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Gonzaga University Denies Pro-Life Student Group Official Status

by **Payul Nowak**
LifeNews.com Staff Writer
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Spokane, WA (LifeNews.com) -- Gonzaga University, a leading Catholic college, has denied a pro-life student group official status, stating that a policy allowing only Christians to hold leadership positions was discriminatory.

The Pro-Life Law Caucus was formed this past fall to promote the pro-life movement and to assist a crisis pregnancy center in Spokane. The 20 member club sought affiliation with the school, which would entitle them to money from student fees and mention on the University's website and student handbook, as well as allow them to use "Gonzaga" in the club's name.

The Student Bar Association's President Albert Guadagno affirmed that the groups pro-life stance is not the issue. The problem is that the club excludes non-Christians from leadership positions.

Campus spokesman Peter Tormey said school administrators support the SBA's ruling.

"Any club seeking funds must not discriminate. This club has that discriminatory clause," Tormey said.

"Why not allow a Jewish, Muslim or nonreligious student to be head of the caucus, when they could be equally concerned about pro-life issues as a Christian student?" said Gonzaga spokesman Dale Goodwin.

Ashley Horne, the group's co-founder, said she consulted Gonzaga Law Professor David DeWolf prior to seeking official status. DeWolf consulted Gonzaga Law School Dean Daniel Morrissey, who in turn discussed it with the university's counsel, Mike Casey.

According to DeWolf, both Morrissey and Casey seemed to be "of the opinion that university policy permits restricting a group's leadership [or even membership] to those committed to the group's religious purpose."

"It is not surprising that a university operated by a religious order that restricts its own membership would be tolerant of

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student groups that do the same," DeWolf told the SBA president.

The decision is upsetting to one organization that monitors students' rights.

"We live in a strange age, indeed, when a Catholic, Jesuit university would deny a Christian pro-life group recognition because its religious nature is considered discriminatory," said Greg Lukianoff, spokesman for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education in Philadelphia, a conservative watchdog group for student rights.

Lukianoff points out that Gonzaga's nondiscrimination policy enables the school "to take religious faith into consideration where it is deemed appropriate." He hopes the school administrators will intervene in the case of the Pro-Life Law Caucus.

It is surprising that such a case came up at a private, Catholic university. Similar cases have occurred elsewhere in the U.S., although primarily at public institutions.

Rutgers University in New Jersey recently settled a case, allowing a Christian student organization to continue to choose officers based on religious beliefs.

"It is sad enough when secular institutions do not recognize the value of religious freedom. Gonzaga University, as a Catholic institution, owes its very existence to America's commitments to religious liberty and voluntary association," said Lukianoff.

Ashley Horne, the Pro Life Law Caucus co-founder, said the club will continue to operate, and recently held a baby-supply drive for the crisis-pregnancy center the club supports.

At another Jesuit Catholic University, St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, approximately one third of the graduates and faculty walked out of the commencement ceremony in June when the University honored pro-life Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) with an honorary degree.

Protesters said Santorum's views did not represent the university's vision of social justice and service to the community, including Santorum's views as a Catholic on homosexuality and the death penalty, among other social issues.

Gonzaga University was founded in 1887, two years before Washington became a U.S. state. It bears the name of Aloysius Gonzaga, whom Catholics revere as the patron saint of youth. The young Jesuit died in 1591, at age 23, from complications related to his service to those suffering from the plague.

Approximately 45 percent of Gonzaga's 5,800 students are not Catholic.



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