Can stats find causation when a study can’t?


A common problem with some scientific research, particularly projects studying human health, is that it is often difficult, if not impossible, to prove that a specific action directly causes an effect.

For example, scientists have found that those who smoke cigarettes also are more likely to suffer from depression. However, scientists cannot uniquely determine whether smoking directly causes depressive symptoms, or if those with depression are more likely to cause health-damaging behaviors, including smoking.

Now, Wolfgang Wiedermann, a quantitative psychology and assistant professor in the University of Missouri College of Education, and Alexander von Eye, a quantitative methodologist at Michigan State University, have developed a new statistical technique that can help scientists determine causation of effects they are studying.

Wiedermann says this method can help scientists advance research that otherwise would stall out in its early phases.

“It is a limitation of observational studies, such as the smoking and depression example, that scientists can only find links and correlations between actions and effects,” Wiedermann says. “Often, this is due to ethical boundaries scientists face. It would be unethical to ask nonsmokers to start smoking to see if depressive symptoms appear, which would be the only true way to determine a causation.

“This new statistical approach can help provide scientists a direction, or cause, in their research instead of only finding links or correlations.”

In a series of six recently published papers, Wiedermann and von Eye illustrated the effectiveness of their approach by applying observational data from studies performed by other scientists.

One such study featured data finding a correlation between children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and high levels of lead in the blood. Ethically, scientists could
not inject children with lead in order to determine if it caused ADHD symptoms to appear, so the most specific finding their research could prove was simply a link between the two conditions. Wiedermann and von Eye applied this data to his statistical model and were able to determine a direction from the research: that high levels of lead in the blood may cause ADHD symptoms in children.

In another example, Wiedermann and von Eye found support for hierarchical stages of development in how children learn and process numbers and mathematics. Wiedermann says this new technique determines this by examining distributional characteristics of data, such as asymmetry in variable distributions.

“It is a modern myth that all datasets sit on symmetrical, normally distributed bell curves,” Wiedermann says. “In reality, every dataset for every study has some level of ‘non-normality.’ Taking distributional characteristics into account leads to situations where two variables cannot be exchanged in their status as cause and effect without systematically violating assumptions of the model. These systematic violations can be used to identify whether an action or condition causes a certain effect (high lead-blood levels causing ADHD) from large enough sample sizes of observational data.

“This could be an important tool for scientists to use in furthering their research. Ethical boundaries in scientific experiments certainly always will remain, thus we should start working on pushing the limits of what we can learn from observational data.”


In a recently published volume Statistics and Causality: Methods for Applied Empirical Research, edited by Wiedermann and von Eye, they present their methods in the metric and categorical data domains, other researchers from all over the world present modeling approaches that are related to direction dependence, and leading philosophers discuss the relation of these methods to philosophical accounts of causality.
Missouri interim president discusses racial discord, future

ST. LOUIS – The unrest that rocked the University of Missouri-Columbia campus last fall was part of a racial conflict that has existed in Missouri and the nation for centuries and still is evident on campuses across the country, interim president Michael Middleton said Tuesday.

Middleton also defended the firing of assistant professor Melissa Click and told the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., that he expected to be in his job until at least the end of the year.

The Columbia campus is expecting a $30 million drop in tuition because of fewer freshmen enrolling this fall, said Middleton, who added that he understood why parents might hesitate to send their children there if they thought it was in "disarray."

"The fact is the University of Missouri-Columbia is not violent and not in total disarray," he said. "I am optimistic. We have been around 177 years. We have been through problems, ups and downs. We generally come back stronger."

The October and November protests, which led to the resignation of former system president Tim Wolfe and chancellor R. Bowen Loftin, were a "perfect storm" that continued longstanding racial conflict, said Middleton, an African-American who grew up in segregated Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Missouri has been a hotbed for centuries, and it is reflected in Missourians' opinions and positions with regard to what happened at the university," said Middleton, who received his undergraduate and law degrees at the Columbia campus.

The university has progressive people who support the students and want to make changes, he added, but others believe the university is out of control.

"So you have got a variety of positions in Missouri, as I think Missouri has had since the Civil War, when brothers were fighting brothers," he said.
The interim president also defended the firing of Click after she interfered with journalists trying to cover the protests.

The American Association of University Professors placed the university on its censure list Saturday because of it, which essentially means the university is guilty of violating academic due process in firing Click.

"I thought Dr. Click lost control in a very heated situation," Middleton said, adding that her firing had nothing to do with Click's academic freedom. "The AAUP couched their sanctions in those terms. ... We will have to live with it and work to get off this censure list as soon as possible."

