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The Nation

New Guidebooks Offer Students an Education on Civil Liberties

By Robert B. Bluey
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(CNSNews.com) - College students have a new tool to fight speech codes, censorship and other draconian measures on their campuses thanks to a broad coalition of First Amendment supporters.

It comes in the form of a [website](#) launched Tuesday and a series of guidebooks released by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based civil liberties group.

The 3-year-old organization has been fighting on behalf of students since its founding, but now its co-directors, University of Pennsylvania professor Alan Charles Kors and Boston lawyer Harvey A. Silverglate, hope the guides educate students about their rights before they encounter problems.

"We have begun to put out these guides in order to empower the students with some knowledge and with some tactical advice for what they can do," Silverglate said. "We realized that we somehow have to leverage our efforts, so we decided we were going to educate a whole generation of college students in liberty."

Tuesday's gathering in Washington, D.C., to announce the launch drew a diverse crowd of First Amendment supporters. Former U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese III, a fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, joked with American Civil Liberties Union President Nadine Strossen that they probably disagree on 99.9 percent of issues, except when it comes to free speech.

Meese and Strossen were two of nearly a dozen First Amendment heavyweights who contributed to FIRE's guides. The books address common problems facing students at many American colleges, offering advice on topics like [free speech](#), [religious freedom](#), [due process rights](#), [student fees](#) and [thought reform](#).

"There's no doubt in my mind that censorship, speech codes and political correctness are the absolute antithesis of what institutions of higher learning ought to be about," Meese said. "We should be thinking of university and college campuses as a marketplace of ideas where competitive speech is the best way of arriving at the truth."

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Meese said too many colleges today disrespect certain viewpoints, most often stifling minority voices. An instructor at Citrus College in California recently told students they had to write antiwar letters to President Bush if they wanted extra credit. One student questioned the assignment, and now, the instructor has been placed on administrative leave.

Strossen said the hostile environment present on many college campuses could change if students took their civil liberties seriously. FIRE's guides, she said, were a first step in that direction.

"We the people, including students on private as well as public campuses, should have knowledge about what our rights are - both our moral rights and our constitutional rights - and be emboldened to exercise those," she said.

Other supporters of FIRE's efforts included Freedom Forum Ombudsman Paul McMasters, Cato Institute Vice President for Legal Affairs Roger Pilon, Harvard Law School professor Alan M. Dershowitz and Alliance Defense Fund attorney Jordan Lorence.

Strossen commended the group for staying neutral and consulting with individuals across the political spectrum, much like the ACLU does, she said.

Kors, who travels to campuses to talk with students about their rights, founded FIRE with Silverglate after the two co-authored "The Shadow University," which documented abuses of power by college administrators.

The outpouring of calls and requests for help led them to create the organization, which takes an aggressive approach to dealing with universities that offend students' liberties.

"Abusers of power in a free society are unable to defend in public what they do in private," said Kors, who noted that 90 percent of FIRE's cases are resolved with a simple telephone call. "We need systemic change on our campuses. We need to arm students and the defenders of their rights with the moral and legal arguments of a free and decent society on behalf of liberty."

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