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Free speech

WVU policy unnecessary

Tuesday June 18, 2002

FREE SPEECH is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, written back in 1789. All colleges and universities should encourage free speech, and vigorous debate, as a cornerstone of their education.

So what's going on at West Virginia University? How can university professors in the faculty senate pass a "Policy on Freedom of Expression" that restricts student protests and marches to "Free Expression Areas"?

The bizarre policy limits the number of protesters to 30 in some areas. It restricts protests to hours between 7:30 a.m. and 10 p.m.

Students should have the right to free speech and to protest anywhere, at any time, as long as they do not disrupt classrooms. University professors and administrators should be leading the charge to defend, not rewrite, the Bill of Rights.

Students everywhere have the right to protest for environmental causes or for animal rights. Students have the right to picket speakers at university functions, no matter what their political views may be. And students have the right to assemble in protest against government or university policies.

During the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of students marched across campuses from Berkeley to Columbia, from West Virginia University to Kent State to back civil rights and protest the Vietnam War. Sometimes, they held sit-ins and got

arrested.

Those speeches, marches, picket lines and sit-ins played an important role in making sure Americans of all colors and creeds got treated fairly.

The use of free speech — unrestricted to “zones” — played a major role in ending the deaths and tragedy in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Bob Griffith, the WVU professor who led the committee designed to overhaul the policy, told the Daily Mail that the issue came to a head when a student was told to leave a presentation by Disney after he had passed out fliers criticizing the company.

“That was the last straw for the students,” Griffith said.

But the “new and improved” policy is hardly better. In fact, it has gotten the university sued by the Rutherford Institute from Charlottesville, Va.

Free speech should be allowed everywhere, except in special places such as classrooms during instructional periods. There are laws on the books to control disruptions. Students who block doorways or hold sit-ins know they face arrest.

Neither WVU nor any university needs any “Policy on Freedom of Expression.” The definitive policies were written back in 1789.

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