

Episode 144: Reporter Alex Lassiter shares Board of Regents coverage insights

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Formerly a campus administration reporter, now a podcast reporter, Alex Lassiter reflects on his past coverage of the University of Minnesota's Board of Regents and the recent process of selecting a new president.

KAYLIE SIROVY: Talked about this back in like October. We were like, oh, it'd be so cool to do a Q&A session with like someone who's really high up, maybe the president or like an interim president. That never happened. So, I think that would be really cool.

ALEX LASSITER: I think we need to talk to Steil about that for sure.

Well, not whoever comes after Steil. Yeah, that's what I meant is 'cause like. Steil, I don't, he wasn't against it, but he just never did anything to make it happen. So, yeah.

SIROVY: And he was doing a lot, so we're never going to hold him against that. Hey everybody, this is Kaylie from The Minnesota Daily and you're listening to In The Know, the podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota. In the studio with me today is one of our, well, newer reporters on this desk, but he was a previous reporter at The Daily. Alex, thank you for joining us.

LASSITER: Thank you for having me, Kaylie.

SIROVY: We are talking today about his Board of Regents coverage. This was his beat. He knows all about it. So, let's start with who you are here at the University of Minnesota.

LASSITER: So, my name is Alex. I am a junior, third year student at the University of Minnesota, journalism major currently. I don't think I'm going to change it because we are way too deep in that hole. So, but I'm really enjoying my time spent here. I'm a Minnesota native as well. I grew up in Minneapolis, Southwest Minneapolis. The 20 minute drive between my home and my apartment is one of the factors as to why I came to the University. It's definitely, it makes it easier, but I've been really enjoying my time here. Not too much of a paradigm shift because I've already been used to the winters. And I've been at The Daily for a little under a year now. I think I'm in month 10 of my employment here. So, yeah, that's, that's a little bit about me.

SIROVY: What are some of your, I'll start with some of your favorite stories that you've done?

LASSITER: That's like asking me to pick a favorite child. It's really really hard.

SIROVY: Maybe narrow it down.

LASSITER: Let's think a lot of my admin coverage is stuff that I'm proud of. I'm very proud of, there's this one story. It's so, it feels so different from a lot of the stories I've done, but it's a story about North Dakota State University's free tuition program. And I liked it because I got to do data for it and then I accidentally edited the graph for a different graph into a different story and the embed code didn't change. So, now there's a graph for a different story up there on the North Dakota story.

SIROVY: I didn't know about that.

LASSITER: I didn't know about that either until I went back and I double checked it. So, I totally, found it totally by coincidence, but oh, well.

SIROVY: I don't think anyone noticed.

LASSITER: Nobody should notice it at least, but I also really enjoyed, I used to work on the research and development beat before going to work on the administration beat. And one of my favorite stories, it was my second story ever. I believe it was about bees and I got to talk to a lot of bee professors at the University. They were talking about all like the 500 different kinds of bees that they discovered and that they categorized across the state of Minnesota. And then the one that I did most recently that I'm absolutely the most proud of.

SIROVY: As you should be.

LASSITER: I worked with Hannah Ward on the investigative desk. And the two of us, we pooled our efforts. It was after the school shooting threat. Recently, I believe it was in, was that February?

SIROVY: That was February. That was like a week or two after we came back.

LASSITER: It just, it feels like February last year. Time just kind of flies.

SIROVY: It's, my sense of time is very skewed right now, but that's okay.

LASSITER: Yeah, but anyways, Hannah Ward and I from the investigative desk, we teamed up on that. And I got to talk to a lot of folks who were involved with the investigation and with the police response. And I learned a lot about the police side of things as well. And I hadn't gotten to do an investigative piece like that before and it was very, very enlightening. It just made me feel like I was a detective.

SIROVY: So then how did you kind of switch to your administrative side?

LASSITER: So I, as I mentioned, I started on the research and development desk when I first joined The Daily over the summer. I was here over the summer and we had another Board of Regents reporter, Henry Hagen. He is now the editor of Campus Activities. And so, with Henry gone, we needed somebody to step in and fill the Board of Regents beat and something that we joke about on the admin desk or joked about rather was how we never had a full desk ever from the time that I joined to the time that I left. We never had a full desk of five people and go figure, I continued that trend, I suppose by coming over to podcasting.

SIROVY: That's kind of a thing for a lot of desks, though, if we want to talk about that.

