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A win for free speech at CSU

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It's big news when a university adopts a restrictive speech code. But it's often ignored when one is improved in response to student protests.

Colorado State University's new policies on speech, student protests and residence hall advertising are all big improvements over the restrictive policies of the past, and the university deserves great credit for making the changes.

The student groups that sought the changes deserve a big chunk of the credit, as does the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which championed the student cause.

Prior policies at CSU on student protests, student speech and residence hall advertising contained some remarkably questionable provisions. For one thing, the policy on hate incidents included a provision that prohibited any "expressions of hostility," directed at a

laundry list of potential targets. University officials have quite sensibly changed this policy so that it now prohibits only outright harassment or verbal and physical abuse.

A similar softening has been adopted on the issue of what may or may not be advertised on the bulletin boards of residence halls. The policy formerly prohibited "offensive language" and any reference to alcohol or other drugs. It, in fact, contained this language: "Be sensitive to social concerns such as sexism, racism, homophobia and not use offensive language or illustrations." This has now been replaced by a policy that prohibits obscene language and the promotion of illegal behavior in connection with alcohol and drugs.

Finally, the issue of student protests has been dealt with by making it clear that protests are not restricted to a single campus site and that free student speech is welcomed everywhere on campus.

The revision to the hate-incidents policy is especially welcome. The old policy contained this language:

"Hate incidents are expressions of hostility against a person or property because of a person's race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, ability, age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. They can also include actions that are motivated by bias, but do not meet the necessary elements to prove a crime. Examples of these incidents

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can include verbal or written name-calling, slurs, and jokes. Hate incidents can be classified as either open or anonymous. Hate incidents will not be tolerated."

Note the provision on expression of hostility against property. Does that mean one could not complain about the absence of parking spaces? Or how about the university's attempt to eliminate bias from human behavior or its willingness to monitor student slurs and jokes? Reading the old policy makes it easy to understand why the new one, which focuses on actual harassment and abuse, is a big improvement.

Those interested in a more detailed accounting of the CSU policy changes can find them on the Internet at thefire.org.

It would be nice to announce that the helpful changes made at CSU will spread like wildfire across the academic landscape. Alas, it is not so. Most major universities have student speech codes, some far more restrictive than the old policy at CSU, and at most there is no serious effort to revise them.

This fact may be disappointing, but it is not a cause for depression. FIRE continues its vigorous campaign on behalf of individual rights, due process and academic freedom nationwide and has lately become involved in a dispute at San Francisco State University, where students were threatened with discipline for a protest in which they stepped

on Hamas and Hezbollah flags during an anti-terrorism rally. Had these same students burned an American flag, it would hardly have raised an academic eyebrow. Nonetheless, the protesters (college Republicans) were subjected to a five-month investigation before finally being cleared. FIRE has aided the students with a lawsuit against the university.

It is always a little risky to back a development that might loosen the lips of college students, but CSU was doubtless correct in opting for changes that remove some needlessly vague and even menacing language from policies governing student conduct. The state is better off because of it.

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