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Dear Chairman McBroom and Members of the Senate Oversight Committee:

The Michigan Press Association supports SJR E.

There are many issues involving the lack of transparency with the 15 public university boards in Michigan. We can start with secret presidential searches. The OMA already allows secrecy until finalists are named, but that became unnecessary after the 1999 Federated Publications v MSU Board of Trustees case. We believe that public input on the selection of such an important position is necessary.

The ongoing issues regarding the Nasser case at MSU are a perfect example of sunshine being the best disinfectant. Knowing who knew what and when would go a long way toward assuring the public that the University has a handle on the issue now and will do their best to prevent anything like this from happening again.

University boards (any public body) better serve the public when they deliberate in the open and listen to those their decisions impact. They have two important responsibilities--fiscal oversight/budget and selecting the president (and all other administrators and faculty). This involves hundreds of millions of dollars of money, with a fair percentage coming from the state appropriations/MI taxpayers.

This constitutional resolution addresses the obvious problem. The Michigan Supreme Court decision said public universities, since they are constitutionally created, cannot be subject to OMA. The only way to make sure they are covered is to amend the constitution.

OMA's current exemptions provide enough protection on sensitive issues. Boards simply do not like to work under the public's view.

Another point to consider is that only three of Michigan's public university boards are elected. The other 13 have politically appointed trustees so there is not citizen input in the selection.

There is a sad irony that universities should be one of the prime advocates and safe places for the free exchange of ideas, vigorous debates and transparency. Yet so much of what occurs at the very top happens in secret, behind closed doors.

Thank you for considering this resolution today.

Sincerely,

Lisa McGraw, Public Affairs Manager  
Michigan Press Association