How the 1969 battle over UMBC's literary magazine kicked off an era of discontent at the university.

“Literary Magazine to Determine True University Status of UMBC”

The headline in the February 10, 1969 edition of The Retriever seems a bit grandiose, as do the brash pronouncements of its editor quoted in the article:

The staff of the magazine anticipates a lot of excitement on its debut. Editor Michael Jacobs stated in an interview that “the response to this magazine will be a kind of gauge on how far UMBC has approached being a true university.”
A s the Retriever’s editor at the time, Diane Jakolis Tichnell ’70 knew what was coming: the new magazine featured a series of soft focus nude photographs of a duet between a male and female dancer, taken by Washington, DC, photographer Robert Stark. Stark’s photographs were not explicit. Indeed, they were hanging in an exhibit at The Corcoran Gallery of Art when the magazine was published. Yet Jacobs and magazine staff knew it was a risky move in the Baltimore County of the late 1960s which had produced Spiro T. Agnew—the nation’s new vice president and most prominent conservative cultural warrior.

The literary magazine was distributed in a plain manila envelope to students who showed an ID card. Stark was punningly referred to as the new magazine’s “Innocent.”

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UMBC’s first literary magazine — Dialogue — was founded with high expectations in 1967. Indeed, Dialogue’s literary advisor, English department faculty member Joseph Goodman, solicited an inaugural letter for the first issue from UMBC’s president. “Your letter would demonstrate that the university takes the magazine seriously,” Goodman wrote to Kuhn on November 17, 1967. “I know the students working on the magazine would be flattered.”

Dialogue’s first issue was filled with playful and literary poems and stories, possessing only a mere whiff of politics and emerging counterculture. Kuhn’s letter was published prominently on its inside front cover. This era of good feeling didn’t extend beyond the following spring. The magazine’s second issue (published in Spring 1968) was a beautiful and oversized publication brimming with typographical whimsy, but one particular piece of writing — by Dialogue editor Gary Blanchard — drew unwelcome attention outside the campus community.

In a play called “A Dance,” Blanchard juxtaposed voices from the African-American experience of pulp, home and street corner. Many of the play’s characters spoke in a profane and incorporating language unlike anything else in the magazine, and the discontent articulated by the voices in “A Dance” simmered with the same racial tensions that had so recently bubbled over into the streets of Baltimore and other cities after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968.

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There was no controversy on campus. Everything went smoothly, without any fanfare. No one took exception.

Looking back, observers say that mitigating a balance between diplomacy with literary magazine critics and a strong defense of student expression was typical of Kuhn’s approach. Kuhn “was a wonderful man,” recalls Shugg. “Sensible, smart and modest.”

Tichnell concurs. “I always got a sense that he wanted to preserve a climate in which we could innovate,” she says.

The fall semester also brought changes to Dialogue’s staff. Blanchard resigned from the magazine in September 1968 and was replaced by Michael Jacobs. Arthur Levi ’75 remained the magazine’s business manager, and Jacobs added American Studies major Bonnie Rachael Hurwitz ’70 and Peter Caruso ’70 to the masthead.

Hurwitz had contributed short stories to the first two issues of the magazine — portraits of men and women in quiet crises, drawn carefully from life. The 1969 Skipjack yearbook captures her as a pretty, dark-haired young woman with an enigmatic smile.

Local media eagerly framed the flames, egged on by the reaction of outraged state and county legislators. (One of them dubbed UMBC an “institution of pornography.”) Faculty and students quickly united against Albin O. Kuhn, UMBC’s first president, who first denied the magazine access to student activity funds and then ended its affiliation with the university.

“Those were the innocent days,” says former UMBC professor Wallace Shugg, who had an excerpt from his travel journal published in the controversial magazine. “But radicalization was growing. In the first two years [of the university], there was no politicization, it was rather quiescent.”

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But Zebellean and other critics persisted, dragging state legislators into the fray. One of Maryland’s U.S. Senators, Daniel Brewster, even wrote demanding to see a copy of Dialogue. Kuhn met with Zebellean and three state legislators on October 21, 1968, and apparently allayed their immediate concerns. UMBC’s president also publicly defended the magazine, telling The Retriever on September 16 that he thought Blanchard “was attempting to do something worthwhile.”

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“That was the person I was then,” says Hurwitz, who today works as a code enforcement officer in the Baltimore suburbs. “I was always interested in writing.” Hurwitz says her writing reflected her own personal growth. “I wasn’t a great student in high school,” she recalls. “But I really blossomed after that.”

