

University Accused of Discriminating Against Muslims



Amanda Pellegrino, Tower Staff
October 20, 2011
Filed under [News](#)

New charges have recently been filed against the University on counts of illegal discrimination against its Muslim and female students. The allegations are being reviewed by the District of Columbia Office of Human Rights (OHR), which has the strictest discrimination laws in the country. President John H. Garvey and the University is being urged to respond to the charges.

John F. Banzhaf III, the George Washington University Professor of Public Interest Law who initiated the legal controversy surrounding same-sex residence halls, is also the one behind these new charges.

The official allegations claim that CUA, “does not provide space – as other universities do – for the many daily prayers Muslim students must make, forcing them instead to find temporarily empty classrooms where they are often surrounded by Catholic symbols which are incongruous to their religion,” according to a press release on PRLOG.com.

This formal complaint also maintains that the new same-sex residence halls are particularly discriminating against female students, which is a new position on the same-sex lawsuit that began last month.

Banzhaf claims that the University is denying Muslim students the same benefits that students of other religions are able to enjoy since there is no formal Muslim association sponsored by Catholic University but the Columbus School of Law has an association for Jewish students

“Denying Muslim students the opportunity for form a student group on campus could hardly be based upon any fundamental Catholic doctrine since Georgetown University not only has such a Muslim student group, but also provides its Muslim students with a separate prayer room and even a Muslim chaplain,” said Banzhaf in that press release.

Wiaam Al Salmi, a Muslim student at CUA who recently started the Arab American Association, which had its first meeting this week, said, “The community here is very respectful of other religions and I feel free to openly practice it.”

As the number of Arabs has drastically increased over the past year, Al Salmi began this organization as a way to encourage American and Arab students to comfortably interact with one another. She found that Arab and American students have a difficult time befriending each other because people naturally gravitate towards others with similar backgrounds and interests. Although not limited to Muslim students, the Arab American Association has many Muslim members.

“The ideal mission of this student organization shall be bridging two cultures by developing a community that understands the Arabic culture, discusses cultural issues, eliminates stereotypes, and establishes a student association that will carry on in the future within CUA,” said Al Salmi.

With the number of Arab students increasing at CUA, the number of Muslim students has also grown. According to the Planning, Institutional Research, Student Learning Outcomes Assessment of CUA, in the fall of 2007, there were a total of 56 Muslim undergraduate, graduate and law students on campus. That number has more than doubled as of fall 2011, as 122 Muslim students are currently members of the CUA community.

“An important reason [that Muslims are gravitating towards Catholic universities] is that the Muslim students, especially those who are observant, feel comfortable and safe at the institution,” said President Garvey in an interview with NPR in December of 2010. “It’s a place where their own faith practices are mirrored by our own. And they feel both welcome and understood at the campus.”

“Even though it’s a Catholic school, a lot of its teachings are very similar to Islam,” said Al Salmi. “It teaches respect, community service, love, worship etc. which are things that Islam also teaches.”

The discrimination charge asserts that although OHR has been investigating alleged discrimination on campus since Banzhaf's lawsuit began, "neither the President nor anyone else speaking for the University has sought to explain to the public, or even to CUA's own students, why it believes that its discrimination does not violate the Human Rights Act."

"As University spokesman, I have repeatedly explained to anyone who has asked me, including the media, that we reject the premise of Banzhaf's argument, namely that single-sex residence halls are discriminatory," said Victor Nakas, University Vice President of Public Affairs. "And we also reject his assumption that the Human Rights Act requires residence halls to be co-ed."

As these charges are being considered by the Office of Human Rights, the University administration said they will continue to work towards the betterment of its students.

"Catholic University is committed to the religious freedom and dignity of all members of its community," said Nakas. "This includes the dozens of Muslims who come to the University for its academic excellence as well as its demonstrated history of outreach and dialogue to people of all faiths."