

Oklahoma State University Ends Free-Speech Showdown With 'Cowboys for Life'

A new legal settlement means pro-life student groups will no longer face disruption of their pro-life events and displays at Oklahoma State University (OSU). Cowboys for Life, a student organization represented by Alliance Defending Freedom attorneys, filed a federal lawsuit against the university last year after officials there took numerous actions to impede and disrupt the group's pro-life displays on campus.

"Universities should promote the free exchange of ideas, not exile views they don't like to isolated places on campus," says Alliance Defending Freedom litigation staff counsel Travis Barham. "This settlement ensures that Oklahoma State officials will not have free reign to censor students. We commend OSU for changing its policies to ensure that student groups like Cowboys for Life who hold displays and distribute literature on campus will not be restricted simply because they present a point of view that some people might not like."

As part of the settlement, OSU agreed to update its policies and practices to respect students' constitutionally protected freedom of expression and will treat Cowboys for Life the same as all other recognized student organizations.

OSU also officially rescinded any verbal warnings against the group, made clear that the group no longer faces any investigations for supposedly violating the Student Code of Conduct, and paid for the group's attorneys' fees.

Beginning in July 2012, members of Cowboys for Life sought to reserve space for some pro-life displays in October 2012 near the Student Union, a highly traveled area of campus that student groups regularly use for such events. Using materials

from the pro-life group Justice for All, they sought to highlight numerous facets of the pro-life perspective and to converse with passing students about abortion.

OSU officials denied the club's requests to reserve areas near the Student Union because, the officials claimed, the displays might offend some people. Instead, the university relegated the displays to a less-traveled area of campus and then required Cowboys for Life to place warning signs around the displays, further discouraging students from approaching them.

When members of the group tried to distribute literature near the Student Union, OSU officials disrupted their efforts, demanding that the students leave the area or post additional warning signs. After the event, officials coordinated and launched an investigation that claimed the students had violated the Student Code of Conduct as they expressed their pro-life beliefs.

Alliance Defending Freedom attorneys have successfully defended pro-life student groups seeking to use Justice for All materials at other university campuses, including the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Houston and Arizona State University.