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Students challenge Clemson's free speech policies

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. - A group of students are challenging Clemson University's use of free speech areas, saying they infringe on the students' civil rights.

Clemson Conservatives were censured by the university in connection with an Oct. 30 protest that they held outside the areas. The group held a protest Friday to get signatures for a petition opposing the university's policies.

Clemson officials said they are working on revisions to the policy and hope to have them ready by Jan. 1 for review by students, faculty and staff.

"No public university should have the right to restrict, limit, or abridge this fundamental right," said Andrew Davis, a senior and chairman of the Clemson Conservatives.

The original protest was held at the scene of a Clemson Gay Straight Alliance rally, which was not at one of two free speech areas mentioned in the university's policy. The Clemson Conservatives did not get approval from campus police to protest at that location on Oct. 30, said George Smith, university union director.

The free-speech areas provide the university with a way to be aware of events happening on campus so student safety is protected, Smith said Friday.

"By having free-speech areas, we're in no way trying to censor free thought or expression of ideas," he said.

Davis said his group chose to protest where it did because the organization's leaders think the university's policy is unconstitutional.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group based in Philadelphia, has asked Clemson officials to respond by Nov. 27 to the foundation's letter of concern about the university's free-speech policies.

"Constitutionally protected speech is permitted at the university," said Gail DiSabatino, the university vice president for student affairs. DiSabatino said the university is planning to reply to the foundation's letter.

Clemson Conservatives leader Davis has been in the spotlight before as editor of the Tiger Town Observer, a free monthly publication that receives no money from the university. The newspaper gave away two guns - one an assault rifle - to bring attention to the Second Amendment right to bear arms and to raise money for the paper and other charitable causes.

Davis also was investigated for possible violations of the student code of conduct after a March 2005 anti-war rally on campus that he organized turned out to be a hoax. Davis said all charges against him were dropped in that case.

Information from: Anderson Independent-Mail, <http://www.andersonsc.com>

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