

GIFT Form

Contact Information
Name Chad Painter
Job Title Assistant Professor
Department Communication
School Eastern New Mexico University
Mailing Address 1500 S. Avenue K, Station 27, Portales, NM 88130
Phone #(s) 575-562-2415
E-mail Address(es) Chad.Painter@enmu.edu; chadpainter77@gmail.com
GIFT Preparation
Title of GIFT entry: FOIA your school
Entry Subtitle: Teaching access through a public records project
Summary
Please describe in 1,000 words or less all pertinent details about your GIFT entry, including: • What is your idea? • Goals? • How does it works in the classroom? • Student reaction? Please e-mail your GIFT description as a Word attachment to the GIFT coordinator, Nicole Kraft at kraft.42@osu.edu. Type GIFT ENTRY (Name) [Your name} in the SUBJECT line on your email. All submissions must be received by Sunday, April 17, 2016. Submitters give the AEJMC GIFT Committee approval to use their entry for the competition and to disseminate to members. Email entry is required.
GIFT Poster Display Information
If a panel of judges chooses your GIFT, you will be notified by May 15 and asked to create a visual display of your GIFT to fill your personal bulletin board (measuring approximately 4 feet high and 3 feet wide) by Aug. 1. You will have the opportunity to share more about your GIFT with those who attend the poster session at AEJMC in Minneapolis. An email to all finalists detailing the poster display will follow.

FOIA YOUR SCHOOL: TEACHING ACCESS THROUGH A PUBLIC RECORDS PROJECT

The idea

Articles based on open records help society and help a university improve its performance. The purpose of this hands-on assignment is to gain an understanding of the principles and tenets of media law as it pertains to open records. Through the assignment, students develop a “document state of mind” and might begin further open-records requests either as journalists or as citizens. Students also develop a valuable skill that will make them indispensable in the eyes of prospective employers.

Goals

The goal, for students, is to obtain public records. However, some documents might not be obtained by the end of the semester, and that is OK. The project grade is based on the process, not the results. Ultimately, students create and deliver a presentation on their experience attempting to obtain public records. Because group members must count upon one another for success, each student is expected to contribute and participate to the highest of his or her ability.

How it works in the classroom

Students work in groups of 3-4 people (depending on overall class size) to send *at least one* Freedom of Information Act request to the university through its custodian of records (or other designated party). This request should seek records—on the topic of the group’s choosing—that are open to public. (Records are considered open unless there is a specific exemption.) Group members should document every letter, email, phone call, or personal interaction while trying to obtain records. Create a document to record and write the date, agency, and what was requested so the request can be tracked. Leave space to write who responded, his or her contact information, what he or she said, when he or she responded, and how you responded.

There are several steps that help to ensure a successful project. First, students read and discuss *The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records* by David Cuillier and Charles Davis to gain a theoretical foundation, as well as several ideas and tips on how to create a document state of mind, the wealth of public records available, and strategies for accessing public records.

Several classes (typically about two weeks total) are spent discussing the Freedom of Information Act and Sunshine Laws such as the New Mexico Inspection of Public Records Act. Students read and discuss pertinent websites such as the state attorney general’s office, the Student Press Law Center, the National Freedom of Information Coalition (which also provides a sample FOIA request for each state), and a local freedom of information foundation such as the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government. Further, a university administrator (typically the custodian of records) is invited to speak to the students to address the process of obtaining public records from the side of the record keepers. Finally, one class is spent showing examples of articles or series based on public records. A couple of my

favorites are "What's Lurking in Your Stadium Food" (<http://espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=100725/stadiumconcessions>) and "May I Have Your Attention, Please?" (<http://www.sptimes.com/2006/02/26/Pasco/ May I have your atte.shtml>).

Student reaction

Students have reacted very positively to the assignment. The professor stresses at the beginning and conclusion of the assignment that the ability to navigate the open-records process is a sellable skill that helps build a quality resume for a beginning reporter or public relations professional. The ability to navigate the public-records process makes them more competitive in regional media markets.

Students also have embraced the idea of learning more about their university. Typically, several members of the class already have a desire to learn more information about some aspect of the university. Students also have been very successful in obtaining records. In the past three years, student groups have obtained a report from the university to the NCAA regarding violations from eight athletic teams, budgets for the College of Fine Arts and the Athletic Department, student fees allocations, health inspection reports for campus dining establishments, and maintenance and safety reports for campus dormitories. These records, in turn, have provided the basis for news stories in the campus newspaper and a student-run PBS news show.

The reaction from the statewide community also has been very positive. The professor received a New Mexico Foundation for Open Government First Amendment Award in 2015 for his work training students in the principles and tenets of access and open records.