LASSITER: But anyways, it was myself and I think one other person from campus admin over the summer who stayed between summer and fall. And so since I technically had seniority on that desk, I was bumped up to the campus administration beat. And I definitely enjoyed it. I really got to hit the ground running. I knew a lot of people on the desk and I knew a lot about the University already. So it wasn't too hard for me to step into that role. And I came in at a really, really good time because there was a narrative through line that kind of kept me going the entire time on that desk which was the Board of Regents' presidential search.

It started, or it didn't rather start, but they kicked it off primarily in October, and it just recently came to a close with the election of Dr. Rebecca Cunningham as president, at the start of this month, actually. So, that, basically, that whole thing took up, like, maybe 90 percent of what I did on the desk. It was such an intensive process, and I was very, very honored to be part of the desk for that entire search.

SIROVY: I knew if, and if we were covering anything Board of Regents, you would be a part of it. I knew that. How many meetings do you think you went to?

LASSITER: Gosh, let me, let me count. Okay. So they had none in January, which was exceedingly great. They had one October. I want to say one November, maybe two December. That sounds right. One Feb, no, two or three Feb. I want to say the ballpark of definitely under 10, but high above five. So I want to say seven or eight. I think that sounds about right.

SIROVY: And what did they talk about in these meetings?

LASSITER: Oh man, what didn't they talk about? Uh, these meetings, depending on what they were covering or what types of agenda items they had. Would go anywhere between three to seven hours per.

SIROVY: Oh my goodness.

LASSITER: Yeah, longest meeting I had by far.

SIROVY: Oh my goodness.

LASSITER: Longest one I had by far was the Rebecca Cunningham presidential selection meeting because they interviewed each presidential candidate for I believe it was an hour and a half per. And yeah, that meeting, that meeting went on for a long while, a long while. I got to talk with a lot of the regents and everybody was tired by the end of that thing. I got to the boardroom, the meeting room at nine in the morning, and I didn't leave that building even not like to get lunch or anything. I didn't leave the building until I want to say 5 pm. It was actually a 9 to 5.

SIROVY: That, literally, you did a whole job right there.

LASSITER: Yup.

SIROVY: Whole job day.

LASSITER: No 401k or anything.

SIROVY: No benefits.

LASSITER: Seriously, they gotta pay my dental if I'm covering eight hour long meetings like that.

SIROVY: I had no idea they went on, that went on for that long.

LASSITER: Yeah, not many people did. That was kind of my job, was to sit there and take the brunt of it and just condense it down so you could spend only like, 10-15 minutes reading about it instead of eight hours watching the entire thing happen before your eyes.

SIROVY: Did you like it?

LASSITER: I tolerated it. It was, I enjoyed it. No, I enjoyed it. We, myself, my editor, Liv Hines and a Star Tribune editor were all there. We were the only three reporters in the room from start to finish. Uh, there were public information people there, there were public relations people there, people from student government, people from student relations, but we were the only three to be there from start to finish.

And we walked out of that room. We were all just totally exhausted and we walked into the next room. And lo and behold, there are like 10 other reporters from different TV, podcasting outlets, et cetera. And they're all asking questions to Rebecca Cunningham about stuff that she already answered during the meeting. And we're just like.

SIROVY: So, you were being the better reporter is what I'm hearing.

LASSITER: I mean, not to brag or anything, but we did break the story of the meeting coverage. Broke the story of the election decision, and we even beat the PR email on both of those. And so I think that is the crowning achievement of my career. My short journalistic

career at the University of Minnesota is getting to say that I not only sat there for eight hours, but I did it first.

SIROVY: No, you should totally brag about that. I, that day that that story broke that you that you wrote. We were so like impressed. We were so proud. We're like, Oh my gosh, you guys did this. We beat everyone. That is an incredible achievement. It was a good day.

LASSITER: The first thing that I did after I was done was I raced over to Noodles and Company and bought myself a big old bowl of mac and cheese. Cause like I said, I skipped lunch, to make that happen.

SIROVY: Yeah, which maybe not was a good thing, but you know.

LASSITER: Yeah, no, I'm not encouraging that. I'm just saying that that was probably the best meal that I've ever eaten in my entire life.

SIROVY: So I'm guessing the people in that meeting, did they get to know you as you sat in on a lot of these?

LASSITER: Yeah, I've actually, I got to meet a ton of people from University relations side. As I mentioned, that Star Tribune reporter, she and I covered basically the same beat. And I met her, I think on my third story for the admin Board of Regents beat. I was covering the construction kickoff party of Fraser Hall. Which, that's a currently ongoing construction project on the University. They are transforming it. It used to be a law building. Then it was in, like, a support services building. Now it's a chemistry building.

