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Campus lifts limits on conservative clubs

By Joyce Howard Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The University of Miami has repeatedly blocked recognition of a conservative student organization on campus, saying one conservative group — the College Republicans — was enough.

But Donna E. Shalala, the university's president, said yesterday that the policy was not acceptable and is no longer in effect.

Miss Shalala, former secretary of Health and Human Services during the Clinton administration, said she had directed the Committee on Student Organizations (COSO), the student panel authorized to approve or reject student groups at the University of Miami, to conduct an "immediate" review of the application of the Advocates for Conservative Thought (ACT), which it has denied four times in the past six months.

"They were using a rule that said you couldn't start a new organization that's like an existing organization," Miss Shalala said.

"But the subject matter [of an organization] should not be subject to review. ... You cannot make a judgment on substance," she said.

Miss Shalala said in an official statement yesterday that the refusal to recognize more than one conservative student organization on campus violated academic freedom.

"I have asked Committee on Student Organizations to implement a new policy that is consistent with the principles of free speech, academic freedom and competition," the statement said.

Officials of ACT said they were repeatedly told by COSO that there was already a conservative voice on campus, the College Republicans. COSO leaders further held that another group, the Council for Democracy, already provided a political forum, so ACT would merely be "replicating" the work of those groups.

Thor Halvorssen, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a civil liberties group,

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disagreed with the reasons given by COSO. He cited at least a half-dozen liberal groups that were officially recognized on the Miami campus.

He also pointed out that the university recognized "multiple black student groups, multiple Caribbean student groups, multiple Latin American and Hispanic student groups, and multiple Asian student groups." He said it didn't make sense that there could be only one conservative student group.

In a four-page April 7 fax to Miss Shalala, Mr. Halvorssen argued that the College Republicans and ACT were not one and the same.

He said the College Republicans "promote candidates and policies of the Republican Party." ACT, he said, is dedicated to the promotion of conservative principles and ideas in society. Some members of the group, he said, are "registered Democrats who consider themselves conservatives."

As for the Council for Democracy, it "provides an explicitly neutral forum for debate," Mr. Halvorssen wrote.

Mr. Halvorssen said FIRE, based in Philadelphia, finds it "appalling" that university administrators failed to address ACT's problems until they were the subject of national publicity.

Miss Shalala said in an interview that she "did not know" about the issue.

"That's manifestly untrue," countered Mr. Halvorssen, citing his April 7 fax to her.

He said Miss Shalala's office acknowledged receiving his fax. Nevertheless, as recently as last week, COSO once again denied official recognition of ACT, Mr. Halvorssen said.

In her statement yesterday, Miss Shalala acknowledged that official recognition of a student club is important because it allows such organizations "access to funding, space, and other benefits through student activity fees."

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