

EDUCATION

Top journalism award goes to coverage of diversity issues by alumni-resurrected VMI newspaper

An investigation into racism at VMI, and the subsequent rollout of diversity, equity and inclusion programs mandated by the state, have roiled many alumni of the Lexington school.



by **Lisa Rowan**
May 10, 2023



The staff of The Cadet received the state's top journalism award from the Virginia Press Association on Saturday in Short Pump. Photo by Dwayne Yancey.

Virginia's top journalism award was given Saturday to a student newspaper for its coverage of diversity, equity and inclusion at the Virginia Military Institute. The judge lauded the students for their bravery in taking on a topic that has shrouded the Lexington institute in controversy since 2021, when VMI began to respond to revelations about a pervasive culture of racism at the school.

The Cadet, which takes the same name as VMI's former student newspaper, is written by students but funded by a nonprofit led by a VMI alumnus who has filed two lawsuits regarding the school's diversity, equity and inclusion — or DEI — contracts. Bob Morris, a retired U.S. Army colonel and business owner in Yorktown, helped relaunch the paper after it was shut down in 2016 because of what he described as interference by the school.

VMI has offered to give The Cadet club status, but only if the cadet in charge certifies students have full editorial control and a faculty adviser, according to a spokesperson there.

On Saturday, two cadets attended the Virginia Press Association's annual banquet in Short Pump and to a mostly standing ovation accepted the year's highest award for community service.



The audience at Saturday's VPA awards dinner gave The Cadet staffers a mostly standing ovation. Photo by Dwayne Yancey.

The Cadet was **lauded by VPA**, which said the outcome of the paper's continued reporting was a "robust dialogue" among cadets and faculty, "free speech and tolerance of alternative views" and "a reduction in the administration's attempts to suppress or control the student newspaper."

It was the first time a student newspaper has received the top honor in the award's 75-year history. Last year, the Virginian-Pilot received the award for its coverage of ongoing racial segregation in Norfolk. The Cadet also won six other awards.

VMI came under scrutiny in 2020 when The Washington Post wrote about **numerous racist incidents** reported among students at the school. The reporting led to a leadership change at the institute, and to then-Gov. Ralph Northam, a VMI alumnus, ordering an investigation of the claims and the campus' culture.

The current superintendent, Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, is the first Black leader of VMI. He has been open about a need to increase diversity at the school. But the push for DEI on campus has been divisive, particularly among VMI alumni who say that pervasive racism doesn't exist at the school and that DEI training is unnecessary. The most recent development in the DEI battle was an appearance on VMI's campus by Gov. Glenn Youngkin's chief diversity appointee who declared that **"DEI is dead."**

James Mansfield, one of two top editors for The Cadet during the 2021-2022 school year, was one of several cadets who spoke with school administrators about restarting the campus newspaper after connecting with several alumni who were also interested in a student paper revival. The new publication would have a faculty adviser, the students said, but they didn't want to be held to VMI's rules for cadet clubs.

"We wanted to be purely objective and didn't want to have any institutional pressure on what we produced," Mansfield said. So they ran the paper on their own, reporting primarily by phone and working in their barracks rooms since cadets must get permission to leave campus. Alumni like Morris, who established the Cadet Foundation to support the newspaper financially, helped them get set up.

The **Cadet Foundation**, which says on its website it supports the newspaper "as well as the related activities supporting cadets and alumni," raised about \$8,000 in 2021, its initial year. Its website encourages **members of the class of 1974 to donate to the foundation**, instead of to the traditional gift to VMI's Alumni Agencies, in honor of its 50th reunion.

Mansfield, who is now a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps, said he thinks The Cadet won the community service award from VPA because of the paper's difficulty in working with school administration. He said the students had support from people outside the school like Morris, Lexington News-Gazette publisher Matt Paxton, and VMI alumni who had worked on The Cadet newspaper in previous decades, when the newspaper was officially connected to the school.

The Cadet's award-winning DEI coverage included articles on meetings of the school's DEI committee and commemorating the 25th anniversary of women being admitted to VMI. The coverage also included a cadet's opinion piece arguing that changing systems at the school too quickly would dilute the traditions that students experience at the rigorous military college.

Of the 15 articles judged, 10 were written wholly or in part by unnamed parties, including several by “The Cadet Editorial Staff.” The byline on one article, about 19th century VMI alum Sir Moses Ezekiel, who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, is credited as “From jewish-history.com.” (The stories [can be viewed](#) in the VPA winners’ gallery or in the PDF document attached to this story.)

The Cadet, February 6, 2023, Page 1

The Voice of the Corps
We are The Cadet newspaper, the independent voice of the Corps. Let your voice be heard. Contact us today at: editor@thecadet.org

The Case for Preserving Tradition - Why VMI may NOT be changing for the good.
By Cadet Preston Boyd '23

should we allow this threat to persist? Some say to change with the times, or to increase the appeal of the Institute to a broader demographic. And in some areas, we should change with the times. But this change should be discussed, debated, and determined by the Corps and not done for us by a group of individuals who cannot understand what it is like to be a part of our systems. The case for tradition is that these things do not align with the mission of the Institute. These objectives ought not to be achieved at the expense of the quality of the cadet through time. Most cadets chose the Institute understanding it provided to be the most difficult college experience available. Therefore, the Institute has attracted extraordinary individuals. With the continued fading of the Corps' full involvement in the nation, the altering of sacred traditions, and cadet systems being changed without cadet input, what will separate the Institute from any other SMC or Service Academy? What will make VMI "No Ordinary College" if we allow that which makes us extraordinary to be taken away?

Keydets in Saint-Cyr
Photo by Rebecca

Cadets on parade at St. Cyr Military Academy

By Cadet Andrew Weston '23

France's military history has always been intertwined with America's military history since the Revolutionary War. You may have seen one French Spahis assault gear during the fall semester last year. This semester VMI has sent two cadets to the Ecole Spahis Militaire de Saint-Cyr to experience the prestigious officer training program of the French military started by Napoleon in 1802. The exchange program is not well-known at the Institute, yet through the accounts of the experiences of cadets at Saint-Cyr, hopefully the interests of those seeking to commission and suppose their French will be expanded to continue to maintain a strong relationship with our French ally.

