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NEWS

Colleges attempt to restrict First Amendment rights of students

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Contributing Writer

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Some colleges are attempting to restrict certain freedoms protected under the First Amendment.

Gerald Reynolds, head of the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, distributed a letter in July to colleges and universities across the nation, addressing, "a subject ... of central importance to our government, our heritage of freedom and our way of life: the First Amendment."

Though Reynold's office cannot bring lawsuits to enforce the First Amendment, his letter confronts hundreds of institutes of higher education that have policies that restricting speech and discouraging intellectual exchange.

"Speech codes" are unclear rules that target speech that may be offensive to certain people or groups..

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education reports an attempt last spring by students at Ithaca College in New York to get police to stop a speech sponsored by the College Republicans.

The speaker was political activist Angela Bay Buchanan and the topic was "the failures of feminism." The protesters claimed Buchanan's speech was a "bias-related incident."

The event was not censored, but the school's "Bias-Related Incidents Committee" is looking into the matter of creating policies to prohibit similar speeches in the future.

Norman Wick, president of SMU's Faculty Senate, said he isn't aware of such policies at SMU.

"Hate speech is not allowed," he said. "But students have the right to express a wide range of social and economic viewpoints."

Hate speech is defined as bigoted speech attacking or disparaging a social or ethnic group or a member of such a group, and it's not protected by the U.S. Constitution. Wick said that SMU does not have a bias-related incidents committee.

Richard Mason, director of the Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility said that SMU encourages students to speak out.

"The heart of the university is intellectual inquiry and free speech," he said. "As long as [speakers] are responsible for their point of view, they should be free to speak."

Mason said that important issues are essential to making assignments help students develop a sense of quality reasoning. The position that students take is up to them.

Regarding SMU, "Student organizations, faculty members and administration need to determine appropriateness of certain speeches and events," Wick said.

If students are bothered by certain speech, he says they can express concern to the University and the matter would be explored further.

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