UM interim president calls Mizzou problems part of struggle on race

By Chuck Raasch St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 8 hrs ago

WASHINGTON • The interim president of the University of Missouri system said the protests at the Columbia campus last fall were an extension of a centuries-old continuum of racial discord in the state and the country.

But Michael Middleton told the National Press Club that Mizzou can also be a national example as it struggles to deal with the problems exposed last fall.

In an hourlong speech and question-and-answer session, Middleton also defended the firing of controversial professor Melissa Click. Middleton said he expected to be in his job at least until the end of the year, as a national search for a permanent system head continues.

In one of several blunt answers to questions about challenges facing the flagship Columbia campus, he described prospective freshman fall enrollment there as "grim," and said the campus is bracing for a $30 million drop in tuition from a smaller first-year class.
Middleton said that as a parent, he, too, would have second thoughts about sending a child to a campus “that I thought was violent and in total disarray.”

“The fact is the University of Missouri-Columbia is not violent and not in total disarray,” he said.

“I am optimistic,” he said. “We have been around 177 years. We have been through problems, ups and downs … We generally come back stronger.”

While describing last fall’s unrest as a “perfect storm” that extended beyond race, Middleton couched the protests and recoil as part of a lingering national story.

Speaking before C-SPAN cameras, he was asked a question that framed Missouri as a one-time slave state that prompted the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision denying citizenship to freed slaves.

Middleton, an African-American who grew up in a segregated Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s, paused before answering. He said that knowing the history of the state, that when he was in college in the 1960s, in the then-sports rivalry with the University of Kansas, “I am on Kansas’ side, you know.”

“Missouri has been a hotbed for centuries, and it is reflected in Missourians’ opinions and positions with regard to what happened at the university,” said Middleton, who received his undergraduate and law degrees at the Columbia campus.

“We have got some very, very progressive people — very, very supportive of the students and supportive of what happened, and eager to make the changes,” he said.

“But we have got a lot of people who think that it was out of control. I have heard phrases like, ‘animals running the zoo,’ or ‘inmates running the asylum,’” Middleton continued. “Just bitter, angry people over the fact that this happened in the first place.

“So you have got a variety of positions in Missouri, as I think Missouri has had since the Civil War, when brothers were fighting brothers.”
It’s a “fundamental flaw in this country that grows out of declaring all people equal and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, but (at) the same time... black people were held in bondage.”

“What you are seeing at Missouri and college campuses across the country is a reflection of that tension, that imperfection in our union,” he concluded. “And we need to find a solution. What better place to do that than a university?”

On Saturday, the American Association of University Professors voted to censure the University of Missouri-Columbia for its firing of Click, the controversial communications professor whose “I need some muscle” call against a student reporter went viral on the internet during the campus demonstrations.

Middleton said he was not surprised at the censure vote, but he defended the university’s decision to fire Click.

“I thought Dr. Click lost control in a very heated situation,” Middleton said. Her firing, he said, had nothing to do with Click’s academic freedom.

“The AAUP couched their sanctions in those terms,” Middleton said. “But they have a job to do themselves, and they did it. We will have to live with it and work to get off this censure list as soon as possible.”

Middleton, who was involved in civil rights protests on the Mizzou campus in the 1960s, was asked whether college students today were “coddled.” He gave a personal answer.

“On the race issue, I grew up in the ’50s and ’60s in Mississippi,” he said. “And I think I grew a very thick skin. And my parents, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles all kept reminding me that the indignities that I was subject to had nothing to do with me, but had everything to do with the ignorance of those who were imposing their stupidity on me, and that I needed to stand up, keep my head up, and push through it.
“So at a very early age I learned something about resilience,” Middleton said. “I don’t know if young people today have had to learn that level of resilience.

“You may call that coddled,” he said. “I don’t think I would characterize it that way. I would just characterize it as having a different experience than generations before them…. (Younger people) are just less willing to put up with the kind of experience that we all have experienced.”

Michael Middleton Hopes Measures Keep Mizzou Out of Eye of Storm

WASHINGTON — University of Missouri System interim president Michael Middleton said Tuesday that he is hopeful that a series of initiatives meant to bring about more diversity, equity and inclusion at the system’s flagship campus can stave off the tumult that rocked the campus last fall.

“While we’ve made significant progress since November, there’s much more to be done,” Middleton said during a talk at the National Press Club. “I’m optimistic about the progress made and will continue to make and hopeful that our students will have the patience to allow us to continue that work.”

