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Friday Dec. 13, 2002

NEWS

WV college abolishes campus free speech zones

By Debrah Bonn (Daily Texan Staff)
December 09, 2002

Students at West Virginia University can now picket, demonstrate or hand out fliers wherever they please, a freedom not allowed prior to Nov. 8.

After two years packed with debate and protest, the university scrapped its old free-speech policy in favor of one that allows students more choices on where they can express their opinions.

The previous policy, put into place during the Vietnam era, said Bill Nevin, external communications manager for the university, allowed just two "free speech zones" on campus where groups could assemble. Under the new policy, the entire university campus is available for groups or individuals to express their concerns. Nevin calls the new rules "more up-to-date with the times."

University officials and those fighting the old regulations agreed that the previous rules were not often enforced.

"Unless you were harassing someone or stopping people from going somewhere, that's the only way the police would come down and say 'Hey, you're violating the policy,'" Nevin said.

Michael Bomford, a grad student studying agriculture, said the university only enforced the rules "when it suited their fancy."

He became involved with the policy debate after he was forced to desist handing out fliers about sweatshops in front of a Disney recruiting session on campus in October 2000. Bomford, along with three other students, was told he was violating university policy by being outside of the two designated zones for free speech.

For about a year, Bomford said attempts by the student group

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Students for Economic Justice to get the university to respond to the policy were largely ignored. In spring 2001, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education became involved in the struggle at West Virginia, and within a year the university took up the issue to change the policy, Bomford said.

"It looked, to me, to be obvious that the policy, as it was, violated the constitution," Bomford said. "What really surprised me was how long it took and what a struggle it was."

The issue of free speech may be over at the university, but it is far from resolved at college campuses across the country, said Thor Halvorssen, CEO of FIRE. He said that the problem lies largely in college administrators who have little faith in university students to handle their free speech rights.

UT President Larry Faulkner appointed a task force to review free speech policies at the University in 2001. The recommendations, which included making the entire campus available for free speech and adding five amplified sound zones to the existing three, now have to be approved by the UT System Board of Regents. Faulkner has said he is "favorable" to the recommendations.

Halvorssen said efforts to protect people from being offended have materialized in policies that directly prohibit certain types of speech in "today's oversensitive campus environment." Most often suppressed, he said is speech which is politically incorrect, conservative or Christian.

As for West Virginia University's policy change, Halvorssen doesn't think it will influence other schools to act.

"I doubt this is going to start a trend. Is it a monumental event? You bet," Halvorssen said.

