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UF flag flap: Patriotism or politics?

The debate on whether to put American flags in classrooms is fueled by a resurgence of conservatism on campuses in Florida and nationwide.

By ANITA KUMAR, Times Staff Writer
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GAINESVILLE - To Adam Guillette, it's a simple show of patriotism.

The 22-year-old senior, leader of a conservative group at the University of Florida, wants to mount American flags on the walls of all 382 classrooms, lecture halls and auditoriums on this traditionally liberal campus.

Some students are offended, saying the flags would intimidate people who don't support the war in Iraq or the U.S. administration. Student leaders also are balking, saying Guillette did not follow proper



[Times photo: Ken Shimizu] An American flag stands at the main entrance of the University of Florida.

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procedures when making his proposal. Administrators suggest a single flag be erected on campus instead.

"It's shocking to me that people have staunch opposition to the flag," said Guillette, an energetic, in-your-face political science major who ran for Gainesville mayor in 2001. "It's disgusting this behavior exists on college campuses."

The flag spat in Gainesville illustrates the conservative resurgence that is changing college campuses in Florida and across the nation. Students with the financial backing of national conservative groups are demanding a voice in areas both large and small.

Several factors are believed to be fueling the movement: the popularity of President Bush, the fallout from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq.

At Florida Atlantic University, the Jeffersonian Conservatives tied yellow ribbons on about 100 trees. At the University of Central Florida, Rebuilding on a Conservative Cornerstone is gearing up to start a conservative newspaper.

And at Florida International University, the American Conservative Student Union brought in the author of the book, Why the Left Hates America: Exposing the Lies That Have Obscured Our Nation's Greatness.

"This should be a welcome trend," said Thor Halvorssen, who heads the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a nonprofit group in Philadelphia dedicated to free speech and academic freedom. "One of the hardest things to be on campus is conservative. But campuses should be diverse and diversity is diversity of opinion too."

But Guillette's group, the Freedom Foundation, is not finding UF all that welcoming.

Its drive to blanket the campus with American flags has been embroiled in debate for a year now as students, faculty and administrators argue over whether the flags are just a symbol of a political view.

"It's pseudopatriotic," says Charlie Grapski, a graduate student

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who has fought several battles with conservative student leaders and threatened to cover the flag in his classroom. "The purpose behind it is to send an implied message to those who have a different attitude toward government."

Members of the Freedom Foundation gather in their tiny office with blue concrete block walls above the Shamrock Pub, down the street from the UF campus to talk politics.

Inside, pillows and curtains are sewn out of fabric adorned with flags and eagles. A bumper sticker on the wall reads, "Diapers are Disposable, Babies are not, Stop Abortion." Then there are the typical college student touches like bean bag chairs and the Pink Floyd poster.

The students may look like any other Florida college students in their shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops. But they listen to Rush Limbaugh on the radio, collect autographs of conservative role models and campaigned for Jeb Bush.

"What it is doing is bringing conservatives together," said Jen Adams, 20, a UF junior from Melbourne. "People like having a different voice on campus."

The Freedom Foundation, which has about 40 members, started a weekly newspaper, the Gator Standard, a year ago as an alternative to what they call the liberal bias of student leaders, administrators and the daily student newspaper.

They have written articles about the high number of registered Democrat professors in the political science department and Alachua County's delay in turning over the Choose Life license plate proceeds to a nonprofit group.

The group, just 4 years old, is considered one of the most active in the new wave of such organizations on campuses looking to counter liberal faculty and administration while trying to persuade their undecided and apathetic peers to join them.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's popularity triggered a similar outbreak of conservative activism producing future leaders such as Dinesh D'Souza and Ann Coulter. That waned in the 1990s but has made a comeback in recent years.

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There's even a conservative group at such ultraliberal campuses as the University of California, Berkeley. At least eight exist at schools in Florida, though not at the University of South Florida.

"There is a renewed patriotism," said Joshua Mercer, director of student publications for the Campus Leadership Program. "There's a sense of pride and a re-examination of what it means to be American."

National nonprofit groups are eager to help spread the gospel of the right. They give money to start and run newspapers, pay for travel to training programs and reimburse students for the cost of celebrity speakers and yellow ribbons. They make house calls, persuading students to start groups and providing hands-on training.

In 1994, Collegiate Network worked with 35 student papers. Last year, it gave more than \$170,000 to 80 papers.

"We exist out of student demand," said Bryan Auchterlonie, executive director of the Collegiate Network. "It's not necessarily uncool to be conservative anymore."

Many student groups start newspapers. Others bring in speakers or hold rallies.

But flying the American flag on campus is the topic du jour.

American flags have sprouted up all over the nation since the terrorist attacks. Now students at both UF and UCF in Orlando want to mount 2-by-3-foot flags in each classroom at a cost of thousands of dollars to be paid for with student activities fees. That requires student government to sign off on the expense.

"The American flag is a symbol of freedom and liberty," said Heather Smith, 21, president of Rebuilding on a Conservative Kornerstone or ROCK at UCF. "What better place to have it?"

ROCK collected almost 1,000 signatures of students supporting the idea. It also received a handful of e-mails against it.

Emily Ruff, co-chairwoman of the UCF Progressive Council,

which represents nine groups such as Greenpeace, said some students oppose the flags because they worry they will offend others, including international students. And they are concerned about maintaining the flags and the \$3,000 cost.

"How will the money benefit students?" she asked.

But UCF administrators approved the idea, and agreed to cover labor if student fees pay for the flags. Student government will debate the issue this month.

"The flag represents the country," UCF vice president Bill Merck said. "It shouldn't be a political statement."

At UF, the situation is a bit more complicated and everyone involved seems to have a different version.

Guillette introduced the proposal at the last minute at a student government meeting last summer, failing to go through the committee process first. The student senate eventually approved spending \$8,000 for the flags, though only after members discussed whether it would be better to erect three large flags.

UF provost David Colburn formed a committee of faculty and students to study the issue. The group will recommend in a few weeks that one flag be flown alongside a plaque commemorating Sept. 11 as a more meaningful tribute.

"As a veteran of the Vietnam War, it's important to me," Colburn said. "But I think we could do it in a better way than having one in every classroom."

Other colleges plan to try similar flag campaigns, though a California community college already struck down a plan to require flags in classrooms after faculty and students complained.

"Campuses in the United States need to be reminded of our values," said Julien Kreisman, 20, a junior at the University of South Carolina who heads the Carolina Patriots. "Hanging a flag is a great start."

Not everyone thinks that way.

"The flag should be respected, but not revered; to place it atop a pedestal of worship is to deny, or at least fatally discourage, one of the fundamental rights it guarantees: our disaffection," said Casey Boyd, 20, a UF senior majoring in history. "To be a patriot of a flag is to be a drone, a thoughtless instrument of government disposal."

- Times researchers Cathy Wos and John Martin contributed to this report.

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