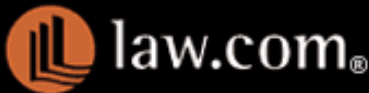




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news

Washington University Law School Club Feud Is Resolved

Law students first refuse to sanction a 'pro-life' group, then back down

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[The National Law Journal](#)
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The Washington University School of Law in St. Louis has sanctioned, among other groups, a Jewish Law Society and a club for students enthused about golf.

But a group of law students with anti-abortion sentiments was twice denied official recognition.

The Student Bar Association (SBA) -- which acts as the student government of the law school -- relented last week and granted recognition to Law Students Pro-Life after the group's plight became a cause célèbre for civil rights advocates.

"We thought this would be easily resolved," said Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) in Philadelphia, which became involved in the dispute. "It didn't seem possible the Student Bar Association would stand by its decision, as absurd and unprincipled as it was," said Lukianoff, a self-described "pro-choice liberal."

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Law Students Pro-Life seeks to promote discussion of abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide from an anti-abortion rights perspective, said David Hacker, a second-year law student and club member.

The club appeared on Sept. 10 before the SBA, anticipating no problem gaining the official standing that entitles student clubs to funding and use of campus facilities. It was instead rejected by a margin of 27-10. "We were the first group to ever be denied recognition," Hacker said.

A SINGLE MAILING

Tim Yeaglin, SBA vice president, said Law Students Pro-Life had circulated a single e-mail at the beginning of the school year inviting students to join. It had 11 members, all male, when it asked for official recognition at the Sept. 10 meeting. He compared that to another club granted SBA recognition that night that had at least 30 members.

"I'm pro-life myself, but the point is, they had just one more than the minimum requirement of 10 members," Yeaglin said. "We felt they hadn't done much to invite membership from the general student body."

Elliot Friedman, president of the SBA, in a letter to Law Students Pro-Life after the Sept. 10 vote, wrote that because the organization refused to include the death penalty along with abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide it "was not touching on all possible Pro Life issues." He also insisted the group explicitly open its membership to students who disagree with its political viewpoint.

The anti-abortion rights students rewrote the club constitution to clarify that membership is open to any student, regardless of his or her opinion on abortion, but declined to include capital punishment in its topics of interest. "They thought we should discuss the death penalty from a pro-life perspective and we saw that as tyrannical," Hacker said.

The SBA reconsidered the club's application for recognition and rejected it without comment. Yeaglin said that by the time of the second meeting, Law Students Pro-Life had 15 members. "In two weeks they added four people. They weren't really trying," he charged.

After the second rejection, FIRE got involved and circulated an open letter accusing the university of condoning "intolerable restrictions on freedom of conscience, freedom of association and freedom of speech." The dean of the law school, Joe Seligman, accused FIRE of "wild posturing" after the controversy drew press attention.

While Seligman had no wish to override a student organization, he said he did "communicate to the Student Bar Association my personal view that this school should be based on mutual respect and pluralist principles."

Last week, following meetings Seligman had with both the SBA and Law Students Pro-Life, the SBA approved official standing for the club.

"I don't want to say we bowed to pressure, but we were concerned the controversy was hurting the school," Yeaglin said.

