

Snappy Answers to Spicy Questions

Students' unions who have taken a pro-choice stance may face critics who are hostile to their right to do so. The following are possible questions such critics may pose, and appropriate responses.

Scenario 1: Your students' union takes a pro-choice stance.

Q: Why are you pro-abortion?

A: The students' union has taken a pro-choice position. This means that we believe women should be able to decide on what they do with their own bodies. This is not the same as being "pro-abortion," which falsely implies that abortion is promoted over all other options. We support a woman's right and freedom to choose to have an abortion or to carry her pregnancy to term. Being pro-choice means that you occupy the middle ground on the abortion issue, rather than promoting forced pregnancy, or forced abortion. This is why many people who are personally against abortion are still pro-choice advocates.

Q: Why do you say anti-choice rather than pro-life?

A: Individuals and organisations that want to criminalise abortion oppose a woman's right to choose what she does with her own body, so they are opposed to choice. Anti-choice activists advocate the removal of rights. The term "pro-life" draws on religious morality to attempt to define when life begins, an essentially philosophical rather than scientific question. It also belies the fact that anti-choice groups seem to disregard the thousands of women who die each year from unsafe and illegal abortions. Given that abortion rates do not decrease with criminalisation, a truly life-affirming position would value women's lives and the right to legal and safe health care services.

Q: All students pay membership fees to the students' union. Aren't you supposed to represent the opinions of all students?

A: As a students' union we have democratically decided upon values and principles. For instance, we advocate for accessibility in education, so it would be contrary to our mandate to represent the opinions of

students who want to increase tuition fees. Similarly, it is contrary to our mandate to represent the opinions of organisations that want to take away human rights and freedoms from women. We have an equity mandate as a students' union and we are complying with it.

Q: Why isn't your students' union concerned about the rights of the fetus?

A: Taking a pro-choice position has nothing to do with the rights of a fetus. In other jurisdictions in the United States, the entrenchment of so-called "fetal rights" has led to the prosecution of women for a broad range of actions that could be construed as endangering their pregnancy. Our students' union believes that women should be able to make decisions about what happens to their own bodies. We, along with a large majority of Canadians, believe that with accurate information and safe medical services, a woman and her doctor can best determine what is right for her and her family based on her own values, social conditions and personal circumstances.

Q: How can you support abortion when there is no "abortion law" in Canada?

A: In 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the law regulating access to abortion ruling it unconstitutional in its entirety. The ruling found that the criminalisation of abortion violated women's fundamental human rights to liberty and safety. For twenty years, abortion has been a legal medical service in Canada, available in hospitals and clinics across the country. It has been self-regulating, as indicated by the steady and low abortion rate over this time.

Q: What about religious students on campus? Won't Catholic and Muslim students be shut out of the students' union as a result of this stance?

A: The students' union has taken a position to uphold a woman's legal right to reproductive freedom. Many people of various faiths support this right. Any student who does not support abortion for religious reasons or any other reason has a right to hold that opinion. They can choose to not have abortions. It is still the case that the medical service of abortion is public and legal in Canada and the students' union supports that right.

Scenario 2: Your students' union decides not to fund or provide space to anti-choice groups for their events or "debates:"

Q: Why have you decided to ban pro-life groups on campus?

A: There is no ban. Pro-life groups are free to organise on campus. The majority of space and resources are not owned or controlled by the students' union but the institution, and therefore remain available to any group. Students' unions are not campus gatekeepers and the denial of their resources does not constitute the restriction of free speech or access to campus space. The students' union decides democratically on how to use its limited funds in accordance with the priorities of its membership and policies. It is a private association that has every right to determine such priorities. We have decided not to use our funds for anti-choice organisations that seek to criminalise abortion.

Q: Aren't you limiting freedom of speech for the pro-life students on campus?

A: Absolutely not: anti-choice groups are free to organise on campus. Only the institution's administration has the right or authority to determine who may or may not be on campus. It is also important to remember that students' unions are not charged with the role of enforcing freedom of speech and remaining neutral, as is the educational institution. Instead, students' unions are charged with advocating for and representing the democratically-determined views of their members. The expression of these democratically-determined positions is free speech. It would be contrary to the principles of free speech to force every student on campus to support, through their students' union fees, groups that violate democratically-determined equity principles, in this case women's human rights.

Q: Don't you think the university/college should be a place for free and open debate?

A: Freedom of speech is of paramount importance to the democratic functioning of public post-secondary educational institutions. The promotion of this freedom is the role of post-secondary institutions. As advocates for their members, students' unions are participants in rather than hosts of such debates. In addition, the methods and materials used by such groups have often traumatised and offended

students rather than engaging them in debate. For example, the Genocide Awareness Project uses large graphic images of genocides and manipulated images of supposed abortions to compare abortion to the Holocaust, the Cambodian Killing Fields, racial lynching in the United States, the Rwandan genocide and the Battle of Wounded Knee. In *Gray v. UBC Students' Union*, a case that affirmed students' unions right to deny club status to such groups, these materials were found to be "offensive in tone and content." For students who have links to the tragedies depicted, who have had an abortion, or who find them offensive, the aggressive tactics used by anti-choice groups are what prevents debate.

Q: If a student wanted to use students' union resources to discuss the rights of a fetus would you allow it? What about if a student group wanted to hold a debate about religion and abortion?

A: I can't answer hypothetical questions. This decision is not about creating a list of things that can or cannot be done with students' union resources. It is about creating student space that is safe, and free of harassment. Giving the discretionary funds of the students' union to organising within our equity mandate is an important criteria for hosting an event. The students' union has the right to determine how to allocate its limited resources, including the allocation of funding and space.

Q: Don't all student groups deserve equal treatment for funding and student space?

A: Not all groups can practically have access to funding or space because students' union funding and space are limited. The students' union has the right to determine priorities in the allocation of those resources. It is contrary to our mandate to represent the opinions of organisations that want to take away fundamental human rights to liberty and safety. We have an equity mandate as a students' union and we are complying with our mandate.

Q: Can you provide a list of all of the issues you won't allow on campus?

A: No. The students' union does not decide which students' groups are allowed or not allowed on campus. That is the role of the institution. This particular decision was to not give students' union resources to anti-choice groups that want to erode women's human rights.