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Annie Flaherty, a sophomore from Cincinnati, watches as Ryan Gleeson, a sophomore from Hebron, covers the logos on her sandals. Flaherty signed away her First Amendment rights Wednesday in return for a free lunch .



Benji Hamm, editorial director of Landmark Newspapers, discusses the future of newspapers and journalism Tuesday in a panel on "Why Journalism Matters."

## Celebrating First Amendment freedoms

### FIRE defends First Amendment rights of students

**By: Kaylia Cornett**

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In 2006, at San Francisco State University (SFSU), members of the university's College Republicans were under investigation after hosting an anti-terrorism rally in which participants stepped on makeshift Hamas and Hezbollah flags.

Charges filed against the Republicans stated they created a "hostile environment."

Some students witnessing the act reported they were offended and filed a complaint against the Republicans.

The Republicans contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, better known as FIRE, for help in defending their First Amendment rights.

College administrators at SFSU were ignoring that it is legal free speech to burn or desecrate religious or political symbols, said Luke Sheahan, director of FIRE's campus freedom network at a lecture on Eastern's campus on Monday.

The Republicans at SFSU won their case, thanks in part to help from FIRE.

FIRE has existed for 10 years and won over 100 cases, Sheahan said.

On its Web site, FIRE lists universities across the nation that violate First Amendment rights in one way or another, and Eastern is on that list with a "red light" warning - a classification for schools that "both clearly and substantially" restrict free speech.

SGA President Alex Combs said Eastern's designated "free speech zones" are one way free speech is restricted on Eastern's campus.

Eastern has two designated areas that students may schedule to use for free speech activities: Powell Plaza and the Ravine, according to an agreement form released by Student Development.

The agreement states that people who wish to use university property for speech activities, including the distribution of literature, must comply with the university's time, place and manner guidelines.

"Any acts that are disruptive to the normal operations of the University, including but not limited to classes and University business, or invade the rights of others, will not be tolerated," the agreement reads.

During his lecture, titled "Liberty in Peril," Sheahan focused on university speech codes across the nation.

Sheahan said the goal of speech codes is to help regulate friction among students from various social and ethnic backgrounds on campuses. But in many instances, speech codes also wind up being a violation of the First Amendment, Sheahan said.

Speech codes are university regulations prohibiting expression that would be constitutionally protected in society at large, according to the organization's recently released "Spotlight on Speech Codes 2009" pamphlet.

Besides the Republicans at SFSU, Sheahan also explained how FIRE has stood up for the First Amendment rights of students at Johns Hopkins and Valdosta State universities.

At Johns Hopkins, FIRE helped reduce the sentence of a student who posted a Halloween party invitation that some people considered racist.

The student had originally been suspended for one year, ordered to complete 300 hours of community service, assigned 12 books to read and write papers on, and required to attend workshops on diversity and racism because of his party invitation, Sheahan said.

At Valdosta State, FIRE helped out a student who had been expelled for posting photos on Facebook protesting the school's decisions to construct new parking garages.

Valdosta's president - Ronald Zaccari - felt the photos were a threat on his life, including one that was subtitled "Zaccari Memorial Parking Garage."

"When we talk about college campuses, we're talking about adults here," Sheahan said. "[People] can deal with Facebook posts and fliers posted on campus. You're an adult."

In its "Spotlight on Speech Codes 2009" pamphlet, FIRE agrees that universities have the right to enact reasonable time, place and manner restrictions so nothing interferes with learning.

But colleges cannot limit free speech to just small or remote areas of campus, or regulate speech based on viewpoint, it reads.

Combs said he agreed precautions should be taken to make sure no one on Eastern's campus is put in any kind of danger but said free speech should not be limited by a long list of requirements.

"[Free speech] is what a university stands for," Combs said. "A university should encourage a free market of ideas."

Eastern's Society of Professional Journalists and SGA sponsored Sheahan's lecture as part of free speech week.

For more information on FIRE, students can visit their Web site at [www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org).

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