

This became clear during our event.

As we were preparing and promoting “Free Speech, Free Press, Free Cookies,” the director of campus security sent me an email voicing concerns about how the staff would handle “pornography or vile language.” The email suggested I contact the director of security if I would like to discuss it further. I decided I didn’t need to discuss it further and did not respond.

More than a week later, the department head in my academic unit received a phone call from the director of security voicing his concerns with the event and how we would handle inappropriate material on the free speech wall.

After a discussion with the dean of the college and a meeting with me and the department head, the director of security knew he should go about his regular day during the event and would be notified immediately should his services be needed.

Less than two months after “Free Speech, Free Press, Free Cookies” I ran into another example of the need for free speech education. The editor-in-chief at the *Crimson* was working on a story about a conflict between a local business magazine and the university. The reporter from the magazine was named persona non grata on campus, and the university sent his magazine a cease-and-desist letter threatening a libel lawsuit. The magazine reporter copied me and the *Crimson* editor-in-chief on several emails complaining about the university’s actions.

My then co-adviser at the *Crimson* forwarded me an email from a high-ranking administrator that said: “We were told to not have any communications with [the news magazine]. Please let the *Crimson* staff know.”

I quickly pointed out to that high-ranking administrator that whoever decided to ban the *Crimson* staff from contacting a potential source is really violating the guarantee of free press rights so clearly stated in the Media Board Governing Document. He responded by telling me he disagrees, that I should use common sense, and that our job is to prevent students from getting caught in a possible legal matter.

These are two examples of well-meaning university administrators who in the course of their daily operations unintentionally undermined the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. My point is not that Florida Tech has a group of bad administrators who don’t respect students’ rights. I don’t think that’s the case. My point is that advocates of free speech rights—for students and all people—need to educate students, faculty, staff, and administrators about those rights and why they are so important.

Every chance we get, we should remind administrators and colleagues that respecting free speech rights is the most effective and only ethical way to teach journalism. If our universities or academic units have statements on free expression, we should make them as visible as possible (I put the statement from the governing document in the signature of every email I send). If not, we should work toward crafting and adopting those kinds of statements. We should organize free speech events or demonstrations. They can be as complicated as hosting a daylong festival or as simple as putting up a free-speech wall.

And whenever necessary, we should defend our students’ rights to free expression because if communication and journalism professors are not passionately advocating for free speech rights, no one else in our universities will.

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References

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