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SUNDAY FOCUS: ARE CAMPUS 'FREE-ASSEMBLY' ZONES UNCONSTITUTIONAL?

UCF rules fuel debate on freedom of speech

Susan Jacobson | Sentinel Staff Writer

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PHOTOS



In the zone (JULIE FLETCHER, ORLANDO SENTINEL) Dec 9, 2006

One minute, members of Students for a Democratic Society were sitting in a breezeway, holding signs asking other students to discuss a possible war in Iran.

The next, the University of Central Florida police were accusing the campus activists of trespassing and were threatening them with arrest if they didn't move to a designated "free-assembly area."

That event in April launched an ongoing dispute over free speech at UCF that echoes similar struggles between university administrators and students across the country.

Officials at the campus east of Orlando say they're just trying to prevent protesters from blocking entrances or disturbing classes and other university functions.

"We're trying to protect everyone's interest here, not only those who want to demonstrate or protest," UCF spokesman Tom Evelyn said.

Students contend that the real motive is to shut them up.

"They have no respect for the First Amendment, and they want to control what we say," said Patrick DeCarlo, 21, a UCF creative-writing major, SDS member and student senator.

Modern-day attempts to regulate student speech at U.S. universities go back at least to the Vietnam War era, when protests on American campuses vexed administrators even as they reflected a growing public anti-war sentiment.

Universities ramped up free-speech restrictions in the late 1980s and early 1990s for fear of offending anyone, particularly on the basis of race or religion, said Robert Richards, founding co-director of the Pennsylvania Center for the First Amendment at Penn State University.

"The political-correctness movement was at its height," Richards said.

Suits led to special zones

But court rulings struck down limits on what protesters could say while allowing constraints on time, place and manner, said Paul Haridakis, an associate professor at Kent State University's school of communication studies and an expert on First Amendment issues.

The resulting creation of special zones for public protest and demonstrations has spread beyond college campuses to other locations, including the 2004 Democratic and Republican national conventions and the sites of many presidential appearances.

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"Personally, I think they go too far," Haridakis said. "It could be a mechanism for controlling expression."

Debating and publicizing social issues is a major activity of the SDS chapter at UCF. The group is part of the national reincarnation of the organization co-founded in the 1960s by political activist Tom Hayden, later a California state senator.

SDS members say fire codes and other laws adequately address potential problems with their activities, and that they were not breaking any rules during the incident that brought out the campus police.

"We're just looking for peaceable assembly," said Austin Smith, 21, an SDS member and a junior studying history.

Maribeth Ehasz, vice president for student development and enrollment services, said the SDS members were interfering with business when they held signs in a breezeway outside the John T. Washington Center, which contains a bookstore, credit union and other services.

UCF has 'assembly' areas

The breezeway leads toward a plaza in front of the student union. That plaza -- but not the breezeway -- is one of four campus areas designed so students can use amplified sound without disturbing classes.

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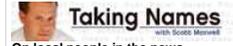
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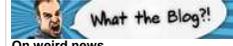
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