SIROVY: And it will be in construction until, like, '26, right?

LASSITER: Easily, easily. It's like the chameleon of the University buildings. It's played many different roles in many different colors. But they kicked it off back in October, I want to say. Governor Walz was there, Interim President Jeff Ettinger was there, and so this was like my first higher up event that I was invited to, and I was just a student with a backpack. I met this Star Tribune reporter there who covered these beats, Liz Navratil, and she and I kind of connected because we cover a lot of the same events. And so I'd see her at a lot of the Board of Regents meetings.

I'd see her at a lot of like, there was a task force on academic health that I was covering and I saw her there as well. I'd see her basically everywhere I was, she was too. So, she and I kind of connected on that level. There was also, I got to know a lot of the University PR people. And I did tell the story before you walked in about how I've just met the University president yesterday or the interim president Jeff Ettinger. I was getting lunch, he was getting lunch, and he just came up to me and started talking as we were waiting for our Panda Express.

SIROVY: God, I love our jobs.

LASSITER: Yep. So, you just meet people, and you know people, and if you run into them, great, and it's super, super, it becomes easy to reach out to them too, which is phenomenal because if you're that high up in the University, you want to have quick contacts with these people and quick access to them. So, it definitely provided me with a lot of new connections that I'm extremely grateful for.

SIROVY: Was that last presidential interview meeting, was that the most difficult meeting that you were in on or?

LASSITER: I want to say yeah, I want to say yeah, because not only was I note taking, but I had to write each section of the interview. So there were three interviews, as I mentioned before. One for each candidate, lasted about an hour and a half each. I had to write the section of the article on top of all the notes that I was taking because we were publishing updates live.

So, as an article, or as a candidate was done being interviewed, I had to have that section of the article ready to go within like 10 minutes after they took their break because we were updating the website as we wrote.

So when I say that I was doing that work for eight hours, I wasn't just sitting there twiddling my thumbs. I wasn't just like note taking. I was actively writing my piece for all eight hours.

SIROVY: Was Liv also?

LASSITER: Liv was there. She was live tweeting everything. So she would be collecting quotes from folks. And then her live tweets were also hyperlinked within the article. And I swear that if Liv was not there, I probably would have actually lost my mind. Because having that, having that other Minnesota Daily rep in support. We did have some folks also, I believe, from opinions there. They were sitting in on that meeting. And it was either that meeting or no, it was the one where they announced the three candidates.

SIROVY: Okay.

LASSITER: It's so, so people were coming in and out for various points in the search. They were the public interview forums, which people were talking or Minnesota Daily people came. Those were across all campuses. We had the ones where the candidates were announced and then the one where the designate was selected, so it was a very lengthy and very, very surprisingly public process as well. So, I was there for all of them, which meant that I was just kind of like that, that little bridge across all roads.

SIROVY: You were representing us, you were representing students.

LASSITER: I got to see many people, I got to meet many people, and it was, overall, it was a very tiring and taxing experience, but it was a very fruitful one, so I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

SIROVY: What was one of your most surprising moments during either one of these meetings or while you were writing or the stuff you learned about?

LASSITER: Well, I really, really wish that I could say that things that happened were off book. A lot of these meetings, I heard from my desk editor that the person who covered the Board of Regents beat before me last year, it was a more contentious board. It was a more argumentative board and so meetings would go off kilter and they would.

SIROVY: Oh.

LASSITER: Yeah, people would start arguments, board members would start arguments with each other and this was back when Joan Gable was our president too. So, it's just a little bit more contention all around. But this year things, and it sucks to say this, but like things were like a clock that worked smoothly. But I wish they weren't, you know, like I just a little bit more drama would have been.

SIROVY: Give me the juice, I want it.

LASSITER: I would say there were two protestors or two groups of protestors that interrupted two of the meetings that I was at. The December one was interrupted by students for a Democratic society.

SIROVY: Oh, I remember that.

LASSITER: Yes.

SIROVY: I remember seeing that, yeah.

LASSITER: Yeah. And so they stood up, they said their piece, they marched out, and I got to snap a few pictures of them as well in action. It was a great demonstration. And then there was also some unidentified student group at Laura Bloomberg, one of the other presidential candidates, at her public forum, her public interview forum.

There were one or two unidentified student groups also in favor of Palestine, and they stood up near the end of the interview process. And she handled it really, really well, I think. Didn't happen during either of the other two forums on the Twin Cities campus. So I think it might have just been because it was a Friday.

SIROVY: I was gonna say, maybe they know something we don't?

