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Heather Dougherty/Staff Photographer

Free speech petition gathers signatures

by Sally Gunter
October 14, 2003

BRIAN ROA, A graduate philosophy major from Lubbock, passes around a petition regarding Tech's free speech policy Monday morning at Stangel/Murdough Market.

The Students for Free Speech passed out

petitions in the Stangel/Murdough dining hall Monday in an effort to challenge Texas Tech free speech policies.

Tech students and visitors from University Day crowded the Market dining hall at 1 p.m. as about nine members of the organization recruited people to sign petitions addressed to President Jon Whitmore.

"We are collecting them all and are going to find a unique way to turn them in," said Sean Boyle, a junior sociology major from Keller and member of the Students for Free Speech.

The organization has about 15 active members and works with other organizations such as Students for Social Justice, Boyle said.

After three weeks of passing out petitions, the organization collected more than 700 signatures, said Beth Robinson, a senior human development and family studies major from Burmingham.

"We are trying to show that is it not just a few students," she said. "We want a free speech campus."

Six free speech zones are not acceptable for the more than 27,000 Tech students, Robinson said.

Boyle agreed that even though Tech expanded its number of forum areas to six, these areas are not appropriate.

"The free speech zones are in low traffic areas," he said. "It's an inconvenient way to get the information out. It is more productive to break the rules and stand where the people are."

There were mixed emotions among the Tech students present.

Taylor Hood, a freshman business major from Fort Worth, said because Tech had

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not been a free speech campus before did not mean it could not try being one.

"There's no reason to not have a free speech campus," he said. "We could try it and see."

Lindsey Jasbring, a freshman undeclared major from Mesquite, said she would like to see the whole campus be a free speech zone.

"I'm all for free speech," Jasbring said. "As long as it's done peacefully, I don't see any problem."

Some Tech students were not receptive to the information being presented.

"There's a place to protest," said Jennifer Sheridan, a sophomore public relations major from Sherman. "It is not in the cafeteria when people are eating."

Other students said they did not agree with the petition at all.

"I don't want people in my face when I'm walking on campus," said Brad Rieger, a sophomore business major from Decatur.

Nick Stanley, a sophomore political science major from Arlington, agreed.

"It's a given right already," Stanley said. "There doesn't need to be a protest all over campus. It's not a peaceful environment."

A lawsuit filed in June by Jason Roberts, a student at the Texas Tech School of Law, against 13 Tech employees, said the university "unlawfully restricts" students' First Amendment rights.

The ruling on this lawsuit is pending, said Victor Mellinger, Tech's associate general counsel.

"Both sides have filed motions for summary judgment to decide who wins," he said. "It is down to the judge to decide."

Elaine Willerton, 27, is a graduate of Tech. As a student, she said she was active in the Students for Social Justice. She said she was in town for the weekend and jumped at a chance to help out the organization.

"Students have been very enthusiastic for the most part," she said. "For the most part students have been eager to help out."

Students for Free Speech wants to collect at least 1,000 signed petitions before presenting them to Whitmore, Willerton said.

During the 45 minutes the members spent collecting signatures in the dining hall, they collected about 320, said Allison Spikes, a junior in political science /philosophy major.

Spikes said she had moved from Kansas recently and said she could see a difference in the way Tech approaches some subjects.

"They feel threatened by different opinions," she said. "Everything is very restrictive."



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