Cadet Will Rich and I arrived our adventure the 28th of January, beginning a week of integration with other cadets from the Belgian, French, Luxembourgish, and Lithuanian academies, later to be joined by American and Czech cadets as well. This week of integration included plenty of activities to introduce us to the language, as well as the traditions and practices of the academy, all while Saint-Cyr cadets conducted their FCS of the month watched as with various eyes. The French introduced each of us to horse riding, something which every French officer has learned since the time of Napoleon. For many of us it was the first time riding a horse. Cadets also conducted an introduction to the French FAMAS weapon system. The FAMAS is unique in the service role of the French army but will most likely be the one we will use during the two field trainings that foreign cadets will participate in this semester. Other activities included learning the history of the academy and French officer corps, and VMI and Lithuanian cadets visiting the city of Rennes for a weekend.

Now this week, classes and cadet parties have begun, one party being held at an old French cavalry officer club with French and foreign cadets both eager to enjoy each other's company. Although, it may still take some time to convince the French that VMI cadets are not West Point cadets. Each class is in English, except the French class obviously. These classes are designed to improve the content of such content some French and other partners engage in, enhance leadership abilities, and help Americans and French cadets create friendships that will follow them into their military careers. I hope that Cadet Rich and I will be able to provide the corps an insight to the culture of Saint-Cyr, as well as the differences we share with our French counterparts in options in some.

The Corps note to self: Stay off Jodel

X
 Unless it is routine, basic stuff, remember that the administration, the media, parents, and probably the Russians are all monitoring.
 Join The Cadet to have your voice heard.

[The-Cadet-winning-entry](#)

Download



The Cadet Regimental Commander gives commands to the Corps of Cadets at Virginia Military Institute. Courtesy of Mgirardi.

Reporting last year by [Inside Higher Ed](#) about tensions between the newspaper and the school alleged that alumni made at least some decisions at *The Cadet*. That allegation was based on an email from a student claiming that Morris has written for the paper under the “Cadet Staff” byline.

Morris said he serves in a support role to the students, who write the paper’s content. He handles elements of the business side of the operation, including soliciting donations from alumni and readers. (Cadets on campus at VMI can get the newspaper for free in the barracks approximately twice per month, but the online edition of *The Cadet* is behind a paywall; online access costs \$75 per year.)

Morris and Thomas Wilson, the other alumnus listed as a mentor to the editorial team, help connect the students to journalist mentors when necessary, Morris said. “The whole idea is they need to focus on learning to be journalists, writing and running the newspaper.”

Mansfield also said that during his time at the paper, the editorial staff of cadets had complete control over the content of the newspaper. “That was a big point of contention with VMI,” he said. He said Morris “never told us what to write” or influenced the direction of *The Cadet*’s reporting.

But Morris has had some time in the spotlight — a connection that hasn't been spelled out clearly in the pages of *The Cadet*: A firm he owns has filed two lawsuits related to VMI's efforts to diversify.

In the first case, in 2021, Morris' company, a consulting firm called the Center for Applied Innovation, sued Virginia's higher education council for favoring Barnes & Thornburg, the firm selected to conduct the investigation of the school ordered by Northam. CAI applied but claimed in the suit it was put at a disadvantage to compete for the contract.

That case was dismissed. **In a second case, filed in 2022** against VMI, CAI claimed that improper procurement practices were used to award a contract for DEI training. It also claimed that the DEI training violates Youngkin's policies against critical race theory. That case is ongoing.

In articles about the suits by *The Cadet* staff, including those included in the judging packet for the VPA awards, it is not disclosed that the owner of CAI is listed on the masthead of *The Cadet* newspaper as a senior mentor.

When asked why *The Cadet* didn't disclose Morris' relationship to the paper in its articles about the lawsuits, Morris said there's a "firewall" between himself and the cadets regarding the pending legal issue. "I'm not allowed to talk to them about it, and they do their own reporting on it based on what they can get from publicly available documents." But Morris said "the connection is clear" to anyone who reads the articles and related documents that *The Cadet* has provided on its website.

Mansfield, who graduated prior to *The Cadet* publishing the articles about the lawsuit, said that the editorial staff didn't have formal ethical guidelines for their newsroom to follow, and that he and co-editor-in-chief Claire Curtis predominantly operated on their "gut feelings."

Bill Wyatt, director of communications and marketing at VMI, said the school doesn't want editorial control over a student newspaper. He said that to be formally recognized by the school — which would grant the newspaper use of office space at VMI — the cadet in charge of the student organization would need to certify that students have full editorial control and a faculty adviser. "Thus far, they've been unwilling to agree to those things," he said.

VMI doesn't have a journalism program, but Wyatt said a dean had given permission for professors at nearby Washington & Lee University to serve in that role for VMI students.

The newspaper in its current iteration has garnered support from the Student Press Law Center and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, which **issued a letter to VMI defending *The Cadet*** at the request of the newspaper's student staff.

Relationships between college newspapers and the campuses they cover can vary widely. Some publications receive funding through student fees collected by the institution, while some rely on outside contributions. The University of Virginia's *Cavalier Daily*, for instance, is a nonprofit led by a volunteer board.

It's not unusual for alumni to be involved in collegiate student media, said Barbara Allen, director of college programming at the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit journalism and media literacy organization. Those alumni may serve as advisers to the student journalists, alongside faculty members and other advisers — who may or may not influence the independence the publication seeks to uphold.

“The question is, what are the agreed-upon principles?” Allen said. “Is there a guiding framework or a process in place to say, ‘Here’s how we do things and why?’”

The Cadet Foundation website includes [guiding principles](#) including transparency, accountability and civility.