LASSITER: No, I think it was just because it was a Friday. Everybody has more free time on a Friday.

SIROVY: That's true.

LASSITER: But, I'd have to say, yeah, just the student engagement and the protester engagement. That was probably the most, I mean, it was all off book, obviously. Nobody says, hey, I'm gonna schedule a protest and come up in here during your time. Try and stop me.

SIROVY: That would be a little weird.

LASSITER: It's a really interesting way of getting to see the student voice as well and getting to see what issues they're concerned about because if students feel like they aren't being heard or something, that's probably the best way to get them to the administration, the higher administration, because everybody's there.

SIROVY: And we don't, we don't have that contact with higher administration all too much. The highest people that we see maybe on like a weekly basis is maybe like our advisors, our professors, maybe the head of a department, we don't go much higher than that.

So, to be able to have, like, a public forum like this where they can speak out is, I think, pretty important.

LASSITER: I think so, too.

SIROVY: What was the public saying about your stories? Was it, did they really enjoy seeing your stories? Did they not look at your stories?

LASSITER: That's a good question. It's a very good question. For I think, the best way to put it is that they're there for, they're like information pamphlets. My stories were like information pamphlets. They were a lot of facts and a lot of explanatory stuff. But when you're going on a tour, typically you don't want to grab an information pamphlet. You just want to go to the place. So, not too many people checked out, like, my routine stories, Board of Regents, healthcare task force, any of that.

And if they did it was for the perspective of somebody who was speaking at one of these meetings, maybe, or an announcement that was happening at one of these meetings. The stories that I found that had the biggest reach were not actually the meetings themselves, but they were stories that directly impacted and said in either the headline or the subhead what the thing was all about. So the three I think that had the biggest impact, and that people came to the most was there was one about the data breach that I did over the summer.

SIROVY: That was a big one. Yes. A lot of people were concerned about that. 'Cause I know we got emails about it as University students like, hey, your information may not be so safe. And then this is a little quick note about me, but my dad works in Minneapolis, right? And since he's connected to, like, the Minneapolis school district, so am I technically.

So, I got an email about my data breach from here and from the Minneapolis public school district.

LASSITER: Oh, no.

SIROVY: So that was the whole other thing that I had to worry about.

LASSITER: Yikes.

SIROVY: And I don't know if other people saw that, but I also had to think about that. We had a data breach, the Minneapolis Public School District had a data breach, and I think a few others, so.

LASSITER: Yeah, I don't remember if the Minnesota or the Minneapolis Public School District's data breach was that, how far back did that affect?

SIROVY: I don't know, but I know I got letters from them. They were like, you should probably plan and maybe stop your credit. I was like, okay.

LASSITER: Because I graduated in 2021. So, I think I might've been affected by that one too.

SIROVY: Yeah.

LASSITER: So yeah, I was also on two sides of that coin.

SIROVY: Yeah. They were like your address may be out there. Your social security may be out there.

LASSITER: I was definitely, I remember.

SIROVY: Your name, your birthday. I was like, okay. Great.

LASSITER: I remember those emails.

SIROVY: Thank you. I live in Monticello, but thank you.

LASSITER: I definitely remember getting those emails as a former student. So yeah, thank you for reminding me that I might be getting targeted on two fronts now.

SIROVY: I think we all are. It's okay.

LASSITER: But yes, I did. I did that story. I think that was the first story that The Minnesota Daily wrote about the topic and so I also looked into the lawsuits going on against the University because that was a huge point of interest. They're still ongoing. The Board of Regents are still holding litigation meetings to discuss everything, and obviously, of course, they are because it's a very slow process in suing anybody for anything. A lot of students tuned into that one because they were looking for resources or just concerned generally about the ramifications of it.

The next one that I did that had quite a bit of reach was, there was unfortunately a student who had passed away recently. I believe it was January of this year. A lot of students on campus, his name was Sumith Maddi. A lot of students on campus knew who he was, and a lot of students knew that he had gone missing. And so, it was breaking news when they found him, unfortunately, deceased in the river. And a lot of students were looking for answers to that.

And so, when that story broke, when I published that story the morning that we found out, a lot of people engaged with it. And they're like, thank you, because this is how I found out. And I can't remember the third one, but those are the two that came to mind most just because they impacted the most people. I think they had the, oh! The presidential elect, of course. I was going to bring this one up.

SIROVY: That's one of our higher ratings. I remember seeing big numbers for that one.

LASSITER: Is it really?

SIROVY: Yes.

