



# SPEECH FIRST

## ***Speech First Sues Virginia Tech, Challenging Four Policies That Enable Broad Censorship***

April 8, 2021

**Blacksburg, Va.** — Speech First, a nonprofit membership association working to combat restrictions on free speech and other civil rights at colleges and universities across the United States, filed a lawsuit today against Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University — ***Speech First v. Sands, et al.*** — in the Roanoke Division of the United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia as part of its efforts to help restore free speech and expression for American college students and fight against arbitrary censorship that violates the First Amendment.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (“Virginia Tech”) and its administrators have created a series of content-restricting policies and processes that allow the university to police and censor speech they deem “biased” or “unwanted.” Speech First has challenged four specific policies that have been designed to – and have the effect of – chilling student speech: the University’s discriminatory-harassment policy, its bias-related incidents, its computer policy, and its flyering policy, a restriction that requires students to obtain the school’s approval before distributing handouts on campus.

Under these policies, students can be disciplined for “unwelcome jokes” – or even being present when such jokes are made and failing to report when such comments are made by another person; sending “partisan, political” emails using the university’s internet; or failing to register to hand out flyers on campus. And through the school’s Bias Response program, students are encouraged to report each other while speculating on the “bias” that may have motivated their peers’ opinions, sowing mistrust and undermining community.

These policies – combined with the fact that the school has given itself jurisdiction over activities and speech both on and off campus, as well as on students’ social media and other digital platforms – means that students credibly fear disciplinary repercussions for anything they say or do anytime, anywhere. Accordingly, they self-censor themselves, losing out on a college experience where ideas are vigorously debated in the pursuit of truth.

Speech First president and founder Nicole Neily said: “Through this elaborate disciplinary apparatus, administrators at Virginia Tech have intimidated students into silence, refraining altogether from expressing comments or viewpoints that might be perceived as controversial or offensive. This effort to restrict (and even punish) speech based on content goes against the commitment to academic discourse that is supposed to be paramount in higher education.”

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