Middleton—the former deputy chancellor of the University of Missouri who came out of retirement last fall to serve as interim president after protests led to the ouster of his predecessor, Tim Wolfe—has been speaking to various higher education organizations over the past few months about the importance of taking heed to the concerns of student protesters.

Tuesday’s talk was no different except it provided an extended opportunity for journalists to question Middleton about various issues—from strained race relations on campus to threats to academic freedom—that have beset not only Mizzou but campuses nationwide as of late.

Middleton also outlined a series of efforts that he said he hopes will bring about positive change at the main campus at Mizzou, which has been beset by declining enrollment figures—a decline of 2,600 students this fall, by one account—that he conceded were “grim.” The decline in tuition revenue is estimated at $36.3 million, according to a recent news report.
Asked what he was doing to counteract the problem, Middleton stated that he had a communications team working to “accentuate the positive and minimize the negative and that kind of thing, but we can’t gloss over it.”

He also said he was not sure if the target audience for Mizzou’s messaging was students as much as it was parents.

“I think parents are going to be a hard sell,” Middleton said. “I’m a parent and I would worry about sending my child to a place that I thought was violent and in total disarray. The fact of the matter is the University of Missouri is not violent and is not in total disarray.”

Among the various steps that Middleton said the system had taken to increase diversity, equity and inclusion are:

- Having Kevin McDonald, the UM System’s first Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion officer, serve as the interim vice chancellor for Inclusion, Diversity and Equity at the main campus through a dual appointment that was announced last week.
- For the first time, making sure each campus in the system has a chief diversity officer who reports directly to the chancellor.
- Establishing a task force at the system level that will conduct an audit of programs, policies and practices related to diversity, equity and inclusion. The task force will make recommendations to the board of curators in order to effectuate “positive change” on all four campuses, Middleton said.

He said additional support would be provided to support faculty and staff who have experienced “disparate treatment” and to hire more diverse faculty and staff.

Of the $2.5 million invested in such initiatives to date, Middleton said $921,000 is for a “campus climate” survey, as well as to provide additional training for campus and system administrators, and to provide mental health support for students.

Middleton fielded a number of questions that included the case of Melissa Click, an assistant professor of communication fired for interfering with reporters who were covering the November protests at Mizzou.

The American Association of University Professors moved recently to place Mizzou on its censure list for the firing of Click.

Middleton said he hoped to get the university off the censure list but said he did not find fault with the firing of Click, who took it upon herself to physically block reporters from an area deemed as a “safe space” for protesters, even though it was in a public space on campus.

He said it was “clearly time to do something because the university was really in turmoil and it did not appear that the turmoil would die down unless something were done with Professor Click.” But he added: “I don’t think that what the university did had anything to do with Dr. Click’s academic freedom.”
“I think that she just lost control in a very heated situation,” Middleton said. “She clearly was very supportive of what our students were doing, so she positioned herself as the protector of our protesting students.”

Middleton—who as a student at the University of Missouri founded the Legion of Black Collegians, the official Black student government at Mizzou—defended the right of reporters to cover public events, although he said journalists should be careful about how they assert their First Amendment rights.

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you have to, and, if doing it causes too much controversy, it might be wise to consider not doing it,” he said of journalists.

At the same time, Middleton said that, if protesters want privacy or to be out of the media spotlight, they should consider holding meetings off campus in a private place.

“I don’t want to deny the press or anyone else to attend functions in a public place,” Middleton said.

**Middleton blames complacent leaders, 'perfect storm' for outcome of University of Missouri protests**

By Rudi Keller

Tuesday, June 21, 2016 at 2:00 pm

The University of Missouri administration was weakened by strife over graduate student health insurance, controversies over Planned Parenthood and bitter divisions between academics and administrators when protests over racial issues brought down President Tim Wolfe, interim President Mike Middleton said Tuesday.

Speaking to reporters gathered for a breakfast at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Middleton said the university was hit by a “perfect storm” and praised the effectiveness of the Concerned Student 1950 protesters in pushing their agenda of greater diversity and inclusion for minority students.

“These young people knew what they were doing, and they did it well,” Middleton said.
In his talk, Middleton touched on a number of issues growing out of the protests, from promises to create required courses and staff training about diversity to protesters’ efforts to declare a media-free “safe space” and the continuing controversy over former Assistant Professor Melissa Click’s actions and the decision to fire her.

