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Occidental Suspends Student Government

■ The college president says ugliness in campus politics got 'out of hand.' Civil libertarians object.

By Stuart Silverstein, Times Staff Writer

Occidental College has shut down its bickering student government for the rest of the school year — a rare move intended to cool off what officials said was "a culture of acrimony" but which is drawing protest from civil libertarians.

The college's president, Theodore Mitchell, also postponed this week's student elections until the fall. In a statement released to the 1,840-student Eagle Rock campus this week, Mitchell said he was taking the actions to halt personal attacks between political rivals.

Mitchell said that college staff and students have been the targets of "harassing phone calls, e-mail spam and threatening letters." He added that the administration in the last two months has received "an unacceptable number of complaints and cross-complaints" involving student government leaders.

Officials of the liberal arts campus said they are conducting disciplinary reviews of "at least 10" students. Anyone

determined to be at fault would face penalties ranging up to expulsion. Though officials declined to reveal details of those cases, they said none involved physical assaults.

At the center of this situation is not any major policy decision by the student senate, which has authority over a \$441,000 budget and employs almost 100 students. Instead, campus officials say it grew out of personal

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disputes and nasty allegations in student government over the last year and worsened during the now-postponed election campaign.

According to various accounts, one candidate was wrongly accused in voice-mail messages left for students of being thrown out of a student program because of a sexual harassment complaint.

Campus officials said the government shutdown was not directed at any single student or event. But several student leaders said the action was linked partly to controversies this year surrounding a student government vice president — Jason Antebi — who was removed by the Occidental administration last month from his job as co-host of a "shock jock"-style campus radio show.

Antebi, a senior who by many accounts was one of the most powerful figures in student government, said he was notified that he also is a target of a disciplinary complaint lodged by three students. He said they accused him of sexual harassment because of remarks made on his March 11 radio show.

A recording of part of the program obtained by The Times revealed that Antebi urged listeners in general to call in with their "rape victim stories." He also said the staffers of the campus weekly newspaper were "stupid retards." The complaint also accused him of mocking members of student government.

Antebi defended his radio show as "satire, parody and extreme exaggeration," and he likened himself to controversial radio personality Howard Stern, who has had his own regulatory troubles. "Maybe some people found it offensive, but it's not sexual harassment," Antebi said.

He said the complaint came from opponents who promoted an unsuccessful recall campaign against him earlier this year. Antebi said he also has been a target of criticism by administrators and others because he espoused conservative causes at a school where he says liberalism dominates.

Mitchell's temporary shutdown of student government — and Antebi's removal from the radio show — were criticized as "an incredible message" to send to students by Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy for the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, or FIRE. The national group advocates for civil liberties in academia; it filed a protest with the college on Antebi's behalf.

"How are students supposed to learn respect for a system of government when their school treats free speech, debate and democracy as nuisances, which is essentially what they've done here? Instead of trying to actually fix the problem, they've just decided to completely do away with student democracy," Lukianoff said.

Future student officials and radio hosts, he added, "now know to beware of the administration — that they will go to extraordinary lengths to stop speech that they find offensive and to prevent senators that they dislike from exercising their power."

Peter Eliasberg, managing attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, said that he has not investigated the Occidental situation, but that the student government shutdown is a worrisome development.

"People should be concerned, and say to themselves, 'Well, wait a minute. What's a liberal arts school teaching students about government and self-government if it's shutting down its student government?'"

Occidental administrators denied that their suspension of student government had raised broad issues about democracy or free speech.

"This is an action about a student organization that is out of hand. We would take this action if this were a basketball team, if this were the outing club or if this were a fraternity or a sorority. Student government is, at the end of the day, a student organization at Occidental College," Mitchell said in an interview.

He added that the shutdown of student government "is a pro-free speech act, because there is nothing more chilling to free speech than a pattern of intimidation and harassment, and that's what we were beginning to see emerge."

Campus officials said they knew of no precedent in the 117-year history of the college of the administration

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shutting down student government. Perhaps the closest event came in 1973, when student government decided to shut itself down for part of the year, citing a lack of participation by the student body.

Campus activities run by the student government this semester, which ends with commencement May 16, will not be interrupted. Until Associated Students of Occidental College resumes in the fall, its affairs will be run by Ross Papish, an associate dean and director of student life.

Student government ordinarily supervises such operations as, among other things, the campus newspaper and radio station, the student activities center, and a programming board that arranges events.

Reaction to the government shutdown and elections postponement was divided on the leafy campus just west of Pasadena.

Some students expressed frustration both with student government and with the action taken by the administration. Others said the cooling-off period could begin a healing process, and could help push forward an effort to reform student government by rewriting its constitution and dispersing power more among its officers.

Meghan Ryan, a senior who until this week was president of the student senate, said she was disappointed that her year in office was cut short by the shutdown. But, she added, "I don't think that the administration had a choice really. Something had to be done because it was getting out of control.

"There was a lack of political discourse. It had broken down into just attacking," Ryan said. Because of the verbal attacks, she said, this week's scheduled voting "wasn't a clean election anymore."

But Roy Nichols, a sophomore student senator, said the shutdown "is circumventing the democratic process of government." He said "there was a lot of unnecessary drama, but that would have been solved in the general elections."

*

Times staff writer Joy Buchanan contributed to this report.

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