

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Advertisement



News

Holding Fire

May 29, 2009

Was it her message or the rules that got Christine Brashier summoned to the dean's office? Brashier says she's being blocked from organizing a student group that favors "gun rights" while the college says she just isn't following the rules.

Late last month, Brashier, a student at the Community College of Allegheny County, in Pennsylvania, created a [three-page flier](#) highlighting information about Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, a national gun-rights group with more than 38,000 members in chapters at college campuses across the country. The literature indicated that Brashier intended to form a chapter of the organization at Allegheny, and it included space for interested students to provide their contact information.

According to Brashier, she was called into the dean's office on April 24 to discuss the brochures. Brashier said she was told that pamphlet distribution constituted solicitation, which is prohibited on the Allegheny campus.

"I retorted that it was not solicitation due to the fact that I am not attempting to 'sell' anything, and you answered that it was solicitation because I was trying to sell people on the idea of this organization," Brashier wrote in her letter to the two deans of student development. "I answered that getting people to register to vote, or sign a petition would not be solicitation and you told me that this would also not be allowed on campus but only out on the street in front of the campus."

Brashier said the deans also asked whether she owned a gun – to which Brashier replied that she does, but would not bring it on campus until the law barring weapons on campus is changed, as she believes it should be. The deans, Brashier said, stressed how it could be a "disaster" for the college to allow students to have guns on campus, and asked if she had considered alternative means of self defense. Brashier also reported that Dean Yvonne Burns told her the issue of guns on campus might be something Brashier wants to discuss, but it is not something the college wants to discuss. Finally, Brashier reported that Burns instructed her to cease all activities related to bringing Students for Concealed Carry on Campus to Allegheny.

Brashier contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and officials there, in turn, wrote a [letter](#) to Alex Johnson, president of the Community College of Allegheny County. FIRE's letter expressed concern with the First Amendment implications of the college's solicitation policy and suggested Brashier was singled out for holding a viewpoint that was unpopular with campus officials.

FIRE's letter advised that the college cannot legally condition approval of student publications on the content or viewpoint of the materials being distributed – something both FIRE and Brashier believe college officials did.

College officials all directed calls to David Hoover, director of public relations, who said the college would not at this point discuss the legal issues at stake in the case, as the college is awaiting review of the case by their legal counsel. Hoover did say, however, that the college's concerns over Brashier's pamphlets stemmed not from the gun-rights message but from the improper use of the college's name. The publication was "misleading," Hoover said, in the way it presented a connection between Students for Concealed Carry on Campus and the college.

The front page of the pamphlet included the name of the group, Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, and also listed the college's name directly below it. FIRE was quick to point out, though, that the brochure also included the caveat that the group was "not affiliated with the NRA, a political party, or any other organization."

Hoover also referred to a statement released by the college in response to FIRE's letter, which states that Brashier "is welcome to

follow the appropriate CCAC procedures to seek recognition of the proposed group as a student organization. CCAC does not have any intention to limit the student's involvement in the group or her ability to discuss her own political viewpoint."

Again, Hoover declined to comment on the conversation that Brashier reported took place in Dean Burns' office, when, Brashier claims, the dean discouraged her pro-guns on campus stance.

According to Fran Cairns in the student life office at Allegheny, students seeking to form a group on campus must complete an application, show interest from at least 10 students and secure a faculty advisor. The application then goes on to the student government for approval, which Cairns said is rarely denied.

Asked how students generally go about recruiting potential group members, Cairns said they usually employ word-of-mouth advertising, or submit a flier for the college to approve and display. Students "may have tried" to hand out their own fliers on campus, she said, but that is not standard practice.

Robert Shibley, vice president of FIRE, said he is still awaiting reply from Johnson regarding his organization's letter, but said the statement released by the college – which states that Brashier has not been punished – "misses the point." For Shibley, the crux of the problem is with the college's solicitation policy and Burns' viewpoint-biased enforcement of it. The text of the college's policy is as follows: "Solicitation: The distribution or display of, and the personal contact with individuals or groups related to non-sponsored college material or events, without prior written approval of the college are prohibited."

"It's really vague, and I have a hard time believing that they actually even mean that," Shibley said. "Whether or not [Brashier's] actions violate that, well maybe they do because it's so broad, but it's certainly unconstitutional to tell her she can't share her viewpoint. That's an ancient right of a free society. You're making Thomas Paine illegal at that point."

— **Kate Maternowski**

© Copyright 2009 Inside Higher Ed