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Good afternoon, St. Louis. Today is Monday, October 14, 2002.

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This story was published in Editorial on Sunday, October 13, 2002.

Exclusion on campus

FREE SPEECH

GREAT universities pursue knowledge by fostering debate and free thinking. Great law schools teach their students to see all sides of an argument and remind them that the orthodoxies of today may turn up tomorrow in history's dustbin.

But Washington University and its Law School students seem not to have learned the lesson. The Student Bar Association (SBA) is refusing to recognize the Law Students Pro-Life group, despite the urgings of Dean Joel Seligman that the school should be an inclusive place.

Last month the representatives of the student bar voted 27-10, with one abstention, not to recognize the anti-abortion student group. The letter of explanation by SBA president Elliott Friedman explains that "the catching issue was the narrowness of your group's interests and goals." Mr. Friedman suggests that the group might have better luck if it also opposed the death penalty or if it included the pro-choice side in its discussions.

It's the narrow-mindedness of the SBA's thinking -- not the narrowness of the anti-abortion group -- that's the problem. The SBA already recognizes student groups for African-American and Asian students as well as Christians, Jews and proponents of gender and sexual equality -- to say nothing of golfers.

When the SBA took up the issue again last week, Mr. Seligman urged the students to approve the group and reject political correctness. "We appear to have stomped our foot down and said there's only one ideologically and politically appropriate way to behave," he said.

Exactly right. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education -- a national group that supports free speech and religious freedom in education -- wants Mr. Seligman to force the SBA to recognize the anti-abortion group. Mr. Seligman has been hesitant to take that step, not wanting to override the democratic decision-making process of the

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SBA. That caution is sensible, but he can't let the intolerance of the SBA stand. He should act on his own to recognize the group and make sure it can get student activity fees on the same basis as other groups.

Dean Seligman might do one other thing -- teach a seminar on tolerance and the enduring values of a great university. It would make his students better lawyers.

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