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College policy must be fair

FREE speech, guaranteed in our Constitution, yet oh, such a can of worms. We sympathize with the leadership at Citrus College trying to balance the right of students to protest and the needs of students who simply want to go about their studies and classes without interruption. We might not necessarily disagree with zones of protest if they are broad enough to facilitate free expression. Clearly, administration offices — often the site of sit-ins, et al., to protest college policy — ought not be off-limits.

It's the process at Citrus with which we take issue. Trustees at the Glendora college gave student Chris Stevens short shrift when he tried to, well, talk about the issue, argue the points, challenge the zone policy. That is until he filed a federal lawsuit alleging the college abridged his First Amendment rights to free speech. Here's one reason: campus organizations recognized by the college come under no restrictions. Clearly, Stevens was singled out.

His message? Essentially, let's support the United States. That's right, he was prevented from organizing a pro-America rally and protest of Gov. Gray Davis' education budget. Odd, since community college officials across the state have done the same, protesting the proposed cuts to education offered by the governor. Must be the overt patriotism that worried officials.

Once members learned of the lawsuit, filed May 20, however, the board dropped the free speech zones like the legal hot potato they are. No zones, no grounds for a lawsuit, right? Here's where it all begins to look like a song and dance to rival production at the Haugh Performing Arts Center on campus. Newly installed college President Michael Viera indicated a committee of students and staff would meet in the fall to design "new policies." After the threat of the lawsuit has passed, we surmise. Will the free speech zones return? Will they be just as arbitrarily and selectively enforced? Officials aren't talking. Neither will they allow Stevens to speak in any zone. The board would not allow him to address members at a special meeting called to discuss the college's speech policy.

He was the person in attendance who wished to speak on the issue, but because he didn't fill out a form, used when there are many people wishing to address the trustees, he was denied access. Instead of allowing Stevens to speak in at least this sanctioned zone of the college — the board room — trustees pointed him to a table where the forms are kept, for "next time." Would that arrogance prevail if someone with a wad of money to donate failed to fill out required forms for presentation? Doubtful. Instead of petty retributions and stalling, let's see this college and others with similar speech zones develop a policy, vote on it and try it out. But any rules must apply to all comers. That's the message Citrus must convey.

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