Caruso remembers himself as an intense young man juggling an outsized class load and a brand new family – with one child already born and another on the way — when he joined the staff. That was the students’ prerogative.” says Caruso. “But he thought it had the support of their advisor, Joseph Shugg says that “the legislators were dinosaurs, holdovers from a previous era.” But their pungent attacks and the accompanying media attention clearly shifted Kuhn’s attitude. In a statement released on February 25, UMBC’s president made clear his frustrations with the magazine – and with Michael Jacobs in particular:

The legislative attacks on the university — and Kuhn’s refusal to defend the magazine — united both students and faculty in opposition to the lawmakers and to UMBC’s president. Eighty-four faculty members at the university pooled almost $500 and took out an advertisement in The Evening Sun.

Baltimore media quickly brought the new issue of UMBC’s literary magazine to a much larger audience. “Magazine With Nudes Accepted at UMBC” was the headline in The Evening Sun’s February 18, 1969 edition. The story also included a quote from the university’s dean of students, Arthur A. Libby III: “I think personally that this is the best Dialogue that has been distributed yet at this campus… I think this is a form of art.”

Baltimore County councilmember Samuel J. Dantoni, Jr. blasted UMBC and state senators blasted UMBC and wrote essays and other works: “Who would post that?” the Sun’s February 18, 1969 edition. The story also included a quote from the university’s dean of students, Arthur A. Libby III: “I think personally that this is the best Dialogue that has been distributed yet at this campus… I think this is a form of art.”

On March 1. The ad took aim at “certain current criticisms,” that “cast unwarranted aspersions on UMBC,” and argued that “a university must cherish and defend the right of open and free expression within its faculty and student body.” Meanwhile, Jacobs forwarded letters of support from distinguished figures in the art world and clergymen to Kuhn. James Elliott, director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, wrote that “the intent of the photographer whose work appears in your magazine is so patently serious, and his presentation so serene, that it would even have surprised me had anyone seriously questioned whether they were in good taste, let alone calling them obscene.”

It was a view shared by Stark, who watched from Washington, DC as the controversy grew. “Everyone was posturing, but no one took the work seriously,” the photographer recalls. Kuhn organized meetings with legislators and orchestrated apologies for the brouhaha. The media hubbub subsided. But the standoff between UMBC administrators and the rest of the campus only intensified. UMBC’s president insisted on forming a new board to oversee student publications, comprised of administrators, faculty and students affiliated with the publications themselves. His ultimatum was met with outraged refusal by literary
When students and faculty left for the summer, Kuhn suspended the literary magazine until the publications board that he sought was in place.

In a letter to Student Government Association president Darryl Hagy on July 16, 1969, Kuhn stated that "I am withdrawing the eligibility for the Literary Magazine to receive State funds and to appear as a University publication."

He added that UMBC students could publish a literary magazine independently, but only if that magazine received no direct (or indirect) state subsidy and made no claims to represent the university.

In a note written to dean of the faculty Homer Schamp on that same day, Kuhn confided that "I feel that the way in which this has been resolved is the only way that I could resolve the matter, taking into account my responsibilities…

My decision to leave UMBC was very much contingent upon the recent controversy surrounding the UMBC Literary Magazine. While I in no way hold the institution responsible for the deplorable and moronic actions of certain Maryland officials, I cannot help but hold the institution responsible for its response to these critics. The final result of this controversy was to create an atmosphere of suppression and fear on campus, an atmosphere in which an art exhibition might suddenly disappear from campus or a magazine be suddenly banned. I was personally involved by the criticisms of the magazine in [Kuhn’s] statement, and I was personally embarrassed by the apology given to the State Senate.

Kuhn refused to reinstate the magazine, facing down his critics at a heated meeting on September 30, 1969. The UMBC Assembly amended Goodman’s May 1969 resolution into a firm, but mild, rebuke that demanded reinstatement of the magazine and a commitment that only the student government or a clear violation of national or state law could disqualify a publication from appearing as a University publication.

The battle quickly resumed when students and faculty returned in September 1969. The UMBC Assembly amended Goodman’s May 1969 resolution into a firm, but mild, rebuke that demanded reinstatement of the magazine and a commitment that only the student government or a clear violation of national or state law could disqualify a publication from appearing as a University publication.

The so-called UMBC Seven disrupted a sociology class in spring 1970 to protest the fact that the UMBC campus did not close for the killing of two Jackson State University students as it did to mourn four white students killed at Kent State University less than two weeks before. The trial turned into a rout of the administration by the defendants, who were acquitted of the charges.

The 1969 literary magazine that shook the campus and the state legislature has become part of the university’s folklore. And the photographer whose pictures stirred the controversy, Robert Stark.

“I think I only ended up getting two copies of the magazine,” says Stark. “But I’ve held on to them.”

Read a longer version of this story, with more information about key players in the literary magazine battle at the UMBC Magazine website.

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