Middleton took over after Wolfe resigned on Nov. 9, the climax of more than a month of protests that included blocking Wolfe’s car during the Homecoming parade in October. Wolfe resigned after members of the Tigers football team said they would boycott athletic activities in support of the protests and a hunger strike by graduate student Jonathan Butler.

The administration was complacent, Middleton said, and pointed to an Inside Higher Education survey, conducted in March, that found 84 percent of college presidents surveyed think race relations on their campuses are good or excellent.

“The prevailing view was that race relations were good, maybe even excellent at Mizzou,” Middleton said. “But the fact of the matter was that, institutionally, leaders were not paying attention, and they got caught.”

Middleton is a graduate of the university and was a founding member of the Legion of Black Collegians, a group that was one of the first to use protests to demand greater diversity and inclusion on campus. Asked to compare the Concerned Student 1950 group to his own experience as a student seeking racial equality, Middleton said students are less willing to endure disrespect than he was as someone who experienced racism growing up in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s.

“The times have simply changed,” Middleton said. “This generation is much less willing to put up with the micro-aggressions, the indignities that people of color experience in this world, than we were in the ’60s.”

On Saturday, the American Association of University Professors voted to censure MU for the Board of Curators’ decision to fire Click without using the standard processes for disciplining faculty.

In his talk, Middleton defended the board’s decision and discussed the situation that led to it. But he also said the association vote to place MU on its censure list must be addressed.

“We will have to live with it and work to get off that censure list as soon as possible,” he said.

On Nov. 9, after Wolfe’s resignation, journalists crowded around the Concerned Student 1950 campsite on Carnahan Quadrangle. The protesters attempted to declare a “safe space” where media were not allowed, and Click, attempting to enforce the boundary, physically tried to prevent student videographer Mark Schierbecker from filming the scene and called for “some muscle” to help.

Both Click and the reporters were partially to blame for the incident, Middleton said.
“Obviously our students did not have a right to claim that safe space, but that reporter, I think, could have avoided the incident that occurred had he, like the rest of the press that was there, respected the students’ desire to have some privacy at that time,” Middleton said.

The image of the university took a damaging hit from the protests and has created a grim picture for enrollment for the fall, Middleton said. Estimates indicate a decline of more than 2,600 students in Columbia, or about 7 percent.

The university will survive and prosper as it cures the problems that spawned the protests, he said.

“I am confident we will get these diversity, equity and inclusion policies in place and we will be much better for it,” Middleton said.

MISSOURIAN

Middleton urges college leaders not to be complacent about campus race relations
TAYLOR BLATCHFORD, 17 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — Interim UM System President Michael Middleton had a warning Tuesday morning for other university presidents: Race relations on your campus might not be as healthy as you think.

In a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Middleton said most presidents feel that the problems at MU that led to two top administrators' resignations could never happen on their campuses. But that kind of thinking is partly to blame for the "explosion" at MU last fall — a word he used repeatedly throughout his speech.

Middleton referred to a survey published in Inside Higher Ed in March that found 84 percent of college presidents characterized race relations on their campus as "excellent" or "good." However, only 24 percent described race relations at colleges nationwide as "good," and none described them as "excellent."
"The prevailing view was that race relations were good, maybe even excellent, at Mizzou," Middleton said. "But the fact of the matter is that institutionally, leaders were not paying attention, and they got caught."

He said he hoped what happened at MU was a wake-up call for other university leaders and would motivate them to continuously assess their campus climate.

MU students protested a series of racially charged events in the fall 2015 semester, including student body president Payton Head being called the n-word and racial slurs shouted at members of the Legion of Black Collegians.

After then-UM System President Tim Wolfe sat mute while protesters blocked his car in the Homecoming parade in October, graduate student Jonathan Butler began a hunger strike Nov. 2 calling for Wolfe's resignation. A few days later, Missouri football players said they wouldn't play until Wolfe resigned.

Wolfe stepped down Nov. 9. Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin, who had been asked to step down by faculty members and nine of MU's deans, resigned hours later.

But there were many factors contributing to last fall's semester of unrest, Middleton emphasized, including the threat to graduate students' health insurance coverage and a feeling that academic freedom was under threat. He said those concerns, combined with racial tensions, created a "perfect storm."

Middleton has some personal experience with campus race relations. In the question-and-answer session after his remarks, he was asked to compare the recent protests and those he participated in as a student at MU in the 1960s as a founding member of the Legion of Black Collegians.

In 1974, the group presented the university with a list of demands to improve race relations, including increased funding for a black culture center and more inclusive hiring practices.
"I think back in the '60s we probably occupied a few buildings and locked the chancellor out of his office one day, but it was pretty much the same techniques," he said.

