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Understanding the Necessity of Free Speech Events

Theodore Petersen, Florida Institute of Technology

In February 2012, the Florida Tech Crimson, the student newspaper I advise at the Florida Institute of Technology, hosted a free speech day on campus. I quickly learned how badly this campus needed the event.

The newspaper staff and I hoped the event would showcase the "free speech" status of the newspaper at this private science- and engineering-oriented university in Melbourne, FL. At a private university, the First Amendment doesn't apply to student media the way it would at a public university. Student media groups do not have guaranteed First Amendment rights.

which states: "Freedom of the press, as guaran- education. Photos by Christopher Penta. teed by the Constitution of the United States, is not blocked or interfered with by Florida Tech or any of its trustees, administrators, faculty or staff."

According to the governing document, the *Crim*son is as free a press as the Independent Florida Alligator at the University of Florida or the Minnesota Daily at the University of Minnesota. We wanted the rest of the campus to know that, so we decided to host a free speech event to celebrate the First Amendment, to educate students, faculty, and staff about the First Amendment, and to promote the Crimson as a free press.

The event—called Free Speech, Free Press, Free Cookies—included a panel discussion with a print journalist, a television journalist, and two local media lawyers. After the panel, students set up a "free speech" wall where students were handed a Sharpie marker and were told they could write whatever they





Students write on the free speech wall at the Florida Tech "Free speech, Free Press, Free Cookies" First Amendment celebration. But the Crimson operates under the Flor- By the end of the day, the wall had more than 150 comments and ida Tech Media Board Governing Document, turned into a robust location for free speech and First Amendment

wanted. If they did, they were rewarded with a cookie.

The event turned into a robust arena for free expression and conversation. The participation on the wall began slowly but gained momentum as students and faculty realized that the speech on that wall was indeed free. Topics included funny or motivational quotations, criticism of the university tuition policy, and complaints about teaching quality.

First-year college students leave high school, an environment where their free speech rights are legally reduced (LoMonte, 2008) and culturally discouraged (Amsden, 2011), and come to universities that typically cherish and celebrate freedom of expression. For these young people, a free speech zone might be a novel idea.

And even though members of the campus community say they appreciate and respect free speech, they don't always understand or mean what they say. 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.

Theodore Petersen is an assistant professor at Florida Institute of Technology.

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