LASSITER: That's great to hear, but I mentioned that I had spent eight hours in that meeting and there were two separate pieces that came out of that meeting. I pitched this to our editor-in-chief and to my editor because they were both very concerned. They knew this was a very important and big meeting, and a lot of people are going to be there. So I pitched to them, I said, hey, let's do two stories for this piece.

Let's do one story that is just full of all the interviews from the meeting and the context and the background of the meeting itself. And then we'll do a brief for whoever wins. I typed up three briefs. One for each of the candidates possibly winning. I did that about a week before, and then as we got closer and closer to the decision, I started tweaking all three of them. And then as it seemed like one candidate wasn't gonna get selected, I just dropped that one and started tweaking two of them.

And then finally, of course, as we know, Dr. Rebecca Cunningham won, and so I polished that one up, went to the post meeting, press conference, finished it, published it. Many more people engaged with that one than the actual meeting details themselves. So, I think the best way to put it is just stories that had a direct impact on the University of Minnesota community and told them how they were impacted or they were affected. Those are the ones that got the most traffic.

SIROVY: I think it's a good way to put that. What were the Board of Regents asking these presidential selects?

LASSITER: A lot of them were in relation to University facing issues right now. This is a very big year for the University in terms of healthcare especially. There's a merger going on between the University or not a merger, but a partnership going on between the University and CentraCare.

That's new, that's budding, and that's going to result in a new medical school campus being opened up in St. Cloud. The University and Fairview are renegotiating their contract and that is going to result in the University buying back their teaching hospital from Fairview as well.

SIROVY: Oh, I didn't know about that one.

LASSITER: Yeah, I know. It's a very, very big year for medical stuff. And then, of course, the governor's academic health task force on recommendations for the University of Minnesota, or the future of academic health at the University of Minnesota. So, that is all happening right now, and I'm pretty sure that's why they chose Dr. Cunningham to be their final choice because she has a very well versed background in healthcare, both on the ground and in the administrative level. And so they asked a lot of these questions that were being directed towards the candidates from the board were about their past, about how they think they'd be well equipped to handle the current issues that the University is facing, and then some, they tried to get personal.

They tried to get like, have like, personal anecdotes be told about, team building and instituting, or fostering a sense of community, which I think is good because you need, a sense of community to be fostered at the, a place like the University where so many different voices are going to be being heard and so many different people are going to be working together.

SIROVY: There's what, 50, 000 people here?

LASSITER: 55,000 people I think.

SIROVY: 55!

LASSITER: I know, right?

SIROVY: Oh my gosh. You don't see, you don't see us all in one place, though.

LASSITER: If you tried to pack that many people into a room, I think the walls would pop.

SIROVY: Anything you want to say about your previous coverage or how much you like it here? I don't know.

LASSITER: I mean, if you asked me to say how much I like it here, I could go on for another hour, I think. But, it was just my time. I say that as if I am dearly departed from this world. I'm not. Uh, I'm still very much here and alive on the podcasting desk. I'm very excited to spread

my wings and try my hand at a few different types of stories. Try my hand at writing different types of stories because admin coverage, to be frank, it's great and it's necessary, but it's also so tiring. And sometimes, for a very creative person like myself, I just need to take a break and I need to try something new and try something different.

So I'm extremely grateful for my time on the admin desk. I learned so many things there that I just would not have if I wasn't in that position at that time. I formed so many connections, like I said, that I would not have formed if I was not there at that time. And I think, hopefully, the admin desk and the whole of The Minnesota Daily capitalizes on some of those connections that I've made during my time there, but I am very very excited to continue on podcasting to get a lot more creative and goofy with my stories.

SIROVY: I love goofy stories.

LASSITER: And, to just have a good fun solid time.

SIROVY: Maybe that's why I like it here so much because I could just do whatever. I don't have to follow.

LASSITER: Exactly.

SIROVY: I don't have to follow a super strict or.

LASSITER: I mean, hey, you've been sitting here talking to this goofball for like, what, half an hour, so.

SIROVY: Well, you had a lot of interesting topics that you were covering and you knew just about anything that we could ask for that, so I think that your coverage of it was super important, especially, with the latest one you did with Cunningham being named president and everyone's seeing it, and I just think you did a really good job, and I'm so excited to have you here.

LASSITER: Well, thank you so much. I'm excited to be here.

SIROVY: As always, we appreciate you listening in, and feel free to leave us an email at podcasting@mndaily.com with comments, questions, or concerns. I'm Kaylie.

LASSITER: And I'm Alex.

SIROVY: And this is In The Know.