

Culture

Pro-Life Group Likely to Win Law School Clash

By Robert B. Bluey
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(CNSNews.com) - After mounting public pressure, the student government at Washington University law school in St. Louis will likely recognize a pro-life student group by the end of the week.

The Student Bar Association (SBA), a group that oversees student organizations, twice rejected the application of Law Students Pro-Life to become an active campus club. Official recognition is required for clubs to receive funding, campus office space and tax-exempt status from the private university.

At the center of the month-long debate was whether the pro-life group should modify its constitution, which currently condemns abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide. After appearing before the SBA on Sept. 9, the pro-life club was told that in order to be recognized, it would have to "broaden its scope" to include a denunciation of the death penalty.

"To be honest, I truly believe that the catching issue was the narrowness of your group's interests and goals. SBA members felt, after a lengthy discussion, that your organization was very one-sided and did not address all issues involving pro-life," SBA president Elliott Friedman wrote in a Sept. 10 e-mail announcing that the club had been rejected.

Infuriated that the SBA would impose such a requirement, members of Law Students Pro-Life contacted Freedom for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a watchdog group that pressured the SBA and university administrators to reverse the decision.

A day after news outlets began calling law school Dean Joel Seligman and Chancellor Mark Stephen Wrighton about the dispute, the SBA scheduled an emergency meeting for Thursday evening. Seligman predicted the SBA would approve the club.

"I will go to the SBA meeting and tell them that this appears to be inconsistent with the general pluralism we practice around here," he said. "I hope they reconsider it."

At the Sept. 9 meeting, the SBA voted 27-10-1 against the pro-life group. Friedman, who did not return phone calls, wrote in the e-mail that if the club were more inclusive to other viewpoints, the SBA might be inclined to reconsider its application.

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"The vote does not reflect the 'ideological' viewpoints of members of SBA in any way," Friedman wrote. "However, in order to be approved as a student organization which can receive funding, I think the best bet is to broaden your scope of your issue, and allow students with diverse viewpoints to become members of your group."

FIRE partly blames Seligman for the dispute, but he maintained it was not his position to intervene in such matters. Only after the SBA rejected the pro-life club at a second meeting in late September, did Seligman become involved. At that point, he met with members of both organizations and concluded that the sticking point was a technical matter about inviting all law students to join the club.

Jordan Siverd, chairman of the pro-life group, said the SBA's vote was a reflection of the group's stance on pro-life issues.

"Even though they denied that from the beginning, it obviously had crossed their minds," he said.

The club has about 20 members, Siverd said, including a few students who do not agree with the issues it advocates but want to see the campus more inclusive of those ideas.

"We are here not just to serve pro-life students," he said. "We are here to serve the entire law school community to foster a more rounded-out discussion of this issue."

Even if the SBA approves the pro-life group at its meeting tonight, Siverd said the incident has left an unfortunate impression about the university's supposed acceptance of a plurality of ideas.

"We thought when we came here that freedom of speech and the free exchange of ideas was going to be welcome," he said. "It turned out that wasn't the case."

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