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Slug: Campus Story

Students' Rights to Free Speech, or Rather, Free Posts



Changes in policy between AU administrations have caused a stir within the AU community and in campus gathering spaces. (Photo: Sophia Carroll)

By Sophia Carroll

American University Students are adjusting to a summer of changes in administration policy about indoor protests that have affected and will continue to impact students' operations on campus.

Last spring semester at American University, former President Burwell enacted a ban on all indoor protests on campus. The ban was released to the AU community in an email on January 25, 2024 and took student leaders like President of AU Student Government, Arusa Islam, by surprise.

Islam recalls feeling extremely hurt over the ways in which the AU Administration went about writing and implementing Burwell's ban.

Islam said, "They were making decisions on the students without student input." She also noted that guidelines set forth by the ban were vague and could lead to trouble for students who may not be aware that they were violating the ban.

Islam explained that this sentiment was shared by AUSG members as a whole. “We came to a campus that thrives on its changemakers, but reacts badly when they do in fact want to create change.”

Organizations like AUSG have worked to have student voices heard by the AU administration regarding these types of policy changes.

Campus spaces affected by these changes, such as The Davenport Coffee Lounge, are also grappling with administrative policy decisions that alter the operations within campus community spaces like this one.

Prior to Burwell’s indoor protest ban, students were able to hang posters within The Dav promoting student organizations, campus events, theater department productions and more with little regulation.

The Davenport Coffee Lounge Manager, Julia Ford, explained that students would ask baristas and Dav employees to hang their organization’s posters and they would be posted to the espresso bar wall [pictured above] upon request.

In the email sent out to students Burwell said, “Posted material at university-sponsored events and within university-owned and managed spaces should be welcoming and build community.” The statement outlines the type of poster content deemed acceptable under the new indoor protest regulations.

However, Ford agrees with Islam’s sentiment that guidelines provided by the university were relatively vague. They also left a great deal of responsibility, regarding enforcement of the ban, to herself and her staff. Ford said, “In my eyes, I think it wasn’t really fair for me to have to choose what is and isn’t objective.” She added, “And also I don’t want my employees taking on that burden.”

This ban instituted by former President Burwell created a great deal of turmoil within various outlets of the AU community. However, with the change in administration

from Burwell to current AU President, Jonathan Alger, came policy changes.

In an email sent out on August 13, 2024 by President Alger, it was announced that new policy changes were being put in place that would effectively reverse a great deal of Burwell's indoor protest ban.

"Free expression and the creation of a safe and welcoming community for all are bedrock principles of American University." He said.

Islam explained how with a great deal of work from AUSG, student input is being seriously considered when these changes to university policy are being made.

[President Alger's policy changes specifically regarding posting materials](#) do not differ much from former President Burwells. However, the policy provides detailed guidelines as to what can and cannot be posted, as well as where materials are permitted and not permitted to be posted on campus.

This specific policy, along with others initiated by President Alger, regarding indoor protests on campus, were created as a result of President Alger and AUSG's joint efforts.

Islam and Ford both said that they believe that campus spaces like The Dav are places for students to gather with friends and classmates, share ideas and create community.

As of now, no posters are being displayed in The Davenport Coffee Lounge. However Ford said that the issue of reopening that space to students may be raised at an all-staff meeting sometime in October.

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