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University of Oregon: On-campus poker tournament with handguns for prizes raises a flap

Diane Dietz

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A libertarian group's plan to offer handguns as prizes for an on-campus poker tournament is causing a flap at the University of Oregon.

The Young Americans for Liberty asked the UO student government for money to stage the event and asked University Housing officials to put up event fliers in dorms — and they were shut down in both places.

Now, the national Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, or FIRE, is asking UO President Michael Schill to reverse both those decisions, based on the Young Americans for Liberty's constitutional right to a "content--neutral decision" from student government and on its First Amendment right to communicate with students about the provocative event.

A UO spokesman countered that the denial of funds does appear to be "content neutral," and said the refusal to hang posters is consistent with UO policies.

Despite the kerfuffle, no one is expecting the Liberty Poker Night Texas Hold 'Em tournament, slated to begin at 5 p.m. Friday in the Erb Memorial Union Ballroom, to be canceled.

Thomas Tullis, president of the Young Americans for Liberty's UO chapter, previously told student government officials that his group organized the event to promote discussion and to challenge people's ways of thinking.

At a student senate meeting last week, according to meeting minutes, student Keegan Williams-Thomas asked Tullis how a poker tournament fosters conversation.

You feel the attractiveness of this event is that it's polarizing? the senator asked.

Yes, Tullis replied.

Young Americans for Liberty is a spinoff of Ron Paul's 2008 presidential campaign. The nonprofit political organization claims chapters at more than 600 campuses nationally.

The UO branch formed 1½ years ago; a second Eugene chapter is forming at Lane Community College. Tullis is a former campus coordinator for Students For Liberty and a former intern at Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland-based free market think tank.

The UO Young Americans for Liberty chapter has five officers, and as many as a dozen students turn out for weekly meetings or documentary screenings, Tullis said.

The organization's mission is to "identify, educate, train and mobilize youth activists" in support of libertarian principles.

The youth organization partners with the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity and the Campaign for Liberty, which this month is raffling off a Colt AR-15 rifle engraved with Ron Paul's signature.

Early this month, the UO chapter began planning for its second annual poker night, complete with pizzas and prizes.

Last year, the prizes included a 9 mm handgun and .22 rifle, Tullis said. The Associated Students of the UO voted to fund that event with minimal opposition.

"We were kind of surprised last year how supportive the campus community was," Tullis said.

But this year's event landed a little more than 1½ months after a student at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg killed nine people and wounded nine others in a shocking bloodbath.

Campus critics have told Tullis that staging a poker event with firearm prizes is insensitive, given the proximity to UCC, he said.

But Tullis said his goal is to reverse the UO's policies that forbid firearms on campus — either openly carried or concealed — because, he said, the policy makes the campus a dangerous place.

"Clearly, campuses are being targeted by mass shooters," he said.

For prizes this year, the Oak Grove Gun Shop in Eugene donated a .40S&W Sig Sauer handgun. Mazama Gun Shop donated a Weatherby Vanguard 243 rifle with a Simmons scope 3.5-10/40. The Oregon Firearms Federation chipped in a Bersa Thunder handgun.

Prize winners will claim their firearms later at the gun shops, so the weapons won't necessarily be brought to campus, Tullis said.

On Nov. 11, the Young Americans for Liberty sought support from the student government's senate, asking for \$600 for refreshments and \$350 for room and equipment rental.

The senate rejected the request by a vote of 11-5 with two abstentions. The group on Wednesday asked the senate to reconsider its decision, but the vote this time was even more lopsided against

the request — with some senators saying they voted no because Young Americans for Liberty obtained outside funding and the event is going forward.

“If you were really serious about this, you would hold a panel, not a poker night that gives out weapons,” said Zach Lusby, a student senator, in an earlier debate.

The international Students For Liberty, meanwhile, stepped in and paid for the event, Tullis said.

UO spokesman Tobin Klinger said the Associated Students’ second vote on Wednesday was based on knowledge that the event had been funded by other sources. “Such grounds would appear to be content neutral and consistent with UO policies,” he said in an email.

The Young Americans for Liberty also sought permission from University Housing to put up a poster about the event in campus residence halls. The poster features small images of a gun and a rifle and a large photo of a hand of cards — with three blackened bullet holes shot through the aces of hearts, diamonds and spades.

Housing officials denied the group’s request to display the posters, saying the university doesn’t allow advertising in residence halls that encourages anything that’s prohibited in the code of conduct. Possession of guns is not allowed, officials said in an email.

Tobin said it was made clear to organizers “that if their poster promoted an outcome where a student could have a gun on campus, it would not be possible to post the posters in the residence halls because it is in direct conflict with university policy.”

The status of guns on campus is complicated. University policy bans firearms, whether concealed or carried in the open. In 2011, however, an Oregon appeals court ruled that universities could not prevent gun owners with concealed weapons permits from bringing their firearms to campus.

The UO Student Conduct Code prohibits the possession, use or threatened use of any weapon or ammunition, unless expressly authorized by law or university policy.

“A concealed weapons permit does not constitute authorization,” the code says.

On Wednesday, FIRE wrote to Schill saying it would “use all the resources at our disposal” to reverse the student government and University Housing decisions.

The organization said that because the money distributed by student government comes from mandatory fees assessed by the university, the distribution must be neutral in terms of views and ideas.

“Put simply, popular support (or lack thereof) for a student organization’s event is an impermissible basis for funding allocation decisions,” FIRE wrote in its letter to Schill.

Students may feel unsafe or uncomfortable about the prizes, FIRE noted, but the guns to be given away were never going to be at the event.

Underlying the objections to the prizes, the organization wrote, “appears to be the pernicious idea that students have a right to be protected from encountering ideas with which they disagree — an argument that our national commitment to freedom of expression utterly rejects.”

UO students, meanwhile, are engaging in a lively debate on Facebook about the poker tournament and about gun control.

Student Kelly Kenoyer posted a note with statistics suggesting that guns increase an owner’s risk of dying in a suicide or homicide.

“Are you OK,” she asked the group, “with generating fear in a student body that just saw a violent shooting on a campus in our state?”