

University of Utah won't keep applicants out if they are disciplined for marching against school shootings

Utah's flagship university joins Westminster College and 200 other schools in supporting students' free-speech rights.

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High-school students who are disciplined for leaving school to protest peacefully won't have to worry about how it affects their application to attend the University of Utah.

The state's flagship university announced Tuesday that "an applicant's participation or lack of participation in peaceful protests is not a reason for the University of Utah to deny or rescind an offer of admission."

The policy was posted Tuesday on the Facebook page of the U.'s Admissions office, with a note that the U. "values and respects the rights of students to participate in active and responsible civil engagement."

The issue of whether students would face retribution for taking part in protests — particularly marches against gun violence, scheduled in the wake of the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., that killed 17 people — has been debated nationwide.

In one case, a school superintendent near Houston warned that students would face an automatic three-day suspension if they walked out to protest. Critics have called that threat a violation of students' free-speech rights, if the punishment is harsher than what would be doled out for a typical unexcused absence.

Since then, more than 200 universities nationwide have issued statements similar to the U.'s, vowing that their applicants would not be punished for taking part in peaceful protests.

At LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University, "our admissions application process does not inquire into high-school suspensions," spokesman Todd Hollingshead said in an email.

Salt Lake City's Westminster College posted its new policy on Facebook a day before the U. did. The private school's post Monday stated Westminster "believes that an important part of an education is being able to critically evaluate facts, draw conclusions, and advocate for and lead necessary change. As such, we are proud to join colleges and universities who have pledged not to penalize applicants nor admitted students who are disciplined by their schools when they engage in peaceful protest while standing up for their beliefs."

Utah Valley University in Orem has no such policy and doesn't need one, said spokesman Scott Trotter. "We have open enrollment. If you apply, you get in," Trotter said.

Weber State University in Ogden is also an open-enrollment school, said spokeswoman Allison Barlow Hess. "We obviously welcome anyone with the dream of seeking higher education," she said.

A representative for Utah State University in Logan did not return messages left by The Salt Lake Tribune.

On other days, though, students who are absent could face discipline, he said.

At Granite School District, an absence for protesting will be treated no differently than any other unexcused absence, "unless your parent approves it," said spokesman Ben Horsley.

"We'll just take attendance like we usually do."

Officials for the Jordan School District are still discussing the policy, a spokeswoman said Tuesday.

A spokesperson for the Alpine School District did not return calls requesting comment. A representative for the Salt Lake City School District did not return messages left by the Tribune. The law is on the students' side when it comes to protests, said Leah Farrell, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union's Utah chapter.

"The school can't take any action against students that is more harsh or more punitive because it's political speech," Farrell said.

Nationally, the ACLU is offering a free online training session on Thursday for students who want to know their constitutional rights to protest.

One of the nationwide protests, the March For Our Lives in Washington and other cities, is set for Saturday, March 24 — and thus, fears of school suspensions would be moot. (A crowd-funding campaign on GoFundMe.com for the Salt Lake City companion march is seeking to raise \$3,000 for expenses, and after six days has raised \$2,500 of that goal.)

Other protests, however, are set for school days.

One event, #Enough National School Walkout, has been called for Wednesday, March 14, one month after the shooting in Florida. The Women's March Youth Empower group is urging people to walk out of schools for 17 minutes — one for every person killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School — at 10 a.m. local time.

Another event, the National High School Walkout, has been called for Friday, April 20, the 19th anniversary of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School near Denver.