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Survey: many college students, administrators fuzzy on First Amendment

By **BILL BERGSTROM**

The Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA - One out of four college students in a nationwide survey was unable to name any of the freedoms protected by the First Amendment, according to a free-speech watchdog group.

"These survey results are disheartening, but they unfortunately are not surprising," said Alan Charles Kors, president of the nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

Even among campus administrators who were surveyed, from presidents to assistant deans, 11 percent couldn't name any specific First Amendment rights, the survey indicated.

And when asked which freedom the amendment addresses first, only two percent of the students and six percent of the administrators correctly named freedom of religion, Philadelphia-based FIRE said.

"It's very depressing. Now we can see the reason why we are so overwhelmed with cases," said Thor L. Halvorsen, chief executive officer of the nonprofit group.

FIRE backs many challenges of campus restrictions on religious freedoms. In one recent case, the group wrote a letter on behalf of a Christian women's housing group at Purdue University that was told it must adopt a "nondiscrimination" clause saying it wouldn't consider sex or religious beliefs in choosing its members. Purdue agreed to exempt religious groups.

In another case, an attorney supported by FIRE filed suit against Rutgers University, which had said the InterVarsity Multiethnic Christian Fellowship couldn't take religious beliefs into account in selecting its leaders. In a settlement, the university agreed that students could associate on the basis of shared beliefs.

The group has also backed lawsuits challenging campus conduct codes, such as one that barred "acts of intolerance including racist, sexist and homophobic speech" at Shippensburg University, and policies setting aside "free-speech zones" at schools including Texas Tech University and

Citrus College in California.

"Our colleges and universities continue to deny students rights that are respected in nearly every other venue of our free society," said Kors, who said the latest survey was a "belated wake-up call."

The First Amendment says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

When asked to name any of the specific rights guaranteed by the amendment, 74 percent of private college students and 71 percent of public college students said freedom of speech; 32 percent of private college students and 27 percent of public college students said freedom of religion, and 31 percent of private college students and 28 percent of public college students said freedom of the press. Smaller numbers named the rights of assembly and association and the right to petition.

Twenty-four percent of private college students and 28 percent of public college students didn't answer or said they didn't know.

The study was conducted between December 2002 and April 2003, surveying 1,037 students at 339 colleges and universities, and 306 administrators at 306 colleges and universities nationwide.

The survey was funded by the John Templeton Foundation, which studies issues including religious freedom, and conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut.

On the Net:

Foundation for Individual Rights in Education: <http://www.thefire.org/>

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