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Oct 16 , 2003

Campus

Tech students fight for more speech freedom

by Sally Gunter
October 16, 2003

Despite the expansion of the free speech forum areas to six, some Texas Tech students are petitioning the university's free speech policies. However, they are not petitioning in one of the designated areas. Instead, they appealed to students eating at the Market Monday afternoon.

"I don't care what the petition is about," said Ethan Logan, assistant director for the Center for Campus Life. "Am I concerned about it? No. They've already done it."

Logan said Tech does not have rules that deny students their First Amendment rights.

"We don't inhibit or limit free speech to that area," Logan said. "Our expression policy is as free as you can get it."

The meaning of free speech zones often is misinterpreted, said Douglas Laycock, a professor of law at the University of Texas.

"It doesn't mean free speech is censored," he said. "Just certain kinds of speech and speech methods. They don't literally mean no free speech outside of the zone."

Robert Wernsman, an instructor of journalism at Tech and former newspaper editor, said the university setting should be the ideal place to exercise free speech.

"I understand the need to have order on campus and certainly don't want the disruption of classes," he said. "But it boggles my mind that a public institute would do anything to inhibit college students from freely expressing themselves."

The university is sending the wrong signal to college students preparing to be open minded citizens, he said.

Other than the state common law concerning defamation, there is no consistent rule concerning free speech among public universities. Other universities in the state vary in guidelines.

Texas A&M's policies on freedom of expression designate three free speech areas and limit the use of sound equipment in each area. Students must make reservations 48 hours prior to using a speech area, according to the university policy.

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"I don't think we really keep anyone from saying what they want," said Becky O'Brien, the senior customer service associate in scheduling services at Texas A&M. "It is a campus and there should be studying going on."

Despite claiming they are not prohibiting students their first amendment rights, students must obtain a permit before passing out any type of literature in public areas of the campus, according to the guidelines.

O'Brien said if they are aware of a potential a problem with a rally, they will alert campus security and police prior to the event.

The University of Texas recently rewrote its policies in an effort to clarify and organize the rules, Laycock said.

Changes also occurred in the content of the guidelines. There are fewer advance request requirements, and the sale of literature is permitted, he said.

"Students, faculty and staff are free to express their views, individually or in organized groups, orally or in writing or by other symbols, on any topic, in all parts of the campus," according to UT policies.

UT does not have free speech areas, but it does have designated amplified sound zones.

Robert Jensen, an associate professor of journalism at UT, said in terms of distributing literature, the entire campus of all universities should be a free speech zone.

"A university campus is not like a public street or public park," Jensen said. "There is no reason the university can't make those types of restrictions."

The rule should be that all speech is permitted except where there are explicit rules on what is restricted. It is inappropriate when state schools in a democracy establish free speech policies in some other way, Jensen said.

Students at UT take full advantage of their rights.

"There is something going on everyday. They are not all protests," Jensen said. "The amount of protest ebbs and flows with what's going on in the world."

One student who transferred to Tech from UT said she sees an obvious difference between the policies at the two schools.

"Anything you could possibly talk about and pose questions about was protested at UT," said Ashley Sawtelle, a sophomore personal financial planning major.

Issues from Islamic groups to preserving the albino squirrel was protested on the campus, Sawtelle said.

"I liked it a lot," she said. "This is so monotonous."

Sawtelle said it is ridiculous that Tech is not a free speech campus and for the most part, people would be accepting of it becoming one.

"Tech is composed of a lot of different people," she said. "If people can stand up for troops overseas, why can't they for other issues? That's what democracy is all about."



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