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College says it acted properly with student gun advocate

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Bill Schackner, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Community College of Allegheny County today said its review finds CCAC did not try to thwart a student's bid to create a group advocating the right to carry licensed, concealed firearms on campus.

Responding to a national advocacy group that has taken up Christine Brashier's cause, the college said its administrators did not take issue with her right to establish a chapter of a student organization, Students for Concealed Carry on Campus.

Rather, the college said, administrators objected to her use of CCAC's name in pamphlets in a way the school contends suggested a link between the college and her as-yet unrecognized group.

In posting material that implied the group was already recognized, the college said, the student violated college policy. "With references to the student as 'campus leader' and to the group as 'Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, Community College of Allegheny County' the proposed (concealed carry) group was improperly presented as an existing, recognized student organization," according to a statement released this afternoon.

Ms. Brashier, 24, of Squirrel Hill, has said she was called to an April 24 meeting with student development staff and told to abandon her organizing campaign. She said she was told her efforts amounted to "soliciting," was ordered to destroy fliers she had created and warned she risked sanctions if she pursued the matter further on campus without the administration's OK.

"I think I'm being deprived of a great many things," Ms. Brashier told the Post-Gazette in a phone interview last week. "Clearly my right to free speech is being infringed upon."

Ms. Brashier said she owns a gun but has never taken it to campus. That's because most colleges in the nation, CCAC among them, bar weapons on school property.

College spokesman David Hoovler said today the college was not trying to thwart her rights. While he acknowledged that representations of the meeting differ, he said the college concluded that student development staff including Dean Yvonne Burns followed proper procedures. He said no changes in policies are planned.

In a letter sent to The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based advocacy group that took up Ms. Brashier's cause, college solicitor Mike Adams disputed the group's contention that the college violated her constitutional rights of free speech and free association. He said the school, which found the pamphlets on tables throughout the campus cafeteria and student service center, has the legal right to oppose literature that might have implied non-neutrality.

When read the college's statement, Ms. Brashier told the Post-Gazette today she handed the pamphlets out, never posted them, and violated no rules. She disputed the college's version of events but said she's glad the school is publicly saying she can form a group.

"I can't imagine the college could make a public statement that was along the lines of 'Oh, yes, we violated the student's rights, and we'll fix it now,'" she said. "I guess that's how they have to respond so they don't publicly shame themselves any more."

Robert Shibley, a vice president with the foundation, said no college has the right to require pre-approval of non-commercial handbills. He said it's "absurd" to suggest that using the college's name on a pamphlet implies endorsement.

"CCAC has officially recognized chapters of the College Democrats and the Newman Club. Does that mean CCAC officially endorses Democratic politics and Catholicism?" he asked.

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