



To submit a case to FIRE, click [here](#).

To contact FIRE, click [here](#).

[Home](#)

[News](#)

Main Categories

[Top News](#)

[Nation](#)

[States](#)

[Washington/Politics](#)

[World](#)

[Editorial/Opinion](#)

[Health & Science](#)

[Census](#)

[Offbeat](#)

More News

[Columnists](#)

[Lotteries](#)

[City Guides](#)

[Government Guide](#)

[Talk Today](#)

[Money](#)

[Sports](#)

[Life](#)

[Tech](#)

[Weather](#)

Site Web

By LYCOS

ARCHIVES
SEARCH FOR
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES
[CLICK HERE](#)

NEW E-MAIL
**GET NEWS
IN YOUR INBOX**
[Click here to get the
Daily Briefing in your
inbox](#)

News

▪ [E-mail this story](#) ▪ [Subscribe to the newspaper](#) ▪ [Sign-up for e-mail news](#)

05/12/2002 - Updated 07:57 PM ET

WVU students finding greater liberty to protest

By Mary M. Kershaw, USA TODAY

West Virginia University's faculty senate is expected Monday to endorse revisions to the school's policy on limiting student protests to designated "free speech zones."

The old policy restricted student demonstrations to two outdoor zones the size of small classrooms. Students demonstrated against the policy last winter, saying that they had a right to protest anywhere on campus.

In February, 50 students gathered in front of the student union and marched through campus with an Abe Lincoln look-alike leading the way. "We needed to let the administration know that a lot of people felt the free speech zones were an issue," says Matthew Poe, 20, a WVU Free Speech Consortium member.

In response, the administration revisited the policy and added five more zones. After more criticism and debate, the policy was revised further: Student protesters would not be required to pay for security, and groups of fewer than 30 students would be allowed to picket outside the zones if they are not noisy or too close to buildings where classes are in session.

The new policy states the university can

Free speech has its place

London has Hyde Park, where speakers can climb onto their soapboxes and express their views. Today, there are dozens of college campuses throughout the USA with Hyde Park-inspired areas designated for student protest and demonstration.

The University of Mississippi came under fire in 2000 when a senior was arrested for protesting against *The Daily Mississippian*, the student newspaper, outside the university's designated free speech zone. UM's free speech policy, which had designated only one zone in front of Fulton Chapel, had been created in 1997 to prevent unruly protesters from disturbing classes.

Following the student's arrest, UM revised its policy, adding two more zones and calling them "speakers corners."

"We wanted to designate areas where free speech occurs," says dean of students Thomas Reardon. "It makes it easier to have areas where people know something is going on, so they can choose to listen or to avoid it."

Reardon says the university does not allow amplified sound or protests that block traffic or entrances to buildings.

"Free speech is free speech, but



put "reasonable restrictions on time, place and manner of speech" to protect students from speech they may not want to hear and to prevent disruption during classes.

If the faculty senate endorses it, the policy will go to WVU president David Hardesty for final approval.

"This is free speech at its best," says WVU spokeswoman Becky Lofstead. "People have objected, and the university has listened."

Zones and other restrictions on free speech have been common on many college campuses for decades. University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Florida State University and Iowa State University faced similar controversies, leading to revised policies.

The original WVU policy, established in 1995, has been under fire for several years. It drew criticism in 1999 when a preacher offended several students during Gay Pride Week, and WVU officials said he violated university code by preaching outside the designated zones. During a 2000 Disney recruiting seminar, campus police told student protesters they could carry signs only in the two zones. In 2001, a student was asked to leave a Disney seminar for passing out fliers outside the zones.

"A couple of unfortunate incidents led to the review of our policy," Lofstead says. "One student was asked to leave for passing out literature when Disney came to visit. That ... shouldn't have happened. The university does not condone asking students to move or to leave."

Many students argue that the policy changes don't go far enough. They would prefer a policy that is "behavior-based" and allows unfettered protest that is not disruptive to the campus.

And some insist there should be no policy at all. "Students are expected

the university has the right to restrict time, place and manner," he says.

Florida State University designates two areas on campus where students can use amplified sound and pitch tents. In March, several FSU students were arrested at an anti-sweatshop demonstration for refusing to move their tents from the area in front of the Westcott building, the campus' main administration building, to the free speech zones.

"It is not about restricting free speech," says Franklin Murphy, FSU's director of communications. "There are certain activities that impede education. If people can come and pitch tents anywhere and everywhere on campus, that could be a major problem."

Iowa State University, like West Virginia University, revised its free speech policy after students opposed the old one. The new policy designates two zones on campus.

"The concept of these areas is to designate a place where students who want to get on a soapbox have a bigger audience and it is less disruptive to the environment," says Paul Tanaka, director of ISU's legal services.

Tanaka says universities have zones to prevent disruption to regular campus activity.

"Many people think if it is public property, you must allow free speech," Tanaka says. "The waiting room of our student health center is public property, but it's not reasonable for anyone to come in and use it as a public forum.

"Some places are not public forums, even though they are public places."

— Mary M. Kershaw

to obey state and federal laws wherever they are," says graduate student Michael Bomford, a member of the Students for Economic Justice. "That includes not disturbing classes and blocking traffic. There are already laws in place that prevent that."

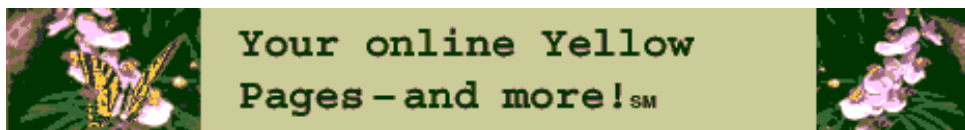
Philosophy professor Daniel Shapiro, president of the West Virginia Association of Scholars, says it is "constitutionally dubious" to have zones on a college campus. "It limits protest to certain areas, and the intended audience can't always be reached."

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based civil liberties group, has been monitoring the zone issue. "There are dozens of campuses across the U.S. with free speech zones," says Thor Halvorsen, executive director. "We plan to take each one down, one by one. By creating zones, the administration is saying that free speech does not exist in the areas of campus outside the zones."

WVU officials disagree. "There are seven areas on campus set aside for demonstration and protest, but certainly the whole campus is open for anyone to express their views or hand out literature," Lofstead says.

"The purpose of the zones is the safety and protection of those who want to protest and those who don't want to be subjected to those views."

Many are hoping there will be additional relaxing of the restrictions. "I hope the final outcome will be what we've been working for all along," Poe says. "But as long as the university zones free speech, they will have a fight from us."



[Front Page](#) [News](#) [Money](#) [Sports](#) [Life](#) [Tech](#) [Weather](#) [Shop](#)
[Terms of service](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [How to advertise](#) [About us](#)
© Copyright 2002 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)