Cardinal News is a member of the Virginia Press Association and also entered the contest for the top award.

EDUCATION

Youngkin avoids talk of diversity, politics at VMI graduation

The Virginia Military Institute has been under scrutiny for several years following reports of widespread racism. Changes at the school have created a rift among alumni and other supporters.

by **Lisa Rowan**

May 16, 2023



Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks to VMI's graduating class on Tuesday in Cameron Hall. Photo courtesy of VMI's Facebook.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin largely avoided politics on Tuesday as he spoke to just over 300 new graduates of the Virginia Military Institute, a campus that's been eclipsed by controversy over the past few years, including in recent weeks.

In a speech that focused on the values instilled in the cadets of the state-supported military college, Youngkin called upon the mission of VMI to guide the graduates in their careers in the military or private sector.

“You live by a code,” Youngkin said. “A code that incorporates words like integrity, character, respect. A code that stands against prejudice, hate and oppression.”

The governor’s speech was punctuated by frequent bursts of applause.

Youngkin visited the campus two weeks ago to visit with cadets and prepare for his commencement speech.

But it was a speech by one of his appointees just a few days prior to that visit that drew a critical eye to the campus once again, after years of scrutiny over reports of systemic racism.

On April 21, Youngkin’s chief diversity officer, Martin Brown, declared in a speech at VMI that “DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] is dead.”

According to [a Washington Post report and video](#) of the speech, Brown said: “We’re not going to bring that cow up anymore. It’s dead. It was mandated by the General Assembly, but this governor has a different philosophy of civil discourse, civility, treating — living the golden rule, right?”

Various groups have called for Brown to resign, including the [Virginia NAACP](#) and the state’s legislative Black and Latino caucuses. Former Gov. Doug Wilder has also [called for Brown to step down](#).

Youngkin’s predecessor, Gov. Ralph Northam, ordered an investigation into claims of racist and sexist practices baked into the culture of the school [after reports of discrimination in 2020](#). VMI has worked since to implement DEI training, a concept that Youngkin has generally opposed since taking over in early 2022. Under Youngkin’s orders, the state now refers to DEI as “diversity, opportunity and inclusion” or DOI.

The state college has seen an administrative overhaul and has worked to implement diversity training, which has roiled segments of the alumni base that claim the need for changes at VMI are overblown.

Of the 1,500 students at VMI for the 2022-2023 school year, fewer than 400 were not white, according to state data. The school has struggled to bring up enrollment numbers in recent years, and its alumni office [missed its recent fundraising goals](#) by a significant margin.

The class of 2023 endured dual challenges, with the investigation of campus culture occurring concurrently with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This class is unlike any other,” Youngkin said. “You have endured the pandemic. You have dealt with distractions that were not of your own making.”

He also claimed he was the cadets' favorite governor, in part because during his visit a few weeks ago he granted them amnesty from some minor infractions they had accrued.



In a speech that focused on the values instilled in the cadets, Gov. Glenn Youngkin called upon the mission of VMI to guide the graduates in their careers in the military or private sector. "You live by a code," he said. "A code that incorporates words like integrity, character, respect. A code that stands against prejudice, hate and oppression." Behind the governor is the school's class of 2026. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

The class, which started with 515 students four years ago, is completing its time at VMI with 53% moving on to commissioned service in the military, across all branches and including the Space Force.

Perhaps the governor's most outwardly political statement came when Youngkin pointed out four graduates in the class who will go on to military service in Taiwan. Those graduates, he said, are "ready to defend your home against oppression from the People's Republic of China. Please know that we stand with you."

Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, who also spoke, is the school's first Black superintendent. He took over in spring 2021, succeeding General J.H. Binford Peay, who resigned in fall 2020. Wins also avoided directly addressing the school's struggles, instead noting that the corps "is on strong footing."

"One of the things I'd like you to take away as you graduate is my recollection of the turmoil about our culture that was imposed upon the entire corps, and my message to you upon my arrival," Wins said. "Those challenges were never about you. ... Nonetheless, I asked you to hold the narrative and let people see who you really are as cadets of character who embody an oath that few if any colleges could come close to living up to. You did so magnificently."

Among the praises shared with the graduates and their families today, Youngkin singled out The Cadet newspaper, which **received seven awards** from the Virginia Press Association earlier this month. The awards included the group's top annual prize for journalistic integrity and public service.

The newspaper, which was revived in 2021 with assistance from an alumnus who recently sued the college over a DEI-related contract, submitted a package of content about diversity, equity and inclusion that included unsigned opinion pieces. The newspaper is not sanctioned by the school, and the paper's parent foundation **has launched a campaign** to solicit donations from alumni outside of the official alumni fundraising efforts.

But the focus on the student newspaper was brief, as Youngkin quickly turned his attention to meals at VMI's Crozet Hall. The governor said he'd heard resoundingly from cadets that the dining hall menu had improved, and congratulated the campus dining leadership for their accomplishments, to cheers and laughter from the crowd.

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EDUCATION

Virginia Press Association holds meeting to discuss VMI student newspaper awards

The student newspaper won VPA's top journalism award earlier this month for its coverage of diversity issues on campus. The association said the meeting was to address reporting by Cardinal News about connections between the paper and the alumnus who has helped fund it.



by **Lisa Rowan**

May 18, 2023



The Lexington campus of the Virginia Military Institute. Photo courtesy of VMI.

The board of the Virginia Press Association met Monday to discuss awards it granted earlier this month to The Cadet student newspaper at the Virginia Military Institute that received the group's highest award for its coverage of diversity

issues on campus.

The meeting came less than a week after [Cardinal News reported](#) that the newspaper had recently been reestablished by an alumnus who has sued the school over a contract related to diversity, equity and inclusion training.

VPA Executive Director Betsy Edwards said by email that the board “agreed that no action needed to be taken” regarding The Cadet’s awards.

