

"That's SO Cedarville...And SO Disgraceful!"

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As a public relations consultant, journalist and communications professor, I am interested in public relations tactics and find pleasure in discussing them with my colleagues and students. Some of the examples we look at are pure genius and others are simply shameless. Recently I came across a PR tactic that I found disturbing--professionally and personally.

As many of you know, a number of regrettable events have occurred at Cedarville University that have drawn local and national media attention. That awareness, in part, is because of a few groups such as www.cedarvillecoalition.com and www.cedarvillesituation.com. These groups have boldly spoken out on a variety of unethical actions and decisions carried out by the university administration and in doing so have been very effective at telling a side of the story that CU administrators would prefer not be known. The facts shared and opinions expressed are troubling and provide insights that deserve consideration.

I encourage you to check out www.cedarvillesituation.com. But be careful to type it correctly since if you inadvertently make a mistake, you may be taken to a very different site. I discovered this tactic while checking out the latest postings on the Facebook group, *Students Who Want the Truth about the Faculty Exodus Away from Cedarville U* where alumnus Matt Handy posted this information:

"So, my friend Ryan was visiting [Cedarvillesituation.com](http://www.cedarvillesituation.com), and he accidentally mistyped the URL.

And you'll never guess where it took him: <http://www.cedarvillesitiation.com>.

That domain forwards you to Cedarville University's "The Heart of the Matter" page.

Guess what? So do these:

<http://www.cedarvillesituaton.com>

<http://www.cedarvillesituation.com>

<http://www.cedarvillesituaoon.com>

and many more...

You get the same result for just about every misspelling of the URL.

The domains were bought by a registrant listed as "The Cedarville University."

I checked the detailed registration information through Whois.com, and every domain is the same.

Registered under the name "Cedarville University" and the listed contact is

David Haffey, 251 N. Main St., Cedarville, OH. ...

This is huge. If this is indeed Cedarville, it proves that they are willing to go to unbelievable lengths to suppress free expression and make sure only their point of view gets out....

I checked it out. Matt was right. The mistyped URLs are owned by Cedarville University. Not only that, if you Google "Cedarville Situation" instead of typing it in the URL line, you will be directed to Cedarville's website as CU is a sponsored supporter. How misleading! Cedarville University's message is very different from that of www.cedarvillesituation.com.

Initially the PR consultant in me thought CU's efforts were clever. But as I consider how I teach my students that public relations is about building trust and respect, I realized that buying internet domains with the intention to mislead people and limit access to potentially damaging information is simply deceptive. That's not building trust and respect. It's being dishonest! And yes, "That's SO Cedarville!"

"**That's SO Cedarville**" is the university's newest slogan. (Oh the ways one can play with that!) As a former faculty and PR staff member, I have observed and experienced a number of disgraceful and unethical things and have to say that this recent deceptive act is only the tip of the iceberg.

I spent seven years at CU writing for various publications—Inspire, Torch, and the annual report. Working in the PR department, I also wrote several press releases and pitch stories. I enjoyed my job until my boss was let go and a trustee's daughter with no journalism or public relations experience was named to succeed him. Things soon changed and not for the better. (To say that some of her practices were "questionable" is being gracious.)

Probably the most regrettable was being ordered to rewrite quotes to make interviewees say what the administration wanted communicated. Not that they were saying anything negative, it was just that they weren't saying the 'right things' or fitting the Cedarville mold—as I was told. When I refused to put words into others' mouths or manipulate text to alter intent, I was reprimanded and my work, at times, was edited against my will or without my knowledge.

Being disgusted by such shameful practices and tired of being threatened and reprimanded for having ethics and a backbone, in April of 2007 I resigned from the PR department and accepted a part-time faculty position. However, 15 months later I was chastised by the administration again.

Why? Because when the problems at Cedarville (commonly dubbed 'The Cedarville Situation') made front page headlines I was teaching a news-writing and public relations course during which we discussed the media's handling of The Cedarville Situation and CU's internal and external PR efforts. My lessons were taught in a balanced manner and I made sure that the focus was professionally and educationally beneficial. However, because the discussions involved negative things about the university, the administration was angered. My department chair knew what I was teaching and was fully supportive. Unfortunately, his approval was not reflective of the comrades above him.

In one conversation with my dean (that was held without my chair's knowledge) I was told, "You need to understand that you are NEVER to say anything negative about the university!" When I explained that I was simply making something good out of a bad situation, he angrily chastised me noting that, regardless of truth, I was out of line--adding that CU does not like to have anything negative expressed. I was then ordered to be silent and not discuss The Cedarville Situation in future classes.

That is when my husband (also a Cedarville professor) and I decided to resign and join the faculty exodus. To stay, we felt, was giving tacit approval to unbiblical behavior. I must point out that my husband gave up a tenured position. That is how strongly he disapproved of the administration's practices and conduct.

Perhaps this apparent obsession with silencing truth explains why Cedarville is investing an extensive amount of resources, time and effort to mislead people and stop them from visiting websites that provide unfavorable information and views. Personally, I am repulsed. There is nothing biblical about intentionally misleading people and seeking to deceive. Professionally, I find such deception disgraceful. Not only does the university's efforts adversely impact internal PR--as no one likes to feel like they are being silenced, manipulated, or fooled--but it also sets a bad example for Cedarville students. I have no tolerance for dishonesty in my classroom and I find it troubling that the administration of an institution of higher learning would behave in such a manner--especially a Christian institution.

With aspects of The Cedarville Situation now being heard in the legal system, my hope is that as the media covers related events, they will not buy into CU's deceptive efforts and will boldly tell the full story. In doing so, we can pray that many eyes will be opened.

In closing, I applaud www.cedarvillesituation.com for standing strong and sharing facts that might not otherwise be heard and weighed. The efforts and deceptive tactics that Cedarville University is employing to silence your message give testimony to the truths you share and the threat you present.

Kudos to the Students Who Want the Truth About the Faculty Exodus Away from Cedarville U for sharing your concerns and insights on Facebook. Thank you for alerting me and others to such an unscrupulous maneuver.

To Cedarville administrators I offer this advice: Instead of merely describing your institution as being "grounded in biblical truth..." consider conducting your affairs in a truthful and biblical manner. Maybe then you can stop resorting to desperate and misleading PR tactics.