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Free speech alive, well at county colleges CLC, LFC don't have policies restricting expression, activism

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By Kendrick Marshall KMARSHALL@SCN1.COM

GRAYSLAKE -- Free speech is alive and well on college campuses.

Well, at most campuses anyway, depending on who you ask.

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Jen Zacarias of Grayslake (left), Secretary of Chi-Alfa, and Tammara Pirro of Grayslake, President of Chi-Alfa at CLC. (Marina Samovsky/News-Sun)

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Pirro (right) and Zacarias have a quick meeting in the school hallway.

The issue of universities trying to move speech away from certain areas of the campus is not entirely new.

Many colleges and universities have resorted to limiting student protests and demonstrations to certain select areas of the campus----called free-speech zones, which are described as content-neutral time, place and manner restrictions on all expression.

The last several years have seen a rise in such speech zones at universities, and college administrators believe free-speech zones are a way to prevent student activism from disturbing the learning process.

Several universities, including some in Illinois, have adopted these policies, and also have had the policies revoked in court or by pressure from First Amendment groups.

In 2003, Western Illinois University in Macomb abolished its policy regulations of campus demonstrations after 30 students and several professors waged a silent protest against their free speech zone.

Although the silent demonstration violated the school's policy which was established in 1995, university officials did not hand out punishment to the individuals.

Regulations that restrict speech based on content are deemed unconstitutional and are subject to a high degree of judicial scrutiny, said David Hudson, a lawyer with the First Amendment Center in Nashville, Tenn.

However, the College of Lake County, with a student body of 16,000, does not have restricted speech and says it promotes expression.

"Why would we not do so?" said Felicia Gather, director of student life at CLC. "I don't know how it is at other colleges, but here we have had no problems with expression. I don't know why there would be a problem."

Experts believe that universities adopted the zones to instill greater civility on public campuses and prevent harassment based on race and sex that was prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. Now, many schools have restricted students from distributing newspapers and other paraphernalia near libraries and student centers.

In recent years, students have often sought the help of groups like Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), putting legal and public pressure on colleges to abandon their restrictions.

Under pressure from FIRE, Chicago's DePaul University recently lifted a ban on propaganda that it used last fall to silence student protest of a campus appearance by controversial University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill in 2005.

Tamara Pirro, president of Chi Alpha, a religious organization at CLC, said students will get their messages out no matter how many restrictions administrators put on free speech.

"If students want to say something, then who is to really stop them?" she said. "I don't think it matters where a student speaks on campus. It is silly when you think about it."

The 21-year-old said when her group distributes fliers and promotes events. Neither students on campus, nor administrators have any problems with what they are selling.

"Students on campus will make judgments about what information they want to consume," Pirro said. "I don't think anyone we have run into has found what we are trying to do as a distraction to daily college life."

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