The Cadet won the Virginia Press Association Award for Journalistic Integrity and Community Service for a package of content focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, at the state military college. It’s an award with a 75-year history, and The Cadet is the first student newspaper to receive it.

Edwards didn’t say who requested the May 15 board meeting, or whether the decision to not take action was unanimous among the [nine board members](#).

Jim Maxwell, VPA board chair and Bristol-based president of Lee Enterprises Western Virginia group, did not respond to a voicemail and an email message on Wednesday. The other board members were contacted by either email or phone; one confirmed that the meeting had occurred but referred questions to Maxwell. The rest had not responded by late Wednesday.

A [press release](#) from VPA following the May 6 awards ceremony said the outcome of the paper’s continued reporting on DEI included a “robust dialogue” among cadets and faculty, “free speech and tolerance of alternative views” and “a reduction in the administration’s attempts to suppress or control the student newspaper.”

Comments about The Cadet’s submission written by the award’s judge were read aloud at the banquet: “This is as clear an operational definition of journalism fulfilling one of its primary functions by providing a public forum for the discussion of ideas important to the community it serves as I have heard.”

Of the 15 articles judged, 10 were written wholly or in part by unnamed parties, including several by “The Cadet Editorial Staff.”

The same content that was judged for the integrity award also received a third-place award in a feature writing category. (The stories [can be viewed](#) in the VPA winners’ gallery or in the PDF document attached to this story.)

VPA declined to disclose the names of the judges who reviewed The Cadet’s contest entries.

Entries for the main VPA contest are submitted through an online portal, where volunteer judges from other states (this year, the Tennessee Press Association) review and rank submissions. Entries for the public service award are emailed directly to VPA and are judged by “journalists from around the country,” Edwards said.

The association has not responded to additional questions about how judges for the top awards are selected.



The public service award, according to VPA, “stresses editorial leadership as well as community service above and beyond a member’s circulation area.” Entries are judged in part on whether they made “significant effort beyond the member’s routine scope.”

Cardinal News also submitted an entry for the top award.

Several years of scrutiny, and turmoil

VMI has been under scrutiny since 2020, when claims of numerous racist incidents affecting students at the school came to light. Reporting [primarily by The Washington Post](#) led to a leadership change at the institute and an investigation into the claims and the campus’ culture.

Current superintendent Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, the first Black leader of VMI, has been open about the need to increase diversity. But Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s chief diversity appointee last month visited VMI’s campus, where he declared that “**DEI is dead.**”

[The-Cadet-winning-entry](#)

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Youngkin spoke at commencement for the class of 2023 at VMI this week, [where he briefly praised](#) The Cadet’s VPA awards.

The Cadet, which takes the same name as VMI’s former student newspaper, is written by students but funded by a nonprofit led by a VMI alumnus who has filed two lawsuits regarding the school’s DEI contracts.

Bob Morris, a retired U.S. Army colonel and business owner in Yorktown, helped relaunch the paper after it was shut down in 2016 due to what he described as interference by the school. VMI’s spokesperson said the earlier iteration of the newspaper closed due to lack of student interest.

In Cadet articles about lawsuits tied to Morris, including those included in the award submission, the newspaper does not disclose that Morris is also the lead mentor for the newspaper.

The Cadet and its parent foundation, The Cadet Foundation, were established in summer 2021, around the same time a third party completed a state-ordered investigation into claims of systemic racism at VMI and began to solicit proposals to conduct diversity training on campus.

Morris' company, the Center for Applied Innovation, sought the contract, which was awarded to another company. Morris sued VMI in April 2022, claiming it violated procurement procedures during the selection process. The case is still pending. A previous suit brought by CAI against Virginia's higher education council regarding DEI contracts to investigate VMI was dismissed.

Along with funding the student newspaper, The Cadet Foundation [solicits donations from alumni](#) as an alternative to VMI's official alumni fundraising efforts. It raised about \$8,000 in its initial six months, according to tax records.

Reporting last year by [Inside Higher Ed](#) about tensions between the newspaper and the school alleged that alumni made at least some decisions at The Cadet. That allegation was based on an email from a student claiming that Morris has written for the paper under the "Cadet Staff" byline.

Bill Wyatt, the head of communications at VMI, has also expressed concern about whether students on the newspaper staff are truly independent of alumni influence. The college has stated that it doesn't wish to control the student group but cannot grant its staff extra time in cadets' highly regimented schedules to work on the paper unless it can verify the students have editorial independence.

Morris and former Cadet editor James Mansfield have both said that all content is created independently of the newspaper's mentors, which include Morris, VMI alumni Thomas Wilson, and Matt Paxton, the publisher of the Lexington News-Gazette.

EDUCATION

Virginia Press Association hires attorney to review award to VMI student newspaper

Since receiving the association's top award in early May, The Cadet has come under scrutiny for its ties to an alumnus who has helped fund it.



by **Lisa Rowan**

May 31, 2023



The Lexington campus of the Virginia Military Institute. Photo courtesy of VMI.

The Virginia Press Association has hired an attorney to conduct an inquiry into whether its top annual award was granted according to contest rules.

A May 31 memo from Executive Director Betsy Edwards to members of the contest committee said the VPA board decided to conduct the inquiry “following a number of recent questions” regarding the award, which was presented May 6 at the annual banquet VPA hosts for award winners.

The 2022 award for Journalistic Integrity and Community Service [was given to The Cadet](#), a student newspaper out of Virginia Military Institute. It was the first time in the 75-year history of the award that it went to a student newspaper.

The Cadet had been an official VMI publication before shutting down in 2016. It was resurrected in 2021 with financial help from alumnus Bob Morris, who set up a nonprofit foundation to fund the newspaper’s production.

The paper, which is not sanctioned by the school as an official student activity, has had a contentious relationship with the VMI administration.

