated at Open Houses, included on all print materials, and is front and center on the school’s website, on the homepage and at www.calhoun.org/mission
Social Impact

Empathy, equity and justice are central to our mission. We learn to embrace accountability as we become active leaders and citizens.

[Calhoun web homepage]
Diversity

The rich diversity of human experience is reflected in who we are as a community, in the books we read; the arts and cultures we explore; and the time devoted to issues of social justice and equity.

[Calhoun web homepage]
1. Stories, videos and social media posts gave a glimpse into how teachers were addressing the presidential election and related topics in the classroom.

2. Co-curricular activities led by students were and continue to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis: are the activities/events explicitly political, or are they issue-oriented activities in keeping with the school’s mission?

At left: feature story from The Calhoun Chronicle also lives on the website:

www.calhoun.org/MScivics
www.calhoun.org/LScivics
In Response to Travel Ban
(Executive Order, Jan. 27, 2017):

Eblast sent by Head of School to Calhoun Community, Feb. 2, 2017, and posted on school’s website, www.calhoun.org/justice

Statement from the Head of School
February 2, 2017

Calhoun's Commitment to Justice and Inclusivity

Dear Members of the Calhoun Community,
What Happened Next?

1. Community member complains to NY Post about Head of School letter to community (reportedly, a parent).
2. NY Post reporter calls Head of School for comment (Wed., Feb. 8)
3. NY Post prints story with incendiary headline (Wed., Feb. 8):
   
   **Principal says Trump presidency is ‘more troubling’ than 9/11;** does not link to letter.
4. Trolls start emailing and calling various admin and staff members, and begin posting hate-filled messages on Calhoun’s Social Media and Google Plus
5. Fox News repeats Post story online (Fri., Feb. 10)
6. Online activity from Trolls increases Friday evening
How We Responded

1. **Emails/Phone Calls:** Formatted response was written by the Head of School; also used by Communications Director and the Director of Enrollment/Mktg. Staff members were asked to direct all calls or emails to one of those three administrators.

2. **Social Media:** Kept eyes on all social media. At first, followed a delete/ban policy, where possible. By Friday night, after Fox posted the story, the decision was to temporarily shut down some accounts, which were resumed by late Monday, February 13, after activity had died down.
   1. Facebook (4 different accounts) Deleted/banned posts before shutting down main account
   2. Twitter: Did not respond to trolls. Shut down account and then resumed.
   3. Instagram: Deleted comments and blocked posters. Cannot shut down account without losing the name.
   4. LinkedIn: Ours is a closed group; no problems.
   5. Wikipedia: Reviewed; fortunately, nothing appeared.
   6. Google Plus: Several hate-filled comments and bad reviews appeared. Following week, responded in “customer svc” voice to a few. Contacted Google to have reviews pulled down—which they did.
3. **Website:** By Friday evening, when we realized that several staffers and administrators were receiving emails or phone calls, we REMOVED the Faculty/Staff Directory from the public area of the website (however, we left our “Contact Calhoun” with administrator’s emails and phone numbers). We also moved the Head of School’s original letter to a less visible place on the website, reachable only with link.

4. **Reach Out:**
   1. Contacted web company (Finalsite) for advice on how to respond or delete Google reviews
   2. By the following Monday, reached out to Bank Street colleague for advice on how that school handled previous summer’s incident
What Worked/What Didn’t

1. **Internal Communications:** Faculty/Staff/Admin should have been alerted immediately when we realized what was transpiring; there was a delay before that was done, and several staffers/administrators were blindsided by emails and phone calls without knowing what to say/do.

2. **Formatted response, written by Head of School,** was extremely valuable and kept everyone on the same page.

3. **Social Media:** It would have been helpful to have a plan in place. There would have been less stress if we understood in advance what was possible with each of our accounts—when and how to delete, ban or shut down—and whether it would contribute to the negativity or not.
   1. Shutting down Facebook, we agreed, was a good move—particularly since so many students follow the account. And there was no way the Communications team would have been able to keep up with the Whack-a-Mole nature of the troll attacks.
   2. Google Plus: Responding to negative posts was good practice in “customer service” language for trolls and bad reviewers. Better yet was discovering how to get the bad reviews removed.
Moving Forward:  
A Communications Crisis Management Plan

A Communications Crisis Management plan will be created to address a variety of scenarios—crises of different magnitude—that will guide our responses. Plan will include:

1. WHO is on the communications crisis mgmt team for various types of crises?
2. HOW will each member of the communications team respond?
3. WHAT should be the response in a given situation?
4. WHEN: How quickly should the response be made?
5. WHERE does the response live? (School’s social media or website? Direct respon)se? Other?
Post-Crisis Follow-Up

1. Input from our Bank Street colleague was invaluable, and brought up several questions—some of which remained unresolved as the “crisis” seemed to dissipate.
   • Whether or not to rebut the NY Post/Fox article
   • Whether to send out another letter to constituents with update
   • Whether to post testimonials on our website along with the original letter.

2. Online Photos and Contact Information: Reviewed policy of having photos of administrators on two separate web pages, Development and Admissions. It was decided to pull down Development photos, and Admissions headshots—in keeping with Calhoun’s mission for open communications and transparency.

3. Reflection on Delicate Balance: Our responsibility is to our community, but we have to be mindful about how language and actions reflect on and within our community. In this case, a critical eye to the original letter could have averted much of the push-back.
Postscript:

Because Calhoun is very direct about its commitment to social justice and diversity, and the majority of the Calhoun Community identify with that mission, constituents were very receptive to the Head of School’s original letter. In fact, the Head of School and communications office report an unusual number of positive responses were received after the letter was originally sent to constituents (and shared on Facebook and Twitter). The number of positive responses only increased after the NY Post incident, with many posts made on social media amongst alumni, parents and staffers, saying how proud they were to be affiliated with the school and its mission.

So does this mean that all PR is good PR?
Questions to Ask

When considering how your school should respond to current events, ask these questions:

• Are the current events related to issues central to your school’s mission? Is that mission clear to stakeholders?
• Do you risk offending stakeholders who might NOT understand the school’s mission—stated or not?
• Do you hold discussions with your Board about your mission? With your Administrative team? Do administrators discuss formally with teachers?
• Do you have a communications crisis mgmt plan? Do you have an admin team in place to discuss crisis situations?
• Do you look for examples at or consult with partner schools?