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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Good morning, St. Louis. Today is Friday, October 11, 2002.

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This story was published in Metro on Friday, October 11, 2002.

WU law students maintain rejection of anti-abortion group

By Susan C. Thomson
Of The Post-Dispatch

Unmoved by criticism from a Philadelphia group and the urgings of its own dean, the student government at Washington University's law school is standing by two previous votes to deny recognition to an anti-abortion student group.

At a hastily organized meeting at the law school Thursday, the Student Bar Association, as the governing body is called, aired once again the pros and cons of approving the Law Students Pro-Life group.

No votes were taken, and SBA President Elliott Friedman adjourned the meeting after an hour and scheduled a follow-up for Monday.

The meeting came a day after the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based advocacy group, publicized the issue along with critical comments on its Web site and in a nationally distributed news release.

Joel Seligman, dean of the law school, was first to speak at Thursday's meeting. He said the SBA's decision to deny Law Students Pro-Life had done "some real damage to the reputation of this school," especially among prospective students.

"We appear to have stomped our foot down and said

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there's only one ideologically and politically appropriate way to behave," he said. He said he wanted the school to be inclusive and a place of mutual respect and pluralism.

Seligman left after making his remarks. Then, one by one, 13 students addressed the audience of about 60, among them about 30 SBA members and several members of Law Students Pro-Life.

Three of the 13 student speakers advocated recognition for the anti-abortion group. The rest, several of whom identified themselves as SBA members, voiced objections. A recurrent theme was that Law Students Pro-Life was a single-issue group and that recognizing it would obligate the SBA to recognize other groups with narrow political agendas.

Speakers also said that reversing the previous votes or even putting the issue to a new vote would compromise the SBA's integrity and amount to caving in to pressure from the media and the university's administration.

The SBA recognizes 29 law school student groups. Many, like the Criminal Law Society, have to do with particular fields of legal interest. Among the rest are groups for black and Asian students, Christians, Jews and proponents of gender and sexual equality. Also recognized are a humor publication and golf and softball clubs.

Recognition gives groups access to law school facilities for their events and to funding for their activities from the student activity fee money that the law school collects and SBA distributes.

Members of Law Students Pro-Life say that at this point they aren't petitioning for money -- just recognition. Twice this semester the group applied to the SBA for recognition, and twice the SBA said no. After the first refusal -- on a vote of 27-10 plus one abstention -- the group appealed to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, an organization that backs college students and faculty members when it believes they have been denied free speech or due process or that they have been discriminated against for their political views. The group has taken up issues at universities from Alaska to Florida.

The group takes an especially dim view of what it describes on its Web site as "new-age radical political orthodoxies," which it sees as prevailing on college campuses.

But the group's president, Alan Charles Kors, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, says the group is politically neutral.

Kors said the group advised Law Students Pro-Life to first try "to work within this system" to resolve its issue.

After SBA turned the group down a second time, he said, the foundation wrote to Washington University Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton. In its letter, the group said the university had "directly, inappropriately, and unlawfully interfered with the freedom of conscience, freedom of

association, and freedom of speech rights" of Law Students Pro-Life. The letter, dated Sept. 30, threatened to "take this matter public" if Wrighton didn't reply quickly. When he didn't, the foundation went public.

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