

## ***Morning Edition (10:00 AM ET) - NPR***

**College students protest against so-called free speech zones at their campuses, saying that they violate their First Amendment rights**

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BOB EDWARDS, host:

Some student activists are finding a large portion of university campuses off-limits to protests. Schools with so-called free speech zones limit the outspoken to just a few places on campus. Administrators say the zones balance free speech and the need for order on campus. But some students at West Virginia University say the zones violate their First Amendment rights. Jeff Young of West Virginia Public Radio reports.

JEFF YOUNG reporting:

West Virginia University student activist Matthew Poe wanted to hand out flyers about corporations and human rights, but Poe instead got a lesson about colleges and free speech rights. Mr. MATTHEW POE (Student Activist): The campus police were called because we were outside the free speech zone. They told us that we'd have to go to the speech zone, and I was scared and I was intimidated, which was the point, I think.

YOUNG: The university's free speech zone was two sections of an outdoors plaza near the Student Center. If someone wanted to hand out literature, demonstrate or preach on the sprawling 22,000-student campus, the zone was the only place school policy allowed it. West Virginia University president David Hardesty says his school needs some policy to balance free speech with campus safety.

Mr. DAVID HARDESTY (West Virginia University President): The problem is that people can get carried away and intimidate other people, whose beliefs are different, whose ideas about life are different, and I have a duty to protect them, too.

YOUNG: A spokesman for the American Council on Education says he has no exact count of schools with speech zones, but he says the policies are becoming more popular with administrators. Florida State, Pennsylvania State and Appalachian State universities all recently enacted or exercised speech zone policies. Each of those schools also heard from the civil liberties group FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. FIRE attorney Greg Lukianoff says school administrators establish the

zones for reasons that have little to do with education.

Mr. GREG LUKIANOFF (FIRE Attorney): It guarantees them peace and quiet and control. Frankly, if you're an administrator, your number one concern is not academic freedom. It's not necessarily the pursuit of truth. It's making sure that you don't get complaints from parents, making sure that you maintain good PR.

YOUNG: Lukianoff says speech zones essentially turn the rest of a campus into a censorship zone. But university president Hardesty says the law allows limits on where people can exercise free speech.

Mr. HARDESTY: This is a college campus that thrives on differences of opinion. There is no issue about what can be said here. The question is a reasonable time, manner and place, respecting the rights of everyone who holds a different opinion.

YOUNG: Student activists and some faculty found the policy too restrictive. Dozens have protested, some wearing symbolic gags; others chanting outside Hardesty's office window.

Group of Protesters: (In unison) Hey, hey...

Unidentified Woman: Hey, hey...

Group of Protesters: (In unison) ...ho, ho...

Unidentified Woman: ...ho, ho...

Group of Protesters: (In unison) ...the free speech zone has got to go. Hey, hey...

YOUNG: Student Michael Bomford argues the school's code of conduct already addresses concerns about security and disruptive behavior. Bomford says the only speech policy a university needs is the First Amendment.

Mr. MICHAEL BOMFORD (Student): No law abridging the freedom of speech or the right to peaceably assemble. What'll these crazy kids come up with next?

YOUNG: FIRE attorney Lukianoff says school administrators often drop or change speech zones when students speak out. He says the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and University of South Florida in Tampa abandoned speech zones this year in the face of constitutional challenges.

Mr. LUKIANOFF: I really wish West Virginia University, in particular, and all the universities that have free speech zones would give actual free speech a chance. I think they'll be shocked to discover that the sky won't fall.

**YOUNG:** This month, West Virginia University relaxed its policy, allowing individuals and small groups more freedom to demonstrate. But large groups still must use one of six speech zones, something the student activists still find unacceptable. For NPR News, I'm Jeff Young in Morgantown, West Virginia.