

VIEWPOINTS

Editorials • Opinions • Letters to the Editor



The mission of the Southwestern College Sun is to serve its campuses and their communities by providing information, insights and stimulating discussions of news, activities and topics relevant to our readers. The staff strives to produce a newspaper that is timely, accurate, fair, interesting, visual and accessible to readers. Though The Sun is a student publication, staff members ascribe to the ethical and moral guidelines of professional journalists.

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CLAWING BACK HARD EARNED SPEECH RIGHTS

Students and staff at Southwestern College are buckling up for a bumpy four years. We expect the Trump cabal to come after our reproductive rights, our right to love whomever we wish and our right to a fair legal process.

We also expect the Project 2025 crew to go after college professors and journalists.

What we did not expect was for our own beloved college to go after our right to free speech and our right to petition our government. That came out of left field.

College leaders have not officially done anything yet, other than scare the hell out of us. The working draft of revisions to Policy 3900 and its corresponding procedures have not been passed, but they are hanging over us like the Sword of Damocles and the inauguration of Trump.

Make no mistake, the proposed changes are radical, even draconian. Policy 3900 is currently named “Freedom of Expression.” The looming rewrite is titled “Speech: Time, Place and Manner.” Its overly-lawyered prescriptions violate the spirit of the elegant and much-emulated 2011 policy drafted by former Academic Senate President Angelina Stuart and a team from English, reading, political science, journalism, law and counseling. Stuart – the 2024 Southwestern College Honorary Degree recipient – shepherded the document through the highly-collaborative Shared Consultation Council and to the governing board. The board passed it unanimously and with celebratory fanfare.

An era of darkness and abuse had ended. Stuart said it was a beautiful act of collaboration and thoughtful cooperation. Policy 3900 is balanced, nuanced, logical and is inhabited by the spirit of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. It is a national template for other colleges. Why anyone thinks it needs to be blown up and rewritten is perplexing.

To be fair, most of the new language is reasonable, if unnecessary and pompous. All of the new language is redundant. The 2011 version already contains guidelines to separate office personnel, classrooms and sensitive areas from protesters. It is idealistic, but also sensible and grounded in the law.

NO TO “FREE SPEECH ZONE”

There are some glaring problems, however, as the new proposed title suggests. Two are particularly egregious. One was an issue faculty, students and the community fought and bled for during the repressive regime of former president Raj Kumar Chopra and his henchman VP Nicholas Alioto. During Chopra-Alioto Southwestern College had a tiny “Free Speech Zone,” a speck of campus about the size of the 7/11 store across the street. It was the cafeteria’s outdoor dining area, a covered picnic patio.

In October 2009 about 100 students gathered there to protest Chopra’s spending and his plan to cut 429 classes – about 40 percent of the schedule. For 50 minutes the students spoke and shared their ideas – to nobody. Not a single administrator showed up to give the students the courtesy of listening to their concerns.

Eventually the students realized this. They strolled peacefully down Jaguar Walk toward Chopra’s office in the front of campus only to be met by the entire Southwestern College Campus Police Department, armed and led by a snarling chief ready for battle.

The students did not take the bait. They remained peaceful, if unhappy. Three professors were among them, urging calm. After 10-15 minutes of chanting and sign waving the students learned that Chopra was not in his office. (It was later discovered that he had intentionally left campus when he heard about the protest.)

Later, as Chopra was preparing to leave the country, Alioto sprang into action and ordered a human resources director and an armed campus police officer to visit the homes of the three professors and suspend them. A fourth – the faculty union president – was also suspended, even though she did not attend the rally or the walk.

Students recognized by the police and the student affairs dean were also punished. One was later stripped of a Student of Distinction Award for having the temerity to protest.

The pretext for the suspensions and backlash was that the students left the Free Speech Area and faculty failed to stop them. That is one reason the 2011 version of 3900 does not allow the designation of a “free speech area.” The second reason is that it violates the spirit of the First Amendment which declared the entire nation a free speech zone. So including language in the rewrite that empowers administrators to declare where free speech may and may not happen should send shutters down the spines of freedom-loving people in this community.

PROTESTS ONLY WHEN CONVENIENT

Our second beef with the proposed alterations of 3900 is the “time” component that limits free speech to 8 a.m. – 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

If only democracy was so tidy and convenient.

Nights and weekends would be off limits for free speech at Southwestern College (though high school football is okay).

This rule is laughable on the face and oozes with arrogance and administrative entitlement. To say that Americans may only engage in a sacred national right after breakfast and before cocktail hour is shameful.

Word is that the governing board and some key administrators are quietly pushing to keep all or most of the 2011 policy and procedures in place. Let’s hope so. That would be a wonderful Christmas present for the college and our community.

We are watching closely and so are local and national First Amendment organizations that have dealt with Southwestern College speech issues before. Southwestern’s history of squelching free speech is well known to the community and the San Diego County news media, but it seems current campus leaders do not know about it or pretend not to know. (Come visit our newsroom archives and grab a few back issues. It’s all there in print.)

America would not have witnessed the abolition of slavery, the right women to vote, the Civil Rights Act, reproductive rights and other social advancement without protest and the voices of citizens. Southwestern College students and employees have the same Constitutional Rights as the folks who live across the street.

We are using them in our campus newspaper today. We reserve the right to use them on campus tomorrow.

AWARDS/HONORS

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| National College Newspaper Hall of Fame
Inducted 2018 | California College Media Association Outstanding College/University Newspaper |
| ACP Pacemaker 100 An Outstanding Student Publication of the Century
2022 | San Diego County Multicultural Heritage Award |
| Student Press Law Center National College Press Freedom Award
2011, 2018 | California Newspaper Publishers Association California College Newspaper of the Year
2013, 2016, 2020, 2021, 2023 |
| National Newspaper Association National College Newspaper of the Year
2004-2024 | Student Newspaper General Excellence
2002-24 |
| Associated Collegiate Press Pacemaker Awards
2003-06, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012-2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 | Society of Professional Journalists National Mark of Excellence
2001-24 |
| General Excellence
2001-24 | First Amendment Award
2002, 2005 |
| Best of Show
2001-24 | San Diego Press Club Excellence in Journalism
1999-2024 |
| Columbia University Scholastic Press Association Gold Medal for Journalism Excellence
2001-23 | Directors Award for Defense of Free Speech
2012 |
| College Media Association National College Newspaper of the Year
2020, 22, 24 | Journalism Association of Community Colleges Pacesetter Award
2001-18, 2022-24 |
| | Newspaper General Excellence
2000-2024 |
| | American Scholastic Press Association Community College Newspaper of the Year |