The paper takes pride in its independence, and former editor James Mansfield explained in an interview that The Cadet didn’t want to be an official student club when he and three other students relaunched it, for fear that the administration would censor the paper. VMI, meanwhile, has said it doesn’t want any editorial say in the newspaper but has concerns that Morris has launched the paper to benefit his own agenda.

The paper won the top journalism award for a package of articles focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion at VMI, which has been a focus since [2020 reports of systemic racism](#) at the 184-year-old military college. In the years since those allegations, the school has begun to reckon with its [ties to the Confederacy](#) and has sought to increase diversity under the guidance of superintendent Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, who took over in November 2020 and is the school’s first Black leader.

About 6% of VMI’s 1,600 students are Black, and about 8% are Hispanic or Latino. Less than 14% of the student body are women.

Though The Cadet’s entry was lauded by the contest judge for its “robust dialogue” on the ongoing reforms at VMI, taken as a whole it is skeptical at best of DEI — or as [Gov. Glenn Youngkin has rebranded it](#), DOI, for diversity, opportunity and inclusion.

(The stories [can be viewed](#) in the VPA winners’ gallery or in the PDF document attached to this story.)

The majority of the articles in the entry, which were published in 2022, are credited to the “Cadet Staff” or to anonymous contributors, or are unsigned opinion pieces. One article in the entry is credited “from jewish-history.com.”

The entry also includes an article about a lawsuit filed against VMI by Yorktown-based Center for Applied Innovation. The firm, which is owned by Morris, had sought a contract to provide DEI training at the school but went on to sue both VMI and the state’s higher education council over efforts to investigate diversity and implement inclusion training at the school. The suit against the council was dismissed; the suit against VMI is pending.

The article did not disclose Morris' ownership of CAI.

That article also cited support for CAI's lawsuit by the conservative Spirit of VMI PAC, which is not disclosed as an advertiser in the print edition of the paper.

The political action committee has spent just over \$7,265 on ads in the print edition of The Cadet, based on the PAC's expenditure reporting. They include several full-page ads, some of which have referenced DEI training "struggle sessions" or promote a "wokeness survival guide" via a QR code that links to a video from conservative nonprofit PragerU titled "the DEI Disaster."

An April 2023 article on CAI's lawsuit against VMI was updated in late May to include a disclosure about Morris' ties to the company and the newspaper.

The VPA contest committee, which reviews contest rules each year, will postpone its annual meeting until the review is complete. "Recommended changes to the rules or procedures resulting from the inquiry will need to be discussed by the Contest Committee at its annual meeting," Edwards wrote in the memo.

VPA's board held a special meeting on May 15 to talk about the award. Edwards had said by email on May 23 that the board had unanimously decided to not take action on the journalistic integrity award, which was judged by a single person this year, a member of the Tennessee Press Association. Edwards has declined to provide the name of the judge, saying that VPA does not disclose this information.

Cardinal News also submitted an entry for the award. Last year's award went to the Virginian-Pilot for its coverage of ongoing racial segregation in Norfolk.

Conrad Shumadine has been retained to conduct the independent review. Shumandine, a retired attorney based in Norfolk, has a long history of experience in First Amendment cases, including those that have risen to the Supreme Court of Virginia and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Shumadine has not responded to a phone message left Wednesday afternoon.



The-Cadet-winning-entry

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Morris, who graduated from VMI in 1979 and served as a colonel in the U.S. Army, said in an early May interview that the content of the newspaper is completely student-driven, and that he serves in an administrative capacity. He also said he hasn't "taken a stand" on DEI, stressing that his company's lawsuit against VMI was about contract procurement rules, not about "trying to stop or start or change DEI."

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EDUCATION

Virginia Press Association inquiry upholds top award to VMI student newspaper

The Cadet's contest submission had raised questions about the newspaper's lack of disclosure that its alumni mentor has sued VMI, and about whether students were responsible for all the content that was published.



by **Lisa Rowan**

June 29, 2023



Virginia Military Institute in Lexington. Photo courtesy of VMI.

The Virginia Press Association followed its rules when it gave its top annual award to a student newspaper from the Virginia Military Institute, according to an attorney tapped by the group to conduct an independent investigation into the outcome of the contest.

The inquiry did not review the association's rules for the contest, only whether the award was granted in line with the existing rules.

The Cadet newspaper received the Journalistic Integrity and Community Service award in May for a package of articles addressing diversity, equity and inclusion training that had been implemented at the state-run college in Lexington following an investigation of reports of widespread racism there.

[The stories [can be viewed](#) in the VPA winners' gallery.]

The Cadet's submission raised questions about the newspaper's lack of disclosure that its alumni mentor has sued VMI, and about whether students were responsible for all the content that was published. Those questions led the VPA board to commission an independent report and hire Conrad Shumadine, a retired First Amendment attorney based in Norfolk.

Shumadine said in his report, which VPA released Thursday, that the association has no procedure for appealing or revoking a news outlet's membership, or for reviewing a challenge to one of its awards.

This year's contest was judged by members of the Tennessee Press Association. VPA has confirmed that a single judge reviewed the entries for the journalistic integrity award but would not release the name of the judge. Shumadine's report indicated there were three entries. (Cardinal News submitted one of them, but VPA has not disclosed the third entry.)

The Journalistic Integrity and Community Service Award has been given out for 75 years, and until 2018 drew so many entries that the association broke judging into two categories based on circulation.

For the inquiry, Shumadine said by phone Thursday he "read everything that was given to me." That included complaints that had been made to the VPA, "all the articles," the rules of the contest and information about how the contest had been run in the past, he said.

Most of the articles in the entry, which were published in 2022, are credited to "Cadet Staff" or anonymous contributors rather than to individual student writers.

The Cadet's entry was lauded by the contest judge for its "robust dialogue" on the ongoing reforms at VMI, but the coverage as a whole is largely skeptical of DEI.

The entry also included an article about a lawsuit that a company owned by the newspaper's mentor, VMI alumnus Bob Morris, brought against VMI for its process of selecting a firm to provide DEI training. The article did not disclose that the plaintiff, the Center for Applied Innovation, is owned by Morris.