More than 40 years later, student activist group Concerned Student 1950 included LBC's original list in its demands to administrators. Middleton took on the pressure of trying to meet some of them as the UM System's interim president.

He said the heart of the protests at MU has been similar to those he participated in: students demonstrating frustration with their "lived experience" on campus. Middleton complimented the protesters for adhering to the principles of nonviolent protest very well. He emphasized that there was no violence; no one harmed in last fall's unrest.

But he pointed out some significant differences. Although, he said, he wouldn't describe the current generation of college students as "coddled," they are less willing to put up with microaggressions that have long been targeted toward students of color. He suggested they might not be as resilient as he was, raised in Mississippi in the 1950s and taught to push through prejudice.

"I grew a very, very thick skin," he said.

Another focus of the questions after Middleton's speech was free speech on campus. He rejected the idea that the First Amendment was being compromised on campus or that MU's School of Journalism could be doing a better job of educating students on free speech.

As for the inevitable subject of former Department of Communication assistant professor Melissa Click, he said he wasn't surprised by the American Association of University Professors' unanimous vote to place MU on its censure list. The organization's vote was based on the UM System Board of Curators' decision to fire her in February after her altercations with student journalists and the police during campus protests.

Middleton said the board's action was necessary because the turmoil would have continued unless something happened with Click.
"I don't think that what the (board) did had anything to do with Dr. Click's academic freedom, and the AAUP couched their sanction in those terms," he said. "They have a job to do themselves, and they did it. We will have to live with it and work to get off the censure list as soon as possible."

Much work remains to be done, Middleton said, focusing specifically on a draft policy on protests and free speech. Middleton said the policy, which is meant to improve clarity about when, where and how students can protest, is too legalistic and needs more work to be more accessible to the public.

Making progress on racial issues takes time, Middleton said. He said he hoped students would be patient with the university. He cited the hiring of Kevin McDonald as the UM System’s chief diversity officer as an example.

"Our biggest flaw as a university is that we are notoriously slow at doing what we do," he said. "My hope is that we can accelerate our pace and that this millennial generation will give us the time to do what we need to do."

**Interim MU system president asks for patience in solving racial unrest at Mizzou**

WASHINGTON - The interim president of the University of Missouri system is now asking for patience as the leadership team works to resolve racial unrest on the Columbia, Missouri, campus.

Mike Middleton made the plea during a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday. "Patience is a virtue in a situation like this," he said. "It takes time to rebuild
confidence and trust. Just as these problems did not evolve overnight, real solutions will not come quickly.”

Despite asking for patience, Middleton cited some progress at Mizzou since protests broke out in November. Among the steps taken include the hiring of a chief diversity and inclusion officer, establishing a diversity inclusion and equity task force and providing more support for students, faculty and staff who have experienced discrimination.

But Middleton says there is more work to be done.

"We have an opportunity to lead in developing mechanisms for combating racism and promoting diversity equity and inclusion,” Middleton told the crowd. “And to change our culture to one that is more respectful and more inclusive."

Middleton says the unrest at MU should also serve as a wake-up call for campuses around the country. In talking with other university leaders, Middleton says he’s challenged them to continually assess race relations on their campus and to pay attention to what their students are saying.

At the end of his prepared speech, Middleton says MU continues to face racial problems on campus. But he says they are tackling the challenges and letting them serve as learning opportunities.

"The University of Missouri refuses to be defined by the events we faced in November and in the months following,” Middleton said.

Middleton defends Click's firing and speaks on racial unrest at MU
COLUMBIA - University of Missouri System Interim President Michael Middleton spoke about Melissa Click's firing and how MU has handled racial unrest since Concerned Student 1950 protests last fall.

Middleton told the National Press Club Tuesday the Board of Curators had a split vote on firing Click, but they acted properly. He defended the decision, saying, at the time, it was unfortunate but necessary.

Middleton said he expects a $30 million drop in tuition because of a steep decline in freshmen enrollment in the fall, according to the Associated Press.

Middleton said perceptions influenced by last fall's protests affected enrollment, but high schools also had predicted a decline. He said there is no evidence the unrest had an impact on faculty recruitment.

"I think we'll get over it. I'm optimistic," Middleton said.

He said people working in communications for the university are trying to rehabilitate the school's image. He said he wants to "accentuate the positive, minimize the negative."

Middleton said he spoke to protesters, who told him their goal was to make MU better because they love the university.

