



May 28, 2009

Gun supporters say colleges trample protest rights

By RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI
Associated Press Writer

Colleges nationwide have unconstitutionally barred students from handing out literature, protesting and gathering in support of the right to carry weapons on campus, students and an advocacy group say.

Christine Brashier, a freshman at the Community College of Allegheny County near Pittsburgh, said a dean recently told her she had to stop distributing fliers for the group Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, which has chapters at many colleges, and destroy the pamphlets she had designed.

"I won't be forced into silence. I just wanted to start a student organization. I didn't think it was going to get this much attention," Brashier said. "It only got this attention because they stopped me. People don't like to hear about suppression of free speech."

Brashier is licensed to carry a concealed firearm but doesn't take it to school because CCAC, like most colleges and universities nationwide, does not allow weapons on campus. Some states explicitly ban students from carrying weapons on campus, while others — like Pennsylvania — allow the schools to set policy.

But since April 16, 2007, when Seung-Hui Cho went on a shooting rampage at Virginia Tech University, killing 32 people and injuring 17 before turning the gun on himself, more students have been advocating for the right to carry guns on campus, and state lawmakers have been tackling the issue, as well.

As a result, more universities and colleges have suppressed the rights of students to organize, said Robert Shibley, vice president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit following the cases and writing letters protesting them.

FIRE has not taken any cases to court, but Shibley said the group has not ruled it out. FIRE's philosophy is to work with the universities to get them to independently change their policies.

In the case of Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, Shibley said he would not comment on whether FIRE would sue. But it's "always an option when constitutional rights are violated," he said.

In Tarrant County, students have been trying to hold an "empty holster" demonstration in the college's designated "Free Speech" zone. The college has repeatedly refused to allow the protest, though it has taken place at other campuses nationwide.

"That case is ongoing. They have not relented," Shibley said.

Donna Darovich, the college's spokeswoman, said the students are permitted to voice their opinions in the "Free Speech" zone but will not be allowed to carry empty holsters anywhere on campus.

"We believe that it would be disruptive to the campus environment for people to be walking around with gun holsters," Darovich said.

However, Central Connecticut State University in New Britain allowed a gun holster protest on its campus last month. That was a month after the school was mired in publicity because a student was questioned by police after he gave a class presentation on gun rights that made a professor uncomfortable.

Mark McLaughlin, the university's spokesman, said that the student was not sanctioned and that the presentation did not affect his grade. The university, he said, was not suppressing the right of a student to express support for carrying a gun and has an active chapter of Students for Concealed Carry on Campus.

In Pittsburgh, FIRE sent a letter to the college stating concern about "the threats to freedom of speech and freedom of association." The "free distribution of noncommercial handbills is a quintessentially American tradition," FIRE said, noting that the Supreme Court has ruled it is unconstitutional to require prior permission for doing so.

Brashier's pamphlets say that while college campuses are generally safe, there are assaults, rapes and murders. By barring students from carrying guns, college campuses are "supermarkets for would-be rapists and mass murders," she wrote, mentioning the Virginia Tech shooting and the February 2008 shooting at Northern Illinois University, where a gunman killed five people.

The Pittsburgh college has declined to comment in detail because its solicitor is reviewing it. However, it said Brashier has not faced disciplinary action. The college is encouraging her to follow CCAC rules for organizing a campus group, including having 10 students interested in joining and finding a faculty adviser.

"CCAC does not have any intention to limit the student's involvement in the group or her ability to discuss her own political viewpoint," the statement said.

Brashier, who is studying to be an elementary school teacher, said when she completes her studies at CCAC in a year she will be continuing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, a school that also bans students from carrying weapons on campus but does allow Students for Concealed Carry on Campus to remain active.

The group, Brashier said, tries to get university funding for education on firearms and for trips to the shooting range.

"I just wanted to open up discussion and debate on the topic. I didn't think it would be such a big deal," Brashier said.



© 2009 Associated Press. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.5721?icx_id=D98FDRDG0 into any web browser. Press Association and Associated Press logos are registered trademarks of Press Association . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.