[A Washington Post report](#) in late May noted similarities between that Cadet article and a press release about the lawsuit that was published on an anti-DEI website called Protect Honor that is registered to Morris.

The Cadet operates independently of VMI. A previous VMI-sanctioned newspaper of the same name shut down in 2016 due to what the school describes as a lack of student interest.

Morris helped a group of students [resurrect a new version of the newspaper](#) in summer 2021, shortly after his suit was filed against VMI.

Morris did not respond to an emailed request for comment Thursday.

Shumadine said he didn't interview the judge for the journalistic integrity award or the staff of the student newspaper in his review of the VPA's adherence to its rules. "I wouldn't have thought that would have been necessary," he said.

His report said that "Disqualification would require at a minimum conduct that deviates from normal and ethical journalistic standards." But if the VPA were to determine that a "journalist or aspiring journalist" violated those standards, it could be defamatory "and could subject the VPA to litigation."

"It is hard to even articulate a process for overturning the Award that would not magnify controversy, open the door to litigation and place unacceptable burdens on future contests," Shumadine wrote.

When asked whether the organization plans to review or change its rules for the contest or membership, VPA executive director Betsy Edwards responded via email: "We believe the report speaks for itself."

VPA offers membership to daily and weekly newspapers, along with free-distribution and college newspapers. Freelance writers who have written for VPA member organizations are also eligible. Only one membership category, for online publications, requires that applicants must use "recognized standards of professional journalism" in order to be eligible.

Shumadine said by phone Thursday that he doesn't think it's appropriate for a lawyer to review the quality of journalism. But upon reviewing the three submissions for the top award, Shumadine wrote, "Each of the submissions is well done and should be the subject of pride to the three submitters. The writing in each is clear, each addresses significant issues of public concern, and all seem consistent with the best traditions of public service journalism."

He also noted in the report, in response to the Cadet's [contentious relationship with VMI](#), that "No one disputes the importance of VMI's contributions to the Commonwealth, and nothing in this report is intended to diminish the debt all Virginians owe to a great institution."

EDUCATION

VMI board asks attorney general's office to investigate student newspaper controversy

The state military college has asked the attorney general's office, which serves as its attorney, to step in after a petition called on VMI to support The Cadet, an independent publication.



by **Lisa Rowan**
August 9, 2023



Preston Library at the Virginia Military Institute. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Debate over a student newspaper at the Virginia Military Institute has escalated to the state attorney general's office.

VMI's board of visitors isn't asking for a review of whether the school's independent newspaper, The Cadet, deserved to win several awards at the Virginia Press Association's annual banquet in May, **including the top prize** for journalistic integrity and community service.

Rather, it's asking the attorney general's office to review whether the institute or its board attempted to disparage the newspaper, a claim that began to circulate after Cardinal News and other media reported on the newspaper's win and on concerns about its contest entry.

The Cadet received the VPA's highest honor — the first time in association history that it went to a student publication — for a package of articles on diversity, equity and inclusion at the state military college that were primarily skewed against diversity efforts on the Lexington campus.

In addition, in articles about a company's lawsuit against VMI for procedures awarding its DEI training contract, the newspaper did not disclose that the company was led by The Cadet's chief funder, class of 1979 alumnus Bob Morris.

Tom Watjen, the president of VMI's board of visitors and a 1976 graduate, **said in a statement** posted Monday that he had asked the assistant attorney general assigned to the school to investigate the whether VMI had prompted negative press about The Cadet, and to report to the full board during a closed session at its meeting in September. The attorney general's office serves as legal counsel for all state schools.

“With this information in hand, the Institute and the board will be able to better determine what, if any, additional actions may be required,” Watjen wrote.

In late May, VPA hired an attorney to review its award procedures, and **that report** found that no parts of the established judging process had been violated.

But since then, some have accused VMI of pressuring the media or VPA to disparage the newspaper. During a board meeting on July 13, board member Teddy Gottwald, a 1983 graduate of the school, accused VMI's administration of continually trying to undermine the efforts of the student newspaper.

And **a petition started Aug. 1** by The Cadet newspaper's parent organization, the Cadet Foundation, requested that the board of visitors support the student newspaper and investigate whether VMI's actions regarding the publication were inappropriate.

Documents obtained via public records requests show that VMI spokesperson Bill Wyatt reached out to VPA shortly after the awards announcement, but not about the journalistic integrity award. He inquired about another Cadet article that had received honors: an investigation of VMI's cadet counseling center that the student reporter said had been published as an incomplete draft without his knowledge. It won first place for in-depth/investigative reporting in its circulation category.

“I have not yet seen any indications that the administration is intentionally engaged in proactively sharing information with individuals or news organizations to lead them to a particular story line, something implied by a petition being circulated in social media,” Watjen wrote.

VMI’s student newspaper was resurrected in 2021 after a five-year hiatus. Morris worked with a group of cadets to relaunch the newspaper, although this iteration, unlike its predecessor, is not sanctioned by the institute.

The school has not granted the newspaper a permit, which would allow cadets flexibility to pursue reporting amid strict schedules maintained by the institute.

VMI has said it’s not convinced that the newspaper is produced wholly by the cadets, rather than by their alumni mentors. Morris has maintained that students have control of the publication.

The school gained national attention after allegations of widespread racism in 2020 led then-Gov. Ralph Northam to [order an investigation](#) of practices at VMI.

Since then, VMI alumni have found themselves largely [split into two camps](#): those who support the college and accept that it has evolved from its historic roots, including strong ties to Confederate Civil War history, and those who say VMI’s tradition has been broken down by the “woke” left.