He said he understands the call for safe spaces and trigger warnings and supports privacy, but not the absence of journalism. The MU campus is a first amendment-protected space, he said, so groups that want privacy should meet somewhere private off-campus. Middleton said the UM System is working on policies to find a proper balance.

He asked alumni to get the word out to turn last year's protests into a positive, but said parents will be a harder sell.

Middleton also praised social justice groups on campus working for inclusion. He said it's not easy to fix diversity issues because there are so many of them, but he said the UM System is doing its best.

"Where we find gaps in what we're doing, we are going to fill in these gaps," he said.

Middleton expects to remain interim president until at least the end of the year while a search for a permanent president continues, according to the Associated Press.
MU dismissive of grad student unionization effort

COLUMBIA — MU asserts in a court filing that graduate students have no rights to collective bargaining.

And if they do have that right, they are doing it wrong, attorney Michael Kaemmerer wrote in a brief filed last week in Boone County Circuit Court, the Columbia Daily Tribune reported.

The filing was the university's official response to a lawsuit filed May 11 by the Coalition of Graduate Workers, which is asking the court to order the four-campus University of Missouri System to recognize that graduate assistants are workers with bargaining rights protected by the state Constitution and to honor a vote held in April selecting the coalition as their union.

Joseph Moore, outreach coordinator for the coalition, said the filing has nothing new in it and that the group "expected them to challenge the election and the makeup of the bargaining unit."

Graduate assistants have been organizing since the university gave graduate assistants 24 hours notice in August that they would no longer receive health insurance subsidies because of an IRS interpretation of the Affordable Care Act. The university rescinded that decision following student and faculty backlash.
To quiet unrest among graduate assistants, the university also promised to increase stipends and to increase the value of tuition waivers.

MU interim Chancellor Hank Foley said Thursday at the Board of Curators’ meeting that the university has committed $6.3 million for the effort.

"Graduate students was another big issue on campus this past year," Foley said. "We're taking that off the table. We're basically saying we are going to give you an increase in graduate student stipends, we're going to do it this year, we will do it again next year."

Moore said the promises aren't enough and that graduate assistants believed the promise of health insurance until the university tried to take it away.

Audit highly critical of University of Missouri college

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) An internal audit is highly critical of a University of Missouri’s College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources after a former employee admitted to stealing more than $716,000 over nine years.

The Columbia Missourian reports that the audit found that fiscal oversight was "inadequate" for the 17 agricultural research centers scattered across Missouri. It also found that the college repeatedly violated university policies.

The college received a score of four on a scale of one to five, with five assigned to institutions with the highest possible financial risk.
The audit follows an earlier one detailing how Carla Rathmann of Mount Vernon was able to steal from the university's Southwest Research Center in Mount Vernon while working as an office support assistant. She pleaded guilty earlier this month.

High on image, MU says no to pot on T-shirt

The University of Missouri and a student group are squabbling over marijuana.

Not over the drug itself, but on whether a marijuana leaf can appear on a T-shirt next to the school’s name.

University officials have said no. However, leaders for the campus chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws say it’s about First Amendment rights and fairness.

“The University of Missouri does not want to seem as if they are endorsing our viewpoint,” said Benton Berigan, president of MU NORML. “We just want the rights that are afforded to other university organizations.”

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has written the university twice, saying the school is violating the First Amendment. The Washington-based foundation asked the university for a “substantive” reply by June 3 but has not received one.

MU spokesman Christian Basi said officials were reviewing the foundation’s letter.

“The university values free expression,” Basi said. “These are issues we want to take a look at very thoroughly, and I don’t want to put a timeline on it.”

Last year, MU NORML wanted to raise money selling specially designed shirts with a marijuana leaf in the shape of an animal paw next to a depiction of the campus skyline, another leaf of cannabis and the group’s name.

Because the group also wanted to use the University of Missouri’s name, Berigan asked permission. He said his request was rejected. According to the school’s licensing guideline, the university’s name won’t be approved for use in “connection with promotion of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs or in connection with pornography or other forms of expression limited by law.”

Berigan said NORML doesn’t advocate the use of marijuana but aims to reform laws through political engagement and community education.
“I see it as an immediate threat to student intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights,” said Berigan. “This isn’t an issue that is going away.”

Both sides have reviewed a similar situation at Iowa State University. The campus chapter of NORML there sued in 2014 after the university withdrew approval for a marijuana-themed shirt featuring the school’s mascot.

In January, a federal judge granted the chapter an injunction, blocking the university from using a trademark to prevent the group from printing the shirts. The university has appealed.