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College groups unite for free speech at UNCG


Amy Kingsley

Staff writer

A controversy held over from the fall semester reemerged last week on the UNCG campus as student political groups protested and administrators scrutinized an embattled speech policy.

College Republicans and Democrats joined the College Libertarians Jan. 26 for a protest in front of Jackson Library, which is not one of the designated areas for political activity. More than a dozen students braved the cold, windy weather to raise awareness and circulate a petition to have the policy changed.



The UNCG Facility Use Policy designates the east lawn in front of the Elliot University Center and outside the Foust building as free speech zones. Students wishing to use the areas must notify administrators at least 48 hours in advance. Student political groups contend that the policy is too restrictive and prevents groups from organizing spontaneously.

“We’re here for solidarity and free speech,” said Patrick Tutwiler, president of the College Democrats.

Protests began on Nov. 16, when a group of College Libertarians staged an event in front of Jackson Library. Although the protests were peaceful, UNCG Police and Cheka Leinwall, the associate director of student life, urged the students to move to a free speech zone. The altercation resulted in student code of conduct charges against Robert Sinnott and Allison Jaynes that were later dropped.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education entered the fray, sending letters to UNCG Chancellor Patricia Sullivan urging her to change the policy. The Foundation has been behind several lawsuits against schools they feel have violated students’ civil liberties.



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The university soon formed a panel to look into the policy and consider making changes to it. That group, made up of students, faculty and administration, met for the first time Jan. 28 for a briefing by UNCG lawyer Skip Capone.

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Capone reviewed several legal considerations and highlighted the portions of the policy most inconsistent with the First Amendment and the UNC system's commitment to free speech.

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"The historical background of this policy is lost to the memory of anybody currently here," Capone said. "It goes back at least until the 1980s, maybe even the 1970s. It is not unlike many similar policies that came into being during Vietnam."

The students said faculty members have privately shown support for their cause, but few have publicly protested. Spoma Jovanovic, a professor of communication studies, said that many of the professors oppose the policy and see the protests as a positive development.

"I think that a university's mission is to teach students how to solve the complex problems of the world," Jovanovic said. "To the extent that these students have identified a problem that is incompatible with our values and are trying to fix that, I think that's great."

Leinwall has defended the policy in the past as a compromise that allows free speech for political groups but protects the rights of others to study. Now she is chairing the committee charged with recommending changes to it.

Jovanovic acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining a balance between promoting open dialogue and respecting students' different value systems.

"I would err on the side of less regulation," she said. "There are different ways of handling it that are less offensive than invoking the law or the honor code."

During the Jan. 26 protest, participants noticed a conspicuous lack of police or administrators. In contrast, police and administrators gathered before the protesters took to the lawn in front of Jackson in November.

"If they're not going to enforce the policy, why even have it at all," Sinnott said.

He said that the College Libertarians would hold a protest every two weeks or so until the policy is changed. The Campus Speech Policy Committee will meet weekly for about six weeks, or until they are ready to make recommendations to Chancellor Sullivan.

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