EDUCATION

Attorney general's office will not review VMI's relationship with student newspaper

The president of the school's board of visitors said this week that VMI will conduct its own review of whether the institute has interfered with the student newspaper. He earlier had said he had asked the state attorney general's office to look into the matter.



by **Lisa Rowan**
August 18, 2023



Smith Hall at the Virginia Military Institute. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

The state attorney general's office will not investigate allegations that the Virginia Military Institute facilitated negative reports about an independent student newspaper, the Lexington school said this week.

Tom Watjen, president of the school's board of visitors, [announced Aug. 7](#) that he had asked the assistant attorney general assigned to the institute to look into whether VMI had supplied reporters with information about The Cadet newspaper after it won the top annual award from the Virginia Press Association. The package of stories that won was largely critical of the military college's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and came under scrutiny for failing to disclose that its alumni mentor owns a company that sued VMI, and for including news articles with no author names attached.

Because VMI is a state school, the attorney general's office is its legal counsel.

But an [update](#) posted Aug. 16 from Watjen stated: "After further consideration, we have chosen to handle this matter in the normal course of business, and I am discussing with [Superintendent] Maj. Gen. Wins his plans for doing so."

Board member Teddy Gottwald had raised the issue in a July board of visitors meeting, where he accused institute spokesperson Bill Wyatt of telling VPA and publications including Cardinal News that The Cadet was not independently produced by students.

Watjen and Gottwald are both VMI alumni.

The Office of the Attorney General did not provide a comment by publication time Friday. Wyatt said by email that "A number of factors led to the decision to handle the matter internally" but did not provide further details.

When concern arose regarding the student newspaper's [VPA win](#), the press association hired a retired First Amendment attorney to determine whether the association had followed its own rules for its annual contest judging. The report [found no wrongdoing](#) on the part of the press association.

VMI has had a strained relationship with the newspaper since it was relaunched by alumnus Bob Morris in 2021. VMI hasn't given the newspaper a permit — essentially its blessing to operate on campus — because it says it doesn't have assurance that students create the publication independent of its alumni mentors. Morris has said he serves merely as an adviser to the students.

The Cadet Foundation, the nonprofit organization that supports the student newspaper, launched an online petition Aug. 1 demanding that VMI support The Cadet and initiate an independent review of the institute's actions regarding the paper.

A review by the attorney general's office would have been a conflict of interest, an Aug. 8 update to the petition stated, because the attorney assigned to VMI is defending the school in a case against Morris. Morris sued VMI in spring 2022 claiming that the school had violated procurement policy when it considered firms to provide diversity training on campus. Morris' consulting firm applied for the contract but did not make it to the final consideration round.

[The petition](#) had more than 1,500 signatures as of Friday.

“We continue to support a full, open, transparent investigation by a truly independent entity,” Morris said by email late Friday.

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POLITICS

VMI board votes to accept Confederate Memorial from Arlington National Cemetery

The state military college's board of visitors voted unanimously to accept Gov. Glenn Youngkin's request to house the statue at its Civil War museum at New Market.



by **Lisa Rowan**

September 13, 2023



The Confederate Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Courtesy of the cemetery.

A Confederate monument slated for removal from Arlington National Cemetery will be placed at a Civil War site owned by Virginia Military Institute.

The state military college's board of visitors voted unanimously Wednesday to accept the memorial as the federal government works to jettison all elements of Confederate history from its property — a task that ranges from removing monuments to renaming military bases.

The Confederate Memorial, unveiled in 1914, will be moved to the Virginia Museum of the Civil War at New Market Battlefield State Historical Park. The site, about 77 miles from VMI's campus in Lexington, is where 257 cadets were involved in the battle of New Market in May 1864.

For years, VMI commemorated the battle and the 10 cadets who died there by hosting an annual New Market Day parade. In 2021, it was renamed the Memorial Parade to honor all alumni who died in battle.

The monument was designed by Moses Ezekiel, the first Jewish cadet to attend VMI. He fought with the Confederates at the Battle of New Market before graduating in 1867.

Atop a 32-foot-tall pedestal stands the bronze figure of a woman wearing a crown of olive leaves. Fourteen shields (for the 13 Confederate states and border state Maryland) are depicted on the pedestal, along with various human figures, including that of an enslaved man and woman. The enslaved woman holds a Confederate soldier's white baby.



Details of the Confederate Memorial. Images courtesy of Arlington National Cemetery.

VMI Board of Visitors member Hugh Fain, head of the external relations committee that discussed the matter before bringing it to the board, said ahead of the vote that the monument was created “as a reconciliation effort” after the Civil War.

Arlington National Cemetery’s description of the monument states: “The elaborately designed monument offers a nostalgic, mythologized vision of the Confederacy, including highly sanitized depictions of slavery.”

The remains of more than 400 Confederate soldiers, including Ezekiel, are buried around the memorial. The base of the monument will not be moved in order to preserve the graves around it.



Moses Ezekiel, who created the memorial and was VMI's first Jewish cadet, is buried near the memorial. Photo courtesy of Arlington National Cemetery.

Department solidified plans to remove the monument from the national cemetery, Youngkin's office asked VMI's superintendent, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Cedric Wins, for the school to take it.

"The Governor believes that the Newmarket battlefield will provide a fitting backdrop to Ezekiel's legacy even though he disagrees with the Biden administration that the statue should have been slated for removal," Youngkin spokesperson Macaulay Porter said in a statement Wednesday evening.

VMI did not respond Wednesday afternoon when asked for more details about the decision.

The timing of the move, which will be paid for with state and federal funding, is unclear. Fain said the federal Naming Commission originally had planned to remove the statue by the end of 2023.

Across the country, hundreds of Confederate memorials and symbols have been removed in recent years. The movement of this particular memorial is part of an effort by the Department of Defense — ordered by Congress — to purge Confederate relics such as landmarks and military base names in the wake of the 2020 racial justice movement.

