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Fla. college student successfully fights campus

School officials told student she could hand out animal-rights leaflets in one area of campus

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FLORIDA – Seminole Community College student Eliana Campos will be allowed to hand out pamphlets describing the conditions of animals in slaughterhouses in more locations on campus after the college had previously relegated her to a "free speech zone" on campus.

Campos was told on March 23 that she was not allowed to distribute the pamphlets where she wanted near a café on campus. Campos spoke to an administrator, Gail Agor, who said Campos would not be allowed to set up the table because she did not like the organization that sponsored the material, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Agor said in an e-mail to Campos, which is posted on the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education Web site: "Eliana, maybe you wouldn't insult or yell, but PETA instills a feeling in me that I can't, and won't, take a chance on campus." She told Campos she could not pass out the near the café because "students would be eating animal products in front of you ... I feel this is a set up for conflict."

Agor told Campos that she could talk about slaughterhouses in an area designated as a "free speech zone" by the university, but could not hand out pamphlets. Campos called the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, an organization that has been working to defeat speech codes on campuses around the country, who contacted school administrators.

"We were kind of amazed considering the decision seemed to be based entirely on the content of the speech she wanted to engage in," said Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy for FIRE.

Lukianoff said by creating so called "free speech zones," college campuses turn into places where students' abilities to freely express themselves is limited.

"Free speech zones are an Orwellian exercise for turning 99 percent of a university's campus into a censorship zone," Lukianoff said. "To tell students they can only protest or hand out pamphlets in this tiny little area turns the idea of free speech on its head."

After Seminole Community College administrators and officials from FIRE corresponded over a two-month period, the college agreed to let Campos distribute her pamphlets near the café and revise their free speech zone policy.

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James Henningsen, vice president for student success at Seminole Community College, said limiting Campos' ability to hand out the pamphlet because her information was from PETA was "wrong," and not the school's policy, which he said was to not discriminate on the content of the speech.

"The situation with Eliana has give us the chance to say we may not have the best procedure in place for requests that come from students," Henningsen said. He added that there has been some confusion on where Campos could set out her pamphlets, and that the college is setting up a committee to examine what they should change in their policies.

Henningsen said the school had tried to set up the free speech zones in areas of campus that officials believed had lots of student traffic, but has heard from students that those areas are not always the most traveled. He added that he did not think there was anything wrong with students who wanted to hand out literature on campus as long as they are not disrupting other students.

–By Rebecca McNulty

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