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SLU files lawsuit against longtime prof

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Saint Louis University is taking Avis E. Meyer, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Communications, to court for \$6,327 this December. The lawsuit stems from Meyer's attempt earlier this year to copyright the name of The University News, whose staff he has informally advised for more than 30 years.

"The University doesn't believe that students' tuition dollars should have to be used to legally protect SLU from this frivolous action by Meyer," said Jeff Fowler, vice president of SLU public relations. "Therefore, the University is asking for reimbursement of its real expenses incurred to protect its trademarks and intellectual property."

The University filed the lawsuit on Oct. 11 on the grounds of trademark infringement. On March 16, 2007, Meyer registered the phrase "The University News, A Student Voice Serving Saint Louis University Since 1921," as a precaution during last year's conflict over the newspaper's charter. The University wanted to rescind the charter of the paper and write a new one in hopes of improving the quality of the paper. Had the editorial board disagreed, Meyer said, The University News might have been forced to move off campus. Meyer said he was simply trying to protect the paper and its staff.

Once the University was made aware that Meyer had registered the name, they made motions to reclaim what Fowler said rightfully belongs to SLU.

"The University is the publisher of The University News," Fowler said in an e-mail interview. "Dr. Meyer had no right to incorporate using the University's trademarks and intellectual property."

Although the full name of the paper had not been trademarked before, the name "Saint Louis University" had. The administration also took the stance that it was common knowledge that The University News belongs to SLU.

Kathleen Farrell, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Communication, said the lawsuit is regrettable.

"I think the whole thing is most unfortunate. And I'm very sorry that it has come to this," she said. "I don't think anybody wins in this. I don't understand the amount of energy that we're putting into this problem when we face other challenges to become a great university."

Meyer said that his attorney thinks the fact that he is a tenured professor may have played a part in this lawsuit.

Tenure is a guarantee of job security granted to professors who have demonstrated strong records of teaching, publication and research. It can be lost for displays of strong misconduct, including plagiarism and conviction of a felony.

Meyer said that his lawyer, Brian Gill, speculated that the University may be using the lawsuit as a way to revoke Meyer's tenure.

The University, however, maintains that this lawsuit is in response to Meyer's actions.

"Let's be clear: It is because Dr. Meyer tried to willfully take the University's name and trademarks that there is a lawsuit. The lawsuit is a response to an action taken by Dr. Meyer," Fowler said.

Upon relinquishing the name on Aug. 21, Meyer submitted a statement to the lawyer representing the University which said that he had never used the name for personal reasons during the time it was registered under his name. On Aug. 30, he received a third letter asking for the \$6,327 the University had spent on legal fees.

Meyer said that Gill, who did not return repeated calls from The University News, told Meyer that he believed the lawsuit appeared to be a personal vendetta against Meyer by University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J.

Meyer teaches classes in journalism, writing, editing and film in addition to having served as the student-appointed adviser to The University News from 1974 to 2006. Meyer has been a professor at SLU since 1976 and is currently on sabbatical to write an editing textbook.

Meyer has been publicly critical of Biondi in the past, and most recently in an August issue of Saint Louis Magazine, which contained an article about last year's rewriting of The University News charter. Following the article was an interview with Meyer in which he said that he had "never done anything but react to what Biondi does."

Meyer feels this lawsuit is another case of contention between himself and Biondi, yet is disappointed it has gone this far.

"I think they should be ashamed of themselves for allowing this; these student's lives have been burdened, the paper's been threatened, the University's reputation has been tarnished because one guy doesn't like me," he said.

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