Fain said that Gov. Glenn Youngkin's office had opposed the removal of the monument. But when the Defense



Daisy McLaurin Stevens, president of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, speaks at the dedication of the memorial in 1914. According to a history of the memorial provided by Arlington National Cemetery, the UDC began to raise funds to erect a memorial in the Confederate section of the cemetery in 1906, with the approval of Secretary of War William Howard Taft. Library of Congress photo records show that President Woodrow Wilson and Col. Robert E. Lee, a grandson of the Confederate general, also spoke at the dedication. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

A number of groups have spoken out against moving Confederate monuments. One, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, sued the Defense Department and the Army in March in an attempt to block the removal of the Confederate Memorial, claiming that it represents reunification of the North and South after the Civil War. The case is pending in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

But in 2017, 22 members of the Ezekiel family wrote to The Washington Post calling for the Confederate Memorial to be removed from the national cemetery.

“Like most such monuments, this statue intended to rewrite history to justify the Confederacy and the subsequent racist Jim Crow laws,” the letter reads, later imploring: “Take it out of its honored spot in Arlington National Cemetery and put it in a museum that makes clear its oppressive history.”

That letter was signed days after Heather Heyer, a counterprotester at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, was killed.

In December 2020, following allegations of widespread racism at the school and the resignation of its last superintendent, Gen. (Ret.) Binford Peay, VMI removed a statue of Confederate Gen. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson from its place in front of barracks.

That statue, also designed by Ezekiel, was moved to New Market Battlefield State Historical Park.

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EDUCATION

VMI won't release the findings of its investigation into alleged interference with student newspaper

The state military college announced in August it would handle an investigation of its relationship with The Cadet internally, after the nonprofit that operates the independent publication called for an external review of the fraught relationship between VMI and the newspaper.



by **Lisa Rowan**
November 2, 2023



Virginia Military Institute in Lexington. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

The Virginia Military Institute has concluded an internal investigation into its relationship with the independent student newspaper, The Cadet. But it won't be releasing the findings of that review, according to a spokesperson from the state military college.

The newspaper, which was restarted in 2021 after the school-sanctioned version shuttered in 2016, gained statewide attention in May when it won the top annual award from the Virginia Press Association.

The package of stories that won was largely critical of the military college's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and came under scrutiny for failing to disclose that its alumni mentor owns a company that had sued VMI, and for including news articles with no author names attached.

Teddy Gottwald, a board of visitors member who sits on the executive committee, originally raised the issue in a July committee meeting. He accused institute spokesperson Bill Wyatt of telling the VPA and publications, including Cardinal News, that The Cadet was not independently produced by students.

Wyatt said during that meeting that the accusation wasn't true, and that he'd only questioned a separate award that The Cadet had received from VPA in May. That award honored an article about the Cadet Counseling Center that the institute had raised accuracy concerns about when it was published in April 2022.

Following the discussion, the VMI Board of Visitors in August asked the state attorney general's office to review whether VMI had supplied outside reporters with information about The Cadet after it won VPA's journalistic integrity award. Because VMI is a state school, the attorney general's office is its legal counsel.

But about a week after that announcement, **VMI decided to handle the investigation internally**. Superintendent Cedric Wins requested the inspector general's office review the issue.

"The Inspector General's investigation into activity surrounding The Cadet newspaper awards has been concluded," Michelle Ellwood, the school's assistant director of news and editorial services, said by email Wednesday. She added that "the report and its findings are not subject to public disclosure" under state law, and that if the board of visitors is briefed on the findings, "it would be done during a closed session in accordance with state law."

When asked if the report could be released with relevant personnel information redacted, Ellwood said it wouldn't be possible to do so "without deducing the personal identity of one of the subjects of the report."

The executive committee of the board of visitors met Tuesday, but the student newspaper was not on the agenda for the public portion of the meeting. The committee spent about 90 minutes in closed session, which is reserved for discussion of personnel matters or consulting with legal counsel.

At the full board of visitors meeting in September, Gottwald **distributed copies** of The Cadet and recommended that board members read articles detailing the ongoing battle between the newspaper staff and VMI administration.

One of the articles he pointed out was headlined “Is VMI Where Freedom of Speech Goes to Die?” It included a detailed timeline of events when VMI allegedly interfered with The Cadet and cast doubt on the honor of students who worked on the newspaper after learning about its awards.

The timeline closely mirrors one that Gottwald had referenced during the July committee meeting, according to documents obtained through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act. It’s unclear who prepared the timeline, but The Cadet article notes that it was “collectively developed” by staff, alumni and “other supporters who assisted with research.”

Gottwald has not responded to a request for comment sent Wednesday to his VMI email address.

When concerns arose [regarding the student newspaper’s VPA win](#), the press association hired a retired First Amendment attorney to determine whether the association had followed its own rules for its annual contest judging. The report [found no wrongdoing](#) on the part of the VPA.

VMI has had a strained relationship with the newspaper since it was relaunched with assistance from alumnus Bob Morris in 2021. Critics of the newspaper have accused Morris of writing some of the content, but Morris has said he serves merely as an adviser to the students.

Morris sued VMI in spring 2022 claiming that the school had violated procurement policy when it considered firms to provide diversity training on campus. Morris’ consulting firm had applied for the contract but did not make it to the final consideration round.

In October, a Rockbridge County judge ordered VMI to pay Morris’ company, the Center for Applied Innovation, \$15,000 in legal fees. But the case remains active, awaiting a final decision from the judge on whether the lawsuit is moot because VMI did not go through with awarding the training contract.

Morris is also president and treasurer of Cadet Foundation, the nonprofit organization that supports the student newspaper. The foundation launched an online petition in early August demanding that VMI support The Cadet and initiate an independent review of the institute’s actions regarding the paper. [The petition](#) has nearly 2,500 signatures as of Nov. 1.

“Neither the paper nor the foundation has any comment on matters we know nothing about,” Morris said by email Wednesday afternoon. The newspaper staff has not responded to an emailed request for comment.

VMI administration hasn’t granted the newspaper a permit allowing it to operate on campus, but met with students from the newspaper staff in September to discuss their relationship, according to an article in The Cadet.